

The Genesis of *Belfast Girls*

At the beginning of 2010, my play *Leopoldville* won the Papatango New Writing Prize. Based on a true story, the play is set in an Irish border town and explores a crime committed at the tail end of the recession of the 1980s. It took a year to write and by the end of that year, 2008, Lehman's Bank had collapsed as had Anglo Irish Bank, plunging Ireland into another recession, from which, seven years later, it has still not recovered. The cast of this play is all male (five young men, one older male) –and in 2009 I began to think about writing something that would be the converse of this work: an all female play - a thought that grew especially during the London-based rehearsal and performance period of *Leopoldville*, when I considered that I needed a serious break from the testosterone-heavy environment I'd been in for months (the youths of my play are tough and violent and I'd already spent a year with them in my imagination!). I did not have a story at this stage but felt that I wanted to write something for and about women – and preferably a group of feisty women - almost as a riposte or some kind of balance to *Leopoldville*. In this regard, the two plays are quite connected.

Back in Ireland, after the London production of *Leopoldville*, I began to notice the terrible effects of Austerity. I became very angry. Everywhere people around me were losing their jobs, their homes; their sons and daughters had to emigrate. People seemed to be leaving the country in droves – as I had done myself in the 1980s – but this time they were heading further afield – to Canada and Australia rather than to London. The now infamous 'Guarantee' made by Brian Lenihan and Brian Cowen – which guaranteed the bondholders who'd invested in Anglo Irish Bank (many of whom were themselves banks, or billionaire investors from abroad), and the subsequent calling in of the IMF and ECB and the ensuing bailout arrangements, simply drove me to distraction! I could not believe that elected leaders would so openly sabotage the lives of a populace – and be so readily prepared to drain the country of its money for a guarantee arrangement that has since been deemed by Germany as 'unnecessary' (yet Ireland still pays it). I began to think of the Famine - and noted that the effects of the bondholder payments and subsequent Austerity measures were being compared to the politics of the Famine period by economists such as Michael Lewis (for *Vanity Fair*) and Morgan Kelly etc. Every day, the Liveline programme on RTE Radio One seemed to be full of accounts of evictions with historical comparisons being made. I realised then that in Ireland in 2009 the Famine, once again, held a prominent place in the public consciousness.

I began to wonder if any of my own ancestors had had to leave Ireland during the Famine. I had often asked my father (who hails from Sligo) about this but he had little information for me despite having researched the McCarrick family tree a number of years before. So, I Googled ‘McCarrick’ and ‘the Famine’, surfed the net for a while, and chanced upon a register of young females leaving for Australia in 1850. One of the names was Nora McCarrick, from Easkey, Sligo. I became excited. (All writers know that feeling when they come across the beginnings of a good story.) I read more, and discovered that over 4,000 young females had left Ireland between 1848 and 1851 – under a scheme called the Orphan Emigration scheme, established by Earl Grey. It was a chapter of Irish history I knew nothing about. At the time there seemed to be little on the net about such an important event (though there is a lot more information available now etc, and more recently, documentaries have been made, novels and other plays written) - so I read what books I could find on the subject, including Robert Hughes’ *The Fatal Shore*, Thomas Kennelly’s *History of Australia*, Trevor McClaughlin’s *Barefoot and Pregnant? Irish Famine Orphans in Australia*, *Irish Women and Irish Migration*, edited by Patrick O’Sullivan. In my reading of these books and articles, I discovered that a particular group of ‘orphans’ were considered to have been especially feisty and colourful, known for their use of obscene language and riotous behaviour. These were known as ‘the Belfast girls’. Right there I sensed the makings of the story I’d been looking for. But the truth is, I am not usually drawn to historical fiction – nor do I write it (much) especially in terms of playwriting. I like to write about today, about what is happening in my world, right now. I am drawn to modernist and post-modern structures and ideas. With regards plays, I am a fan of Sarah Kane, of Edward Bond and Jean Genet. In fiction I gravitate towards David Foster Wallace. So I think there were two very big reasons why I set about telling the ‘historical’ story of the *Belfast Girls* – and these are:

1. Because of the parallels I saw between Austerity Ireland and the days of the Famine: the apparent return of the policy of ‘laissez faire’ (devastating in a country as small as Ireland), the allowing of emigration to solve a crisis (half a million Irish people have left Ireland since 2009), the policy of shipping out grain and cattle and people – which to me looks a lot like the ‘exporting’ of taxpayers’ money (which is clearly needed to run the State) to pay bondholder debt.
2. Because the *Belfast Girls* were feisty, three-dimensional women (not all, according to nineteenth century Australian newspaper reports, of the arrivals in Australia were fragile

young orphans; there were some who were hardened, who were boisterous, some who had clearly calculated their way out of Ireland). Ultimately, I felt that these women would be good vehicles to explore the politics of 'laissez faire' – and the strange boom and bust economics that seem to plague Ireland no matter who is in power.

Along the way came contributions that were fortuitous. For instance, my meeting with a Cavan school teacher (at the Pushkin Trust in Tyrone where I sometimes teach) who told me that in her home-town local myth has it that with reference to the Orphan Emigration Scheme, the Catholic Church colluded with the workhouses to purge her particular Cavan community of prostitutes and 'fallen' women.

Again, I became angry listening to this woman's story. I could not believe that the morality of women might even be something to consider during a Famine. Further reading confirmed the veracity of this 'local story' – which is backed up in various essays in *Famine, Land and Culture in Ireland*, edited by Carla King. A fascinating fact also emerges in Liam Kennedy's essay, 'Bastardy and the Great Famine': that, during the Famine, in some parts of Ireland such as Monaghan – the so-called 'bastardy' (illegitimacy) rates actually shoot up, often by as much as 180%. Kennedy writes:

It was certainly the case that some unmarried mothers, including prostitutes, made use of the new poor-law system as a means of survival. It was said of the Lurgan workhouse: 'The house appears to be a most convenient place of accommodation for the cure of disease, and delivery of illegitimate children; and the facility of going in and going out, has very considerably increased the number of unfortunate females, who live by the wages of sin in the populous parts of the union.'

Obviously, for many women at this time there were very few choices indeed. During the Famine years women's bodies became their one reliable currency – for rent paying and otherwise. Often marriages were cancelled – either because many men had emigrated – or because those men who were left behind could have their pick of wives. Many women had children outside of marriage, some committed suicide – or/and infanticide. After getting a sense of how the entire social fabric of Irish life had been damaged by the Famine, I also realised that my play could tell the story of the Famine years from a purely feminine perspective – a perspective that had not previously been taken in Famine fiction or Theatre - and that in many ways, the more I explored and read, the more I realised that to a huge extent the Famine *is* very much a female/feminine story.

By now it was pretty clear to me that the Earl Grey Scheme had been abused by many: by the Church and workhouses who quite probably colluded – at least to some extent - to get as many 'unwanted'

women out of Ireland as they could; that the Earl Grey himself and the Victorian British administration capitalised on the Famine environment in Ireland to enrich Australia with female servants and workers etc – and that here and there the women themselves abused the scheme, in order to seek a way out of Famine-ravaged Ireland. Though most of the orphan girls were exactly who they said they were, and were supposed to have been, the ones *I* was interested in were at the bottom of that pile: *the Belfast Girls*.

Once my imagination was thoroughly wetted, my research and reading done, I began to imagine my story. First, I tried to find the exact conditions of the ships that the orphan girls had sailed in – but had to make do with visits to the ‘coffin ships’ at the Ulster-American Folk Park near Omagh, and imagined slightly different (improved - though not by much) conditions for the orphan girls. I also brought further reading material into the mix, such as conflicting reports on whether or not grain was being shipped out of Ireland during the Famine (mainly because I wanted my characters to reflect differing thoughts on the matter) and books by Karl Marx, and books and features about economics and current Irish politics (as I was very much weaving into the work an allegorical component).

I knew instantly that I would set the entire drama on the ship (the screenplay goes outside the ship) as I felt this to be a good theatrical choice.

So who were to be my feisty women? I wanted to be able to write convincing voices, so the young women had to be from places I knew well: the North, the border area, and Sligo. Looking through one of the registers I also found that one of the orphans had been born in Kingston, Jamaica –and from this detail I created the mixed-race orphan, Judith Noone, who is pretty much the leader of the pack in her corner of the ship.

I also came across information that suggested there may have been cases amongst 4,000 women of aliases, girls who were travelling on other girls’ tickets, and so one of my characters is not who she claims to be. During my research period I had come across a case of a rich family who were starving. The absentee landlord of a big house had abandoned his wife and daughter in Ireland and when their outward appearance of wealth was rumbled they were both found to be sleeping under a green velvet curtain (with all the furniture sold off) such was their shortage of actual cash. Out of these details came Rachel de Courcy who masquerades on the ship as her dead maid, Molly Durcan.

And so with all of these details percolating in the back of my mind, I wrote *Belfast Girls* in a white heat period of a few weeks. I sent the final play out to a couple of people in 2011 and was contacted in July

by Robyn Winfield Smyth who said she would like the play for a new programme called *Without Décor* at the King's Head Theatre in Islington. The *Without Décor* season of plays was inspired by the early days of the Royal Court, when new work was staged without costume or set etc. The play had a short rehearsal period and was shown without set or costume or lights. The show proved to be very popular and at one performance, Jack Bradley, of Sonia Friedman Productions (and former Literary Manager of the National Theatre), was in attendance. He recommended that the play's director, Svetlana Dimcovic, and I, apply to the National Theatre Studio to develop the piece. We did - and were subsequently placed on attachment to the National Theatre in 2012 in order to further develop *Belfast Girls*. Over three weeks I did more research – mostly at the British Library - and developed the play to a 9-character piece. But after the attachment period I felt that the original ensemble of five women was better and I settled on that, though the Studio work has proved invaluable in terms of writing the screenplay.

Later that year, *Belfast Girls* was invited to be part of the 2012 National Commemoration of the Famine in Drogheda, where it had a beautiful staging at Droichead Arts Centre with the King's Head cast (and Galway actress Emma O'Grady in the role of Molly), again directed by Svetlana Dimcovic. The play has since been shortlisted for the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Award, the BBC Tony Doyle Award and won the 2012 Galway Theatre Festival New Play competition. In 2013, Artemisia, A Chicago Theatre gave the play a staged reading - and are to give the American premiere of *Belfast Girls* on May 16th 2015 at the Den Theatre, Chicago, where it will run for four weeks. *Belfast Girls* has also just received a reading at RADA, London - as part of the 'Women: 100 Plays' series.

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Links:

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