Nostalgia and Terror

The Fureys and David Arthur: When You Were Sweet Sixteen
Awards Record, 1992.

Molly Bloom (in Joyce’s Ulysses) had an excess of love which spilled out beyond her affirmation of herself to Leopold, that half-jew, no-man, every-man. These songs should be heard in that context, but also another context, one within which love is not possible, where gratitude is frozen by boredom and where fatherhood is negotiated through death. Where are we now, after W. B. Yeats, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett? The gun firing is meaningless, preserved only by the old photograph which remains a shadow of the man that went away. The last loss of love, lost fathers, lost jobs, lost wars, a lost Ireland: Yesterday’s Wars haunt us.

“The Green Fields of France” is probably the most startling and shocking song on Irish pop. It is a lyrical bombast, set not in Ireland, but in the trenches of France at the end of the first World War, turning itself into a pastiche of Irish Reel Songs (Enniskillen and that ilk). How does this continuity of a bellicose nostalgia set against the English remember every moment of their history: the English nonce of theirs, except as artifice,” as someone said or should have said. But how do we remember? The English sanctify the monuments of imperialism, the English remember the consequences of colonialism, the generals of the first and second world wars were largely Irish, on one third of the Other Ranks list in the First World War. Large numbers of Irish, Scots, Newfoundlanders (the Irish Guards) and other ‘Commonwealth’.

Fighting for what? The war to end war, when Roger Casement was negated, was gained, with the German’s on behalf of Irish independence. There are memories and memories. The English remember their part in; savagery; “civilians”, the Irish the continuity of our nobility and contempt. Part of Irish culture has always been dedicated talking about the unmentionable. The pain of knowing that we are all double-agents, Kim Philby of the imagination. Whose side are you on? POW! Protestant! Bastards! Pissup! But these voices have largely been literary, or revealed in drunk conversations in pubs in Westminster St. Dublin or immigrant retreats in New York in America. (Can’t we remember the deconstruction of selective amnesia? No? Then you haven’t read Brian Moore).

It is necessary to appropriate the nostalgia from here and to take the tourist version of bombs and Joyce’s map of Dublin. But what actually happens in Dublin? Does anyone sing any more? What do they sing about? If you have a long memory Nostalgia is the bombs, round the Post Office in 1916. But Ireland is free of bombs, except in Belfast where they crackle off like the dull rumour of another war. The Fureys’ songs come alive in the course of the imaginary bombs.

“What are you carrying in your pocket? Agrenade? But it might go off: Boom!” and the mundane reality of getting by, being made redundant at 20. Yesterday’s people, fighting Yesterday’s war, obviously today’s.

The Fureys cut nostalgia down to the present. That war that you thought you were fighting then is our war, here, now. We inherit your misfortunes and your graphs. When the drums played the Last Post and a chorus it was not only for you, but for us. We drum that retreat from your battles.

And “When you were sweet sixteen,” and our “Anniversary song,” and “Oh Rubabuka” and meeting and not meeting you at the railway station, all the other nostalgia cut through me like a knife. I am back with Beckett and Joyce and the whole taggie-taggle bunch who will tell me that the Irish are the Jews, that Palestine and Belfast are one and the same thing. And of course it’s a lie. “My love is like a Red Rose that’s newly sprung in June,” but meanwhile my son lies in a green field of France, and “although you died back in 1916, in that fated heart you are forever 19.” I am breeding sons who will be stragglers “without even a name,coal dusted there forever behind a glass frame.”

The Fureys shock us out of our romanticism. War is not nice, sex is war; nostalgia is both a sense of our own histories and violation of our own privileged space; the past lives in our presence. The guns that you hold against my groin exactly replicate the galls that I hold against yours. But yet I worry not of us pull the trigger: obviously because “I will go down with you to the grave.”

The Fureys are about that knife blade that would slit you apart but knowing that other knives have slit other necks like yours. I like your neck. I wouldn’t have anyone touch it.

If? You? History? Violence? These songs/poems/songs discourses, are about living on the borderline of experience. Not that romantic blood nonsense of H. D. Lawrence, no this romantic Sartre/Fawkes conception that violence is necessary to our well being. But that absolutely mundane sense that violence strikes us into our sensuality, that the time of the horns is at our presence in this time of the days I got him to promise to me yes first I gave him the law of unkinked one and one mouth and it was in the year 16 you say my god you say her and then I lost her and then I lost my brown yes he said it was a flower of the mountain yes it was flowers of all a woman broken last touch her face. This was the truth that he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was the way only him because I knew he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew you would get me out of it and I gave him all the pleasure I could lead him on till he killed himself and I would never answer first only looked over the sea and the sky one day I was coming on the beach in strange things he didn’t know of Mahony and Mr Stanislav and Hyster and Father and old captain Groves and landsmen pulling all birds fly and I stand up and weading up shall they call it in the poor and the sick and the ailing in the front of the government house with the cannon going and his white hair ruffled and the Spanish girls laughing in the street and his black and their tall comb and the auctions in the morning the Greeks and the Jews and the Arabs and you didn’t know who else from all the nations of Europe and Dublin streets and the First monarch all clocking outside Lady Sharot and the poor doorstep slipping half asleep and the vague followers in the cloaks playing in the shade of the statue and the big wheels of the carts of the boulds and the old and the child beside me and I did not sit down in their little bit of a shop and rings with the listening of the child glassy glancing eyes a kettle bell for her lover to ring at the new moment at the new moon at night and the cannon and the night we missed the boat at Adare the watchmen going abroad nevermind it all that awful depressing storm O and the sea the sea the crimson somvone and the glorius nascent and the ligntness in the Adare parke and the rooms and the streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the road beyond and the road beyond and the road beyond and the road beyond and the road beyond and the road beyond and on and on and the breasts all performer you and her heart was going like mad and yet I sat there.

James Joyce

SMALL ME SOUL PASS THRO’ OLD IRELAND

In the lovely Irish prison where a dying rebel
Rise to see a priest was standing o’er his soul and passed on.
And he faintly murmured, ‘Father,’ as he clapped his hand on his breast,
‘Tell me this before you leave me: shall I see you again in Ireland?’

Tell me shall I see you again in Ireland shall I see you again in Ireland?

I’ll see the little chapel where I played my head and hand
Tell me father, ever my eye shall see the little chapel where I played my head and hand

EXPOSURE

Our brains ache, it’s miraculous and mad that you are awake... We live, we die, we die... We chase our memory of the silent... Worried by climes, tropics, whips, curiosity, nervous, Barbara

Watching, we know the mad gods gripping on the wire... Like monstrous agents of men among its branches... Northern Included, the fleeting pantrys, Furies, a silent blow of some other war...

What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow... We only know, urinating a drake, clouds and crows say stamp.

Dawn matting in the sand like the colorless army

Attacks once more in ranks on skirring rank or

But nothing happens.

Ivan Davies

Wildlife Owen