

Introduction: Friel, criticism, and theory

The critical consensus towards Brian Friel's drama and its relationship to the Irish Republic's form of nationalism has evolved significantly since the first studies of his career appeared in the 1970s. The initial discussions by D. E. S. Maxwell and George O'Brien argued that the playwright espoused a relatively unproblematized Irish nationalism, and even as late as 1988 Ulf Dantanus' *Brian Friel* positions the playwright squarely within the tradition of Joyce, Synge, and O'Casey: "the habitat, heritage and history of Ireland have made him an Irish writer" (Dantanus, 20).¹ Yet, in that same year the playwright's ideological ambivalence to the Irish Republic was first posited by Shaun Richards and David Cairns in their broad revisionist interrogation of Irish literature (Cairns and Richards, *Writing Ireland*, 148–9). In her 1994 study of the early Field Day Theatre Company and Friel's collaborations with it, Marilyn Richter recognizes that their ideological objective was to articulate a relationship to Irish nationalism "for which there was, as yet, no name" (Richter, *Acting*, 254). By the late 1990s, only the most naive critics would read Friel's career within a straightforward nationalistic framework. This recognition of Friel's problematic relationship to conventional constructs of Irishness has deprived the critical community of a vocabulary to discuss his career; while he cannot be accommodated comfortably by Republican nationalism, he strenuously opposes the Protestant domination of the Northern Irish province and rejects its brand of Unionism. Thus, without the ability to associate Friel's position to a statist ideology, the criticism has retreated to interpretive frameworks based upon such amorphous criteria as a generic "Irish psyche," a tenuously

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undefined “new nationalism,” or a vague identity “defined, to a very large extent, as ‘not English.’”

My approach views this confused taxonomy as indicative of the playwright’s subaltern status and the traditional difficulty that elite discourse – in this case both Republican and Unionist – has in representing it. *Brian Friel, Ireland, and The North* will argue that this confusion over Friel’s relationship to conventional Irishness – nationalist identity and culture – results from the critical failure to recognize the emergence, articulation, and waning of a Northern subalternity in Friel’s work. This book’s first chapter will demonstrate that even in his earliest enthusiasm for Republican nationalism, Friel engaged with the state’s ideology not as a presumptive Irish citizen who lived in the North, but as a doubly disenfranchised Northerner: one alienated from both Irish states and unable to identify with either.

This book will further argue that this initial ambivalence to the Irish Republic evolves into a separate Northern identity in the early 1980s, and the Field Day Theatre Company, which Friel founded with actor Stephen Rea, should be considered as one of the formations produced by this subaltern group to press its claims upon both the Irish Republic and the Northern province. Of course, such an interpretive agenda must by definition remain provisional and speculative not only because Gayatri Spivak reminds us that the subaltern often acts unwittingly and without consciousness of its own subalternity, but also because “it is never fully recoverable . . . it is effaced even as it is disclosed” (Spivak, *Other Worlds*, 203). Similarly, various critics have recognized the subaltern as a consciousness that is “contradictory, fragmented, [and] more or less haphazard” because it is emergent and not yet formalized (Chatterjee, “Caste and Subaltern,” 170); David Lloyd has pointed out that by definition “it resists or cannot be represented by or in the state” (Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, 127). Thus, most often this book will trace the “effect” of Friel’s subalternity: his vexed engagement with the Irish Republic or Northern Ireland, rather than merely his short-lived advocacy of “the Northern thing” in the early 1980s.

While it is not uncommon for the strategies for reading culture articulated by Ranajit Guha, David Lloyd, Partha Chatterjee, and others associated with Subaltern Studies to be categorized under the rubric of

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postcolonial studies, I will avoid such a limiting affiliation for my examination of Friel's ideological evolution.² As evidenced in the arguments offered in the mid 1990s by such theorists as Luke Gibbons and Declan Kiberd, the initial impetus for applying postcolonial theory to Ireland was to interrogate a theoretical practice "expansive enough to include not only the literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean but also Canada, Australia, and even the United States," but not Irish literature (Gibbons, *Transformations*, 174). While Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* stands as the most nuanced postcolonial reading of Irish literary history, the recent collection of essays edited by Clare Carroll and Patricia King applies postcolonial theory to diverse aspects of Irish history, sociology, and literature. However, these works rely upon the evolution of the counterhegemonic nationalism associated with such elite historical phenomena as the Young Irishmen, the Home Rule movement, and de Valera's Republicanism. Whereas none of the essays in Carroll's and King's collection seeks to examine the cultural challenges posed by Northern Ireland even in the form of subsidiary argument, postcolonial analyses of such Northern writers as Brian Friel and Seamus Heaney have tended to consider their careers as univocal responses to a cultural nationalism emanating from Dublin as metropole, rather than attempting to negotiate the two distinct discourses associated with Dublin and Belfast.³

Notwithstanding Terry Eagleton's proviso that the "second rule" of every postcolonial critic is to "Begin your essay by calling into question the whole notion of postcolonialism," I would like to state my suspicion of too readily adopting the methodology for Northern Ireland (Eagleton, "Postcolonialism," 24). With the possible exception of recent works by David Lloyd and Shaun Richards, the brief postcolonial discussions of Northern Ireland adopt a nationalist bias towards the political crisis that has defined the province since Partition in 1921 (Lloyd, *Ireland*, 47–52). While the basis of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 legitimates the necessity for authentic and tangible enfranchisement of the Catholic population within the governing structures of the province, George Boyce's study of Irish nationalism along with the treatments of Ulster and Northern Ireland authored by Jonathan Bardon, Paula Clayton, and Colin Coulter have

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clearly recognized the recalcitrance of a robust Loyalist culture that cannot be easily absorbed into the current paradigms of Irish nationalism. Moreover, the works of Boyce and Coulter also document a reluctance among Northern Catholics to unequivocally embrace Southern republicanism. In other words, the application of an unnuanced post-colonial theory either ignores the complexities of Northern Irish society, or adopts the republican bias that the region will eventually reconcile itself to absorption into a greater Ireland.⁴

By situating my analysis within the context of subalternity, I seek to avoid the totalizing tendencies of postcolonial analysis, as it has come to typify the version practiced within Irish Studies, to align itself with or against one of the poles of elite historiography: Irish nationalism or English imperialism. Moreover, I suspect that the ultimate resolution between Ireland and the North may have less to do with historical paradigms of the Irishness and more with the suppletive postnationalism suggested by Richard Kearney (Kearney, *Postnationalist*, 70–95).⁵ While the ideologies and historical practices of conventional nationalism and colonialism are certainly the topic of Friel's plays, I will argue that the author's own ideological strategy throughout his career evolves tangentially to these gross nationalisms. To that extent, Friel's writings express the subaltern's enduring alienation from and resistance to co-optation by the conventional ideologies associated with the governments of Dublin, Belfast, and London. Likewise, his resolve to reside in Derry's environs rather than one of these metropolises is similarly indicative not of a provinciality on the playwright's part but, as I will discuss in chapter 4, his fundamental inability to subordinate Northern subalternity to doctrinaire Irishness. Such a strategy will allow *Brian Friel, Ireland, and The North* to reconcile the fundamental paradox of Friel's career; while he has chosen to live in the Republic and serve as a member of The National Treasury of Irish Artists (Aosdana), the Irish Academy of Letters, and even the Irish Senate, these seeming endorsements of the Irish Republic coincide with the author's professed disillusionment with both the Irish state and its national culture.

This book's project is to chart the long arc of Friel's ideological evolution: from his paradoxical combination of alienation from and

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enthusiasm for Irish nationalism in the 1960s, through his skeptical interrogation of the state in the 1970s and 1980s, to his ultimate disillusionment with Ireland in the largest sense in the 1990s and early 2000s. I will pursue a symptomatic reading of Friel's career to explore facets of his engagement with the Irish state's nationalist ideology; at times this analysis will focus on how Friel's plays interrogate nationalism as a patriarchal discourse, how other plays encourage an exploration of the reverberations of seminal historical events in contemporary society, while still others concern the literal relationship between the individual and the state. Ultimately, however, this book's particularist readings will construct a single strategy of explicating Friel's vexed dialogue with the Irish state. In many instances my reading of individual plays will contrast itself to the *ad hoc* strategies that have come to dominate most, but certainly not all, Friel scholarship. This criticism too often relies upon convenient interpretive precedence for reading his plays; exploiting simplified notions of contemporary culture for overtly political plays like *The Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers*, aesthetic concepts for presumed metaphysical plays like *Crystal and Fox* and *Faith Healer*, or modes of generic Irishness for such plays as *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *Aristocrats*, and *Dancing at Lughnasa*.

Of course, such eclecticism of interpretive strategies has been intellectually productive and is particularly important to assessing the scope of a contemporary author, especially one whose long career is marked by such a challenging combination of formal experimentation, thematic evolution, and popular success. Indeed, the abilities of such critics as Richard Pine and Elmer Andrews to deploy diverse intellectual contexts to their studies of Friel's career underscore the playwright's complexity. This extensive body of criticism is often both refined and nuanced, and my present study does not pretend to supersede this considerable corpus of valuable work, much of which informs this project. Yet, this eclecticism stales when numerous authors defer to the conventions that encourage the routinized discussion of particular plays as thematic expositions of love or exile, others as obsessed by language, and yet others as expositions of the oedipal struggle against the father. By contrast, rather than producing

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a reductive treatment of Friel's career, my decision to rely upon a single interpretive strategy will reveal an unsuspected depth in Friel's oeuvre; for example, rather than endeavoring to discern minute distinctions within the confines of accepted readings, I am able to expose ignored themes, such as the equivocal portrayal of the generation that came of age during the era of Irish independence in the plays of the 1960s, the emergence of what I term a group of sorority plays in the 1970s, and the sustained interrogation of history and its methodologies during the latter half of his career.

In other words, this book is self-consciously aware of its position both within and against the prevailing criticism of Friel's career, and the assessment of scholarly trends will be part of my subject. I will adopt an adversarial relationship to both the scholarship and the author, and will seek to evade the complicity that sometimes develops between the two. In his discussion of Third World literature and specifically the career of Salman Rushdie, Aijaz Ahmad has warned of the symbiotic etiquette that frequently develops between a living author and his commentators; we witness a corresponding deference in many discussions of Friel's work, where critics defer to, if not actually explicate at length, the interpretive cues that Friel himself provides. For example, in the early 1970s his repeated assertion that his early plays "were all attempts at analysing different kinds of love" conditioned much of the initial criticism (*EDI*, 47); similarly, the treatment of his 1990 success *Dancing at Lughnasa* demonstrates Friel's continued ability to influence the critical community. During the three years following the staging of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Friel repeatedly and publicly emphasized two themes that figure in subsequent examinations of the play: first, that the play "is about the necessity for paganism"; second, that the autobiographical aspect of the play is limited to the metamorphosis of his aunts, "those five brave Glenties women" referred to in the play's dedication, into the drama's Mundy sisters.⁶ Following Friel's lead, as early as 1992 – merely two years after the play's premiere – the ontology of paganism becomes the subject for numerous discussions, beginning with Alan Peacock and Kathleen Devine and followed by Elmer Andrews, Roy Rollins, F.C. McGrath, Richard Allen Cave, Tony Corbett, and Margaret

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Llewellyn-Jones.⁷ While no critic has explored the play's biographical content, Fintan O'Toole, F.C. McGrath, and Richard Pine all refer only to Friel's maternal aunts to define the play's autobiographical scope.⁸

By maintaining an adversarial relationship to Friel, I will not, as some have, praise some plays or cursorily dismiss others as "failed" or "overrated." Rather, I will seek to discern what the critical consensus has overlooked and, more importantly, subject Friel's public statements and writing to the same scrutiny usually reserved for his literary efforts. In the case of my previous example, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, I seek to demonstrate how our understanding of the drama develops when we resist the author's desire that we limit the play's autobiographical scope to the Mundy sisters and expand it to include Michael Mundy, Friel's surrogate, and the character's father Gerry Evans, a figure who bears little resemblance to the author's father. Rather than merely indulging in speculation concerning the author's relationship to his father, such a shift in the type of question asked about the play reveals surprising insight into Friel's sense of Irish cultural identity. Likewise, rather than embracing the play's didacticism, which strenuously directs our attention to paganism and the spiritual transcendence made available by dance, I will consider matters more consistent with the book's focus on the political and ideological. Thus, my book's overarching strategy is to initiate the exploration of political and ideological territory that has been ignored in the criticism.

Brian Friel, Ireland, and The North departs from established critical strategies most in its decision to initiate its analysis of the author not with his handful of short stories or unpublished plays from the late 1950s and early 1960s, but with the series of columns that he wrote for *The Irish Press* during 1962 and 1963. All of the monographs include lengthy discussions of either these roughly twenty stories or six plays – while Andrews, Pine, and McGrath examine both – but none discusses these fifty-nine articles written during a formative period from the staging of his first play at the Abbey Theatre to his internship at the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. In chapter 1 I will argue for the centrality of this overlooked journalistic series to

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understanding Friel's ideological development. Because of their general unavailability, the significance of these articles has been overlooked; however, my treatment of the most ideologically charged pieces powerfully reveals the extent of Friel's alienation from the societies of both Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Unlike its predecessors, this book is also the first to exploit Friel's essays and interviews, which have only recently been published in selected form by Christopher Murray in 1999 and Paul Delaney in 2000. In the past, only the resourceful scholar could uncover Friel's occasional essays, published in theater programs or regional periodicals; now Murray's and Delaney's collections provide a wealth of material that is valuable not only for its importance to Friel's sanctioned corpus, but also for our ability to observe the author's casual, even unguarded admissions. Indeed, chapters 3 and 4 would have assumed markedly different trajectories had it not been for the insights available in such fugitive pieces as "Self-Portrait," "Making a Reply to the Criticism of *Translations* by J. H. Andrews," his preface to Charles McGlinchey's memoirs, and such interviews as those with Laurence Finnegan, Ray Comisky, and Mel Gussow. Whereas his two early essays on Irish theater, "The Theatre of Hope and Despair" and "Plays Peasant and Unpeasant," allow Friel to position himself within Dublin's theater society as a type of studied *agent provocateur*, these less conventional pieces contain a wealth of information relevant to this study's focus on Friel's ideological development and his ongoing dialogue with Irish history. Finally, this work also benefits from the many political histories and cultural studies focusing on Northern Ireland that have appeared in the decade since the ceasefire and Good Friday Agreement have restored to Northern Ireland a normality that it had not enjoyed in over forty years. Jonathan Bardon's authoritative *History of Ulster* as well as the cultural studies by Colin Coulter, Anthony Buckley, and Mike Morrissey and Marie Smyth are but a few of the valuable works to have appeared since 1997.

Finally, my work is the first to appear since the staging of a series of short plays set in Russia and central Europe: "The Yalta Game" (2001), "The Bear" (2002), "Afterplay" (2002), and *Performances* (2003). Both Richard Pine and Elmer Andrews have valuably discussed Friel's earlier

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versions of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* and Turgenev's *A Month in the Country* and *Fathers and Sons*; because Friel generally translates these texts faithfully, both critics turn their attention to the consonance between Friel's cultural sensibility and nineteenth-century Russia. Yet, neither these commentators nor the criticism in general could have anticipated how these plays of the new century would mark a rupture in Friel's career; rather than merely undertaking more translations, "*Afterplay*" and *Performances* are the only original plays in Friel's more than forty years of playwriting to be set outside of Ireland.⁹ Thus, for the critic concerned with Friel's engagement with Irishness, they introduce significant questions regarding the relationship of the writer to his homeland. While *The Home Place* (2005) fails to resolve all of the questions raised by the short Slavic plays, this final portrayal of Friel's fictional Ballybeg provides a powerful summation for the playwright's career by returning to several topics that have concerned him throughout his career: the opposition between elite and subaltern histories, the union of nationalist ideology and familial authority in the figure of the aging father, and the challenge posed to the formation of Irish cultural identity by a benign Englishness.

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I **The *Irish Press* essays, 1962–1963: Alien and native**

The early 1960s was a period of considerable professional risk and maturation for Brian Friel, when his artistic future seemed poised between the writing of drama or fiction. Because of a series of artistic successes in the late 1950s, Friel had the courage in 1960 to leave teaching as his full-time occupation and attempt a career as writer. In 1958, BBC Northern Ireland broadcast his radio plays *A Sort of Freedom* and *To This Hard House*, while his talent as a writer of stories was confirmed in 1959 when he secured a contract with *The New Yorker* (O'Brien, 2; Dantanus, 39). During the following few years, he divided his energies between writing short stories and plays; however, his eventual decision to devote himself to the theater appeared increasingly unlikely as the 1960s commenced.

A Doubtful Paradise was staged by the Group Theatre of Belfast in 1959, but the production was poorly received and soon closed. In fact, Friel later admitted that "It was a dreadful play. I don't think the Group Company collapsed because of it, but it didn't do them any good!" (*BFC*, 7). This aura of inadequacy regarding his plays was succinctly expressed in December 1962 when an *Irish Press* headline referred to him as one of two "Abbey Rejects," in an article announcing that his play *The Blind Mice* was selected for production by Phyllis Ryan's Orion company to be staged at Dublin's Eblana Theatre (Ward, "Test," 8).¹ Friel soon admitted that this unsuccessful play was, in his own words, "also a bad play," and he soon disavowed it along with his other early dramas. Even his comparatively successful *The Enemy Within* ran for less than a week at the Abbey Theatre as part of its summer series of 1962. Conversely, during this period of theatric