

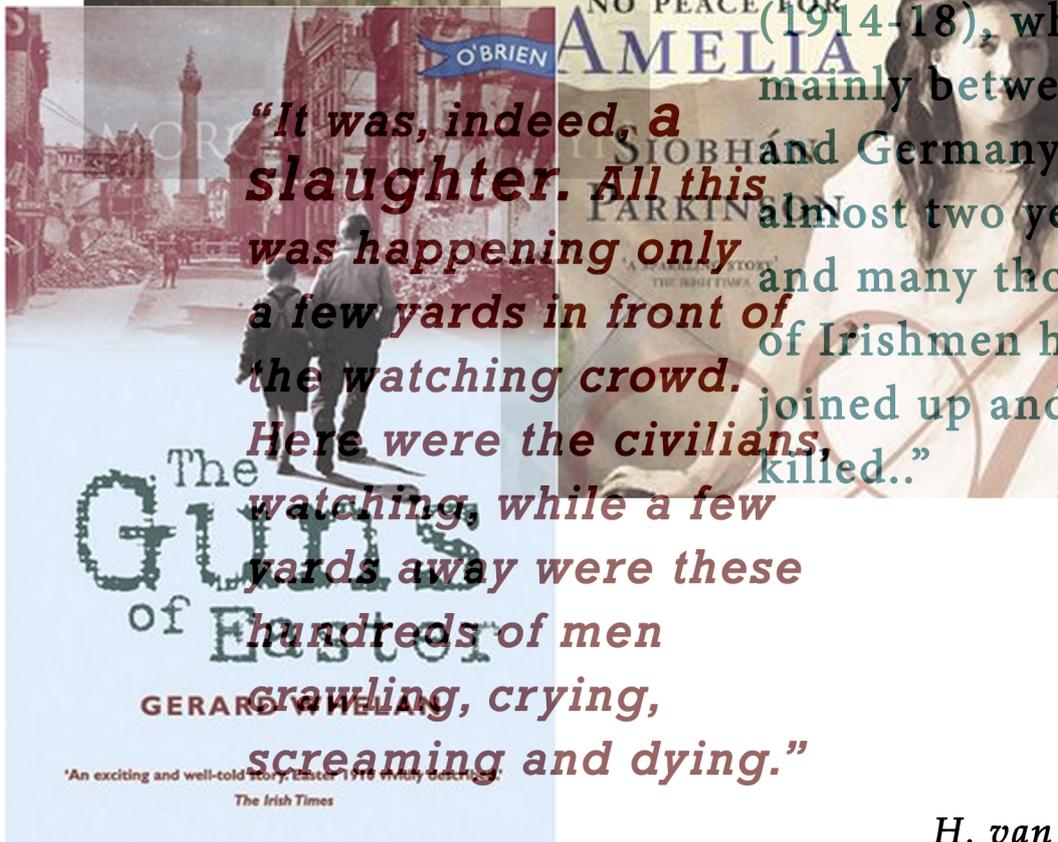
# If we but tell these stories to our children...

## Nationalism in Irish historical fiction for children



*"Last night there was a huge battle at the Mount Street Bridge. For five hours a mere handful of volunteers in Clanwilliam House held out against a whole British column."*

**Historical Note**  
This novel is set in Dublin in the spring of 1916. World War I (1914-18), which was mainly between Britain and Germany, was almost two years old, and many thousands of Irishmen had already joined up and had been killed.."



*"It was, indeed, a slaughter. All this was happening only a few yards in front of the watching crowd. Here were the civilians, watching, while a few yards away were these hundreds of men crawling, crying, screaming and dying."*

*H. van den Herik*

**"If we but tell these stories  
to our children..."**

**Nationalism in Irish historical fiction for children**

BA thesis Language and Cultural Studies / Comparative Literature

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University of Utrecht, July 2013

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## Introduction

While in Jerusalem on a study trip, I met two young, Dutch girls, who had recently moved to Israel with their parents. I told them the next stop on our schedule was Bethlehem, where I would be staying with a Palestinian family. Their eyes grew wide. For them, that trip would be impossible, they assured me. They would be killed instantly!

During my travels in Israel and the West Bank, as well as in the workshops with Syrian children in Jordan refugee camps, I met many teenagers and children expressing fear or aggression towards an 'Other' through song and story. The younger the children were, more obvious it was when their big words and adult imageries were copied from 'older' sources: parents, teachers, older kids. The things they wanted to do to the Other, or feared the Others would do to them, were sometimes brutal. Most of the times the dreaded 'Other' was someone the child had never even met. Of course some of these fears weren't completely unfounded. But the children's hateful and indiscriminate words made me realise how a conflict, even if and when a peace treaty is signed, will live on in the next generations, unless the songs and stories these children have learned are somehow altered or replaced.

This experience, as well as my encounter with the theories of conflict studies, raised my curiosity about the role of literature in the retelling of antagonistic histories. Books, once such a threat that leaders had them put to the pyre, are now one of the few media that are still free from age advice or parental advisory stickers. Yet what do authors from (former) conflict zones tell children about the past? How do they deal with the controversies? This thesis looks at the extent in which violent antagonistic discourse is (still) present in historical children's books from a (former) conflict zone. Through comparison with the general cultural elements and imageries of the chosen discourse, as well as the representation of the same historical event in other novels, I analyse whether and how the grand narrative is sustained or changed.

The former conflict zone I chose is the Irish Republic. First of all because it allowed me to read the literature in its original language, secondly because of the only recent ending of the related violence in Northern Ireland, and the ongoing political, academic, and public debates on commemoration. One of these debates concerns 1916, the year of both the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme. Through their remembrance and framing, these stories have become part of significant, antagonistic grand narratives (Beiner 2007: 366). Until recently, these stories were 'used' in Northern Ireland as justification for mutual violence between nationalist republicans and unionists. Members from both sides re-used old symbols and stories as part of the explanation,

justification and promotion of their struggle. Prisoners of the (P)IRA openly likened themselves to historical martyrs such as 1916's rebel leader Patrick Pearse, and saw their fight in line with previous revolts against the British such as the 1916 Easter Rising (Kearney 1997: 110). Children in Ireland too came into contact with the antagonistic imaginaries at a young age (Marriott 1998: 11). The documentary *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* by Michael Ignatieff shows children in Northern Ireland actively participating in parades, curb painting, and bonfires where dolls representing the pope are burned.

In political discourse and historiography, in both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, attempts have been made to revise the historical framing into one less antagonistic. As a 'crossroads of remembrance in modern Ireland' (Beiner 2007: 368), 1916 is employed by historians and politicians as a key to shared commemoration. Literature has had its own counter revival against nationalist discourse and politics. But the history of Irish children's literature shows that for a long time youth novels written in the Irish Republic lagged behind in their detachment from nationalist discourse (Ní Bhroin 2004: 112). With 1916 as the historical arena the authors discussed here theoretically have the possibility for telling the shared history, or at least show a different side of the stories. Did they grab the opportunity, or chose more traditional and possibly antagonistic narration?

## Methodology

For the sake of a comprehensible framework and depth rather than width, I focus only on work written by residents of the Irish Republic. As a result I discuss only republican nationalist discourse and its possible revision. In order to study the recent representation of history, the publication dates are all after 1990. The titles were found in the extensive children's books departments of the websites of Amazon and Book Depository, through the search queries '1916' and 'Easter Rising'. The titles are *No Peace for Amelia* (1994) by Siobhán Parkinson, *The Guns of Easter* (1996) by Gerard Whelan, and *The Young Rebels* (2006) by Morgan Llywelyn. The three books (by fortunate coincidence) were all published by the Irish O'Brien Press and are categorised on the O'Brien website as suitable for a 10+ audience. With sales numbers of respectively 21,000, 54,000 and 10,000 copies<sup>1</sup>, these novels have potentially reached a significant amount of children.

In the first part of the analysis I will elaborate on the theories concerning the power of words and the possible consequences of the age of the intended reader. Also, I will further discuss the grand narrative of Irish nationalism, to know what elements we are looking for in the texts. This also involves cultural elements, such as language and religion, the myths of motherland and

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1 These sales figures were acquired from The O'Brien Press on 05-27-2013.

martyrdom. Next I will investigate how the narratives and elements of nationalist discourse are used, reversed or left out in each of the three novels. I will specifically focus on the portrayal and possible justification of violence, and the definition and portrayal of 'the enemy'. Another important element is the representation and role of WWI.

In the analysis I used the eight (and then some) useful questions to critically locate and nuance ideology in texts, offered by Peter Hollindale (Hollindale 1988: 117-118). He warns against the tendency of polarisation, seeing books as either black or white when it comes to ideology, arguing that "... many major works will sustain more radical and subversive readings..." (Hollindale 1988: 117). A fair warning when it comes to the debate concerning the Irish conflict, which has shown to lead to all or nothing opinions. With the help of his questions, hopefully, a more refined analysis can be made.

The choice for children's literature is arbitrary in the sense that I find the study of children's literature just as relevant as that of the books for the grown-ups. When it comes to the presence of antagonistic discourse, I think books for adults are as likely to be biased as children's books. I do think there is more reason to be aware about the framing of history in children's books. Not only is the target audience possibly less capable of putting the story into a larger context, but also because authors tend to simplify the world when talking to a younger audience. Yet it is the simplification of history that can easily lead to binary or monolithic perspectives on events.

More optimistically, another reason to look at children's literature is that if literature can add to one's ideas on the world, it can also do this for the better. What I hope to find in novels for children are counter-narratives to the antagonistic narratives that roam the streets of (London)Derry, but also Hebron, and the likes. Because if the 'grown-ups' can't fix it, the younger generations will have to make the change. I dare to have the quiet optimism that literature may help them do just that.

## *Intermezzo*

On 24 April 1916, Easter Monday, members of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army and other separatist movements, take charge of several key locations in Dublin. They proclaim the Irish Republic and independence from the United Kingdom. After six days of fighting between the activists and the Irish and British police and army, leading to the death of 64 insurgents, 312 soldiers and police, and about 230 civilians, and the wounding of over a thousand, the leaders of the Easter Rising decide to surrender. The main instigators are arrested and tried for treason. Sixteen of them are indeed executed in the following days.<sup>2</sup>

On 1 July 1916, the French and British armies start a joint attack on the German lines near the river Somme in France. Among the British soldiers are several thousands of Irish, amongst which the 36th Division from Ulster. When the battle starts, the Ulster Division manages to secure the first three lines of the German trenches. The next day the conquered territory is reoccupied by the German forces. On that first day of 'the Battle of the Somme' nearly 60,000 British soldiers die. The 36th Division alone suffered over 2000 deaths and over 3000 wounded (Officer 2001: 160).<sup>3</sup>

In 1968 the para-military Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA or IRA) launch a violent campaign to enforce the union of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. The violence is met by the police force of Northern Ireland and the British army. This starts the period of violence known as 'the Troubles'. Throughout the conflict other para-military groups from nationalist and unionist side add to the violence. It was not until 1998 that the conflict is officially ended, yet sporadic eruptions of violence occur long after this date.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed but still quick information on the Rising, visit the online exhibition of the National Library of Ireland at <http://www.nli.ie/1916>.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information check the online exhibition of the Imperial War museum at <http://archive.iwm.org.uk/server/show/nav.2164> or, for a more Irish perspective, the summary of the Department of Taoiseach at [www.taoiseach.gov.ie/en/eng/Historical\\_Information/1916\\_Commemorations/Irish\\_Soldiers\\_in\\_the\\_Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Somme.html](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/en/eng/Historical_Information/1916_Commemorations/Irish_Soldiers_in_the_Battle_of_the_Somme.html)

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<sup>4</sup> For a general overview of the history of the Troubles, see the CAIN project by the University of Ulster at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>.

## 1. (his)Stories at work

At the end of the nineteenth century a renewed interest in Irish cultural heritage bloomed. Texts from this Irish Literary Revival retold Irish fairy tales and folklore, and took up the mission to prevent this heritage from being forgotten. Douglas Hyde -the future first president of the Irish Republic- started the Gaelic League, which organised Irish language classes to prevent the language from disappearing. As part of the Literary Revival writers for children too embraced the Irish heritage of fairytales and heroes (West 1994: 166). But this wave of creativity had died out three years after the 1916 rebellion (West 1994: 183). For a long time after the independence very few books for children were published in Ireland. The majority of the children's books in the English language weren't set in Ireland. Those that were, were often written with an American or British reader in mind, because of the bigger audience. As the British or American reader had certain images and expectations of Ireland and the Irish youth novels tended to accommodate to these expectations through a traditional and stereotypical representation of Ireland (Kiberd 1995: 136). At the same time, under nationalist discourse and censorship of the Republic's government, a similar traditional discourse can be seen in novels more focussed on the Irish reader.

Celia Keenan estimates that today 25% of all children's books published in the Irish Republic fall under the genre of historical fiction (Keenan 1997: 369). Popular Irish arenas are the Viking age, Ireland in the seventeenth century, the Great Famine, and the Easter Rising. Many do try to revise the story according to modern perspectives, but Keenan shows that 'the truth' still suffers from the both the British and Irish author's connection to their traditional grand narrative (Keenan 2003: 118). To know what we are looking for, I first try to sketch the general and relevant ingredients that together make this grand narrative of nationalist discourse. I then look at implications of retelling history for a young audience.

### The nationalist story

Ian McBride states that in Ireland "...the interpretation of the past has always been at the heart of national conflict." (McBride 2001-1: 1). Whereas the Troubles can be seen and analysed as a violent protest against contemporary, perceived injustice, the conflict becomes linked to history through the discourse used to frame the events. The deadly 'sticks and stones' are only one part of the fight, the other part is fought out in cultural elements: words, rituals, songs and symbols. This is why the outbreak of republican violence in the 1960's urged politicians and historians to a different response to nationalist discourse, and not just in Northern-Ireland. Afraid the violence might cross the border, the Republic's government too felt the need to revise ideology and its

(commemoration of) history too (Perry 2010: 330). As one of its results, the annual state parade commemorating the Rising was cancelled in 1970, because some argued it inspired the republican violence in the North (Beiner 2007: 366). But a (violent) discourse cannot simply be changed by cancelling a parade. Ideological discourse is not just part of the fighting parties, or the politicians and academia, but is embedded in the whole of society, from media and literature, down to the children in the street.

Nationalism is defined by Ernest Gellner as "primarily a political principle which holds that the national and political unity should be congruent" (quoted by Demmers 2012: 33). There is no one Irish nationalist or republican discourse, as the ideas and ideals differ per group, per person even, and change over time (Beiner 2007: 377). In general, Irish nationalism sees all people born in Ireland as Irish. These Irish share a joint history and culture, and should live in a united island of Ireland, free from the rule of coloniser Britain. Constitutional nationalists strive to achieve a sovereign nation state through politics, revolutionary nationalists deem violence the only way to independence.

### **-cultural heritage**

After partial Irish independence in 1921, the new government chose a policy of conservative nationalism. It adopted many images and sentiments of the nationalist strand of the Literary Revival, but also introduced its own strict censorship. In this modern nationalism, Catholicism became a fixed element of Irish identity. In its imagery the discourse preferred the countryside over the city, with a special place for the west of Ireland. Old (pre-English) legends and heroes served as examples of how Ireland and the Irish should be. Kevin Whelan summarises the discourse of the Republic's government as "Catholic, not Protestant; rural, not urban; Celtic, not Anglo-Saxon; agrarian, not industrial; religious, not secular..." (Whelan 2004: 183). Many of these elements have continued on into the modern nationalist discourse. Richard Kearney furthermore distinguishes two important myths of the modern nationalism: motherland and martyrdom.

### **-mothers**

Usually, with young protagonists, the protagonist's parents play an important role in the story. In Irish culture too family life is an important theme, where the mother-figure has gotten a symbolical role in nationalist discourse. In this Irish 'myth of motherland' the woman as a personification of Ireland goes by the name of Caitlín or Kathleen ní Houlihan.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes described as a young lady, emblem of purity, she is also known as the 'Sean-Bhean Bhocht', the poor old woman who

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<sup>5</sup> . A female personification of the nation is a common image found in (nationalist) discourses from all over the world. Well known examples are Britain's 'Lady Britannia', 'Marianne' symbolising the French Republic, and 'Bharat Mata' or 'mother India'. The mythical female figure often represents the purity of the young virgin, or a mother-figure, in a vulnerable or battle-ready position.

asks of the young men, her sons, to right the wrongs and free Ireland. The image of the victimized Irish woman is as old as the eighteenth century, but the Gaelic Revival and (post-)Rising discourse embedded it in the 'popular imaginary' (Kearney 1997: 118; Beiner 2007: 374). The 1916 Easter proclamation of independence even opens with this image.

In post-independence literature everyday family life took over the themes of heroes and adventure. In this less romanticised depiction of family life, Declan Kiberd notices a strong mother-son relation, as opposed to the children's relation with the weak father-figure, who has "lost face" for either working with the British or having retreated into alcoholism and unemployment (Kiberd 1997: 380).

### **-victimhood**

The sense of victimhood doesn't only stem from the Irish underdog position when it comes to military power, but has its roots in the Irish position as a colonized people who have been disadvantaged politically, economically and culturally by British rule. This is reflected in imagery such as Kathleen ní Houlihan, who loses her land. In this narrative of victimhood protest against suppression becomes a noble and logical consequence. When this protest then is beaten down in an unbalanced battle, the victimhood of the present adds to of victimhood of the past. Guy Beiner shows how throughout time these "humiliating defeats" were commemorated through a theme of "triumph in defeat" (Beiner 2007: 367, 378). The lost fight is interpreted as a stage in the ongoing battle, that will one day lead to victory. Those who died, made a heroic and righteous sacrifice for freedom. The hunger strikes by imprisoned IRA members in the 1980's confirmed the image of the nationalists as brave victims willing to sacrifice themselves for the Cause, which was better propaganda for the IRA than its bomb-strikes were (Kearney 1997: 111).

### **-revision**

In the 60's and 70s, when Northern Ireland was caught in the Troubles, revisionism grew as historians set out to 'demythologise' the past (Boyce & O'Day 1996: 6; McBride 2001: 38). Where in the first decades after 1916 the Rising got very little attention from historians - and when discussed, its leaders were often granted the status of martyrs- now a more critical stance on the rebel leaders was adopted (Boyce 1996: 163, 166). This led to a heated debate on how to write about the Irish past. According to critics of the revised histories, the traumatic events were ignored or downplayed (Beiner 2007: 369; Perry 2010: 330).

## **The story for children**

What defines a children's book? The most simple but still contestable answer is: a book written specifically for children. Generally, when writing for children, authors abide to certain unwritten rules on theme, style and perspective that are supposed to make the text suitable for a younger audience. When it comes to rewriting history, children's literature knows the same pitfalls as historical fiction for adults, but also adds some of its own.

### **-connection to the events**

The popular coming-of-age theme is often connected to the historical events. The popularity of the theme in part has to do with the age and interests of the intended reader, as historical novels are often written for a 10+ audience (Thaler 2003: 4). When history and fiction collide, for example through the encounter with a historical character, the historical event or the historical character often influence the development of the protagonist from child to adult (Thaler 2003: 8). The fictional protagonists, along with the reader, is the one learning lessons, the lesson has to come from secondary characters (Nikolajeva 2001: 396).

### **-perspective**

Historical fiction seems a contradiction in terminus. How can a historical narrative remain historical when parts of the story are made up? In children's literature this is more problematic, as we often find a protagonist of the same age the intended but history generally concerns adults reader (Nikolajeva 2001: 396; Thaler 2003: 4). Of course there children in the past, but their role – if any- in important events was usually that of non-acting bystanders, about whom little is known. Danielle Thaler shows how in French novels for children the protagonist is often a fully fictional character with a fictional plot, with the historical characters and events serving as a background (Thaler 2003: 5). This in contrast to general historical fiction, which is less hesitant to have historical characters as protagonists or at least important characters.

The lives of the young character(s) however can also come to narrate a history of its own. They may not be part of the Great Events, but their adventures in everyday life "... bears witness to the atmosphere and way of life in the period depicted" (Thaler 2003: 5).

### **-point of view**

In general, in a well-written work, the protagonist is the character that the reader develops some kind of sympathy and empathy towards. The reader has to care about what happens to the character (Chambers 1985: 360). This doesn't mean the protagonist is to be good or reasonable all the time; literary history has shown even evil characters can be made likeable, understandable or

at least interesting. It does mean that the reader in some way needs to positively relate to the character's motivation and goals. His or her actions have to be made a convincing and understandable result of the situation given, maybe even an action the reader feels he or she would take when in that same position.

This means that in this positioning antagonistic characters become 'the Other' to both protagonist and (in part) reader. It also means that when the protagonist's goals are related to violent conflict, the reader is thus asked to relate to choices for or against violence. The opinion a reader forms can be heavily influenced by the text. A third-person narrative does not guarantee an escape from this inevitable manipulation: a extradiegetic narrator or implied author often tries to form his own friendly bond with the reader (Chambers 1985: 359, 360).

### **-themes**

Besides the coming-of-age theme, other themes in children's literature are of course varied. But the protagonist's young age leads to the recurrence of relationships important in almost every child's life: family and friends. At an older age love and sexuality join these almost omnipresent themes, but for our 10+ audience this will probably be kept at a minimum. The family theme will prove an interesting connection with the myth of motherland.

## 2. The Young Rebels

*The Young Rebel's* protagonist and narrator, eleven-year-old John Joe, is introduced as a 'difficult kid'. We first meet him in September 1913, on his second day of school at St. Enda's, a (non-fictional) secondary boarding school for boys, just outside Dublin. The school was founded in 1908 by Patrick Pearse<sup>6</sup>, one of the signatories and leaders of the Easter Rising, and one of the main characters in this novel. Pearse takes John Joe under his wing and introduces him to Irish history, Irish culture, and nationalist politics. John Joe becomes a member of the Fianna Éireann<sup>7</sup>, who are involved in the plans of Pearse and company to start a rising against British rule. Not allowed to join the actual fight, John Joe and his friend Roger sneak into Dublin to witness the Rising, and end up right in the middle of it.

### A true Irishman

John Joe's story is a coming-of-age narrative in which the character grows from a boy to (self-acclaimed) manhood. As in the Irish schoolboy novels, the path to adulthood is connected to the Irish identity. The Irish identity as portrayed in *The Young Rebels* consists of all the cultural and political ingredients of nationalism. In the first chapter John Joe declares his hatred of everything and everyone: the Headmaster (Pearse), the children in school and the school itself. He also hates Brussels sprouts, the Irish language - "... the language of poverty" - and history which, he claims, has nothing to do with him (Llywelyn 2006: 12, 13). As the story progresses, John Joe comes to love all of these - his home grown Brussels sprouts included. A good, Irish man, the text tells us, speaks Irish, plays hurling, and knows and cares about Irish (not British!) history. The most important proof of manhood, however, is political conviction. As Patrick Pearse becomes more and more involved in the resistance, the boys in the school are taken along. Their education comes with a nationalist vision and discourse, and cultural heritage is intrinsically linked to revolutionary nationalism. This message is not only present in John Joe's development, but also in that of his best friend. Close friendships are common narrative constructs in children's literature, as friendship is an important theme in children's lives. When the main character hooks up with the most unlikely of friends, a contrasting but sympathetic world view can be introduced into the story, which seems to be the case in *The Young Rebels*. At Saint Enda's John Joe somewhat reluctantly befriends Roger. They make a contrasting couple, as they differ in class, physical appearance and religion. But John

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6 After the execution of Patrick and his brother Willie Pearse for their involvement in the Rising, the school was reopened by their mother. The school closed down again in 1935.

7 Fianna Éireann (the warriors of Ireland) was a nationalist youth organisation that was established in 1909 by Countess Constance Markievicz and Bulmer Hobson. Several members of the Fianna participated in the Rising and later in the War of Independence and the Civil war. These kind of pseudo-military boy scouts were no Irish phenomenon; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century similar organisations could be found all over Europe (Hay 2008: 53).

Joe emphasises how Saint Enda rules treat all boys alike when it comes to class and religion: "'It is the same God for all of us,' the Ardmáistir says" (Llywelyn 2006: 23). The same tolerance is expected of the pupils. Especially on the theme of religion the narrative clearly diverts from modern nationalist discourse. Yet in spite of this tolerance, a closer reading reveals how in fact one political point of view is regarded superior to the other. The descriptions of Roger, as told by John Joe, often has a negative tone. It is implied that Roger is not as smart, tough, or fit as John Joe is. Roger is slower in his embrace of the Irish heritage and doesn't want to talk politics, so John Joe concludes that Roger, unlike himself, is not ready to be a man yet (Llywelyn 2006: 91). Roger's unionist stance changes as the story develops. Basically Roger goes through the same changes as John Joe, but at a slower pace, coming from 'farther away'. The teachings at Saint Enda's and the death of one of his brothers in the Great War turn Roger from a snobbish unionist to a brave and fit, protestant nationalist. The climax in his development is illustrated when John Joe argues with a desk clerk, who complains about the Rising disturbing the perfectly fine situation in Ireland. Roger unexpectedly backs his friend up:

Roger retorts, 'It may have been fine for you. You have a job and enough food to put in your belly. But there are thousands of people in Dublin who go to bed hungry every night. The authorities don't care. It's all right with them as long as plenty of Irish soldiers fight for King George's war, and plenty of Irish produce is shipped to English tables.'

I turn to stare at my friend. [...] Some time between the death of his brother and yesterday morning, Roger has turned into a rebel.

*(Llywelyn 2006: 119)*

Only as a rebel Roger earns John Joe's full respect. Because of the first-person narration, there is little room for the reader to think of Roger differently than from the perspective given by the narrator.

### **Defending the mother(land)**

The relationship of the protagonist to both his parents, can be read as an analogy of the nationalist's struggle, similar to the narrative of Kathleen ní Houlihan. John Joe's mother is an ill woman, who is verbally and physically abused by her violent husband. Her son suffers the same fate of abuse. When Pearse paints Ireland green on the world map, declaring the Irish republic in front of the children, it triggers a memory of abuse as well as revolt. At this point in the text the memory is only hinted at, to be shown several pages later:

Me cowering against the wall - I must have been no more than three or four years old -

and my little mother standing in front of me, shielding me with her body. I have committed some offence like wetting my bed and my father is determined to punish me severely. 'Over my dead body, Bertie!' Mam shouts at him. It is the most defiant act I've ever seen. She is a heroine, my mother.

He doubles his fist and clubs her to the floor.

*(Llywelyn 2006: 76)*

The double occurrence of this scene, because of John Joe's initial 'refusal' to remember, emphasises the importance of the event. Here weak Mother Ireland and her young son are being abused by brutal 'father' England. Several literal connections are made between the English and John Joe's father: he works for the (British ruled) government and he openly supports the English views on Ireland. He is an all out 'bad guy', showing no love or kindness anywhere in the text. The analogy justifies the nationalists struggle for Irish independence. The offence committed by the child is innocent, one that does not deserve severe punishment. One could even argue that it is natural for a child to sometimes wet his bed. In the same way that Pearse, in this text, considers sovereignty a natural given for any state (Llywelyn 2006: 30). So just as it is unreasonable for the father to get mad over a child wetting its bed, it is unreasonable for England to get mad over the Irish wanting sovereignty.

Later in the story, Pearse, representing nationalism, literally becomes the saviour of the child when he prevents John Joe from being beaten by his father (Llywelyn 2006: 37). In a room full of people, John Joe runs up to his father for comfort over the loss of his mother. The father then raises his hand to hit his son. Notable is how the other people present don't act, only Pearse dares to interfere, stressing his remarkable heroism.

With Pearse as a role model, the defenceless young child becomes a man, now strong enough to rise against English rule and against his father's influence and ideas. But Pearse does not just step in as a father figure, but also overrules John Joe's mother. When the Fianna is set up John Joe wants to join them, but his mother won't give permission, afraid he'll get hurt (Llywelyn 2006: 22). Shortly after his mother dies, John Joe is called to Pearse's office. Pearse again suggests he should join the Fianna. When John Joe reminds Pearse of his mother's worries, Pearse replies: "'It will not worry her now,' [...] 'Shall we try again?'" (Llywelyn 2006: 37) The text here is free of irony or anything that may question this - in my opinion- questionable dismissal of the mother's expressed wishes. To the adult reader, it is not difficult to read John Joe's 'rescue' by Pearse as the indoctrination by an adult of an angry and vulnerable young man. Yet it is doubtful whether the 10+ target audience will read into this other interpretation without guidance. Likewise the analogy of domestic violence skilfully translates the situation of the Irish as perceived by the nationalists to a story more comprehensible for a 10+ audience. Through this analogy the violence of the

nationalists against the British is justified, overruling the mythical mother-figure and reviving the myths of victimhood and martyrdom.

### **Victimhood and martyrdom**

Overlapping the myth of motherland are the (also overlapping) myths of victimhood and martyrdom. The short but significant scene of abuse discussed above, contains all three. We see how the child and mother are both victims of the father. The mother defies the abuse, willing to 'die while trying'. The narrator calls her a heroine for doing so, after which the heroine becomes a martyr of sorts when she is mercilessly 'clubbed to the floor' by the much stronger father-character.

Besides the mother, Pearse provides for a role model on martyrdom. Almost a biographical work about Pearse, *The Young Rebels* without exception presents Pearse as a hero, on both a personal and public level. He takes care of John Joe, who can stay at the school during the summer holiday, and spends Christmas with the Pearse family. Pearse becomes the father John Joe never had, tousling his hair ("My father never tousled my hair."<sup>8</sup> (Llywelyn 2006: 109)). Pearse and James Connolly are remembered by John Joe as "the bravest men ever born in Ireland" and the execution of Pearse is compared to executing George Washington (Llywelyn 2006: 145, 147). Through John Joe's narration the historical characters become martyrs.

On the level of the personal narrative the Easter Rising functions as the climax of John Joe's transformation from a victim into a true Irish rebel, and possible. It is then that he gets the chance to show himself prepared to die for Ireland. On the final day of the Rising, when a messenger announces a shortage of stretcher-bearers, John Joe volunteers. He and Roger are moved to the General Post Office (GPO), the rebel's headquarters. When they have to retreat from the GPO, John Joe is assigned the honourable task to carry the wounded James Connolly.

No sooner do we leave the protection of the post office doorway than British snipers open up on us. [...] In another moment the hidden sniper will have James Connolly in his sights.

I hurl myself across the stretcher, shielding Connolly's body with my own.

(Llywelyn 2006: 141)

Like his heroic mother, John Joe steps in between the victim and a 'fist' that is sure to knock him down. Bravery and loyalty to the Irish cause is equalled with the will to sacrifice your life, even in a battle you are bound to lose.

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8 Note the past tense. John Joe's father doesn't die in the story.

The voices of nationalism are represented by historical characters such as Patrick Pearse, James Connolly and Constance Markievicz. In the encounter between the fictional main character and the non-fictional character, history and fiction collide. Especially when the encounter involves a conversation, or even a plot-changing action, the reader is left to question where fiction ends and historical fact starts.

### **The wrong battle**

As explained earlier, the Irish (his)story of World War has always been problematic. The reception of the Battle of the Somme by the unionists 'claimed' its commemoration. In nationalist discourse this led to the interpretation that the war was an 'English' war. In *The Young Rebels* there is no room for this revision of this grand narrative. Instead, WWI serves as another example of the victimisation of the Irish. Before the war has started, it is commented on through the voices of Patrick Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh<sup>9</sup>, who accuse the English of using the Irish soldiers as "cannon fodder" (Llywelyn 2006: 42). The main character adopts this rhetoric, comparing Belgium to Ireland: where England goes out to fight for Belgium's independence, it denies the Irish their Home Rule (Llywelyn 2006: 59). The secondary narrative of the Great War adds to the myth of victimhood, pushing Roger to embrace nationalist discourse, while at the same time urges the nationalists into the Rising, as a window of opportunity to strike the English at a weak moment (Llywelyn 2006: 60). To John Joe the English and the unionists become the enemy, alongside his father. All characters representing 'Others', such as the hotel clerk, or 'a man with a bowler hat', are flat characters who John Joe only fleetingly meets. No British soldiers or Irish serving the British army are met or given a voice otherwise.

Along this nationalist line, the text makes a distinction between victimhood and violence of the Self and that of the Other. When Roger's brother dies, the soldier's death is categorised by John Joe as a "sacrifice for a cause that was not his" (Llywelyn 2006: 82). The death of Roger's brother is told in the same breath as the (natural) death of an Irishman who "... has spent his life in the struggle of Ireland's freedom". A distinction is made between the two lives, or rather, deaths. One a useless death for the wrong battle, the other the end of an honourable life by fighting the right one.

Likewise, the myths of victimhood and motherland are used exclusively to justify the violent actions of the nationalists. Through its comparison with the domestic violence in John Joe's life, the defensive actions against the brutal English is made logical. There is only one point in the text

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas MacDonagh was a teacher and poet who was actively involved in the nationalist movement. He was one of the signatories of the proclamation of independence and one of the battalion commandants during the Rising.

where the main character expresses doubt about violence. Hearing about the Christmas Truce<sup>10</sup> by the WWI soldiers, John Joe realises that without people willing to fight, there wouldn't be wars. But then, he wonders, what would one do if your country is attacked or occupied? He asks Pearse, who explains to him: "War is a terrible thing but war is not an evil thing. It is the things that make war necessary that are evil." (Llywelyn 2006: 68). The violent revolt against the English is seen as the only road to freedom, and self-sacrifice the logical means to this end. However, the violence of WWI and the violent responses of the British army to the Rising are met with disbelief about such cruelty. When entering the GPO, John Joe is surprised by the "dreadful damage" done by the British artillery (Llywelyn 2006: 137). The destruction done by the rebels to change the place into a battle station is left unmentioned, as are any soldiers or civilians who may have died from rebel guns.

The perspective of the child protagonist doesn't effect this one sided view of violence. Even children can join, the story tells us. The protagonist is praised for coming to Dublin, both literally by the characters, as by the choice of words and image for his moments of 'heroism'. When Pearse decides to surrender to prevent more bloodshed, John Joe is disappointed and he regrets not having fired his gun (Llywelyn 2006: 145). Nobody, neither the characters, nor the (implied) author, corrects this statement, leaving it up to the young reader to dare contradict the main character. The strict first-person narration makes this difficult in two ways: it makes it impossible for a narrator to put events into another perspective, and it leaves the reader with no one else to sympathise with.

Although a product of the twenty-first century, the narrative construction of *The Young Rebels* as well as its moral of blood-sacrifice in the name of nationhood show a striking similarity to the children's books during the Irish Revival of the early twentieth century (West 1994: 172). In the final paragraphs of the novel, a promising turn is given to the loss of the battle, as it has changed the attitude of all the Irish and made more of them ready to continue the war: "It's up to us to prove their sacrifice was worth it. I mean to do my best" (Llywelyn 2006: 148) It is a call to arms almost, that rings on to the reader in the present who might believe the war hasn't been won yet. And, as more current history of Ireland and Northern-Ireland has shown, there are those who feel this way.

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10 The Christmas Truce was an unofficial truce between German, English and French soldiers in the week before Christmas, 1914. On several battlefields soldiers left their trenches and exchanged holiday greetings, and shared rations and souvenirs.

### 3. The Guns of Easter

*The Guns of Easter* (1996) is the writing debut of Gerard Whelan. This novel too tell the story of the 1916 events mainly from a child's perspective. The story starts only several weeks before Easter and quickly jumps on to Easter Monday. Main character Jimmy Conway and his family live in the city centre, and end up right in the middle of the violence. After an introduction to Jimmy's life in Dublin, his family and his uncle Mick, who is a member of the Irish Volunteers, the Rising starts. This is the kernel for the novel's main plot: the journey of the twelve-year-old protagonist through a city at war, in an attempt to feed his hungry family. The story ends on Friday, when Jimmy has returned safely with his treasure of food.

In his comparative article Padraic Whyte criticises the way the 'historical landmarks' are represented in *The Guns of Easter*. According to Whyte, public history comes to overshadow the private history of Jimmy: "He appears to float from historical landmark to historical landmark, as the novel transforms itself from the adventures of a boy during 1916 to a version of 1916 for young children" (Whyte 2004: 122). This development, where the public history becomes the primary narrative and the private history takes a secondary position, is cause for alarm according to Whyte, as public histories "... often gloss over the complexities of the Irish past and subsequently adhere to versions of history that serve to marginalise certain contemporary struggles while promoting others." (Whyte 2004: 124). In other words, an emphasis on public history tends to repeat either the familiar nationalist or the revised discourse and link it to modern day issues. He concludes that *The Guns of Easter* depicts a linear, public history, whereas *No Peace for Amelia* offers more conflicting historical narratives and forgotten ideals that challenge dominant histories, leaving room for the readers to draw their own conclusion (Whyte 2004: 129). To a certain extent *The Guns of Easter* does draw from a familiar grand narrative, but, as we will see, compared to *The Young Rebels* its source shows to be noticeably fresher, closer in fact to the revised grand narrative the Republic has tried to establish.

#### The poor bystander

*The Guns of Easter* is told through a third-person, omniscient narrator. Focalisation switches, offering an inside look into the mind and secrets of different characters, mainly Jimmy and his mother Lily. Main cultural elements of nationalist discourse such as the Irish language and Catholicism are left unmentioned in the novel. The culture that we are introduced to is that of the poorest of Dublin, which adds a critical note to the Rising rather than a supportive one. When the GPO is closed down, the soldier's wives are unable to get their separation pension, depriving them

of their main income (Whelan 1996: 40). The novel also extensively describes the looting in the city centre, an event hardly mentioned in *The Young Rebels*. Not only are the rebels unable to prevent the looting, the shocked Volunteers Jimmy meets are unable to understand it, since they come "... from a comfortable home." (Whelan 1996: 83). This raises the critical (and rhetorical) question whether the rebels really represent 'the Irish people'.

As a travelling character Jimmy gets to witness many different historical scenes, and meet a variety of parties in the conflict. This in contrast to John Joe, whose field of view is limited to the preparations by the nationalists. As a climax in the violent scenes, the already confused Jimmy witnesses the confrontation between the rebels and the British army on Mount Street Bridge. This scene, in which British soldiers tried to enter the city through the bridge, but were ambushed by the rebels, is described extensively over several pages. It depicts the surreal situation where civilians watch a battlefield from only a few yards away, running in to pick up the wounded when the fighting stops, to flee again when the whistle announces another British charge. With the rebels hidden in the houses, Jimmy only sees the British side of the "slaughter". Through Jimmy's eyes, the scene is described as "the worst thing in the world" and "madness". The protagonist's empathy here lies with the soldiers on the bridge, who he recognizes to be "... fathers and brothers and sons and uncles. They were good men or bad men, mean or decent men, heroes or cowards" (Whelan 1996: 128). In contrast to *The Young Rebels*, this text acknowledges victimhood on both sides of the conflict. Jimmy's doubt, horror and disbelief concerns the violence from all sides, instead of the monolithic justification of nationalist violence and condemnation of all British violence.

### **The wrong battle?**

"It was time to enter enemy territory" (Whelan 1996: 95). With this promising sentence chapter 12 ends and Jimmy's adventure starts. The 'enemy' here is the British army that is standing between Jimmy's house and that of his aunt. Their animosity is initially confirmed in the first encounter with the soldiers. The British sergeant trying to prevent Jimmy from being shot, is described as red faced, with a Northern Irish accent and glaring eyes (Whelan 1996: 98). He 'growls', 'grabs' Jimmy, 'flings' him to the ground and 'grips' his arm tightly. Not only is the sergeant's face red, it hard and rough and has a scar on the cheek. All in all a pretty violent encounter with a character that in the mind's eye by now resembles the typical 'bad guy', which is confirmed as silently concludes "This man, now, did look like an enemy"<sup>11</sup> (Whelan 1996: 99). Jimmy's and the reader's first impression of the sergeant is turned around when on the next page the man shows understanding for the

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11 This awareness of the stereotype suggests irony, but at this point Jimmy doesn't seem an ironic character. Previous irony in the text reads as commentary of the narrator, not of Jimmy. Besides, as Whyte notes, this kind of irony might not be picked up by the young readers.

looting considering the living situations in the slums of Dublin (Whelan 1996: 100), proving himself more knowledgeable than the Irish Volunteer who despaired over the looting. Some of the other soldiers also help Jimmy out, collect money for him and openly doubt the rightness of their actions. This difficulty of deciding right from wrong and good from bad is the main theme of the novel. Jimmy constantly wavers in his opinion on what is going on around him. His father joining the British army has left Jimmy missing his father, but the steady income means less hungry weekends. Before the Rising starts, Jimmy daydreams of being in the cavalry and British soldiers "... were the most glamorous thing he knew" (Whelan 1996: 22-23). This dream shatters when he realises his father joined only for the money, possibly expecting to die in the war. Jimmy's ideas on war and soldiering start out romantic, until he realises his father may not make it back alive. Jimmy's position becomes more complicated when his uncle Mick joins the fight of the Rebels, shooting at Jimmy's father's 'colleagues'. "Are there any good causes? Ones worth dying for?" Jimmy asks his uncle (Whelan 1996: 41). He doesn't get an answer.

In spite of this, the descriptions of the British army seem to not really escape the label of enemy. The British are literally called 'the enemy' at two points, one of which is a chapter title *The Friendly Enemy*. Here the shifty focalisation that is used throughout the text causes confusion: is this labelling done by the narrator or by Jimmy? And how should this oxymoron be read: does the enemy turn out to be friendly, or is the friendliness of the few soldiers an exception in the otherwise confirmed animosity? In one of the final chapters Jimmy blurts out he'll "... *join no army!*" (Whelan 1996: 161). It can't be mistaken for a neutral or pacifistic opinion though, as he confidently shares an "*Up the rebels...*" with a soldier on that same page. These moments of siding against the British seem to contradict the moments where Jimmy wants to distance himself from the violence. Judging by the unclear shifting of focalisation, and some small discrepancies in Jimmy's character, I feel this is more a result of poor writing, than a conscious political statement. Nevertheless, this doesn't change the ambiguous message given to the young reader.

### **More violence**

There are two secondary stories of violence. First there is the story of Mr Meyer, a Jewish pawn shop owner from Austria, who had fled Austria because "many people there didn't like Jews" (Whelan 1996: 34). When WWI started, his store in Dublin was vandalised because people thought he was German. He is told to now live in the west of Ireland, where they hate the British and are friendly to Mr Meyer, also mistaking him for a German. Then there is the story of uncle Charlie and aunt Ella. Jimmy hates aunt Ella for coming over to moan, cry, drink their expensive tea, and then get money from his mother. As far as Jimmy knows, Ella has married middle-class Charlie

and is far better off than they are. In the end of the story, after he himself has been harassed by Charlie, Jimmy learns that Ella is beaten by her husband, who also spends all their money on alcohol. Again we have a story of domestic violence. The latter story is connected to the plot, as Charlie is an active antagonist who prevents Jimmy from getting his food. But neither of these stories is directly connected to the political violence of the Rising or WWI. Their connection is that in both cases, there is a misjudgement of the situation and characters. Jimmy's hate is misplaced, as is the violence against Mr Meyer. Like the Rising and WWI, the situations prove to be more complicated underneath the surface.

### **More voices of war**

The name of Jimmy's mother is Lily, a name suggesting a link to nationalist discourse, which has the lily for a symbol. She is described as "... a small woman, looking older than her age" (Whelan 1996: 14). The text emphasises the tough situation Lily is in, as well as her kindness towards her children and others. Her weakness is in her situation, now that her husband is off to war, and she is out of money and bound to the house because of a sick daughter. Here too we find a weak, absent father-character, leaving room for the son to step in and take his heroic place next to the mother. Yet in this text the *motif* of the mother is not supportive of nationalist discourse. At several points focalisation switches to Lily, giving her a voice of her own. This adds to the humanity of the character, showing her strength, and lessening the idea of Lily as a mere symbol. More importantly, in the narrative she distances herself from the both the "wars of men" (Whelan 1996: 166). She categorises Jimmy's journey as a battle in her own war: "... the fight to feed her children and keep her family whole and safe." (Whelan 1996: 165).

The story ends when this battle is finished, with Jimmy safely back home and his mother happy he survived. This ending further disputes Whyte's idea that public history of the Rising as the primary narrative, since the Rising is not yet over at this point. What could be argued is that the 'war' fought by Lily and her family is in fact a public narrative on the lives of the lower classes of Dublin in 1916.

The nationalist ideals present in the novel are voiced by the minor character of Jimmy's uncle Mick. Mick's nationalist vision is introduced through memories of debates between Mick and Jimmy's socialist father. Whyte notes a 'boyishness' in Mick, and refers to another element in the myth of motherland: besides a cause to fight for, the myth of motherland can also work to euphemise the violent acts of the mere 'children' (Whyte 2004: 123). Moreover, as in *The Young Rebels*, the child metaphor can strengthen the image of the nationalists as victims and the British as

brutal, overpowered aggressor. In *The Guns of Easter*, though, Mick's boyishness also makes it hard to take him seriously. Jimmy's mother treats her 21-year-old brother like a child, and shows her clear dislike of the Citizen Army. The nationalists he represents are not labelled as innocent children, but as silly children, their fight a waste of time. Especially coming from a likeable character as the mother, this is a strong opinion in the narrative.

The representation of the historical characters who have their 'cameo' in the novel, is similarly ambiguous. In *The Guns of Easter* Jimmy never meets historical characters, and his actions don't influence the course of history. Jimmy does see and recognise Patrick Pearse as the man fiercely speaking of violence and bloodshed, who is considered a lunatic by people, and supposedly "taught middle-class boys to worship bloodshed" (Whelan 1996: 54). As Pearse then walks to the GPO in preparation of the occupation "It was almost as though the three men [Pearse, James Connolly and Joseph Plunkett] were surrounded by a light that came from inside them that had nothing to do with the real Dublin that they were walking through." (Whelan 1996: 55) Whyte reads this paragraph as an "immediate glorification" and mythologising of the rebel leaders (Whyte 2004: 122). Yet besides the classification of Pearse as a possible lunatic, the whole scene jumps between Jimmy's emotions of wonder and awe, to descriptions of the clumsiness of the improvised armies and surrealism of the situation. The fact that the leaders are in a state that has "nothing to do with the real Dublin", can also be read as them walking in their own bubble, without any connection to reality. Yes, there is a discourse of glorification present, but it is balanced by a choice of words that outright questions this glorification.

I feel the danger here is not in excusing nationalist violence, but in the disregard for the actual injustice that was cause for protests such as the Rising (McBride 2001: 15). In *The Guns of Easter* this is forestalled, as Jimmy's living condition clearly shows something is amiss in the way people are forced to live. Also, Mick's political ideas are positioned next to the socialist ideas of Jimmy's father, who believes bosses to be the cause of Ireland's problems, rather than the British (Whelan 1996: 11). This acknowledges the problematic situation, while also showing how its cause and solution is up for debate.

So in spite of the strong presence of the public history, *The Guns of Easter* in its own way also shows a wide perspective on the past. Through the journey, the reader gets to meet different people in Dublin, and see both the Rising and to some extent WWI from different perspectives. These perspectives are somewhat simplified, as are the characters, which is part due to the brevity of encounters, and part due to the style of writing

## 4. No Peace for Amelia

*No Peace for Amelia* (1994), by Siobhán Parkinson, is the sequel to *Amelia*, but the books can be read independently. Protagonist Amelia Pim is the fifteen-year-old daughter of a middle class Quaker family. She lives outside the city centre with her parents, a younger brother and her grandmother. Amelia's everyday life is changed when her love interest Frederick, against all Quaker beliefs, signs up for the army. It forces her to think about war and the meaning of her pacifistic upbringing. The second protagonist, to whom the focalisation shifts in several chapters, is the families' catholic cook and servant Mary Ann, who is also a friend of Amelia's. Mary Ann lives with the Pim family, but has her widowed father and several brothers and sisters living in poverty somewhere in Dublin. Her brother Patrick is a member of the Irish Volunteers. Mary Ann shares Patrick's nationalist sympathies and initially supports the idea of the Rising. When he asks her to hide weapons in the Pim's house, she has to choose between loyalty to her brother and loyalty to her employers and friend.

### Best friends

Like in *The Young Rebels*, the two friends form another interesting pair. Amelia's worries mostly concern school, her overseas 'beau' and new hats. Mary Ann doesn't have any moments of vanity, on the contrary, in several scenes she is covered with ashes, greasy water, or blood. Her moment of dreamy poetics is triggered by the thought of becoming an Irish heroine "... like Queen Maeve or Granuaile" (Parkinson 1994: 36). But most of the time she reads papers to keep up on the political activities and worries about her rebel brother. Another important difference between the two girls is religion. The differences in belief and accompanying rituals are topics of debate at several moments throughout the novel, as are topics such as class and gender. The upcoming Easter holidays provide an excuse for these talks, but they are also connected to the World War as well as the Rising, as the Pim families' pacifism is related to their religion, and women's rights to WWI.<sup>12</sup> In the debates the girls sometimes row, but in general show curiosity and respect, up to the point where Amelia joins Mary Ann at mass.

The close relationship between the two girls gives the opportunity for a repeated dialogue and debate on pretty big themes between two relatively round characters. Unlike Jimmy, who on his journey does meet very different people with different opinions, but these meetings are all very brief. Because Jimmy's focus is on food and not on politics, and his trust in these characters is low, there is little time for deeper questions or debate. The different perspectives are literally

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12 As with the debate on Home Rule, the debate on women's rights was stopped when the war started.

summarised in a few paragraphs. With the best-friend character as used in *No Peace for Amelia*, along with the flexible focalisation, we can get to see a person behind these perspectives, with all doubts and internal struggles included.

As Whyte notes, *No Peace for Amelia* takes the refreshing perspective of a religious minority that was as much a part of the 1916 Irish society as lower class Jimmy, and middle class, catholic John Joe. The second protagonist represents the more usual narrative, comparable to that of Jimmy, yet from a female perspective. The narratives of the two conflicts, WWI and the Rising, are divided between the two protagonists, who draw each other into their story when in need of help: Mary Ann escorts Amelia to the docks to secretly say goodbye to Frederick, and Amelia helps Mary Ann's wounded brother. The level of tolerance in Amelia's family is explicit, especially concerning religion and political conviction. Also the binary stereotypes of protestants versus catholics and republicans versus unionists is resolved by the Quaker perspective, which adds the option of pacifism and reconciliation to the political side of the discourse.

But in the end, the narrative doesn't seem as open to different opinions as Whyte suggests, as it leads to a mutual pacifist attitude of all important characters. Mary Ann starts out in favour of an active and violent revolt against British rule (Parkinson 1994: 35). As the plans take shape, she gets mixed feelings. When she is asked to contribute in the Rising by hiding guns from the Volunteers in the Pim's house, she refuses. A letter from her brother makes her realise that he might be killed in the battle and she starts to hope the Rising doesn't take place. Her internal conflict mirrors Amelia's mixed feelings over WWI, who ends the story strengthened in her belief in pacifism. We see a similar development in other characters too: Amelia's younger brother who secretly owns a toy gun, converts back to seeing the use of a gun-free house. Soldier Frederick is miserable in the war and dies before getting a chance to actually fight. Even Mary Ann's rebel brother refuses to kill and throws away his pistol. When put to the test, these characters choose the non-violent way and are rewarded for this choice. In this sense there is as much a 'lesson' present for the reader as in *The Young Rebels*.

### **Voices of peace, letters of war**

*No Peace for Amelia* has a strong mother-character: Roberta Pim, who has a job and is involved in the women's rights movement. She is backed by a solid family, the only complete and happy family in all three novels. This mother is not calling her sons or daughters to fight, quite the opposite. She has nationalist sentiments, but is committed to resolving the problems of Ireland through reconciliation (Parkinson 1994: 79). The mother is a voice of pacifism and constitutional

nationalism.

However the nationalistic imagery of the mythical motherland is present in the novel, through the brother of Mary Ann. He writes to his sister: "I know that you are a strong and loyal girl and a true daughter of Ireland, and that you would play your part without heed for your own skin." (Parkinson 1994: 113). Throughout the novel Patrick, from a distance, voices the violent nationalistic ideals, from the duty of self sacrifice to a general mistrust of protestants. *No peace for Amelia* even more strongly belittles nationalist ideas. Patrick's first introduction is through a letter, written in poor handwriting with a blunt pencil and

... confused in its construction and tone, as if Patrick too was in the grip of a mixture of panicky and elated feelings. It was full of sentences that repeated from things that Mr Pearse, the leader of the rebels, had said, and bits of a poem by somebody else all about blood and roses, which was half like a prayer and half not.

(Parkinson 1994: 35)

In this combination of image and content Patrick seems unable to write properly (like a child), think clear, or think for himself. Patrick only physically enters the story when he has already partially decided for a more peaceful approach and has tossed away his gun. Carrying the message of surrender, he is actually a messenger of peace, even though he still believes he should be dying for his country (Parkinson 1994: 152). At this point neither Patrick nor Mary Ann seem concerned with the way the Rising is ending, the personal narrative has taken over and Patrick's survival is most important.

The reference to 'Mr Pearse' is one of the few references to the historical main characters of the Rising. Like in *The Guns of Easter* there is no direct encounter between the fictional protagonists and the historical characters. The two girls do see Countess Markievicz marching with the Citizen Army, which introduces the fact that a rebellion might be on its way to the reader as well as Amelia. The corresponding discourse is delivered by Mary Ann. Amelia later refers to what Mary Ann has told her when she tells her mother about the countess. Roberta calls the countess a "foolish woman" and the earlier arguments made by Mary Ann are refuted through the pacifist discourse (Parkinson 1994: 78). The historical characters are representatives of nationalist discourse, but are portrayed critically as possibly manipulative and certainly foolish for choosing violence.

## Victimhood

*No Peace for Amelia* sticks to a far more personal history, resulting in personal victims. The most obvious victim is Frederick, who dies on the WWI battlefield. But because his conscription is a-

political and not related to nationalism of unionism, it does not lead to a generalisation of victimhood, let alone a glorification of his death. Mary Ann's background offers the possibility to link her family's poverty to politics. Instead, it does not become clear how a free republic would change her personal situation. The antagonists are not the British, or the nationalists, and the story knows no real enemies. The most important antagonists are the girls themselves, wrestling with their views on the conflicts. Amelia shared the same romantic fantasies of warfare as Jimmy. She thinks of the war and soldiers as "gallant and adventurous", a "fight for justice and truth", the "defence of the Empire", "the protection of the innocent" and - ironically- out to defend "the rights of small countries to rule themselves and to resist invasion" (Parkinson 1994: 44). She feels thrilled at the sight of a recruitment poster and elated when she hears Frederick has enlisted, along with guilt and confusion because she has been taught that war is wrong (Parkinson 1994: 27, 44). These ideas are consistent with the naivety and unworldliness of her character. Reality starts to check in when Frederick writes about his hardship, with a climax later in the story when Amelia hears about his death.

After the Rising, a comrade-in-arms comes to tell Amelia how Frederick died. The story of Frederick's death refers to an actual historical event that took place at Hulluch, in the week of the Easter Rising. The German gas-attack killed and wounded hundreds of soldiers of the 16th Irish division. With this scene, *No Peace for Amelia* is also the only novel that gives us a glimpse behind the lines of the soldiers in Europe. In the representation of the soldiers fighting with the British army, we are given two different types, who again defy the stereotypes: one nameless young man with a 'soft country accent', and one middle class city boy, who supposedly joined to escape from his family life.

By placing the protagonists outside both of the 'warzones', *No Peace for Amelia* manages to give equal attention to the Easter Rising and World War. Because both WWI and the Rising are events that are only told about and because the events are divided over two main characters, the narrative of WWI gets equal (emotional) attention as the Rising. By its story on the battle of Hulluch it also reintroduces a part of history that has moved to the background of historiography.

Through their friendship the nationalistic, catholic, poor girl and the pacifistic, Quaker, rich girl share the effects both events have on their lives. Although Amelia mourns Frederick's death by herself, both girls get to rejoice in the happy ending. This ending is happy only because Patrick has survived; the result of WWI or the Rising is in the end of no consequence to the plot or the protagonists. This does not mean the text is without a political message to the modern reader, as the pacifistic moral is explicit. On the themes of war and violence the text doesn't leave as much room for the reader's own interpretation, contrary to what Padraic Whyte suggests.

## 5. Concluding

When asked to what extent we can see a revision of the nationalist discourse in these children's novels, each of the books provide us with a different answer. We can confirm that all texts represent an ideology, but not all of these ideologies are supportive of violence. When deducting whether violence is justified by the text, it is not enough to look at the presence of nationalist myths and elements, but also at who is representing them and how the protagonist responds to this character. Just as the meaning of historical events is not given by the events themselves, but by the people (re)telling them, I argue that it is not the measure in which public and private history are related, but the way the different characters respond to the historical events that determines the overall discourse of the novel. In the end, that is what it comes down to: representation of the different groups involved. By giving different groups involved a voice through a multiple faceted character, a monolithic discourse can be prevented. And although characters and events may be simplified for the intended audience, opinions may still be written in between the lines. Whether or not the younger readers will be able to see these details, can only be known by asking them.

Whyte's view on public and private history can prove interesting to see how the protagonist is connected to the historical events and what the primary story of the text is. Yet as Thaler suggests, and is shown in *The Guns of Easter* and *No Peace for Amelia*, distancing the protagonists from the grand narratives still causes the character's private histories to (seem to) represent a general historical truth on everyday life in 1916.

The role of the protagonist proves to be important, as the young characters are mostly surrounded by adults. All stories offered very few secondary characters to whom a reader could otherwise connect. The three stories show how the problem of positioning the child in a historical arena can be solved in three different ways: as actor, as bystander and as outsider. Likewise their relation to historical characters and the influence of the historical events to the personal plot differed. Yet there is no one on one correlation between any of these narrative constructs and the extent of nationalist discourse or justification of violence. Any suggestion that a first-person perspective from a character fighting in the Rising is by definition nationalist, is contradicted by *The Broken Harp (De gebroken harp)*, a young adult novel on 1916 by the Belgian author Aline Sax (published at Clavis Publishing in 2004), that would be an interesting addition in further studies on the representation of 1916.

What we can conclude also is that none of texts manages to tell something that resembles a whole story. Choices in protagonists or the focus on either the public or the personal story, shuts out other voices by definition. The choice of showing many voices, as in *The Guns of Easter*, seems to lead to flat characters and stereotypes. But imagine the richness of perspectives a readers gets

when reading two or even all three books. In a comparative reading approach all three books attribute to a debate that can follow either privately in the reader's mind, or guided in class or book club.

Those who have been paying attention will have noticed the comparison between the novels has gone awry chronically. (Well? Any idea where this is going?) *The Young Rebels* was published twelve years after *No Peace for Amelia*, and ten years after *The Guns of Easter*. So the book with the most traditional, nationalistic content is, in fact, the newest. *No Peace for Amelia* and *The Guns of Easter* were published before the 1998 Good Friday agreement was signed. Although the unionist perspective is not addressed, especially *No Peace for Amelia* has a message of peace that covers any conflict. *The Guns of Easter* emphasises the situation where Irish fight Irish, indirectly connecting it to the Troubles. Through its detailed description of the horrible results of the fight for freedom, it does give room for questions and confusion. In spite of its clichés and romantic portrayal of the main character, Jimmy's feelings may very well connect to those of children witnessing the violence in their country.

*The Young Rebels* was published long after the Peace Agreement, and close to the actual end of the violence that followed in the agreement's wake. If anything, it is interesting that such a call to arms was published so close to actual peace. It seems to prove that not all nationalists are ready to bury the hatchet. Or are *The Guns of Easter* and *No Peace for Amelia* outcasts in their broader discourse? A more general analysis of a larger corpus could answer if and how the discourse of revolutionary nationalism evolves in historical children's literature. Does it move along with the reconciliation that is taking place in political and social level, leap back to cling to the old rhetoric, or has it matured enough to find its own discourse, becoming leading instead of following like some grown-up books have proved to be?

Many of the themes addressed here are not exclusively relevant for the Irish conflict. The connection between the antagonistic other and violence on the one hand, and the role of best-friend, mother and father, as well as themes as the (romanticised) past, the enemy, victimhood and martyrdom on the other hand can prove useful starting points to analyse children's literature from any country on its contribution to war or peace. Again, not because we should prevent certain books from being published or read. *The Young Rebels* is a good and informative read, and offers a reader a useful insight in the motives of the nationalists. Most importantly they reflect the sentiments that live in a society. Sentiments that the writer and the publisher deem important to share with a younger audience. And some of these sentiments might require a little post-reading conversation at the dinner table.

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