This Is What I Inherit:

Domestic Elegy in the poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin

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Abstract

This thesis looks at how aspects of elegy are reworked in the domestic setting in Medbh McGuckian's *Captain Lavender* and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*. Divided into three parts, it first examines the oppression of women through motherhood in McGuckian's 'Porcelain Bells' and Ní Chuilleanáin's 'Translation' and 'Bessboro'. It then moves on to discuss the relationship between the father and the fatherland in McGuckian's 'Elegy for an Irish Speaker' and 'The Aisling Hat', as well as in Ní Chuilleanáin's 'In Her Other House'. Finally, it examines the connection between Irish conflict, particularly the Troubles, and the domestic setting in McGuckian's 'The Albert Chain' and 'Credenza' and 'Ní Chuilleanáin's 'A Stray'. This thesis concludes that in these poems, aspects of elegy are reworked in the domestic setting through an extension of personal grief and anger to larger issues concerning oppression and a national loss of culture and history.

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Introduction

To this day, the elegy retains a prominent position within Irish literature. Its ability to seek redress and give voice to loss make it unique in its ability to link lyric and history and put them in dialogue (Wills 595). However, past attempts to forge this relationship have resulted in an oppression of women owing to an association of the female image with the national cause, which simplified both (596-597). Nevertheless, more recent Irish poetry has witnessed a shift in this regard, as women turned from subjects of poems into their authors.

Through a discussion of Medbh McGuckian's *Captain Lavender* and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*, this thesis argues that these poets use aspects of elegy to link the private, domestic sphere to larger, public ideas, using this link to portray the elegy as anti-consolatory, break through traditional gender roles, resist the negation of Irish history and to portray its subsequent fractured state.

First, it must be noted that although both McGuckian's and Ní Chuilleanáin's poems are of elegiacal nature, it is not the traditional elegy which they resemble. Sacks defines this as "a poem of mortal loss and consolation." (3) in which "Each procedure or resolution is essentially defensive, requiring a detachment of affection from a prior object followed by a reattachment of the affection elsewhere. At the core of each procedure is the renunciatory experience of loss and the acceptance, not just of a substitute, but of the very means and practice of substitution." (8). Sacks depicts the elegy as a means through which the speaker is able to move on from grief.

McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin, however, resist this idea of consolation, instead turning towards anger and conflict in their poetry of loss. This resembles Ramazani's ideas on elegy as adapted by modern poets: "They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating

and resisting the traditional psychology, structure and imagery of the genre." (1). Ramazani continues that "In becoming anti-elegiac, the modern elegy more radically violates previous generic norms than did earlier phases of elegy: it becomes anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary." (2). The modern elegy becomes "an open wound" (4), through which the poet immerses herself in grief.

How then is this apparent in *Captain Lavender* and *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*? This thesis will examine how McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin use aspects of the modern elegy in the domestic setting to link personal to national through an examination of oppression of women through motherhood, the relationship between the father and the fatherland, and finally the poets' depiction of Irish conflict in relation to domestic imagery.

Chapter 1: Oppression of Women through Motherhood

Traditionally, Irish literature has confined women to roles relating to the national, as mothers or Lady Éire. This kept women from creating their own voice, instead limited to remaining literature's subjects. The past forty years, however, witnessed a change in which women turned from subjects into writers of poetry (Hannon and Wright 58). This chapter examines in what ways McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin make use of motherhood to advocate for a remembrance of a history that has been oppressive to women.

In 'Porcelain Bells', McGuckian uses the connection between the mother-figure and the speaker to make apparent female oppression through patriarchal traditions, while also giving voice to personal loss. The title is linked to the image of the mother-figure, through its dedication to McGuckian's own mother. This subsequently links notions of vulnerability and feminine domesticity to the mother-figure, a porcelain bell being both fragile and decorative. In 'Candles at Three Thirty', the mother becomes the world to the child (Sullivan 82) through a link between elemental imagery and the relationship between mother and child through the final two stanzas:

> But now the intensification
>
> of light in the lower sky
>
> like a stairway outside
>
> the side of a house
>
>
> acts directly on the blood,
>
> not the mind, to make the sea

appear more light than water,

familiar as a fireside. (McGuckian 15-16)

Via the image of the house, as well as a play on the proverb ‘blood runs thicker than water’, McGuckian puts emphasis on the bond that exists between family, which she uses to stress grief in parts two and three of ‘Porcelain Bells’.

In ‘Story Between Two Notes’, McGuckian turns from elemental imagery to the theme of female oppression in:

Even after your death when you are alone

your mysteriously-suppressed

name-sickness

will weave itself into all I see. (16)

Here, McGuckian connects the speaker’s relationship with the mother to the larger phenomenon of female oppression through a suppression of identity. The mother’s demise is caused by a “mysteriously-suppressed / name-sickness”, which Sullivan explains as the patriarchal tradition because of which women give up their maiden name upon marrying (82). This illness does not just affect the mother but the daughter too, as it weaves patriarchal oppression “into all I see.” (16). McGuckian returns to this issue in the final two stanzas, in which she offers hope for a future without this oppression. Interaction between mother and daughter has brought a “beginning / of a normal, if still secret, name.” (17). This name seems free of “name-sickness” (16), as it is filled “entirely with yourself” (17). McGuckian hints to a form of resurrection of the

mother through resuscitation, reiterated in “the sound missing my ear / is that of the silence of your heart.” (17)

She continues this notion of doubt concerning the mother’s death in ‘Speaking into the Candles’. The speaker argues that “This death you have nourished is too orderly, its fragrance too convincing.” (17) and “the mirror hardly believes it.” (17). This doubt, however, turns into accusation as the speaker faces her mother’s death in “Leaving the room, you break off a piece of the world / around which my life is standing,” (18) and “What do you care if I, your younger mouth, / stay or leave, though your dress shone upon me / when it willed me into existence?” (18). The speaker immerses herself in grief, projecting loss and anger onto the deceased through the lyrical ‘you’, emphasizing the modern elegiacal aspects of ‘Porcelain Bells”. This anti-consolatory stance is reinforced by the speaker claiming that “I will survive this late-speaking love / when morning becomes conscious, / it is no longer possible –” (19), through which McGuckian indicates that mourning should be an emotional rather than logical process, advocating for remembrance instead of moving on. This is reiterated through “I will dive you back to earth”, in which she might imply that the mother is brought back to life through remembrance.

Similar to ‘Porcelain Bells’, Ní Chuilleanáin’s ‘Translation’ and ‘Bessboro’ advocate for remembrance. Rather than relating to motherhood through a personal connection, Ní Chuilleanáin’s speakers in ‘Translation’ and ‘Bessboro’ are connected to the mothers in these poems through a shared female identity, looking back upon the dark history of the Magdalene laundries.

It is interesting to note that, while Ní Chuilleanáin advocates for a remembrance of the cruelty of these asylums in these poems published in 2001, the extent of the horrors did not come

to light until January 2021, in the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. Although the function of the asylums was to rehabilitate, a partnership between the Catholic church and the Irish Free State encouraged a transformation through which they instead became a place of confining those who deviated from society's moral standard, most notably mothers who had become pregnant outside of wedlock, mothers who had killed their babies, prostitutes and young women who came directly from industrial schools (Smith 46-47). Although legally these women stayed in these homes of their own accord, the truth was less simple. Most girls had nowhere to go or might find themselves rounded up by the police upon running away (Finnerty). Other congregations attached conditions to their release, for example that they had to have a suitable place to go upon being released. (46). These circumstances turned the asylums into places of confinement, where women were so separated from the outside world that girls would be quizzed upon arrival, the women inside being desperate for information about the outside world (Finnerty).

'Translation', written "*for the reburial of the Magdalenes*" (Ní Chuilleanáin 25), looks back upon such an asylum. The poem portrays the inside of a Magdalen laundry, in which violent imagery is put alongside evocations of innocent youthfulness through "White light blinded and bleached out / The high relief of a glance, where steam danced / Around stoned drains and giggled and slipped across water." (25). 'Translation' is a poem of redress in that it seeks to "even the score" (25), to put right the injustice done to these women. Ní Chuilleanáin does so through confession, but where history depicted the unmarried women as sinners, it is a nun complicit to running a Magdalen laundry who confesses in Ní Chuilleanáin's 'Translation':

> Washed clean of idiom · the baked crust
>
> Of words that made my temporary name ·

A parasite that grew in me · that spell

Lifted · I lie in earth sifted to dust ·

Let the bunched keys I bore slacken and fall ·

I rise and forget · a cloud over my time. (25)

Ní Chuilleanáin uses the confession to reverse the national perspective of who actually bore blame in the Magdalen asylums, and to recognize its complicated nature. She indicates that while such nuns acted cruelly, they too were influenced by the Catholic church and the Irish Free State and should, after confession and repentance, be allowed to come to rest.

'Bessboro' also looks back upon Irish cruelty to women, specifically upon the Bessborough Mother and Baby Home. Almost ten thousand mothers entered the home, which operated from 1922 until 1999, and just under nine thousand children were born or reared there. Of these children, roughly ten percent died, and many of them lie in unmarked graves on the Bessborough grounds (Laffan). The women were told not to speak about the outside world and were given a new name, in order to separate them from the outside world and their own identity. (Finnerty). They were put to hard, unpaid work, even while pregnant. Furthermore, during childbirth women were not given any anaesthetics, as they had "to suffer for their sins" (Roche).

In 'Bessboro', the speaker returns to this place of cruelty after the home has closed. In "This is what I inherit –" (Ní Chuilleanáin 26), Ní Chuilleanáin links the speaker to the women kept inside the Bessborough home through shared womanhood, as the speaker reflects that she might have been one of those women who ended up inside the home. 'Bessboro' is a poem in which separation of those inside and outside the home is emphasized through architectural remains, evoking secrecy and containment through the image of a gate (Haberstroh 91). This

separation, in the present-day of the poem, turns into an absence of not just these women, but of history too. The home physically remains, but there is no remembrance of its injustice (Clutterbuck 145). History has been hidden through “a halfdrawn lace of mist” (26) which “Hides elements of the known” (26).

Ní Chuilleanáin, however, here also hints at a link between private and public in “Hides elements of the known” (26), which was hinted at earlier in “It was never my own life, / But a house’s name I heard / And others heard as warning” (26). She hints at an awareness of those outside the home of what went on inside, deliberately choosing to ignore the home’s practices. Through this implication, Irish citizens themselves become complicit in the erasure of the home’s cruel history. Ní Chuilleanáin herself, on the other hand, reclaims this history through ‘Bessboro’, turning the Bessborough grounds into a place where flowers are born from blood in an image resembling the sacrifice of Christ (Coughlan 167). Through this image, Ní Chuilleanáin implies that hope for a brighter future lies within an acknowledgement of the past.

Chapter 2: The Father and the Fatherland

Considering the previous chapter, the image of the Irish father seems inextricably linked to patriarchal values of traditional Ireland. However, this chapter argues that the father-figure can also be used to subvert these values and their oppressive nature. In McGuckian's and Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry, it also becomes apparent that through an extension of the personal sphere, the father-figure might reflect upon larger Irish issues concerning culture and nationalism. This chapter seeks to establish how both poets use the father-figure in their work, and how ideas of loss and oppression are extended from the personal to the national.

One way through which McGuckian extends the loss of her father to a loss of Irish culture is through borrowing from essays by Osip Mandelstam, drawing upon parallels between her own socio-political situation and his (Alcobia-Murphy 121). When asked why she uses his quotes, McGuckian states that: "Mandelstam's living and dying under a régime inimical to him, in a police state, is not merely a metaphor. But it can't be said till it is no longer true. I have always believed that the lives of people who lived before us were the rightful soil in which poetry grows, and that to try and get in touch with their souls was the whole point of it." (121) In her use of Mandelstam, she follows Heaney, who alludes to Mandelstam's poetry to draw on "the traditional energies of exile poetry" and to highlight "that inner expatriation which specially belongs to Northern Catholics in an incomplete state" (Alcobia-Murphy 103). McGuckian might also look for intertextual dialogue outside of the Irish literary tradition owing to a lack of Irish female precursors, as the national tradition enforced the notion of a passive female, bound to the national cause (Alcobia-Murphy 54-55).

In 'Elegy for an Irish Speaker', McGuckian starts a dialogue with the unknown, vying with Death for the attention of the father-figure (Thompson 401). The conflict and boundaries

negotiated through the father's death are extended to political and cultural boundaries, as McGuckian addresses the long-dead, 'native Irishman', and invites parallels with Russian culture and history through Mandelstam's quotations (403). McGuckian opens with a juxtaposition of life and death, reversing its natural order in "Numbered day, / night only just beginning," (McGuckian 42) Here, she indicates life after death, through which she connects with her deceased father. The father is linked to death through female seduction by personifying Death as "Miss Death", continuing this sexuality in "Are you waiting to be fertilized, / dynamic death, by his dark company?" (42).

McGuckian changes the poem's tone through this reference to Heaney's 'Act of Union', linking sexuality to politics through "dark company" (42), which indicates both sexual and a military company. This military imagery hints at British occupation of Ireland, as its subsequent erasure of culture is what caused this elegy to be written for an 'Irish' speaker. Expressing the trauma of losing her father, McGuckian extends this personal loss to a linguistic parallel in the second part of the poem, onset by

> He breaks away from your womb
>
> to talk to me,
>
> he speaks so with my consciousness
>
> and not with words, he's in danger
>
> of becoming a poetess. (42)

The Irish speaker is here feminized as poetess, which was 'a term of abuse' used by Mandelstam to criticise his contemporary, Vladimir Mayakovsky (Murphy 283). McGuckian crosses gender boundaries, and by positioning the narrator alongside her male other, "the Irish

speaker and Mandelstam represent a mingling of identities." (Thompson 405). He has moved beyond words to a more primal sense of communication, consciousness, which is reiterated through "Roaming root of multiple meanings," (42). McGuckian continues this theme of Irish culture through language until the final stanza, where she addresses the "Most foreign and cherished reader," (43), without whose "trans-sense language" (43) she "cannot live" (43), her own Irish having been lost.

> Instead of the real past
>
> With its deep roots,
>
> I have yesterday,
>
> I have minutes when
>
> you burn up the past
>
> with your raspberry-coloured farewell (43)

These lines reiterate how, along with its language, Ireland lost its culture. This loss bypasses "everything, even your frozen body, / with your full death, the no-road-back / of your speaking flesh." (43). McGuckian connects the personal loss of her father once more to the loss of Irish culture, as she portrays her father's inability to return to life parallel to Ireland's inability to regain its language and culture. Through this connection, 'Elegy for an Irish Speaker' becomes not merely an elegy for her father, but a poem which casts anger at the loss of Irish culture as well.

Similar to 'Elegy for an Irish Speaker', 'The Aisling Hat' is a text which lines are almost entirely taken from essays by Mandelstam. McGuckian states that "I did not take from his poems

but hoped to impose my rhythm on his prose to produce a different and, to my mind, original poetry." (Murphy 124). She opens the poem by re-cycling 'A poet about himself', in which Mandelstam writes:

> "The October Revolution could not but influence my work since it took away my 'biography', my sense of individual significance. I am grateful to it, however, for once and for all putting an end to my spiritual security and to a cultural life supported by unearned cultural income. ... I feel indebted to the Revolution, but I offer it gifts for which it still has no need". (Mandelstam 275)

McGuckian subtly changes Mandelstam's words so that she can use them for her own purpose while retaining their political connotations, now turned towards the Aisling tradition. McGuckian has turned Mandelstam's quote into a reflection of her father's death. In an interview she explains that her father died on October 7th and that "the first week of October was taking my life away." (125). Addressing the month itself in the first stanza, she states that "you offer me gifts for which I have no need. You give me a way of looking at death which I don't need yet, but which I will need." (125). Mourning her father within a political sphere, she connects him to the tradition of the Aisling, as the speaker searches "for a lost, unknown song / in a street as long as a night, / stamped with my own surname." Instead of calling upon men to restore Ireland to its former glory, McGuckian searches for a song, erasing the tradition's emphasis on patriarchal power.

Reiterating the connection between the father and Ireland in "Even your least movement was connected / with the very composition of the soil, / you lived and died according to its laws.", McGuckian moves on to portray the father heroically, transforming him into a being that is ancient in "Paleolithic" (44), Romantic in "Promethean" (44) and masculine in "your ungainly

/ arms, created for handshakes, sliding / like the knights move, to the side." (45). However, this imagery is feminized, turning the father into the personification of Lady Éire in "You were intoxicated like a woman" (45) and "You felt nauseated, like a pregnant / woman" (45). McGuckian continues this focus upon the Aisling tradition in

> Until we remembered that to speak
>
> is to be forever on the road,
>
> listening for the foreigner's footstep.
>
> I felt a shiver of novelty
>
> as if someone had summoned you
>
> by name, to the most beautiful applause. (47)

where she returns to the promise offered by the Aisling figure of a foreign power coming to the aid of colonised Ireland (123). Through the feminization of the father, he takes on the role of Lady Éire, appearing in a dream vision. Having turned from heroic to supernatural in death, the father-figure brings the poem to its climax in

> He does not resemble a man
>
> waiting for a rendezvous.
>
> The area he covers in his stroll
>
> is too large, he is still

a stranger there, until his storm matures,

and what might have been alive, knowledge-bearing. (48)

Through this transformation, the relationship between the speaker and father is extended to that between the Irish people and Lady Éire, apparent in “He controls my hair, my fingernails, / he swallows my saliva, so accustomed / is he to the thought that I am here.” (48). In the conclusion, McGuckian borrows from ‘Journey to Armenia’, in which Mandelstam describes how two linden trees continue to survive, oblivious to the elements (Murphy 129):

How cancelled benevolence gains a script

from a departure so in keeping

with its own structure – his denial

of history’s death, by the birth of his storm. (49).

McGuckian, however, uses this passage to reflect upon the survival of Irish history and culture, which is restored through the father taking on the role of Lady Éire, birthing a storm which carries the power to restore Ireland’s former glory.

Rather than extending the speaker’s personal loss of a father to portray a loss of culture, Ní Chuilleanáin’s father-figure in ‘In Her Other House’ reflects upon Ireland’s past through his actions, subverting patriarchal traditions and safekeeping the Irish Republican ideal within the imagined space of the ‘other house’. This house imagines a new Ireland, in which freedom supposedly has been achieved, portraying the domestic setting as safe and liberated (Clutterbuck 141). However, this freedom is fragile, unable to hold outside the house. Through the image of a

table, which “is spread and cleared by invisible hands.” (Ní Chuilleanáin 20), Ní Chuilleanáin places this house between the world of the living and the dead, adding to the portrayal of an idealized Ireland as imaginative. The father-figure is introduced in the second stanza:

> My father’s glass and the bottle of sour stout at hand
>
> Guarding his place (so I know it cannot be real;
>
> The only boy with six sisters never learned
>
> To set a table, though books lined up at his command). (20).

Ní Chuilleanáin here breaks with the idea of this new Ireland as real, as even in a supposedly freed Ireland, the place of the patriarch remains guarded. The still, domestic setting of the poem is interrupted by a male figure, supposedly a second version of the father (Allen 24), who enters “When everyone is out of sight” (20) adding secrecy to this visit. In the poem’s second part, Ní Chuilleanáin emphasizes the private setting of the house as safe and the public outside as unsafe through “Where he has been / You turn out your pockets every time a door is opened;” (20), while also introducing the young male as linked to the Republican ideal through the image of a lily. This lily indicates the Easter Lily worn by Irish Republicans as a symbol of remembrance for Irish Republicans who died during the 1916 Easter Rising. Through this imagery, Ní Chuilleanáin implies that the Republican ideal is safe in this new Ireland, even though it is only imagined. Through the feminine portrayal of the young male in “He turns like a dancer”, and through a link between the young male and Father Mathew, who brought the pledge of sobriety to Ireland, by muttering “*Here goes, in the name of God* –” (20), Ní Chuilleanáin also subverts the patriarchal ideas remaining within this new Ireland through the guarding of the father’s place. This is

reiterated in the final stanza, which places the young male inside the domestic space and the "Women's voices" (20) outside. The poem's final lines reiterate the "other house" as an imagined space, where "there is no need to wait for the verdict of / history / And each page lies open to the version of every other." (20) In this private space, Ní Chuilleanáin keeps the Republican ideal safe, and subverts patriarchal traditions which have cast a shadow over Irish history.

Chapter 3: Conflict and the Domestic

Whereas the previous chapters focused on domestic relationships, this chapter turns towards the domestic space and its place in Irish poetry of conflict. Through an examination of the Troubles in McGuckian's and Ní Chuilleanáin's work it becomes apparent that they, while not explicitly naming the conflict, do work from their experience as Irish citizens during that time. This chapter argues that through domestic imagery, McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin depict the Troubles in a way that endorses the Irish Republican ideal while at the same time mourning its sacrifices.

Although McGuckian grew up as a Catholic poet in Belfast, her work is generally regarded as non-political. It is indeed the case that McGuckian's style of poetry is private and resists a political reading by focusing on domestic and natural imagery. However, although political messages do not surface in most of McGuckian's poems, they are present (McGuckian and Schrage-Fruh 2).

The opening lines of *Captain Lavender*, in which she quotes Picasso, state that *"I have not painted the war… but I have no doubt that the war is in… these paintings I have done*." McGuckian establishes a parallel between Picasso's and her own shift from apolitical to political artist. According to his art dealer, Picasso had been the most apolitical man he had ever known. However, the Spanish Civil war incited a change, owing to which he turned into a symbol of antifascism (Bottinelli). Picasso's quote comes from a reaction to *The Charnel House*, which was inspired by photographs of concentration camps during the Second World War.

Although incomparable, the Troubles incited that same change in McGuckian. She states that "I've four books that appeared in the '80s and that was really at the height of the atrocities that were occurring, but they really just by-passed, escaped very much from everything through

words during that time." (Alcobia-Murphy 116-117), but that she "was sort of accused by my own side really, of not taking issue, and not supporting them" (117). Through Picasso's quote, she implies that hidden under the personal, her poems in Captain Lavender have turned from by-passing the Troubles to being political.

'The Albert Chain' is such a poem, in which McGuckian compares the IRA's first ceasefire ending in "I am going back into war" (McGuckian 68) to the image of a house. Although the poem does not explain why these two images are connected, McGuckian states in an interview that many of her moving-into-a-house poems focus on Bobby Sands, a victim of the Troubles who became a martyr for the Republican movement (McGuckian and Morris 69).

Sands joined the movement at eighteen and was arrested multiple times between October 1972 and 1977. (Murphy). Returning to prison in 1977, the "political prisoner" status of prisoners who were charged with terrorist acts had been removed, which meant that they were no longer given certain privileges (Murphy). This incited two hunger strikes, through which a restoration of their status and its privileges was demanded. The British government did not give in to these demands. To raise public consciousness, Sand's supporters nominated him for a seat in the British House of Commons, which he won. However, Thatcher was unwilling to negotiate with the hunger strikers, and Sands died of starvation on May 5th, 1981, becoming a martyr for the Republican cause (Murphy). It is interesting to add that McGuckian herself, later during the Troubles, taught inmates of the H-Block of Maze Prison, where Sands died. (Starr 633)

In this context, 'The Albert Chain' becomes a poem of sacrifice, reiterated through "I am learning my country all over again, / how every inch of soil has been paid for / by the life of a man, the funerals of the poor." (68). Through her sacrificial depiction of Sands, McGuckian

endorses the Republican cause, which is reiterated by her reference of the Shankill Butchers, through which she portrays the Loyalists' cause through its darkest supporters.

The Shankill Butchers was a gang of around thirteen men who inflicted terror upon the people of Belfast during the 1970s, murdering at least nineteen people. Armed with cleavers they roamed around Belfast, looking for Catholics to kidnap and brutally murder (McConville). Portraying one of them as unable to cope with the horrors of the Troubles in "who said with tears, 'This is too much.'" (68), is a powerful image, as Ní Chuilleanáin hereby emphasizes its extremity and the effect on both Republican and Loyalist Irishmen.

Ní Chuilleanáin continues to emphasize sacrifice through Promethean imagery in "I saw you nailed to a dry rock," (68) in an image that reminds of T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland', evoking the same loss through which Eliot alludes to the trauma of the First World War, transferred onto the Troubles. The 'you-figure' here again indicates Sands, "already damned" (69), and belonging "to the history of my country" (69). The final stanza seeks refuge from terrorism and sacrifice in images of beauty. In

> I could escape
>
> from any other prison but my own
>
> unjust pursuit of justice
>
> that turns one sort of poetry into another. (69)

McGuckian, who has been hesitant to write about Ireland's political conflict in earlier collections, now recognizes that her poetry has turned from love poetry to poetry of conflict. 'The Albert Chain' links McGuckian's private experience to the larger political sphere through the image of a house, through which she mourns Bobby Sands as martyr to the Republican cause. However,

McGuckian's style is so private that it is almost impossible to reveal this political layer without McGuckian revealing it outside of the poem. Through this resistance to being read, McGuckian does not extend the personal to the political, as previous poems did, but hides the political underneath the personal.

This resistance to being read politically returns in 'Credenza', in which McGuckian uses the idea of a mother's loss of her child to advocate against history's erasure. The title, while at the surface-level referring merely to a dining room sideboard, means 'belief' or 'trust' in Italian, and finds its origins in a 16th century practice in noble households, where servants tested food for poison. The 'common man' dying to protect someone else is, in background of the Troubles, turned into the idea of him sacrificing himself for the Republican cause.

McGuckian emphasizes the importance of colour, introducing a "white melancholy" in the opening lines, through which she binds together the colour of peace and the feeling of sorrow. In the second stanza, she emphasizes this sorrow through personal loss in "Not remembering him every day and every day / and every day has begun," (67) looking at sacrifice through the perspective of the remaining party. Extending the image of the mother starting to forget her son to the national sphere, it alludes to Ireland's negation of its turbulent history after the conflict has ceased, opting instead for a fragile truce.

The son's death itself is euphemized in 'Credenza', the wound to which he succumbs being portrayed through the image of a broken roof in

the wet shoulders

of his breathing ending, the open rafters

of his inner nature little by little

never meeting again. (67)

Adding the image of the mother exploring “the white keys only,” as if trying to cast off death through an avoidance of its colour, black, the reader gets the sense that Ireland’s peace is but a carefully constructed one. This is reiterated through “her fiery dress of tricolour ribbons” (67), which refers to Ireland’s tricolour flag, referencing the truce between Roman Catholic and Protestant Irishmen. This peace is followed by an erasure of history in “the piles of captured cannon / that had raised two pyramids / are being taken away.” (67) in which remainders of the conflict between North and South are removed. This emphasis on history being erased is continued in the final stanza, in

Suddenly the all-black room sees everything

far down the street; war-talk sentences

act as if they had never been shot at;

a for-keeps winter inches wide

the voice of a wine the grapes

never belonged to. (67)

This negation results in a silence, through which Irish history and sacrifice is forgotten. Through the domestic setting, McGuckian uses the grief of a mother mourning a son who sacrificed himself for the Republican cause to attack this negation of history, which renders such sacrifice meaningless.

Ní Chuilleanáin too attacks the negation of Irish history in ‘A Stray’, through the figure of the cousin. Emphasizing oppositions of freedom and captivity, she depicts the fractured state of the Irishman subsequent to the Good Friday Agreement.

This is emphasized through the title, which can be read in multiple ways. As a noun, ‘A Stray’ indicates an individual who has been separated from the group, who is not in the right place. As an adjective, someone who is ‘astray’ has dwindled from the correct path, either literally or morally. Within the context of the Troubles, a stray bullet might also be imagined, evoking violent connotations. This double vision asks the reader to think on who is lost or has been led astray, within the poem’s setting of a fractured Ireland.

Ní Chuilleanáin depicts a state of conflict between the cousin and the released captives in the first stanza, as the release of the first group seems to cause the cousin to try and “flatten himself / Under the wheels of the cars.” (Ní Chuilleanáin 18). Through the return of the released men to the house, an exclusion takes place through which the domestic setting becomes a self-imposed prison to the cousin. “He stayed upstairs all May.” (18) reiterates this idea of the cousin as political prisoner, as it establishes a parallel between him and Bobby Sands, who died of starvation on May 5, 1981 (Murphy), and the leaders of the 1916 Easter rising, who were executed between May 3rd and May 12th (Hegarty and O’Toole). The integration of the released men into a new Irish society is put alongside the cousin’s withdrawal from that society. “You’d find him an odd time smoking / In the courtyard by the bins / At the foot of the steep back stairs” (19) places the cousin in the domestic equivalent of a prison’s courtyard, outside but kept in a circumscribed area, keeping close to the stairs to flee in case anyone was to come upon him. The final stanza explains his imprisonment through an inability to come to terms with a new Ireland in which the Irish Republican ideal of an Ireland completely free of British colonial rule has been

abandoned through the Good Friday Agreement. Instead, the cousin stays stuck in the past. “No news from the prison cells.” (19) is then read as a denial of this new Ireland.

Through oppositions between forms of enclosure and freedom, Ní Chuilleanáin portrays the fractured state of Ireland after the Republican ideal of a country free of colonial rule is set aside for a truce between Republicans and Loyalists, the Good Friday Agreement (Coughlan 158). She does so by attacking Irish erasure of the Troubles, portrayed through the effect the release of the political prisoners has on the cousin, as well as through establishing parallels between the cousin and martyrs for the Irish Republican cause in a denial of this new Ireland in which the past is forgotten.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that in McGuckian's *Captain Lavender* and Ní Chuilleanáin's *The Girl who Married the Reindeer*, aspects of the modern elegy are reworked within the domestic setting to extend personal loss and anger onto the larger sphere of national loss and female oppression. It has argued this by focusing on three subjects in relation to the domestic: female oppression through motherhood, the relationship between the father and the fatherland, and the connection between Irish conflict and domestic imagery.

Further research might ask how aspects of elegy are reworked within the domestic setting in other collections by McGuckian and Ní Chuilleanáin or examine how the extension of personal to national loss is sustained in collections written a larger period of time after the Troubles ended. Furthermore, it might include other Irish poets, examining, for instance, whether the author's gender influences how aspects of elegy are reworked in the domestic setting.

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