Notions of Irishness in Brian Friel’s
Translations and Making History

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Abstract

The playwright Brian Friel who was born in Northern Ireland intentionally avoided to write plays about the conflict in the province. However, since the formation of Field Day Theatre Company, he has changed his strategy: Friel offers responses to the problem through art. In his plays Translations and Making History, he applies historical dimensions to assist an effort to understand the current situation in Ulster. In the former, he depicts how Irish language and culture were deprived of by the English in the 19th century and examines the role of language in terms of national identity. In the latter, he centres on a historical figure, Hugh O’Neill, who is regarded as a national hero in Ireland. However, Friel presents O’Neill in a different perspective than the legend and investigates the validity of history. In both plays Friel attempts to define Irishness newly, which is free from partisan myths.

I

Field Day Theatre Company, which tours around the whole of Ireland, was founded by the playwright, Brian Friel and the actor, Stephen Rea in 1980’. The company’s aims are:

To create a shared context which might make possible communication across Ireland’s border; to give all Irishmen an artistic “fifth province” rising above and covering the whole island, an hypothetical province which would neither accept the North/South division, nor ignore the separate traditional strengths of those on either side².

Its first production, Translations(1980) was written by Friel and soon became regarded as a
national epic. Throughout his work Friel has been trying to define Irishness:

We are more concerned with defining our Irishness than with pursuing it. We want to know what the word native means, what the word foreign means, we want to know have the words any meaning at all?" 

As Binnie indicates, "Friel's artistic development since the formation of Field Day has moved steadily towards a closer integration of historical considerations and contemporary themes" and this is especially seen in Translations and Making History (1988) which was also first performed by Field Day. Hence in this essay I will examine these two plays in order to find how Friel's preoccupation with defining Irishness is pursued.

II

Translations and Making History are set in a historical past, which was crucial in Irish history. Translations portrays an Irish-speaking community in Baile Beag (later becomes Ballybeg) in 1833 when the first Ordnance Survey in Ireland had been made and consequently Irish place names were replaced by English ones. Hence Translations shows "a process of "erosion", whereby English will replace Gaelic first as a language and second as a way of life". In the play Friel applies what Hogan calls the "split-language device". Though Irish characters speak in English on stage, they are considered to be speaking Gaelic. Therefore, although all the actors speak in English, the inability to communicate between the Irish and the English is displayed clearly.

Making History centres on a historical figure, Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, who led the rebel against the English with the aid of the Spanish army at the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 and thus is "an icon of Irish history; an essential component of its nationalist mythology". However, Friel depicts O'Neill as a man who is "ceaselessly caught between his Anglo and Gaelic identities". Therefore, Friel demythologises O'Neill's legacy and throws light on his dilemma between his dual loyalties to Ireland and to England. His defeat at Kinsale is a critical moment since "the Gaelic order is ending; the ancient Brehon laws are yielding reluctantly to the new English laws. A culture is gradually being diluted". Hence both plays illustrate the beginning of dramatic changes in Irish culture and society which are seen as inseparable from the relationship between England and Ireland. Furthermore, the difficult relationship has a parallel on the current situation and in particular
it culminates in the continuing political conflict in Northern Ireland.

The clash of Gaelic and English traditions is presented in the stereotypes and prejudice which each side has about the other. In *Translations*, the action takes place at a hedge-school. The school master, Hugh, boasts of the richness of the Irish language compared to English which, he thinks, suits only "the purposes of commerce", and of their culture which makes "a happier conjugation" with the classical tongues". When he translates a Latin verse into English he finds that "English succeeds in making it sound...plebeian" (p.41). Hugh also looks down on English literature and implies emotional distance between Ireland and England and says to Yolland, the English soldier: "Wordsworth?...no, I'm afraid we're not familiar with your literature, Lieutenant. We feel closer to the warm Mediterranean. We tend to overlook your island" (p.41). The school master regards his people as "a spiritual people" who have a rich language and culture though they live in "mud cabins" on "a diet of potatoes", unlike the English who, he considers, lead "material lives" and are not cultivated (p.42). Thus he feels that their language, English, "couldn't really express us" (p.25). On the other hand, Captain Lancey, the commander of the Ordnance Survey, expresses surprise when he learns that the Irish do not speak his language. When he makes an announcement in front of the Irish audience in English "he speaks as if he were addressing children" (stage direction p.30). This indicates that he thinks they cannot understand what he is saying even though his words are to be translated into their language and it reveals that he regards them as illiterates. Therefore, the English and the Irish share the stereotypical view that their adversary is barbaric. Incomprehension between the two nations is "supported by a mutual snobbery".

In the same way, in *Making History* each side describes members of the other's community as "Butcher". Hugh O'Donnell, one of the Gaelic chieftains, calls the Queen's Marshal "the Butcher Bagenal" and informs Harry, O'Neill's private secretary, that he "slaughtered and beheaded fifteen families that were out saving hay along the river bank, men, women and children". Similarly, Mabel, the wife of Hugh O'Neill and the sister of Queen's Marshal, Henry Bagenal, confides to O'Neill that "Our Henry calls him the Butcher O'Donnell. He says he strangles young lambs with his bare hands" (p.17). Hence both attack one another for their cruelty and brutality without realising both of them are doing the same thing. In so doing they reinforce prejudice against each other and as a result they develop a sense of otherness: they are not like us. This consciousness is clearly displayed by Mary, Mabel's sister, who considers marrying her ageing neighbour because "He's still one of us" (p.23).
The inability to understand each other creates and deepens the gap between the two countries. Thus two distinct communities with different traditions are formed and because of the differentiation each community excludes outsiders. In Translations Yolland, the English lieutenant, feels “so cut off from the people” (p.42) in Ballybeg because he cannot understand their language. However, unlike his superior, Lancey, who symbolises the authority of the British Empire, Yolland feels “very foolish to – to – to be working here and not to speak your language” (p.32) and shows interest in learning it. He also worries that their presence in the country might be “too crude an intrusion on your lives” (p.32) from the beginning of their operation. Hence Yolland understands that he is an outsider in the community but tries to be admitted to it. In the act of changing Irish place names into their English equivalents with the translator, Owen, the son of the school master, Yolland acquires some Irish. He also senses “something is being eroded” (p.43) and insists on maintaining the name “Tobair Vree” as it is. The English soldier comprehends the impossibility of translating one culture into another and becomes aware of the fact that not only the Irish language but also its culture, which is shaped by the language, excludes him from the community:

Even if I did speak Irish I’d always be an outsider here, wouldn’t I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won’t it? The private core will always be...hermetic, won’t it? (p.40)

Therefore, Yolland’s statement makes it explicit that the cultural chasm between England and Ireland is too large to bridge.

Mabel in Making History is one of the New English in Ulster and a Protestant but has left her family in order to marry Hugh O’Neill, which they will never approve of. She is struck by the differences between the community in which she has been brought up and the one which she has married into: “Everything’s so different here. I knew it would be strange – I knew that. But I didn’t think it would be so...foreign. I’m only fifty miles from home but I feel very far away from everything I know” (p.18). Like Yolland, Mabel tries to be accepted by her husband’s community. She actually becomes a Roman Catholic “out of loyalty to Hugh and to his people” (p.24). However, her effort cannot be understood by O’Neill who is going to rebel against the English Crown as a leader of his country. Mabel tries to persuade him not to make a hasty decision about the rebellion and endeavours to help him grasp the situation calmly because she wants to protect him from the foreseeable
disastrous defeat. However, O’Neill does not apprehend her real intention and criticises Mabel saying that “You’re not quite sure which side you’re on” (p.40). Moreover, he tells her that “I can see it wouldn’t break your heart to see the Gaelic order wiped out” (p.40). Therefore, even if she tries very hard to become a member of the tribe, the boundary between the two communities is always drawn in front of her and she is not allowed to cross it.

The heated dispute between O’Neill and Mabel reflects the nature of their marriage and the marriage, as McKeone indicates, mirrors “the tensions and misunderstandings which afflict the larger relationship between the two countries”\(^3\). McKeone also suggests that “it is one of the recurring features in Friel’s plays that the private, more intimate relationships depicted on stage are often metaphors, occasionally oblique, for larger public issues”\(^4\). This aspect is seen in Translations too. The English soldier, Yolland, falls in love with Maire, a local Irish girl. Despite the language barrier — neither can speak the other’s language — they try to communicate with each other. They succeed in conveying their feeling by uttering Irish place names and later, even though each of them speaks in his/her own language, their communication flows. Each of them encourages the other to talk: “Don’t stop - I know what you’re saying” (p.52). Hence it seems that they have reached a mutual understanding. However, though both of them end up uttering the same word “always” in each other’s language, what each of them means is slightly different: Yolland wants to live in Ireland always with Maire but she asks him to “take me away with you” (p.52). Therefore these two lovers’ exchange of emotions epitomises the relationships of England and Ireland: they attempt to reach out to each other but there is always an inevitable misunderstanding between them. Furthermore, the last words Yolland says to Maire are ominous: “he tried to speak in Irish — he said ‘I’ll see you yesterday’ — he meant to say ‘I’ll see you tomorrow’” (p.59). What he meant is a promise but what he said indicates the impossibility of fulfilling the promise; after that night he disappears mysteriously and it is implied that he was killed. He decided to cross the communal line and as a result he was killed. The meaning of this disastrous consequence is explained to Maire by Jimmy Jack, the old man known as the “Infant Prodigy”, at the end of the play:

Do you know the Greek word endogamein? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word exogamein means to marry outside the tribe. And you don’t cross those borders casually — both sides get very angry. (p.68)
Yolland appears to have been killed by Maire’s people who cannot accept their marriage or the fact that the two traditions are going to be merged. His death, in turn, leads to his people’s revenge on the people of Ballybeg: Lancy threatens to order evictions in the area and the death of the Gaelic language and culture seems unavoidable.

In Making History O’Neill and Mabel’s marriage also has a tragic ending. Her sister, Mary visits her with some seeds from home and gives her an instruction: “Don’t plant the fennel near the dill or the two will cross-fertilize….You’ll end up with a seed that’s neither one thing or the other” (pp.21-2). This appears to be a warning from those who want to maintain the tribal divide to those who have married outside the tribe. However, Mabel receives this caution too late since she is already pregnant. Symbolically, Mabel dies in childbirth and her baby also dies. This misfortune suggests the difficulty of fully uniting the two incompatible traditions. It also seems to indicate the unwillingness to accept the mingling of the two heritages and the creation of a new tradition. This clearly reflects today’s situation in deeply divided Ulster.

Both Yolland and Mable are outsiders in Gaelic Ireland who try to become assimilated into the communities but disastrously fail to accomplish the mission. However, in both plays, the ones who lead the country to the loss of its own language and culture are ‘go-betweens’ who are caught between or act for the two traditions. O’Neill in Making History was brought up “to become a leader of his people” (p.35) not in Ireland but in England. He spent his nine formative years there and was “nursed at the very wellspring of that new order” and has the “grand” upper-class English accent (p.28). Hence he understands both the old order and the new order and has a dual loyalty to the countries which represents them. He was made an Earl by Queen Elizabeth but his loyalty to her and her country is not firm, as he says: “I’m loyal today - disloyal tomorrow - you know how capricious we Gaels are” (p.26). However, he is not a genuine patriot either: “I’ve trotted behind the Tudors on several expeditions against the native rebels”(p.27). He appears to have taken a ‘go-between’ stance deliberately in order to achieve his goal:

I have spent my life attempting to do two things. I have attempted to hold together a harassed and a confused people by trying to keep them in touch with the life they know before they were overrun. It wasn’t a life of material ease but it had its assurances and it had its dignity. And I have done that by acknowledging and indeed honouring the rituals and ceremonies and beliefs these people have practised since before history, long before the God of Christianity was ever heard of. And at the same time I have
tried to open these people to the strange new ways of Europe, to ease them into the new assessment of things, to nudge them towards changing evaluations and beliefs. (p.40)

He also says that his two objectives “can scarcely be followed simultaneously” and they are “almost self-cancelling”(p.40). Therefore, he is caught between the two traditions and thus has a dilemma:

Do I grasp the Queen’s Marshal’s hand? – using Our Henry as a symbol of the new order which every aristocratic instinct in my body dreads but which my intelligence comprehends and indeed grudgingly respects...or do I grip the hand of the Fermanagh rebel and thereby bear public and imprudent witness to a way of life that my blood comprehends and indeed loves and that is as old as the Book of Ruth. (p.28)

He is well aware that these two are “deeply opposed civilizations” and that “only one will survive” (p.28). Hence he seems intentionally to have been a ‘go-between’ to save his native country’s tradition from destruction. However, O’Neill finally decides to rebel against the English since he realises that the Gaelic civilisation is doomed if he does not act. Ironically, he is completely defeated and the consequence is the death of Gaelic culture.

In Translations Owen is a ‘go-between’ character. However, compared to O’Neill’s calculation, his behaviour appears to be innocent. He left home six years ago and has lived in Dublin where he is rumoured to be commercially successful and has come home Anglicised. He explains his function in the Ordnance Survey: “My job is to translate the quaint, archaic tongue you people persist in speaking into the King’s good English” (p.29). Therefore, his motivation is, similar to one of O’Neill’s aims, to introduce his people to a modern world through English for the benefit of the community. He collaborates with the English without knowing the operation’s real purpose and its outcome. Hence Owen translates Captain Lancey’s announcement roughly and as a result his translations conceal “as much as they reveal both from himself and from the others” as McGrath points out”. When his brother, Manus, who realises that the survey is a “bloody military operation” (p.32), attacks him for not having conveyed Lancey’s words accurately, Owen still does not understand the meaning of the Ordnance Survey and dismisses Manus’s accusation, saying “uncertainty in meaning is incipient poetry” (p.32). Manus also asks for an explanation why the English call him Roland not Owen. Owen claims he does not care about the difference either: “Owen – Roland – what the hell. It’s only a name. It’s the same me, isn’t it?” (p.33).
Smith indicates that “this superficial assurance is a refusal to recognize the “other”™. Owen “actively forgets the difference”™ between his true identity and the false one that has been created for him by the English. However, by converting Irish place names into their English equivalents, he too comes to understand the significance of the names and of Gaelic culture itself. He regains his Gaelic identity and protests that “My name is not Roland!” (p.44). Therefore, after he has fully become Owen, he stops acting as a ‘go-between’ but his realisation comes too late. As Smith suggests, Owen’s “recognition of homecoming, “I know where I live” is achieved when there is no longer any home to recognize”™ since all the place names have been Anglicised and thus have gained a new identity. Owen’s father, Hugh, the school master, asserts that “we must learn those new names....We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home” (p.66). Hugh admits that the Gaelic language does not correspond with “the facts of an Anglicized Ireland”™ and that his people need to learn English, the imposed language. He promises to teach it to Maire and this indicates the end of Gaelic language.

III

Seamus Deane, one of the directors of Field Day Theatre Company, said of Irishness that it “is the quality by which we want to display our non-Britishness – or our anti-Britishness or, Britishness is the quality by which we display our non-Irishness”™. British colonialism in Ireland is a key theme in both Translations and Making History. They depict the clash of two traditions and the creation of divided communities in Northern Ireland back in history and they emphasise parallels with the current political relationship between Britain and Ireland. As we have seen, in both plays stereotypes of each tribe are displayed and are used to show an “otherness” which divides the people with different traditions making them aware of their identity. This sense of “otherness” has been handed down from generation to generation and it is through its strong cautioning impact on people in Ulster that the conflict in the province still continues. The purpose of Field Day’s productions is to “re-examine those aspects of Irish life which have come to be accepted uncritically”™. McGrath suggests that:

As they demythologize the old histories and myths, they hope to supplant them, in a cautious and self-cautious manner, with new ones that are free from the colonial perspectives, those of both the colonizer and the colonized, that have encased Ireland’s
history for the past eight hundred years, free, that is, both from the old prejudices and myths handed down through the republican tradition and from the myths of official British history.  

Friel examines the role of language in terms of national identity in *Translations*. His intentions in creating the play was to write “a play about the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English and the profound effect that change-over would have on a people”\(^3\). As Pine indicates, “when a community loses its language it loses its culture and its identity”\(^4\). McGrath points out that “the effects of robbing a culture of its language are suggested in *Translations* with particular poignancy in the character of Sarah”\(^5\). The play begins with a scene in which Manuc is teaching Sarah to speak. Stage directions explain that her “speech defect is so bad that all her life she has been considered locally to be dumb and she has accepted this” (p.11). She manages to say “My name is Sarah” in this scene and she can utter the sentence later when Owen comes home and meets her and asks her name; thus she proclaims her identity in her own language, in Gaelic. However, when Lancey asks her name after the Irish place names have been Anglicised and after Yolland has disappeared, Sarah cannot do so. She tries to speak “frantically” but she fails and “she knows she cannot. She closes her mouth. Her head goes down” (stage directions p.62). Lancey is using the authority of the coloniser, threatening to order eviction and demands the colonised refer to the place names in the Anglicised version not in Gaelic. If they are not allowed to use their own language, Sarah cannot speak her name and cannot declare her identity. She chooses not to speak again, indicating the decision by her gesture, shaking “her head, slowly, emphatically” (stage direction p.63) in reply to Owen’s consolation to her: “It will come back to you again” (p.63). Therefore, as Smith suggests, though “the Hebrew Sarah was the mother of nations”, Friel’s Sarah “stands for a people’s loss of tongue and name”\(^6\), that is, the loss of a substantial component of national identity.

In *Making History*, Friel investigates the validity of history, which has been formed by language. Friel once commented that “in some ways the inherited images of 1916, or 1690, control and rule our lives much more profoundly than the historical truth of what happen on those two occasions”\(^7\). This statement clearly echoes what Hugh, the school master, in *Translations* insists:  

it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language....we must never cease renewing those images; because once we
In *Making History* Friel seems to renew "images of the past embodied in language". In the play he mingles fact and fiction; for example, as Connolly points out, Friel "has compressed the events of ten years, from 1591 to 1601, into somewhere under two" and he presents O'Neill in a different perspective than the "inherited images". He demonstrates the creation of heritage; how O'Neill is deliberately made into a national hero by Lombard, his biographer. In Lombard's version of history, O'Neill is depicted as a true patriot so that his education in England and his New English wife, Mabel, are ignored. Even though O'Neill objects to this saying "you are going to embalm me in - in - in a florid lie" (p.63) and urges him to tell the truth, Lombard does not agree with O'Neill and clarifies his intention:

Ireland is reduced as it has never been reduced before - we are talking about a colonized people on the brink of extinction. This isn't the time for a critical assessment of your 'ploys' and your 'disgraces' and your 'betrayal' - that's the stuff of another history for another time. Now is the time for a hero. Now is the time for a heroic literature. So I am offering Gaelic Ireland two things. I'm offering them this narrative that has the elements of myth. And I'm offering them Hugh O'Neill as a national hero.

(p.67)

In this play Friel shows that there can be different versions of history about one event and each of them can be true to each group of people with different points of view. A "history" is not the only truth. He also indicates that "an historical text is a kind of literary artefact" and refuses to accept traditionally handed down myths and history which have constituted national identity without questions. Hence in these two plays Friel focuses on politically significant events back in history and examines the role of language and history as the essential components of national identity in order to assist an effort to understand the unsolved conflict in Ulster and define Irishness newly, which is free from partisan myths.

NOTES

1. The directors of the company include the poets Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Seamus Deane, David Hammond, an authority on traditional music, and the playwright, Thomas Kilroy
who joined them in 1988.


8. Ibid.


14. Ibid.


17. Ibid., P.403.

18. Ibid., P.407.

19. McGrath, op. cit., p.44.


24. Ibid., p.145.


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29. Quoted in McKeone, op. cit., p.8.