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► **To cite this version:**

Virginie Privas. Anne Devlin's "Ourselves Alone" (1987) and "After Easter" (1994): autobiographical plays?. 2006. halshs-00441205

HAL Id: halshs-00441205

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00441205>

Preprint submitted on 15 Dec 2009

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Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1987) and *After Easter* (1994): autobiographical plays?

Should we consider the idea that, in Northern Ireland, religion is part and parcel of someone's identity and determines one's nationality, then a Catholic is Irish and a Protestant is British. This is a basic premise that playwright Anne Devlin tries to deconstruct in her two theatre plays, Ourselves Alone and After Easter. In fact, unlike her co-citizens, she was lucky enough to grow up in a Northern Irish Catholic family, the head of which, her father, Paddy Devlin, was renowned for advocating democratic values. Her father had a strong impact on her private life - she soon learnt not to perpetuate the ancestral conflicts between the two communities in her country - as well as on her writing. Even though they may not be entirely autobiographical, her plays are suffused with references to her childhood in Belfast, her father as well as his fight in favour of equal civil rights in Northern Ireland. Yet, despite the exertions of Paddy through politics and of Anne through literature, the divisions seem to be so deeply rooted in people's minds that reunification is still too far away.

Key words: Autobiography, Belfast, childhood, drama, nationality, Northern Ireland, religion, trade-unionism

The role played by religion in the Ulster conflict is now undeniable since it has been demonstrated that Northern Irish identities are, to some extent, based on religious denominations. In *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, John Whyte demonstrates that this results from the consequential importance of the churches, be they Protestant or Catholic, on society and their participation to political, economic or even cultural issues (Whyte 1990: 3), all the more so as dogmatic notions seem to vanish behind the labels "taigs" and "prods" so as to divide the population. Accordingly, religious identities have come to determine nationalities in this particular part of the world. That is why, if we schematise, Protestants born in Northern Ireland will tend to claim to be British while Catholics will define themselves as Irish¹. Born and brought up in a Catholic family in 1951 in Belfast, Anne Devlin writes drama in which she develops her interest for finding one's identity and overtly questions the legitimacy of the relationship between religion and citizenship. Her experience of Northern Ireland and the Troubles² has nurtured the texts of her two plays as she confessed in an interview:

I write from my own experience - not biography - about things which make up my world: children, motherhood and cultural isolation. I start from the question 'Who am I' and my answers contradict the profile of aspirations or the dogmatic agenda that the paramilitaries have set for me (Bort 1996: 51).

If Devlin is so interested in the definition of one's identity, starting with her own, it is because her childhood was not like anyone else's in Northern Ireland. Effectively, the political ideas

¹ This assessment is over simplistic, though, since more and more Protestants tend to define themselves as Irish and vindicate their Irish origins.

² Although she left Northern Ireland in 1972 to be a teacher in Germany, which she has been reproached for, she participated to the beginning of the conflict.

of her father, Paddy Devlin, did not match those shared by the Catholic Church members but were rather socialist and trade unionist and were much present at the Devlins'. This education gave Anne, the eldest in the family, a new perspective on the conflict. She explained that in writing the scenario of a movie, *Titanic Town*, from the eponymous novel by Maria Costello, she discovered the impact of her father's ideas on her personality:

This whole process of bringing the mother and the daughter together allowed me to revisit a character in myself because I had come from a father who was in politics. So in a sense I watched him going from political inarticulacy to articulacy- and also the effects of his politics on our family (Chambers 2001:113).

Then it is legitimate to question the extent to which her plays are autobiographical and how her literary production has been influenced by the socialist ideas of her father. While in her first play, *Ourselves Alone* (1984), she dealt with the implications of an Irish family in nationalism³, a movement which results from the equation between a Catholic identity and nationality, she attempted to go beyond this mere relationship throughout *After Easter* (1994), confirming her literary maturity but never forgetting her childhood, as we shall study.

Growing up in Northern Ireland during the Troubles

Both tradition and history are at the basis of the culture in Ireland more than in any other country. Faithful to the literary Irish tradition, Anne Devlin writes about the past of her country and province. While *Ourselves Alone* starts with a visual reference to the Irish past - the setting is a Belfast club where pictures of Pearse and Connolly are usually hung -, the beginning of *After Easter* relates a personal episode that the main character experienced. The past tense, as well as the modal auxiliary "would" and the phrase "used to", encountered throughout both texts, confirm Devlin's choice and show that in Ireland, the past is never forgotten; on the contrary it invades the present. Effectively, the spectator is invited to hear different past stories, mainly personal - Devlin seems to have chosen not to talk about myths or legends so much- , on stage. The typical Irish tradition of story-telling is thus exploited many a time by Devlin in her books. When the stories are personal, i.e. private, her characters naturally resort to their children's memories. For instance, at the end of *Ourselves Alone*, the girls remember a moment of pleasure when they were young:

Frieda: ... I remember a long time ago, a moonlit night on a beach below the Mourne, we were having a late summer barbecue on the shore at Tyrella. Among the faces at the fire were Josie, Donna, Liam and my father and mother were there too. And John McDermot was a friend of Liam's.

Donna: I remember. (*Ourselves Alone*, 81)

Nevertheless, the episodes remembered can also be negative ones as the Troubles haunt the lives of any Northern Irish person. Anne Devlin was in her early twenties when the Troubles

³ In this play, Anne Devlin respects stereotypes: nationalists are all Catholic and Irish as opposed to Protestant unionists who side with the British government.

broke out. At that time, she was a student at Coleraine University and participated to the civil rights movement. In an autobiographical book entitled *Straight Left*, her father, Paddy Devlin, reveals that she got badly hurt during the march organised in January 1969 from Belfast to Derry: “she was knocked unconscious from a blow on the head and fell into the river... Anne was taken back⁴ to the hospital and kept in for observation, suffering from concussion” (Devlin Pady 1993: 95). In fact, she and the marchers had been attacked by the Loyal Citizens of Ulster at Burntollet, co. Derry. She has surely been so deeply affected by this episode of her life as well as by the mess her country was in that she feels she needs to talk about it now. Therefore, when her main character in *After Easter*, Greta Flynn, mentions a march from the Students’ Union in Belfast in one of the anecdotes that she remembers, the parallel with the life of the author becomes obvious. From then on, it is easy to understand that the numerous passages where the Troubles are put on stage were either lived by the author or directly based on what she or her relatives experienced.

These are the reasons why growing up in Northern Ireland in the 20th century also means looking back over time. Devlin does not avoid talking about those old fears and ancient hatreds between the two so-called tribes which are maintained as if to keep the division alive. This feeling of hatred naturally engenders a gap between the two communities whose identities are in relation to one another, in other words they are what the others are not: a Protestant rather than a Catholic and vice versa⁵. They even go as far as joining a precise church so as to show who they are not since Duncan Morrow explains that:

[...] church membership is a guarantee that nobody belongs to the enemy. The group is united in their opposition to the enemy. More importantly violence to a member or a member’s family is here experienced as an attack on the group (Morrow, 1991: 75).

In fact, in the private sphere of the family as well as in the public domain, it appears that the fear of the Other, because of their differences, is kept alive. Devlin’s father even dares to suggest that the unionist government used to invent stories to maintain the division. He writes that on the occasion of a royal visit to Northern Ireland in 1951, the authorities had the mission to neutralise the IRA who were supposedly fomenting a *coup monté*, a rumour imagined by members of the government as he supposes:

Frankly, I am sure there was no plot and that it was entirely a figment of the imagination of a bigoted politician, civil servant or Special Branch man. Such IRA ‘plots’ or ‘scares’ were regularly manufactured by the unionist government to keep their supporters in line (Devlin Paddy 1993: 59).

The equations between Ireland and Catholicism as well as between England and Protestantism are particularly confirmed in *Ourselves Alone*, since the plot highlights the importance of

⁴ She had to be taken to the hospital previously because she had hurt her foot

⁵ “The identification of communities as ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ is in relation to one another in other words ‘I am a Protestant rather than a Catholic.’ In MORROW Duncan, *The Churches and Inter-community Relationships*, Coleraine: Centre for study of conflict, University of Ulster, 1991, 75

nationalism for a typical Catholic Irish family in Northern Ireland. Moreover, despite her desire to tackle different themes in *After Easter*, Devlin also deals with this idea through her main character, Greta, who qualifies her marital house⁶ in England to be “a Protestant house”(*After Easter*, 2). Thus, the division between the Irish and the English, which dates back to the first colonies and plantations, is also clearly developed in both plays. For Aoife in *After Easter*, Greta should never have married a “cold English man”, because in her own terms “the Irish and the English cannot love each other” (*After Easter*, 7). She totally rejects the colonial past of her country asserting her Irishness and her religious sensitivity (she goes to mass) whereas Greta and Helen chose to escape from the violence which was sweeping the province where they grew up. However, this exile seems to have led them on an identity crisis. Leaving their country behind, Helen and Greta have lost part of their identities. Though this loss is rather verbal as far as Helen is concerned (she has deliberately swapped her Irish accent for an American one so as to walk freely in London), it is more serious in the case of Greta. She confesses that after leaving Northern Ireland she experienced a spiritual death, which she explains as follows: “Funny how people who leave their country stop living, in some part of themselves, in the same year in which they left” (*After Easter*, 58) This resulted in splitting her personality: one part of Greta completely rejects her Irishness, which she equates with Catholicism, she says- “ I don’t want to be Irish. I’m English, French, German” (*After Easter*, 12). The other part of her personality tries to go beyond the intimate relationship between religion and nationality and advocates equality of denominations: “I am a Catholic, a Protestant, a Hindu, a Moslem, a Jew.” (*After Easter*,7).

Anne Devlin: going beyond the mere relationship between religion and nationality

Like Greta, her character, Anne Devlin left the Province out of fear as she relates:

It is not that I suddenly decided to go and live out of Ireland, out of Belfast, and from the safety of somewhere a refugee in the south west of England decided to write about the North of Ireland. I did not do that. I was sort of driven away. There were levels of violence that caused me to be afraid. I could no longer endure that, so I moved (Chambers 2001: 111-112).

Nevertheless, in an interview, she also confessed that no matter how far she would go from Northern Ireland, her heart would always be there. The place is inside her. That is why, her character, Greta, feels it compulsory to return for a while, back to her origins. At first sight, going abroad, leaving Northern Ireland, the Troubles and segregation behind, might be considered as the solution for any Northern Irish person for embarking on the first step towards distinguishing between one’s nationality and one’s religious sensitivity. Effectively, in England or America, the places where most Irish choose to settle, religion is not part and parcel of the nationality. It is only an element constituting one’s identity. Nevertheless, Devlin really tries to go beyond the mere equation between Irishness and Catholicism inside her plays. She seems to have inherited this perspective on life from the socialist and trade unionist ideas of her father whose efforts were to try and create a government free from religious

⁶ Greta is married to an English man, George, and lives in England.

distinctions. She claims that her life, as well as her books, have been inspired by her father:

The important thing to note about Paddy's influence on me was that it came before he was a public figure. He went to parliament at the same time as I went to university. He brought me up to be a socialist. It was an emotional understanding. I had no intellectual grasp of what it meant at all. I always thought politics and literature and history were separate things. It is very hard to explain what it felt like to be brought up by a working-class socialist in West Belfast in the 1950s and 1960s and to try to understand the intellectual basis of his beliefs – not mine, but his – in order to make them my own. Some of them I did make my own – I loved George Orwell, but because he attacked the Left so much, Paddy got angry. [...] I was being urged to find my model in the writer by my father... (Foley 2003: 71-72).

Not only did her father influence her political way of life – Anne became responsible for the Falls branch of the Northern Irish Labour Party – but he also had an impact on her writing and strongly supported her choices. Thus, throughout both plays, the presence of the father is powerful. In fact, while in *Ourselves Alone*, Malachy is a member of the IRA⁷, *After Easter*'s Michael is a socialist. These references to fathers appear to be somehow autobiographical from Anne Devlin's part. In *Straight Left*, the reader acknowledges that, Paddy, born in 1925 on the Falls Road, joined the Fianna⁸, which he qualified as "the breeding ground for the IRA"(Devlin Paddy 1993: 22), before joining the IRA itself in 1940. It was only after several journeys to prison, where he read a lot, that he came to be interested in politics (Devlin Paddy 1993: 27). He first shared the ideas of the Welfare State in the 1950s and then focused on trade unionism as he writes:

I was convinced that trade unions were necessary to secure justice for workers. Without unions, employers could give whatever they felt they could comfortably spare, and they would not feel much compulsion to provide safe or decent working conditions (Devlin Paddy 1993: 61).

His ideas progressively led him to create a Labour Party in Northern Ireland in 1970, the SDLP, together with John Hume, Gerry Fitt and Austin Currie, among others, whose goals were defined as follows:

The basic party philosophy was to be socialist and democratic and work for the unity of Ireland by consent [...] the SDLP's aim is to promote co-operation, friendship and understanding between north and south with a view to the eventual reunification of Ireland through the consent of the majority of the people in the north and in the south⁹. (Devlin Paddy 1993: 142)

⁷ "My daddy's a big fella in the Provos." *OA* p. 18.

⁸ Not for political reasons but because he could gain authority and power on his street.

⁹ Catholics in the South seemed to approve of the ideas of the SDLP since they even collected money in their churches.

This second part of his life is also tackled by his daughter in *After Easter*, in which Michael Flynn was “the first communist on the Falls Road”, and brought up his catholic children like Protestants so that they might not turn into rebels. Although he lies in his coffin, he wakes up to assure his daughter that “the universe is democratic”, “that everything equals everything else” and that he does not believe in hierarchies. (*After Easter*, 59) Moreover, Rose, his wife, “a member of the children of Mary”, has always blamed him for criticising the church’s attitude to integrated school - i.e. their rejection of this system - since it prevented her from finding a job¹⁰. In reality, Paddy Devlin, who was in favour of integrated schools, split from the Catholic Church as soon as he entered into politics. He became an agnostic, as he says, and this change deeply impacted on his family who had to go through humiliations and insults by other Catholics. However, he never makes it clear in his autobiographical book, *Straight Left* (1993), whether they reproached him for his behaviour. We only know that Anne went as far as sharing his political ideas, entailing a close relationship between father and daughter, which she deals with in her two plays. In *Ourselves Alone*, Josie still lives at her father’s and is supported by him when she accidentally finds herself pregnant. Similarly, in *After Easter*, Greta explains she has distanced herself from religion as her father did. She repeats many a time that she does not believe in God. Nevertheless, and this is paradoxical, she visits her cousin, a prioress in a Belfast convent, to try to find the solution to her identity crisis. When she sees her religious cousin, Elish, who comes in wearing a tracksuit and with an uncovered head, she is utterly shocked by the changes the Catholic Church has gone through even in Northern Ireland. These modern positive changes can be viewed as a step forward for religion to be secularised, which can also be considered to be the solution for separating religious identity and nationality.

Bringing people together?

What Devlin seems to get at is a kind of harmonious universe in which people will get on well no matter their religious preferences exactly like her father was trying to achieve by creating a new government in which power would have been shared equally. She thus sounds to deliver a message of peace, notably in this context of Troubles. To that extent, the role of women in her books is particularly significant since they refuse to participate to the conflict. Based on her personal experience one more time, she wanted to write about women who, like her, grew up and lived in Andersonstown in West Belfast. After she divorced her first husband, she lived alone and spent much time with women, which made her understand what it was like to be alone. Moreover, she also paid more attention to women in Belfast who also lived without men, since the latter were either in prison or on the run. These ladies were sometimes only with their children and would support each other against a backdrop of political violence. In her plays, Devlin sheds light to the close relationship of two sets of three women who represent what the author experienced as she admitted once:

The characters in *Ourselves Alone* were conceived as a trinity of women: the mother (Donna), the mistress (Josie), and the career woman (Frieda). I found the three women representative of three paths available at different stages of life, my own essentially. I

¹⁰ Note here the close relationship between economics, religion and politics.

have been all three women, both political (Josie) and non-political (Frieda), yet when I began writing the play, I had never been a mother. At the end of act 1 of the first draft, I found myself pregnant and the baby was born in October 1984. This fact of motherhood changed my whole perspective on the script. Because I had given life, I could not take it away. So no-one dies in this play (Bort 1996: 50).

No one dies and, on the contrary, Josie becomes pregnant, like the author. Similarly, it is no coincidence that Greta, Helen and Aoife share several aspects of their personalities with Devlin herself. While Greta and Helen are emancipated women who went to live abroad like Anne, Aoife has always stayed faithful to her country and proud to be Irish, which Devlin vindicates. Neither does she hide she is a feminist, a tendency she resorts to when she writes. This is the reason why she created the character of Frieda, “fed up with songs where women are doormats”. (*Ourselves Alone*, 9) She does not want to sing Republican classics anymore, and would rather offer her public new songs of her own composition. Devlin regards the artist as a faithful messenger for bringing people together. She has chosen theatre as her own way to demonstrate that writing can change our perspective radically as she says:

One of the huge changes about the importance of history in Irish theatre is a real shift from what I call the warrior’s sword to the scholarly pen: once you come back into the land of the conversation, the word and the pen, there is a chance to see somebody else, somebody else makes an appearance on stage (Chambers 2001: 118).

In the two plays she also imagines musicians whose role is to bring light to the alarming situation in Northern Ireland. The appearance of musicians in the plays are echoes to the role Paddy Devlin played in creating the Ulster Orchestra¹¹. This is how Manus, a young fiddle player in *After Easter*, resorts to music to try to bring the Protestant and the Catholic cultures together so as to create an Irish one. He wishes Ireland had not been invaded by the English, and urges his audience to “forget 1690! Forget history! Remember – the pursuit of happiness is a Right of Man!” (*After Easter*, 53) Effectively, Devlin advises the Irish to remember the past in order to be able to forget it more efficiently, which could be the solution to bring people together:

I do not think that history is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake, I think that it is part of what I call memory and forgetting: before I can forget I have to remember and before we can put down this particular burden that is our history we have to recall certain things that have not been visible during a certain period (Chambers 2001: 117).

It is clear then that both plays are based on the experience of the author, but are not entirely biographies. The presence as well as the influence of her father can be felt strongly. Accordingly, *Ourselves Alone* and *After Easter* both tackle the division between the two

¹¹ “Jimmy Hawthorne [...] came up with the suggestion of starting our own Ulster Orchestra with local sponsorship and the help of the BBC. We took him at his word and set out to find ways to turn the idea into reality. ... Together with financial grants from private enterprise, we were able to bring a fine quality orchestra to life.” In DEVLIN Paddy, *Straight Left, an Autobiography*, Belfast: the Blackstaff Press, 1993, 275.

communities in Northern Ireland engendered by their confusion between nationality and religious identity, which Paddy Devlin tried to fight against all his life. Even if this relationship tries to be deconstructed by Anne, it appears that it is so deeply rooted in people's minds that it will take them a long time to forget history. In the meantime, this separation precisely constitutes the most relevant characteristic of Northern Ireland: the Irish are united in their division.

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