

# Mapping Postcolonial Ireland: The Political Geography of Friel's 'Translations'

Written by Gah-Kai Leung

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GAH-KAI LEUNG, MAY 29 2015

### Mapping Postcolonial Ireland: The Political Geography of Brian Friel's *Translations* [1]

#### Introduction

While political geography has long been concerned with the interplay between space and politics, an emerging body of work investigates the significance of this relationship for literary texts (for other studies, see e.g. Randel 2003; Elden 2013), informed by both a wider 'cultural turn' in geographical scholarship (Rossetto 2013: 1) and an acknowledgement of political geography's post-disciplinary status (Saunders 2010: 436). This paper continues this strand of research by offering a political-geographical account of Brian Friel's play *Translations* (1981). The narrative begins in the 1830s in the rural Gaelic-speaking community of Baile Beag/Ballybeg in County Donegal. Into the townland arrives a detachment from the British military, charged with Anglicizing the Irish place-names for the Ordnance Survey. Friel therefore reconstructs an early nineteenth-century Ireland after the violent disruption wrought by English colonialism.

*Translations* opened in 1980 in Derry, Northern Ireland, to wide acclaim; it has since generated much critical attention among literary and theatre scholars and it has been performed across the world (Buitel ir 2007: 8). Its translation into other languages has sparked interest in the play's own continuing obsession with language (ibid.: 7-8); indeed the playwright himself has stipulated that *Translations* "has to do and only to do with language" (Friel 1986: 58), but in fact I would suggest that it demonstrates several motifs of concern to political geographers quite apart from language. Among these are issues of power, knowledge and identity, to cite a few; however I argue that central to all of these is the motif of cartography, exemplified in the play by the British attempt to remap Gaelic-speaking Ireland for its own administrative purposes. Political geographers have continually tried to account for the politicization of maps in the empirical world (e.g. Elden 2014; Perdue 1998; Peters 1983); by contrast the political uses of maps in literature have received comparatively sparse attention by scholars in the field. *Translations* would seem to be a seminal case study through which to explore this nascent area of enquiry.

This essay investigates the representation of cartography in *Translations*. Section one explicates Foucault's (1980) analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge in geography and Harley's (1989) extension of this work to include maps as a form of power-knowledge. Section two applies this to *Translations* and considers how maps work as political instruments in service of the English colonial agenda. Here, the external and internal power relations in cartography combine to reveal the status of Friel's play as a postcolonial text, where postcolonialism refers to the "long-term internalized consequences of colonization" (Bertha 2006: 155). Section three extends this postcolonial dimension and brings it into the contemporary context of both *Translations*' premiere and the current divisions between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Overall, this study aims to show how the literature on maps developed in political geography can help to inform a critical reading of the play.

#### I. "Techniques of Power": Foucault and the Deconstruction of Maps

In 'Questions on Geography', Foucault elaborates his preoccupation with the connection between power and

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knowledge. Power is exercised through the dissemination of knowledge to the extent that there is “an administration of knowledge, a politics of knowledge [that governs] forms of domination designated by such notions as field, region and territory” (1980: 69). Geographical knowledge constitutes power because it represents a discourse about the world that can be manipulated for political purposes.

Harley (1989) builds upon the Foucauldian insight in an account of the political significance of maps. Cartography is significant because it operates at the power-knowledge nexus. Harley distinguishes external from internal forms of power that construct the geographical imagination that maps provide. A map legitimates power that is external to the boundaries of the map itself. That is to say that cartography becomes a tool for bureaucratic policy; it facilitates states' control over their peoples as well as ensures the supremacy of their rule. Power is enacted through the instrument of maps; indeed, countless institutions have all initiated mapmaking exercises to serve their own ends (ibid.: 12).

But power is also *internal* to maps: it is intrinsic to the map itself, quite separate from its use by political institutions. Space is unbounded and limitless, yet maps are bounded and finite. Consequently, cartographers must decide what to include in their representation of the world. This is a selective process: one that involves attaching value to some discourses while marginalising others. The “silences and erasures” (Perdue, 1998: 273) that signal the absences in a map can be just as telling as what is depicted (ibid.: 273). Therefore maps are “techniques of power” (Foucault 1990: 11) because they promote a particular ontology. The map becomes a kind of speech-act, a political gesture which permits a certain way (and only that way) of perceiving the world to the exclusion of all others. Often this means depicting objects and systems out of context. Arguably this is what all mapmaking does, in its extraction of a particular conception of space.

## II. Imagining Ireland: The Political Significance of Cartography in *Translations*

I now turn to *Translations* and show how the analysis of external and internal power relations inherent in maps can illuminate a reading of the play. Maps occupy an almost central position in *Translations*: most of Act 2 is concerned with Owen and Yolland's efforts to translate the names for Irish locales around Baile Beag/Ballybeg and inscribe the new Anglicized versions. Friel describes the process in intimate detail in the stage directions at the beginning of this act. The Anglicizations occur

either by changing [the Irish] into its approximate English sound or by translating it into English words. For example, a Gaelic name like Cnoc Ban could become Knockban or – directly translated – Fair Hill. (Friel 1981: 38)

But this is no benign game: Friel continually foregrounds the imperial motivations for the survey and thus sensitizes the audience to the *external* forces involved in the cartographic project. Manus is aghast at the “bloody military operation” (ibid.: 36) that Owen is participating in; later Yolland tells us “the maps [...] can't be printed without these [English] names. London screams at [Colonel] Lancey and Lancey screams at me” (ibid.: 40-41). The diktats from across the Irish Sea and the hierarchies of English politics are a reminder of shrinking space-time and the intrusions of the modernized world-system upon the ancient communal order of Baile Beag. The documentation of Ireland in English symbolizes the superior status of the English language as a tool for bureaucratic communication in Anglo-Irish relations and its strategic importance in this world of global migration. Maire wants to learn English so she can travel to North America, distancing herself from the poverty surrounding her: “There's ten below me to be raised and no man in the house” (ibid.: 16); “the sooner we all learn to speak English the better” (ibid.: 24). Her attitude to English-language education exemplifies the same logic of progress that characterizes both the imposition of outside language and “an economy of mercantile capitalism [...] on settled geographical Irish space” (Breen 1993: 46).

These external forces are imbued within the map, drawn as Lancey commands, “to a scale of six inches to the English mile” (Friel 1981: 33). His insistence on scientific precision is in the spirit of William Petty, who invented the discipline of political arithmetic (Whelan 2010: 13). In his Down Survey of Ireland, Petty sought a cartographic method based on utilitarian rationality, efficiency and calculation. This transformation of the mapmaking process into a mathematical exercise “[stripped] the inherited Irish landscape of meaning and narrative. [As a result] Maps did not only record, they also obliterated” (ibid.: 13). The map with its fully Anglicized annotations asserts the technical

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capability and administrative power of the English colonizers; more significantly, its destruction of the old Irish ways highlights the tension between tradition and modernity that recurs throughout Friel's work[2]. It is hinted that the 'true' view of Ireland, as a moribund colonial backwater, can only be seen with Lancey's eyes.

The *internal* dimensions of power in the map are also apparent at the start of Act 2, where Friel places a "large [blank] map [...] spread out on the floor" (Friel 1981: 38) on the stage. The prop has a practical function in that it enables the director to dramatize the physical cartographic process. But staged objects also demand a symbolic reading; indeed geographers have recognized the textuality of maps and their capacity to be read similarly to literary texts, given this textuality (Harley 1989; Saunders 2010). The blankness of this map symbolizes an Ireland without names and therefore devoid of any significance. It underscores the Foucauldian observation that maps are not neutral containers of meaning; rather, a particular worldview is registered within them. As Owen and Yolland fill the map, it is as though the newly Anglicized Ireland emerges into existence before them and before the audience. The power that cartographers have to reshape perspectives on the world is thus literalized in the very replacement of the native language with another in the English map. Perhaps Owen should have read his Foucault: "We're making a six-inch map of the country. Is there something sinister in that?" he asks rhetorically (ibid.: 52), apparently ignorant of the violence he is perpetrating on his fellow Irish by erasing their language from official documentation and hence demoting it to second-class status. He claims he is "standardising those names as accurately and sensitively as [he] can" (ibid.: 52), as if he will be able to reconcile Irish and English interests in the new survey; the play's conclusion proves how wrong he is, as the brutality of the British presence becomes clear.

The exchange between Owen and Yolland emphasizes contrasting attitudes towards the problem of translation. Textual geographers, who investigate the implications of geographical representation in a variety of media (cf. Barnes and Duncan 1992: 4), have suggested that "textual knowledge is a creative process that is negotiated through a text's production and reception" (Saunders 2010: 440); but translation (and *Translations*) problematizes this view of textual circulation. Translation receives a text in one language and reproduces it in another, which often involves attending to the spatio-temporal distance between the original work and the translation (Hones 2008: 1301). One set of cultural assumptions, values and attitudes is replaced with another located in a completely different spatio-temporal context (ibid.: 1301), revealing an internal power struggle not just between languages, but also between competing sets of knowledge.

As *Translations* shows, the linguistic dislocation involved can have catastrophic consequences. While Owen sees his work as "an innocuous, beneficial civil project" (He 2010), Yolland laments it as an "eviction of sorts" where "Something is being eroded" (Friel 1981: 52-53). Even though he is an English soldier – "by accident," as Friel puts it (1981: 31) – and complicit in colonial rule, Yolland resists English supremacy by ensuring that the Irish "Tobair Vree" survives intact in the new map. The name's associations with "a man long dead [...] whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers" (ibid.: 53) encapsulates "a store of cumulative experience" (Breen 1993: 51) that the banal English name "The Cross" disregards (Friel 1981: 53). The dehistoricized authority of the colonial map eliminates Irish folklore and thus severs Ireland from its past. Owen's faith in the 'sensitivity' of his translation may well be genuine, but it is naïve: it fails to acknowledge "the central reciprocal relationship between languages" crucial to a good translation (Benjamin 1969: 72). He glosses over the fact that the Ordnance Survey project produces an official version of Ireland with its own attendant ideology of Irish space, thus destabilizing the Irish people's self-image (Hamer 1989: 185). The connections established between name, space and identity in the Tobair Vree episode emphasize the disjuncture between "the intangible experience of place and the tangible marker of place" (Bullock 2000: 98) that is a central faultline in *Translations*.

More broadly, Friel's depiction of internal and external power relations in the representation of cartography in *Translations* is symptomatic of a twentieth-century Ireland coming to terms with its colonial heritage. Through its engagement with the legacies of English rule upon Irish speakers, *Translations* lays claim to the status of Irish literature as postcolonial literature.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "conceit" of using one spoken language to represent two onstage languages (Murray 1999). The convention throughout is that the Gaelic-speaking characters only speak Gaelic to one other, while the English-speaking characters only speak English; yet all of Friel's dialogue is in the latter. The

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Anglicization of place-names that precipitates the play's events in 1833 seems to have filtered through into the very fabric of the script that Friel wrote in 1980. (Put another way: Gaelic characters speaking English is an anachronism imposed on nineteenth-century Ireland.) The 'colonization' of the Irish language by the English text implicitly acknowledges the trajectory of history, to the extent that contemporary Irish audiences must confront their own acquiescence to the colonial tongue (Pelletier 2006: 69). And yet a distinctly Hiberno-English dialect remains (Buitel  ir 2007: 13), set against the stiff British English of Lancey, for example. Hence the Irish characters disavow claims to Englishness even in the very act of speaking it (He 2010), suggesting resistance to the imperial order. The absent presence of Irish in *Translations* testifies to the play's obsession with how to reconcile the two languages and their representative cultures. The English map symbolizes this theme: just as it is in some sense a postcolonial text, so the play reiterates its own status as a postcolonial text.

### III. Confronting a Troubled Past: *Translations* and Recent Irish History

*Translations* has been hailed as a seminal moment in the development of Irish postcolonial studies (Cleary 2007: 14); there is no doubt that its treatment of the colonial question remains innovative and paved the way for the repositioning of Irish literature as postcolonial literature. Yet even as the play catalogues the consequences of British involvement in the 1830s, it comments upon Anglo-Irish relations within the immediate context of the play's initial reception.

The original staging of *Translations* was a watershed in Irish theatre as the inaugural production of the newly-formed Field Day theatre company; but it was also a defining moment for Irish politics. The 1980 premiere took place in the Guildhall in the city of Derry, on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic and – more significantly – the site of the events of 'Bloody Sunday'[3]. Reflecting the divided nature of the city itself, dignitaries from Dublin, Belfast, London and elsewhere were all in attendance (Deane 2009; Rushe 1980). The play was seen as a triumphant moment of reconciliation between all sides, emphasized even more strongly when the Catholic Friel dedicated the performance to his Protestant actor, friend and Field Day co-founder Stephen Rea (Buitel  ir 2007: 22). The "discriminatory civic space" of the Guildhall was reconfigured "for theatrically subversive and liberationist ends" (Roche 2011: 151) in an attempt to heal the wounds of history. But the sectarian context throws a stark light upon *Translations*, for it reveals the play's confrontation with then-recent historical grievances.

Roche (2011: 148-149) argues that parallels can be seen between the Northern Irish policy of 'internment' in the 1970s and Yolland's abrupt, unexplained disappearance between the second and third acts. 'Internment,' more properly known as 'internment without trial,' referred to the summary detention of male civilians without charge or a court hearing. Not only did it violate the norm of *habeas corpus*, it was indiscriminate in one sense since it failed to distinguish between those who had committed atrocities and those who had not; it discriminated in another because it targeted individuals on exclusively sectarian lines (ibid.: 150). No one loyal to the Union with Great Britain was arrested, which deeply antagonized the Catholic community (Patterson 2006: 221). The policy ended up backfiring: far from eradicating the Provisional IRA, which sought to reclaim Northern Ireland for the Republic, it radicalized the organization and helped bolster recruitment (ibid.: 221). Echoes of this disturbing chapter in Irish history run throughout Act 3: the British Army presence increases in aggression; the threat of forced eviction stokes anti-British sentiment among the Irish Catholics; Doalty confides in a newly-radicalized Owen about the pressure to mount an organized resistance, as well as tentative collaboration with the Donnelly twins, who represent an invisible proto-insurgency (Roche 2011: 149; cf. Friel 1981: 79-84); the Irish retaliate against the British by burning their encampment. This all occurs against a backdrop of continuing evening rain, which contrasts with the hot weather of the previous two acts and thus symbolizes the dark turn of events. These glimpses of the sectarian violence that crippled Northern Ireland speak to Friel's concern with truths embedded in the near past as well as the fictionalized reality of a more distant Irish colonialism. Although the North/South conflict is never directly addressed, its implicit presence suggests the problem of geographical representation in *Translations* also extends to historical representation (Crowley 2008: 73-74).

But the past is not just what is at stake in this play: Friel's invocation of Irish politics, both colonial and contemporary, has a life beyond its composition. The ellipsis that ends the play invites us to complete Hugh's narrative of the Trojan conquest of Lybia, an analogy for British rule in Ireland. If Hugh is to be read as a cipher for Friel himself (Richards

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1997: 56), then the playwright is asking us to provide a literal resolution to the story and metaphorically to resolve the conflicts at the heart of the play: between British and Irish, north and south, Unionist and Nationalist. The ellipsis is the simplest but finest expression of a call for peace in the Irish present. Although the Troubles have been consigned to the past, the ellipsis of Northern Ireland's continued existence remains incomplete: 2013 prompted the latest wave of clashes in Belfast (*BBC News* 2013). In the literal sense of the word 'translation' to mean 'carrying across,' Friel's title suggests the ongoing relevance of his play in that it carries across the lessons of previous generations.

## Conclusion

This essay sought to show the relevance of literary texts for political geography as demonstrated by the case of Brian Friel's *Translations*. It demonstrated how a political-geographical reading reveals the motif of maps as central to the play's meaning. The first section reconstructed the Foucauldian understanding of maps as "techniques of power" (Foucault 1990: 11) while the second section applied this to *Translations* and argued that maps in the play are highly politically charged, in virtue of their status as loci of internal and external power. The final section connected the political resonances generated by *Translations*' depiction of 1830s colonialism to parallels with the North/South dispute, which is as prescient now as when the play was first presented in 1980. The extent to which political geography can generate fresh interpretations of other literary texts would provide fertile ground for further research.

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## Notes

[1] Marijn Nieuwenhuis' support and advice has been invaluable. I dedicate this study to my Irish friends from both the North and South.

[2] For example, Michael in the opening monologue of *Dancing at Lughnasa* speaks of "a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be" (Friel 1990: 2).

[3] Friel (1996) had already examined the brutal legacy of that incident in *The Freedom of the City*, first performed in 1973.

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*Written by: Gah-Kai Leung*  
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*Written for: Marijn Nieuwenhuis*  
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## About the author:

**Gah-Kai Leung** is Commissioning Editor at E-IR and will be starting an MA in Transnational Studies at UCL in September 2015. His research interests include the relationship between politics and literature, the politics of sexuality and the politics of disasters.