

Reflecting on Kenneth Branagh's 'Belfast'

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, JUL 29 2022

Present-day Northern Ireland is haunted by the macro and micro-level legacy of sectarian warfare. Some of the resulting fissures are archaeological and unquestioned, while others metamorphose into violent events. The province is, at one and the same time, the most and least internationally understood conflict in the western world. Its past is certainly a "strange country" (Hughes, 2019: 1-9.) As some have indeed argued, "we are all like neophyte tap-dancers, gingerly tip-toeing towards genuine dialogue" (Galtung and Duffy, 2000: 603).

Sir Kenneth Branagh's autobiographical film *'Belfast'*, lauded in Oscars glory, has recently reawakened international interest about the Irish conflict, whilst simultaneously causing confusion in equal measure. Hollywood reviewers praise the film, yet generally complain that the Northern Irish accents necessitate subtitles. On this, The Belfast Telegraph stated that: "Our accents, no matter how strong or pronounced, are nothing to be ashamed of". Thus, we can say that not only is Northern Ireland difficult to understand politically, but linguistically it remains hard to comprehend. Nonetheless, Branagh has produced an exemplary expose of how political conflict can often best be understood from the love and travails of somebody's domestic experiences.

Between the late 1960s and 1990s, bombings and assassinations were commonplace in Northern Ireland as society conflicted over its future status. More than 3,500 people died during those violent decades known as 'the Troubles'. Despite a peace agreement in 1998, many communities still today live intensely segregated lives, evidenced in a number of cultural forms (Erskine, 2019: 1-16). Over 90% of children attend schools separated by religion. The number of 'Peace walls' (barriers which ironically are intended to divide neighbors and were erected for their safety from sectarian violence) has increased since 1998. Some hundred or so peace barriers, including so-called peace walls, cross cut across Belfast in a style more reminiscent of, or even comparable to, divided cities like Beirut, Nicosia or Mostar at the height of their individual tortuous political imbroglios (Calame and Charlesworth, 2009).

Northern Ireland's continued segregation, more than twenty years after the violence of The Troubles formally ceased, reveals something about the nature of conflict more broadly. The root causes of conflict often persist in societies long after peace efforts and conflict management agreements have come to a close (Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003). Making political peace is only the start of a longer journey. Like many conflicts, Northern Ireland's Troubles have a long history tied up in religion, ethnicity, and politics—seeds planted centuries ago when British Protestants first subjugated Ireland's native Catholic population (Collins, 1998: 11-19). However, it wasn't until the early 1920s, after a successful push for Irish independence, that the island of Ireland bifurcated (Ibid). It was an uneasy peace, and with Catholics becoming dissatisfied by their humble situation as a discriminated minority – alongside the over-reaction of state authorities – the violence depicted in Branagh's film inevitably erupted.

In Northern Ireland, British Protestants made up the majority of the population and held most of the region's political power. The Republic of Ireland was, and remains, predominantly Catholic – 78.3% of the population according to results from the 2016 census. In the 1960s, Northern Ireland's Catholic minority was increasingly frustrated over issues like unequal access to housing and jobs; this discontent led to a civil rights movement, which was violently suppressed. In 1969 the British deployed the military to quell the unrest (Dháibhéid, Coleman and Bew, 2022). The situation proved a tinder box that quickly caught alight. Initially a potential arbiter, the British army became part of the problem. We could readily substitute examples from India-Pakistan, Bangladesh, China – or even those enclaves and exclaves of political uncertainty from Karabakh to Western Sahara, from Transnistria to Crimea. Hence, Branagh's

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'*Belfast*' illuminates a micro-version of what life can be like in contested territory. Northern Ireland thus provides an example of the fragility of post-settlement ritualization in politically divided societies. Indeed, Branagh's own family home had become a war zone. Nonetheless, Branagh kindly reminds us that despite such conflict: "most people minded their own business and were kindly".

The loss of life and physical and psychological injury which resulted in The Troubles is graphically portrayed in the monumental '*The Cost of the Troubles Study*'. In Branagh's elegant filmography, the chaos extends even to the hospital system as it becomes dangerous to try to access local hospitals. Sectarianism cannot conveniently stop outside the kitchen door. The young Kenneth falls in love with a Catholic girl, and meanwhile the entire neighborhood erupts in full-scale religious warfare.

It is a lamentable reality that the Belfast community Branagh depicts in his movie remains intensely divided. *Under Siege* – the monograph of Arthur Aughey (1989), which influenced secular unionist discussion in the 1990s – is perhaps the most scholarly articulation of this sense of a society divided in its core beliefs; something which makes remembrance or commemoration innately controversial. Within Branagh's beautiful monochromatic cinematography we observe the chronicling of increasing nationalist resistance to protestant parades, and even the claim that Northern Irish neighborhoods have anaphylaxis to opposing flags. '*Belfast*' is fine-tuned to the emergence of larger and larger flags. We see the unique Northern Irish phenomena of 'flag sensitivity' whereby the scale and type of union flags on display convey so much about the political nomenclature of the individual neighborhood. Aughey (1989) challenges the goal of giving equal esteem to political traditions that cherish and seek to abolish such a state, whilst conversely pondering how the nationalist community can give homage to the triumphant marches of the Orange Order? Perhaps parity of esteem may be replaced by a concept of 'due recognition', which would better describe the essence of the new Northern Ireland. Branagh hints at this spirit in a hopeful conclusion of communal unity, lulled consolingly by the hum of the Van Morrison soundtrack.

There is much to observe and reflect on for divided nations across international society. It would be a shame if Northern Ireland came to be regarded solely as a destination for a "dark tourism". Yet a hundred years since the creation of Northern Ireland, and over fifty since the Branagh family left Belfast, it remains polarized. Those who persist (including their own relatives) are immersed in divided cities and contested border fields. Yet, Branagh offers a vision of survival and hope for peace. One that encourages visitors to join in a celebration of increasing municipal and rural multi-culturalism. Generations for whom The Troubles are but a distant memory, and new arrivals for whom ethnic divisions are merely a puzzle, deserve a sense of commemoration which is generous enough to encapsulate all.

So, can we say that the sectarianism portrayed in Branagh's movie are a thing of Northern Ireland's dark heritage? "I grew up with Branagh in Belfast: our childhoods haunt his new film", his cousin Martin Hamilton tells of the real-life conflict which inspired Branagh. "When the Troubles broke out, the atmosphere...was so hostile that these Catholic families, including my friend's, felt too insecure to stay...". A giant steel 'peace' structure was built and its foundations were laid on 1 September 1994, the first day of the historic IRA ceasefire. Although it can be opened during the day, this high and reinforced corrugated iron barrier remains a near-permanent 'border' creating separate Protestant and Catholic zones. It is a symbol and also a living testimony to the city's continuing sectarian division (Toolis, 1997: 37; Calame and Charlesworth, 2009: 61-82). While Branagh's film contains joyous moments, it ends with captions that commemorate the things lost during 35 years of conflict. Hamilton says there is little in the way of artistic license needed to tell Branagh's story – it was brutally real.

In some ways an explanation for the imbroglio which is Northern Ireland is explained in how its centenary year was marked, which Branagh anticipates. There remains a chasm in attitudes towards the Northern Irish centenary from political parties. The Belfastian comedian Tim McGarry once quipped that the definition of success in Northern Ireland was "passed off peacefully". in other words, an event is considered a success if it did not provoke a sectarian riot. It is an exaggerated way of saying that in a divided society there are not many events which enjoy universal support.

It is both a wonderful image of triumph over adversity and of the resilience of a sense of home, that long after the

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entire Branagh family left for England, they retained a residual sense of Irishness. While they had been Protestants in a bitterly segregated Unionist enclave of north Belfast, never did the family feel more Irish than when they set to make a new life for themselves in England.

Perhaps, what the young Sir Kenneth discovered to his surprise, and has never forgotten, is that even the most global of conflicts manifest themselves, painfully, around the proverbial kitchen sink of life. It is a credit to Branagh's extraordinary mastery of memory, empathy, and incantation that his film portrays so accurately that political conflict begins and ends around somebody's home. While Hollywood critics and American film-goers struggled with those Belfast accents, they also failed to appreciate how universally understandable the language of *'Belfast'* was.

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