Fabrice Mourlon, *L'urgence de dire: l'Irlande du Nord
après le conflit*

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Fabrice Mourlon, *L'urgence de dire: l'Irlande du Nord après le conflit*, Oxford, P. Lang, 2018, 197 p.

Before focusing on the compelling content of Fabrice Mourlon's monograph on post-conflict testimony in Northern Ireland, it is worth dwelling on the qualities of the book-as-object which amplify the positive reading experience and render it more accessible and enjoyable. Even a quick glance reveals that this is a well-designed and thoughtfully produced publication. We find none of the passionless, cramped pages (with text disappearing frustratingly into the gutter margins) that mar many academic books. The cover art – a striking night scene by Belfast-based artist Kevin Collins rather than the guns and gable ends we find almost everywhere – was chosen by the author and announces a willingness (explicit in the text) to eschew conventional *modi operandi*. On opening the book, we discover a pleasant, bright, airy, modern and functional layout. The spacing is easy on the eye, the margins generous and the typography crisp and readable. Every aspect of the design has been conceived with equal measures of respect for reader, author and the human beings whose life stories we are considering here.

Turning our attention to the introduction (arguably the most innovative and provocative aspect of the monograph as a whole), our first impression is one of warmth. This might seem like a peculiar remark and not a particularly pertinent one at that, but the compassion that runs through the text is, in my view, its greatest strength and what distinguishes it from similar studies of the Northern Ireland conflict. Mourlon's is nothing like the "cold", detached, "objective", formalistic approach (lamented by several commentators in the text itself) we would expect if the author were a doctrinaire historian. But this is Irish studies (explored to its full potential, I would argue) and that implies something altogether more lively, intimate, sensitive and respectful. The author begins (ego-historically) by taking a good look at himself and honestly assessing his own strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis a particularly difficult subject area, before offering his reader (in)valuable guidance and the benefit of his extensive personal and research experience. This is not an empirical-analytical-historiographical data scraping operation, the sort of by-the-numbers practice which, unhappily, has led some researchers to bemoan the inevitable factual inaccuracies common to all testimony and, in some extreme cases, recommend excluding it altogether from academic studies of the past. Mourlon, instead, demonstrates the value of a Buberian approach, engaging enthusiastically with the human, psychological and emotional context in which the testimony was initially volunteered and encouraging his readers to invest in a self-consciously subjective approach, allowing the affective content of the material to fill their horizon.

He is not a psychoanalyst (how many of us are?) but has been psychoanalysed (same question). It is from this enlightened standpoint that he enters into a constructive and respectful dialogue with his sources. Having put shape and meaning on his own experience, he (as analysand) is empowered to empathise with the trauma of the witness. He has also acquired a certain amount of resilience in the process and is better equipped to deal with the vicarious trauma that often comes with the

territory. Championing a subjective and interdisciplinary approach to post-conflict testimony, then, Murlon introduces us to the notion (novel for many of us) of meaningfully exploring the act of testifying itself rather than merely attempting to “extract” meaning from the facts and figures contained in the resulting testimony.

After this frankly invigorating start, we are presented with three well-crafted chapters, all of which could function autonomously as stand-alone articles but, taken together, provide a comprehensive theoretical and practical framework in which to engage with the evolution of the status of victims through the 20th century, and a methodology for looking with fresh eyes at the testimony of survivors of the Northern Ireland conflict in particular.

Chapter 1 very efficiently maps the epistemological and historical contexts in which a 21st century study of victim/survivor testimony takes place, guiding us through the historical, psychoanalytical and legal literature which developed out of the slow realisation that post-conflict testimony was worth collecting, archiving and studying. Murlon takes a close look at the different discourses surrounding testimony after the World Wars and the Holocaust before transitioning into a study of the situation in Northern Ireland in the following chapter.

Chapter 2 tightens the geographical and temporal scope of the study and convincingly shows how testimony could not properly enter the public sphere in Northern Ireland until victims/survivors were identified as a distinct group with specific needs and aspirations, deliberately written into the political, legal and historical narratives of the Troubles and their voices publicly recognised. Before this recognition there was no hope of real dialogue (in the Buberian sense of the word) and the audience necessary (according to Renaud Dulong) for the testimony to come into being in the first place could not exist.

Chapter 3 builds on the knowledge developed in the preceding pages to sensitively consider and analyse the testimony collected and made public by various groups and institutions in Northern Ireland. It is here that Murlon skilfully demonstrates what his repeated calls for an inter-subjective approach might look like in practice and sets an impressive standard for his peers to meet and, hopefully, surpass.

All in all, this is a provocative (in the most constructive sense of the word), scholarly and compassionate work in which academic rigour is never allowed to do violence to the life stories and dignity of the human beings with whom we are engaging.

Mathew STAUNTON