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## IMAGI-NATION IN BRENDAN KENNELLY'S *Cromwell*

John McDonagh

This paper focuses on the deconstruction of models of self and nation in Brendan Kennelly's *Cromwell*. Set in a post-colonial context, the poem seeks to avoid the stifling and restrictive nature of labels and clichés that dominate cultural expression. Kennelly reappraises the important figure of Oliver Cromwell through the dreams of Buffun, and this paper argues that this crucial process of reassessment of the past is central to the development of post-colonial models of the nation.

*Bloom was talking and talking with John Wyse and he quite excited with his dunduckety mud-coloured mug on him and his old plumeyes rolling about.*

*-Persecution, says he, all the history of the world is full of it. Perpetuating national hatred among nations.*

*-But do you know what a nation means? says John Wyse.*

*-Yes, says Bloom.*

*-What is it?, says John Wyse.*

*-A nation?, says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.*

*-By God, then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.*

*So of course everyone had the laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:*

*-Or also living in different places.*

*-That covers my case, says Joe.*

*-What is your nation if I may ask? says the citizen.*

*-Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.<sup>1</sup>*

James Joyce's Leopold Bloom is a character who exists at the edges of Irish society. Excluded by his Jewishness and personal sensitivity, he is attacked and ridiculed by the regulars in Barney Kiernan's pub as an outsider, denied a place in the Irish nation by the ubiquitous 'citizen' because he is not a British-hating Fenian nationalist. Bloom resists this exclusion and states clearly and simply that his nation is merely a group of people living together in the same place. He is laughed at by the others because he resists the labels that they place on their identity. His simplicity is ridiculed because it ultimately threatens the ideologies that feed the citizen's xenophobia. This section of Joyce's *Ulysses* is entitled 'Cyclops' and it infers a strong link between the ultra-nationalist citizen and the one-eyed, mono-dimensional Cyclops, unable to have anything other than one, unchangeable and unshifting perspective on

history and therefore on self. Bloom queries the underlying assumptions and interpretations of national identity, such as history, language, colonialism and imperialism. He searches for a personal liberation through a rejection of the perceived realities traditionally accepted as national characteristics. Ultimately, and almost inevitably, he fails to release himself from the nets that enclose him but in the search he begins to arrive at the illusive freedom he so desires. It is only through challenging the stereotypes that dominate cultural debate that Bloom, like Joyce himself, can attempt his flight from the suffocating atmosphere of an introspective, culturally moribund, politically mono-focal, religiously paranoid Irish national identity.

Brendan Kennelly's epic poem, *Cromwell*, first published in 1983, takes up the mantle of Joyce's *Dedalus* in what could be termed a wide-ranging pillage of history in order to arrive at a less clichéd view of national identity. In the introduction to his later collection, *A Time for Voices* (1990), he claims that a poet, living his uncertainties, is riddled with different voices, many of them in vicious conflict. The poem is the arena where these voices engage each other in open and hidden combat, and continue to do so until they are heard<sup>2</sup>. This polyvocalism is applicable to Kennelly's vision of Ireland's post-colonial identity in that he strives to articulate those voices that are consciously ignored in the building of the fortress of national identity. Kennelly's poetic drive impels him towards the edges of society and history and to places where the voiceless can be found. *Cromwell* is a dramatic and violent series of poems in which the varied voices of history burst forth to engage and challenge the interpretations placed upon them by an ideologically-loaded contemporary Irish society. Yet the collection is a far more subtle examination of personality and attitudes than a mere attempt to reinterpret historical perceptions. It marks an exhaustive and unexpurgated mingling of myth and demythologisation, history and ideology, modern culture and previous models of society, violence and humiliation, religion and persecution, national language and personal identity, all composite elements of contemporary models of national identity. This collection of over 250 poems revolves around the troubled waking and even more troubled sleeping hours of one M.P.G.M. Buffun, Esq. The mind of this almost schizophrenic character is invaded by Oliver Cromwell, Edmund Spenser and William of Orange, amongst others, men who helped shape both the actual and perceived notion of Irishness in their respective eras. Buffun's dreams and nightmares are peopled by:

*Prisoners on parole from history,  
Striving to come alive as I think I am,  
Finding their food in me, chewing hungrily  
First at the edges, then at the core*

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*Of my heart, beating its victim-victor blood  
Begetting, forgetting through all my dark and light.*<sup>3</sup>

Buffun's 'striving to come alive as I think I am' personifies the post-colonial society's attempt at self-definition, born as it is out of the nightmare of its

***Cromwell is a multi-dimensional character, equally capable of sincere empathy and brutal oppression. Kennelly portrays a character in all its manifestations, rather than concentrating on the few selective traits that feed the creation of myth.***

own history. Models of identity grow to be dominated and controlled by 'prisoners on parole from history', such as Oliver Cromwell, who eventually devour the potential liberation offered by the newly established post-colonial order. Buffun is a microcosm of Kennelly's perception of contemporary Ireland, a country torn apart by history and struggling to come to terms with various models of national identity.

Consequently, colonial history continues to dominate the perception of national identity in the post-colonial era and Kennelly's poem is an attempt to engage in a vital discourse with the past in order to untangle the web of sub-conscious prejudice and misrepresentation that forms present interpretations of a complex history. In this sense, Kennelly's *Cromwell* responds to Seamus Heaney's call for poetry 'to attempt to define the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past'<sup>4</sup>.

In *Cromwell*, Kennelly examines the popularly held image of Oliver Cromwell as the epitome of English barbarism cloaked in civilised and self-justificatory puritanism. Thus reduced, Cromwell becomes malleable, a useful figure in the construction of definable national differences and ultimately recognisable national stereotypes. However, the poems do not ignore Cromwell's more democratic characteristics, exemplified in the letter he wrote only two months after the siege of Drogheda stating that "we have a great opportunity to set up a way of doing justice amongst these poor people"<sup>5</sup>. The poems exist on the amorphous edge between apparent opposites. The fluid interchange between past the present in the poems, the casual violence and credible sincerity of Cromwell, the simultaneous torment and certitude in the voice of Buffun, all point to the complex and impermanent relationship between identity and history. The popular image of a nation is built upon an historical hermeneutic that Kennelly deliberately and carefully deconstructs to invalidate ideologies of political and moral exclusivity. The American philosopher Richard Bernstein, in his book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, identifies the debate between objectivism and relativism as 'the central cultural opposition of our time'<sup>6</sup>. By objectivism, Bernstein means "the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness or rightness"<sup>7</sup>. Kennelly's encompassing portrayal of Cromwell

shatters the objectivists desire for an immutable vision of history and colonisation. Rather *Cromwell* can be better understood if it is seen as a form of literary relativism which resists historical absolutes in favour of a more pluralist approach. Bernstein argues that all ideas “must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture. For the relativist, there is no substantive overarching framework or single metalanguage by which we can rationally adjudicate or univocally evaluate competing claims of alternative paradigms”<sup>8</sup>.

Bernstein’s model of relativism mirrors Kennelly’s polyvocalism in *Cromwell* and the plurality of conceptual schemes presented in the poems, certainly places Kennelly at the forefront of contemporary Irish poetry’s attempt to resist the tyranny of a master-story or metanarrative. The poems trace the uncertain emergence of models of nationhood and self, reflecting Benedict Anderson’s contention, expressed in his book *Imagined Communities*, that “nationalism has to be understood by aligning it not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which - it came into being”<sup>9</sup>.

Buffun’s name is itself half-Irish and half-English, the English ‘O O N’ being replaced with the Irish ‘U (fada) N’. A buffoon is a clown, an idiot, and is symbolic of the popular depiction of the Irish in the English colonial imagination<sup>10</sup>. However, Buffun pretends to be an ‘eejit’, being, as Kennelly writes, ‘most dangerous when he is accepted as the fool’<sup>11</sup>. Buffun could also be seen as a linguistic re-’Buff’ to another significant Englishman who appears in ‘Cromwell’, namely Edmund Spenser, whose book *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (written in 1596 and published in 1633) was instrumental in the fixing of the Irish idiot stereotype in the English popular imagination. Spenser portrayed the native Irish as a “rebellious rout of loose people... infesting the woods and spoiling the good subject”<sup>12</sup>, lacking that essential ingredient for civilised behaviour, i.e. the English language. However, Buffun cannot stop Spenser from wandering into his dreams, nor would he want to do so because the central dynamic of the collection is propelled by the existence of the variety of such voices in Buffun’s imagination. Buffun’s strength lies in his poly-vocalism, in his openness to engagement, while Spenser’s weakness is his inability to recognise or acknowledge any voice other than his own.

In the poem “What Use?”, the voice occupying Buffun’s imagination is that of a pragmatic Irish immigrant in England who realises the importance of English in his search for work. He says:

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*Can you see me facing a foreman in England  
Equipped with my native sounds, asking for a start  
To prove I can use my hands  
Like any other man from any other land?*

***In the post-colonial era,  
the colonised use colonial  
history to create a  
paradigm within which  
their own excesses,  
failures and pretensions  
are given intellectual and  
spiritual credibility  
through those of the  
colonisers.***

*That language should have been choked at  
birth  
To stop it wasting my heart and mind*<sup>13</sup>.

Here Kennelly hints at one of the central foundations of any linguistic colonisation, namely the association of the native tongue with economic poverty and low social standing. The pragmatist regards English as a route out of poverty and it is this belief that helped fuel the decline in the use of Irish in the nineteenth century. In *Cromwell*, Kennelly deals with crucial cultural and linguistic questions. What are the consequences of such a decline in popular use of ethnic languages? Is anything really lost and is such a loss quantifiable? However, before this pragmatism can take root another voice elbows its way to the front of Buffun's mind to point to the latent problems associated with language loss. In 'A Language', another voice comments:

*I had a language once.  
I was at home there.  
Someone murdered it.  
Buried it somewhere.  
I use different words now  
Without skill, truly as I can.  
A man without a language  
Is half a man, if he's lucky*<sup>14</sup>

This contradicts the pragmatist's voice in the previous poem and points to the complexities that Kennelly deals with in *Cromwell*. This voice feels awkward in English, his soul lost in translation, his language existing like a roaming evicted tenant. He can of course communicate but it is 'without skill' and there is a strong inference that so much more has been murdered and buried along with the language, vital cultural signifiers such as songs, stories, poems, names of people and places, family and village histories. The potentially devastating cultural consequences of what Ngugi Wa Thiong'o refers to in the African context as 'the fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature'<sup>15</sup> leads Buffun to reflect on what he has lost. He describes the lost words as "angels", sacred messengers existing in another world. He wonders if a nation without a language can consider itself a nation at all. The pragmatist would of course reply that Ireland has a perfectly adequate and in many ways superior language, namely English.

Buffun's reflections on the nature of linguistic colonisation result from an engagement with the conflicting voices that necessarily compose a national identity. He is neither a pragmatist nor a sentimentalist and while being a medium for their competing vocalisations, he can experience a personal vacuum over the loss of Irish while appreciating the practicality and contemporary effectiveness of English. Indeed, in portraying the Irish as wordsmiths of their own language, Kennelly appears to be advocating James Joyce's possible solution to this linguistic dilemma, namely the Hibernicisation of the English language to the degree that it becomes genuinely characteristic of the Irish psyche. Kennelly recreates a type of linguistic dislocation in terms of Irish history in Buffun's mind. As with all his intellectual dilemmas, however, Buffun fails to ultimately resolve the difficulty of his language. He accepts that English is his contemporary language yet he is aware that Irish contains nuances of meaning that, for him, English could never capture. Both languages interplay in his imagination and forge another element in his composite identity. *Cromwell* points to the folly of contemporary interpretations of history that fail to recognise the necessary dialectic that such translations involve. Kennelly describes the confrontation:

*Is there a Protestant, puritan language? Is there a devious, Catholic language? I think so. I wanted them to infiltrate each other, to confront and invade each other, lay siege to each other, get to know each other in an intense, intimate, loathing way*<sup>16</sup>.

Kennelly states in a note to *Cromwell*, that "Because of history, an Irish poet, to realise himself, must turn the full attention of his imagination to the English tradition. An English poet committed to the same task need hardly give the smallest thought to things Irish. Every nightmare has its own logic"<sup>17</sup>. He consequentially adopts the position of historian-poet in *Cromwell*, cleverly and effectively inter-mingling historical fact (recorded events, speeches, letters, etc) with imaginative poetic inquiry, delving into his characters subconscious motives and actions and, significantly, the contemporary consequences of those actions. The choice of a dream sequence of poems is also significant and effective in that it allows Kennelly the freedom to explore Buffun's imagination and reality in all its sublime, random manifestations and apparently absurd representations. Just as Sigmund Freud claimed that 'all the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience'<sup>18</sup> so Buffun's dreams contain a spectrum of images derived from his perception of reality. Even those dreams whose source Buffun is at a loss to explain attest to the depth and strength of perceived notions of nationhood. Freud argues that even in apparently inexplicable dreams 'we are thus driven to admit that in the dream we knew and remembered something which was beyond the reach of our waking memory'<sup>19</sup>. *Cromwell* is so buried in Buffun's psyche that certain elements of his influence can only appear in his dreams. Therefore, Kennelly posits the idea that crucial cultural icons,

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images and manifestations of self and nationhood exist beyond the reach of our waking memory and in the realms of the sub-conscious mind. Consequently, the poems question the certitude of self-conscious definitions of personal and national identity in the face of the powerful and in many ways

*The imagination of that narrator of dreams, "Buffun" (the poet's mouth-piece in the 'Cromwell' poems), is Ireland's imagination - constructed largely out of memories, images and icons of nationhood that crumble under the weight of sustained critique.*

indefinable influence of the sub-conscious mind on the waking memory. Indeed, the poems posit the tantalising notion of the existence of models of nationhood in both the conscious and sub-conscious imagination filtering insidiously into contemporary waking memory paradigms of Irish national identity.

Oliver Cromwell is the focus of Buffun's nightmare and through Kennelly's "imagistic, not chronological"<sup>20</sup> approach to the poems, we enter into the battleground of Buffun's mind. Buffun is subjected to a barrage of

images of the past that are infused with the personae of the present, and his personal emptiness is filled by the ghosts who occupy and cloud his perception. Cromwell appears at random in Buffun's sub-conscious, correcting Buffun's image of him and admonishing those in Ireland who labelled him 'the butcher of Drogheda'<sup>21</sup>. However, as with many of the concepts in the poems, Kennelly explores contradictory avenues of interpretation in order to enable a hybrid truth to emerge. This juxtaposition of a self-justifying puritan crusader with a sadistic, sexually perverted voyeur highlights the differing interpretations that any historical figure or event can arouse. Cromwell is a multi-dimensional character, equally capable of sincere empathy and brutal oppression. Kennelly portrays a character in all its manifestations, rather than concentrating on the few selective traits that feed the creation of myth. Indeed, Cromwell himself points out to Buffun what his historical legacy has been:

*I tendered them the terrible gift of my name,  
Knowing they would make songs about me  
Echoing curses soaked in verbal bile  
Twisted poems and stories  
To make me an excuse for what they  
Would fail to do, to be, being themselves<sup>22</sup>.*

Through *Cromwell*, Kennelly posits an important re-reading of the traditional perception of the master-slave, coloniser-colonised relationship. As opposed to power resting in the hands of the coloniser, in the post-colonial era the colonised now use colonial history to create a paradigm within which their excesses, failures and pretentious are given intellectual and spiritual credibility through the perceived excesses, failures and pretensions of the



coloniser. Culturally, politically, linguistically and economically, the relationship between coloniser and colonised has been so intense that Kennelly seeks to fragment and shatter the ideologies that have grown in the greenhouse of Ireland's colonial experience. *Cromwell* struggles at the points of historical and cultural intersection, what Colin Graham refers to as the 'liminal spaces that govern perceived national identities'<sup>23</sup>. The Cromwellian land settlements of the mid-seventeenth century played a decisive role in the establishment of an effective, land-owning colonial structure in Ireland and while Cromwell is mainly remembered for the short but violent military campaign of 1649-50, his ultimate legacy was the creation of a Protestant ascendancy, the virtual dispossession of Catholic landowners and the initiation of a recognisable colonial regime based on the crucial platform of land ownership. He is, as Jonathan Allison attests, "a gigantic presence in the Irish national consciousness"<sup>24</sup> yet his contemporary role appears to be that of the scapegoat, a theme that Kennelly returns to in his *Book of Judas* collection. Interestingly, Christopher Hill notes that the Cromwellian revolution signalled "the transition from the divine right of monarchy to the divine right of the nation"<sup>25</sup> while Kennelly explores the parallel role of Cromwell in the construction of contemporary models of Irish nationhood. The fact that almost 350 years later he acts as the catalyst in Kennelly's attempt to answer MacMorris's question in *Henry V* - 'What ish (sic) my nation?'<sup>26</sup> - attests to the dangers in gagging the 'prisoners on parole from history'.

Buffun's imagination is Ireland's imagination, constructed largely out of memories, images and icons of nationhood that crumble under the weight of a sustained critique. Kennelly's revisionism occurs in the vital arena of what Edward Said refers to as 'the shared memory', that liminal space in which confused, under-developed and unfocused concepts of nationhood can flourish. Kennelly points to the arbitrary nature of nationhood and indirectly supports Leopold Bloom's assertion that a nation is merely a group of people living together in the same place. *Cromwell* dissects the edifice that is created when imagined communities become the ideological vehicles for power-hungry social, political and cultural interest groups. The penultimate poem in the collection sees Buffun attempting to analyse what the nightmare of the past has made of his personality, and he honestly admits that he is a walking contradiction, as indeed are most images of nationhood when examined in the detail that Buffun subjects himself to. He can "bullshit about being free" while "selling his country for a fistful of money" and he "knows as little about love as it is possible to know". Although he 'is lost in himself'<sup>27</sup>, at least he is still searching. Indeed, Buffun could give MacMorris an answer to his famous question 'What ish my Nation?'. It is his imagi-nation.

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Notes

- <sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, London: Society of Authors, 1984, p.713
- <sup>2</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *A Time For Voices*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990, p.12
- <sup>3</sup> Brendan Kennelly, *Cromwell*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1987, p.160.
- <sup>4</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations - Selected Prose 1968-78*, London: Faber and Faber, 1980, p.60.
- <sup>5</sup> Christopher Hill, *God's Englishman - Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970, p.122.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Relativism - Science hermeneutics and Praxis*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983 , p.7.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. , p. 8
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. , p. 8.
- <sup>9</sup> Bhaba, Homi K., ed., *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge, 1990, p.1.
- <sup>10</sup> See Roy Foster's essay 'Paddy and Mr. Punch' in *Paddy and Mr. Punch*, London: Penguin, 1993, pp.171-195.
- <sup>11</sup> Personal correspondence, 1-4-96.
- <sup>12</sup> Coughlan, Patricia, ed. *Ireland and Spenser - An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Cork: Cork University Press, 1989.
- <sup>13</sup> Brendan Kennelly, op.cit., 1987, p.40.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. , p.39
- <sup>15</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind - The Politics of African Literature*, London: James Curry, 1986, p.7.
- <sup>16</sup> Personal correspondence, 1-4-96.
- <sup>17</sup> Kennelly, op.cit , 1987, p.6.
- <sup>18</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, London: George Allen and Unwin: 1954, p.11.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.10.
- <sup>20</sup> Kennelly, op.cit. (1987), p.6.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.15.
- <sup>22</sup> Kennelly, op.cit. (1987), p.150
- <sup>23</sup> Graham, Colin, 'Liminal Spaces - Post-Colonial Theory and Irish Culture' in *The Irish Review*, No.16, Autumn/Winter, 1994, pp. 29-43.
- <sup>24</sup> Jonathan Allison, 'Cromwell -Hosting the Ghosts' in *Dark Fathers into Light - Brendan Kennelly - Bloodaxe critical Anthologies 2*, ed. Richard Pine, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 19, p.90.
- <sup>25</sup> Hill, op.cit., p.265.
- <sup>26</sup> Shakespeare, William, *Henry V*, London: The Arden Shakespeare, Routledge, 1954, p.65.
- <sup>27</sup> Kennelly, op.cit., 1987, p.159.