**Something Happening Quietly: Owen McCafferty’s Theatre of Truth and Reconciliation**

‘This talk of the “peace process” having started 10 years ago – or having been initiated

by John Hume and Gerry Adams, or John Major or Albert Reynolds – is a nonsense.

The peace process started when the first punch was thrown, when the first stone was

thrown – that’s when the peace process started, because individuals, in all walks of life

here, decided to do something about it.’

Jackie Hewitt, co-ordinator of *Farset International*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Despite being one of Belfast’s most revered playwrights, aside from introductions to his published plays Owen McCafferty’s work has received remarkably little critical or scholarly attention. This is in some ways precisely because it rests outside the conventional boxes and boundaries of Northern Ireland’s dominant discourses, his plays ‘human melodies, not local street-songs’.[[2]](#endnote-2) A critical feature of McCafferty’s theatre, in something which separates him from most other Belfast-born dramatists, is that we are rarely told of the religion and politics of his characters. While his plays do engage with the political climate, favoured collaborators confirm that McCafferty ‘didn’t want to be a writer in the mould of Martin Lynch or Graham Reid’,[[3]](#endnote-3) both of whose work – while highly-regarded – is viewed as synonymous with either the Catholic or Protestant communities.

This does not mean, as some have interpreted,[[4]](#endnote-4) that McCafferty’s plays avoid politics or Northern Ireland’s recent history. It is a charge the playwright himself has strenuously rejected:

Sometimes the way people have talked about my work, it’s as if they have this notion

that I avoided what was going on here. I’ve never avoided what’s gone on. I actually

think I’ve attacked it head on, but I’ve attacked it from another point of view. I wasn’t

ever interested in the sabre-rattling of political attitudes: I was interested in how that

affected people. I was also interested in the notion of saying that, regardless of what

we’re told, politics isn’t the most important thing in our lives. That is a media and news

thing. It wasn’t true before and it’s not true now. I don’t believe the vast majority of

people live their lives like that. There are emotional journeys we all understand like

when somebody close to us dies. Your experience of being unemployed or being in

love or experiencing death isn’t any more or any less because you’re a Protestant or

Catholic, or you’re a Loyalist or a Republican – it’s the same fucking thing.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Ironically the major exception to this rule is the subject of this article, *Quietly* (2012), which represents – in the words of the original production’s leading actor – McCafferty’s ‘most direct contribution to the political landscape here’,[[6]](#endnote-6) as well as his closest engagement with the Troubles. Essentially the play gears the recent history of Northern Ireland towards a peacebuilding paradigm because political progress appears an oxymoron. Many academic and journalistic assessments go as far as to contend that the process has if anything gone backwards in the years since the Belfast Agreement of 1998, most especially in terms of the solidification of sectarian attitudes and constitutional point-scoring within a political carve-up, punctuated by the continual possibility of outright collapse.[[7]](#endnote-7)

First staged at the Abbey Theatre’s Peacock auditorium in November 2012, *Quietly* features two men in their fifties meeting in a Belfast pub that was the scene of a devastating bomb attack which killed six people in July 1974. One, Jimmy (played by Patrick O’Kane in the original production), lost his father in the action, while the other, Ian (Declan Conlon), was the person who carried out the bombing – one man a victim, the other a perpetrator. Those killed were watching World Cup football on television. Jimmy sets the scene of the city circa 1974: ‘men go out for a pint an the end up blown up or shot – there’s no way that wasn’t going to be the case – a rule of nature – a law of Belfast.’[[8]](#endnote-8) The atrocity is based on a real-life incident which occurred in May 1974 when a volunteer from the Ulster Volunteer Force hurled a canister bomb into the Rose & Crown Bar on the lower Ormeau Road (where McCafferty has also lived since the early-1970s).[[9]](#endnote-9) In this incursion five people died and there was no World Cup being screened because the real-life tournament began in the middle of June, simple modifications McCafferty makes in all his work (‘There’s more to the truth than facts’, as Ian fires back to Jimmy at one point).[[10]](#endnote-10)

Aside from a few textural echoes of Tom Murphy – a comparison alluded to some years ago[[11]](#endnote-11) – Irish theatre audiences, north and south, had not received a play like *Quietly* for many years. It steps into a colossal chasm of political intransigence and stalemate, imagining a meeting which makes the most authentic of statements that the populace continue to live normal lives, get up to go to work, and deal with the city’s violent past on their own individual terms. While many of the contemporary reviews focused on the quality of the performances and direction, most failed to grasp the play’s socio-political significance as a reflection of a grass-roots reconciliation process taking place, inch-by-inch, every day. An actual example of how this occurred organically within the Protestant working class community prior to the 1994 Ceasefires was outlined by the director of *Farset International* – a community organization involved in social, charitable and conflict transformation initiatives – which still perseveres at an interface on the Springfield Road in west Belfast:

We always left things to our politicians. We were happy enough to say ‘they’re looking

after us’ and that was fine. We just accepted how things were done, maybe because

they made us feel that bit more important. But as the community pulled together

because of the conflict, we began to recognise that there were a whole lot of problems.

The community began to talk, to look at housing, at all the social and economic aspects

of our lives. We’re gradually pulling people round to this way of thought.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Such a vision of people moving past their elected representatives – so often working within the potent ‘us vs. them’ binary, in thrall to the stoutest extreme – profoundly anticipates *Quietly*. Through the prism of two individuals marked by the conflict and one critical witness, the play is the dramatic presentation of this basic process. ‘Ordinary lives go on here, just as in any other regional city’,[[13]](#endnote-13) McCafferty has always remarked. As articulated by *Quietly*’s lead actor, ‘there is no genuine leadership from the top. People are having to go into quiet corners of pubs and sort it out for themselves’.[[14]](#endnote-14) For this reason *Quietly* has echoes of truth commission plays such as Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* (1990) and Athol Fugard’s *The Train Driver* (2010), and the play could be conceived as part of a more localized idea of ‘re-imagining Northern Irish identities and of projecting peaceful pluralist communities’,[[15]](#endnote-15) even if McCafferty’s ultimate assessment of the ‘peace’ – like the Argentine-Chilean and South African playwrights mentioned – is far too ambiguous and filled with doubt and danger for this to be the case.

Nevertheless *Quietly* also parallels one of the aspirations of Field Day Theatre Company to provide an antidote to the ‘politically moribund’ atmosphere of Irish politics and society in the 1980s.[[16]](#endnote-16) When the late Brian Friel was quoted in the previous tumultuous decade as saying ‘I see no reason why Ireland should not be ruled by its poets and dramatists’, he was not talking of direct participation – with Seamus Deane as Taoiseach and himself as Tánaiste (as would presumably have been the running order) – but was confronting instead a political culture ‘still in the throes of clientelism, gombeenism and an incapacity to deal with fundamental questions raised by the aftermath of the arms trial and Bloody Sunday’.[[17]](#endnote-17) Plays like Friel’s *Translations* (1980) and Stewart Parker’s *Pentecost* (1987) were, as another of the founder members Stephen Rea claimed, ‘looking for a way out when the ceasefire wasn’t even a remote possibility’ – presenting a ‘language in which things could be debated, because everything was being fought over rather than discussed’.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Rea’s characterization of the 1970s and 1980s, of political stalemate and cyclical conflict, is strongly resonant of modern Northern Ireland, where drama (and the arts more generally) plays a particularly critical role in addressing Northern Ireland’s troubled history through storytelling and character exploration. In other words a process of dialogue and self-examination is taking place creatively – and at community level – in a way which it is impossible to imagine occurring through the political culture. With both ethno-national blocs instinctively tuned towards a polemical response to the past, almost always highlighting the atrocities committed by their opposing actor(s) in the Troubles,[[19]](#endnote-19) any kind of ‘Truth and Reconciliation’ process remains categorically off the table. The situation was foreshadowed by Timothy Garton Ash in an evocative framing of post-conflict tensions arising from the breakup of the former Yugoslavia: ‘Dirty fragments of the past constantly resurface and are used, often dirtily, in current political disputes.’[[20]](#endnote-20) The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and the gradual erosion of structured violence – culminating in decommissioning by the Provisional IRA and Loyalist paramilitary groups in 2005 and 2009 respectively – was intended to diminish conflict and develop mutual respect for each community’s traditions and political aspirations. The reverse has taken hold; an entrenching of long-held animosities and communal footholds, leading to perennial political instability, the implied threat of violence, and a slow-burning form of ‘cultural warfare’.[[21]](#endnote-21) It was onto this contemporary stage that *Quietly’s* protagonists unassumingly took their place.

To get a sense of the early shoots of *Quietly* it is worth going back to some of the playwright’s earlier works which address themes of identity and the legacy of violence. McCafferty’s very first monologue *The Waiting List* (1994) – heavily influenced by Stephen Berkoff – sowed the seeds for some of McCafferty’s later works,[[22]](#endnote-22) most especially in its establishment of an inescapable limbo. An unnamed, disillusioned man appears in his pyjamas and proceeds to delineate life in a ‘not completely integrated area’ of Belfast: ‘mixed only in the sense that I couldn’t put a flag out or douse petrol over mountains of wood in the middle of the street – singing fuck this and fuck that – mixed in that sense.’[[23]](#endnote-23) Despite his linguistic flippancy and evident frustration, the man is reconciled to a stasis which is only combatable through embracing routine. *The Waiting List* is dedicated to Michael Brennan, who was shot dead by a Loyalist gunman in November 1974, a real-life incident referred to by the narrator during his stream of consciousness jabber.[[24]](#endnote-24) At the age of fourteen McCafferty frequented the St. Mary’s Youth Club on Carolan Road, south Belfast, where his history teacher Brennan also volunteered as a youth leader. ‘We were up in the Youth Club, I can’t remember what night, I think it was a Tuesday. Anyway he was shot dead and I saw him lying there. He had taught me that day.’[[25]](#endnote-25)

Debunking the contention that McCafferty’s theatre avoids the Troubles (or politics), the ghost of Brennan wanders once again into *Court No. 1*, McCafferty’s contribution to *Convictions*, a series of terse plays commissioned by Tinderbox Theatre Company which were set and performed in the Crumlin Road Courthouse in 2000. Asked by an unnamed ‘Administrator’ when he was killed, the ‘Victim’ replies:

**VICTIM.** the thirteenth of march 1974 / aged 26 / occupation – teacher / married / expired

/ the 13th of March 1974

**ADMINISTRATOR.** cause of death?

**VICTIM.** gunshot to the head / standing talking to one of the kids I taught / I think I

taught him that day – can’t remember / at night I helped run a youth club / get a better

feel for these things / understand a bit more maybe[[26]](#endnote-26)

More than Purgatory, Limbo again seems the most apt designation of the man’s condition. The finality of the man’s murder condemns him to a bleak hinterland beyond death but short of afterlife’s resolution, where it is he – as a victim – who faces an inquisitive, hectoring legal process (which actually masks judicial impotence), and never-ending isolation.

Regarded as the superior contribution to the seven short plays which comprised -*Convictions*[[27]](#endnote-27) the victim is perpetually reliving the exact moment of his murder. Though McCafferty does not believe in God, he accepts the spiritual dimensions of the piece:

The situation is whether somebody has been caught – caught’s the wrong word –

whether somebody has been held *accountable* for his murder, and they keep on going

‘No’. So he keeps on reliving the same moment again. He’s having a never-ending

argument about the 9-dart finish and the snooker, which is nonsense; you can’t answer

that. So there’s this eternal thing going on, the same thing happening again and again

and again and the only way that cycle can be broken is for that Administrator to say

‘Yes, something has changed’ – and then they can rest.

The root of the Victim’s torment is not merely the brutality of his execution but the need ‘to rest’; to receive some closure for his ‘situation’. He is stranded alone and desires not just a simple hearing but human company.

**VICTIM.** we haven’t finished yet / the darts and snooker thing – lets talk more about that

/ there could be an element of luck involved in the snooker that’s less likely with the

darts

**ADMINISTRATOR.** i have to go / your situation remains unchanged / no person has

been convicted of the crime against you. *The light bulb goes out*

**VICTIM.** right / you use more equipment in snooker which means there’s more…/ *he*

*starts table tennis shot again* / …more chance of it going wrong / we’ll talk about that /

*he paces back and forth* / I’ll think about that one / *every so often he looks at the light*

*bulb*

*Lights fade to dark.*[[28]](#endnote-28)

Aside from the extent to which McCafferty furnishes his drama with actual historical detail, the theatrical sense that the character is locked in the Crumlin Road building, unable to ascertain why he was killed (or by whom), is symptomatic of how poorly victims of the Troubles are viewed to have been accommodated in Northern Ireland’s post-conflict settlement.[[29]](#endnote-29) While recent plays such as Martin Lynch’s *Meeting at Menin Gate* (2013) have addressed a victim’s profile (though even this particular play problematically depicted a victim turned avenger), the deficiency is mirrored theatrically. As with the political scene it is a voice in danger of being left behind amid a ‘community’-driven, post-conflict response to the arts.[[30]](#endnote-30) Politically the dangers of ignoring both the past and victims have been fanned by ‘a new wave of anger from articulate relatives’,[[31]](#endnote-31) such as the children of solicitor Pat Finucane and judge Tom Travers, who were both targeted by paramilitaries during the 1980s (Finucane was assassinated by Loyalist paramilitaries acting in collusion with security forces, while Travers was wounded and his daughter Mary was shot dead by the Provisional IRA as they left Mass in April 1984).

The case is increasingly being put by this ‘professional class of people’ (in Malachi O’Doherty’s phrase) who are hard to ignore. In a theatrical sense we may indeed construe McCafferty’s work as representing a ‘voice for victims’,[[32]](#endnote-32) with their travails and trauma dramatically articulated, and it is no coincidence in his *Convictions* piece that it is the victim who appears to be standing trial – before abandonment to silence and the perpetual loop of his fatal moment. Disconcertingly echoing *Court No. 1*, the son of a man who died in the real-life bombing *Quietly* is based on recently declared: ‘I suppose from the point of view of the authorities they think it is kind of a done deal, sealed off, closed.’ He called for his father’s killing ‘not to be forgotten’, insisting that he did not want those who planned the attack to be imprisoned. He simply wanted them ‘to explain themselves. For me that would give me complete closure on it.’[[33]](#endnote-33)

The relatively modest and low-key space of the Peacock aptly suited the tone and aura of *Quietly*. The performances of all three of the original cast were critically commended, though Patrick O’Kane in particular won plaudits (along with UK Actor and Stage Awards at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe) for a formidably taut and raw performance which veered between explosive, violent anger and calm introspection.[[34]](#endnote-34) O’Kane captured the sense that Jimmy, like many a McCafferty male, is caught in a state he can do little to alter. The elimination of his father and the shattering legacy it unfurls has doomed him to another dead-end limbo. The only prospect for release, of finding some way to numb the pain, is understanding what happened to his father on the day he was killed and the person who took him away. It is not something the political culture of Northern Ireland is going to help him with. When asked about the play McCafferty confirms *Quietly*,

became about the notion of talking and listening and two people having different

stories about the same thing. Politicians keep arguing about this notion of a truth and

reconciliation committee. They keep saying that we’re not ready for it, and it all

sounds very immature – and I thought there’s a possibility that because of that

individuals might be getting on with the job on their own. So something was happening

*quietly*. Politicians can’t cure this: it’s happening without them being involved. There

are moments of reconciliation that are happening outside the realm of politics, outside

that political claw.

*Quietly* had a complicated production history. McCafferty was commissioned by the Royal National Theatre on the South Bank to write a play about ‘the ripple effects of a violent act over a period of time’, initially a grand exercise with a plethora of characters, not dissimilar to the array who made up his lauded *Scenes From the Big Picture*.[[35]](#endnote-35) Originally there were a group of children at the beginning and end of the play, but the eventual director Jimmy Fay thought this impractical (‘all that would happen is you’d wreck the green room’)[[36]](#endnote-36) and every time McCafferty returned to the project, ‘it got smaller and more intense until I got to a point where it felt that it was more important just to have two people in front of each other, confronting each other about something that happened and there being a witness to that’. Aside from Northern Ireland continuing to slip down in significance – always minimal in any case – to London theatregoers, the National regretted the play’s diminution and so amicably passed on the new evolution. It was at this point that the Abbey swooped in to seize the commission, and its debut venue did hark back to an era in the 1980s when the Peacock was known to house ‘tough, well-made naturalistic plays that used vivid characters to explore social issues’,[[37]](#endnote-37) frequently with strong northern grain. Fay, meanwhile, was personally determined to deliver a quintessentially northern play to a southern audience that ‘doesn’t want to deal in any way whatsoever with Belfast and the Six Counties’.[[38]](#endnote-38)

It has been observed that proper attempts at reconciliation ‘require management or, less contentiously, the facilitative efforts of a third party’. Truth commissions can play this role, as occasionally do priests, conflict mediation specialists, and diplomats, for the simple reason that ‘it can help to see that someone else *can* tell such a story’.[[39]](#endnote-39) With this in mind the crucial third individual of McCafferty’s play is Robert, a Polish barman (played in the original Abbey production by Robert Zawadzki). Robert is *Quietly*’s mainly silent truth commissioner, just listening to the story unfolding, apparently understated like the play itself. In front of him Jimmy and Ian proceed to have an extended conversation about the bombing, exploring what Fintan O’Toole has termed ‘the legacy of atrocity’.[[40]](#endnote-40) Simply by listening to this conversation, Robert becomes a vital part of what both men are trying to achieve.

**Ian**  can we do this in private

**Jimmy** no

**Ian**  it should be in private

**Jimmy** i think it should be in the open – if this succeeds we will be seen as the first –

we will be held up as a beacon – a fucking nobel prize maybe – Robert will be

our committee – our truth an reconciliation committee – won’t you Robert

When Robert insists he has no particular stake in the encounter and intends simply to watch the football game playing out on television, Jimmy sets the context (‘for thirty-odd years this was a fucked up place – blah blah blah – now it’s not such a fucked up place’) and the men are really ready to begin.

**Jimmy** it feels like we have been given the opportunity to examine ourselves – to come

to a conclusion – to get to the end – however the powers-that-be don’t want that

because they might find out who they really are – and what fucking right

minded person wants that – you might have to examine all types of shite then –

which brings me to the truth and reconciliation committee – we have been told

we are not ready for that – not mature enough…and lo and behold – no one is

prepared to make the first move…the consequences of all this inactivity is that

this man – this man here – must act on his own – take the initiative – save his

soul and that – so yes to answer your question again – yes it must be in fuckin

public – the floor is yours[[41]](#endnote-41)

Experts on reconciliation caution against using the language of forgiveness or ‘healing’, as indeed does Owen McCafferty. The above speech highlights just how much his own dialogue enters his work (of being ‘not ready for that’), and *Quietly* in turn does not show redemption or a cleansing of wounds. Like the process itself, the play is jarring and oftentimes unsettling, above all because genuine reconciliation requires ‘that people give up fundamental self-conceptions or face some very unwelcome truths about themselves’ (this is where the third party or some kind of independent ‘honest broker’ can prove especially helpful).[[42]](#endnote-42) Even in international contexts such as South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, more often than not forgiveness for past deeds is impossible. Reconciliation, consequently, ‘should not be touted as aiming at the happy and harmonious coexistence of former enemies’.[[43]](#endnote-43) A reviewer of the production which toured to the Edinburgh Festival agreed that while the meeting between the men should ‘allow space for reflection, perhaps reconciliation’, they are caught between Jimmy’s overwhelming grief and the way ‘the perpetrator won't budge far in accepting his guilt’.[[44]](#endnote-44)

*Quietly* avoids the ‘healing’ pitfall in proffering a moment of unguarded reflection which is not occurring at macro-level, and precisely because the setting is so low-key, a microcosm of an apparently impossible larger mechanism, each man can open up without fear of retribution or consequence. The objectives are not friendship or forgiveness: ‘this is about admitting – here – now.’[[45]](#endnote-45) As Jimmy queries Ian on his account of the bombing, of arriving outside the bar and preparing to throw the incendiary device in, the process thus crystallizes into honesty:

**Jimmy** when you opened the door what did ya see

**Ian** i can’t remember

**Jimmy** what did you fucking see

**Ian**  fenian bastards – nothing but fenian bastards[[46]](#endnote-46)

The meeting at the centre of *Quietly* is all the more poignant in light of an ‘ethnic conflict’ model trumpeted by conflict resolution scholars and burgeoning non-governmental organizations, all part of ‘a thriving peace and conflict industry where academics and university departments compete to demonstrate the relevance of their analyses to policy-makers dealing with violent conflicts from Belfast to Iraq and Afghanistan’.[[47]](#endnote-47) Accordingly Eamonn McCann, saluting McCafferty’s play on its Belfast arrival in 2014, observed that ‘These aren't two guys sharing a mic at a reconciliation shindig in the Europa [Hotel], half the audience academics and half of these from the United States, explaining that just a few years ago each would have done the other in, but that now they are journeying together on the path of peace’.[[48]](#endnote-48) McCann is correct to puncture the hollow contrivance and unfeasibility of such a process, which does not in any case constitute genuine reconciliation. *Quietly*’s fictive interpretation is more believable and accurate than the sociologies and legalities of the ‘peace industry’ in its conveyance that there is no easy solution or simple way beyond the impasse of the past, undercutting the even more dubious suggestion by academics and former Troubles participants that the Northern Ireland peace ‘model’ is in any way applicable or transferable to other conflicts.

Politically the play’s thesis becomes even more pertinent in the wake of a number of failed public initiatives aimed at addressing the past, including the recent all-party talks chaired by US diplomat Richard Haass and his assistant Meghan O’Sullivan, which collapsed at the start of 2014.[[49]](#endnote-49) This followed a previous effort to tackle the same issue in the form of the *Consultative Group on the Past Report* (2009), chaired by Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, which also foundered in a maelstrom of controversy.[[50]](#endnote-50) The Haass Report did recommend an archival role for historians in dealing with the past – reminiscent of Spain’s current approach to the time of General Francisco Franco – in essence handing the issue over to historians. But, essentially, the past is not up for serious discussion because it is still contested on the battlefield of fundamentally opposing interpretations. Thus the prospect of any effective Truth commission appears highly improbable, as historian Paul Bew made clear speaking in the House of Lords in October 2014. Leaving aside the unsustainable amount of police time and resources being devoted to investigating past atrocities,[[51]](#endnote-51) Bew pointed out that the Unionist community of Northern Ireland ‘believe that any narrative must reflect the fact that the lion’s share of the killing (almost 60%) was carried out by republicans…that is what they want to hear’. The opposing republican narrative, on the other hand, ‘focuses on broader explanatory factors which emphasise long-term structural factors, discrimination, sectarianism, institutional culpability and collusion’, often expressed in ‘a broader discourse of human rights.’[[52]](#endnote-52) Bew is correct to construe the approaches as basically irreconcilable.

When Robert points out that he has heard everything the two men have been talking about, Jimmy – acknowledging his truth commissioner status – confirms that ‘you were meant to – no point in it just being me and him – has to be someone else there to pass the story on’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Yet the other story which passes on is intolerance, to another group: migrants from Eastern Europe who have entered Ireland, north and south, since the mid-2000s. In the background to Ian and Jimmy’s meeting is a real football international played in 2009 between Northern Ireland and Poland, and after the Belfast men reach an unsentimental understanding and leave in their respective directions, we hear ‘*kids in the street…beating on the window shutters*’, shouting abuse: ‘go back to where you come from and shite in the street you fucker – polish wanker – three-two – three-two.’[[54]](#endnote-54) The final image is of Robert, baseball bat in hand, simply waiting – and so ‘the sectarianism with which Ian and Jimmy grew up has found a new outlet in racist intolerance. The ripple effects of history roll on’.[[55]](#endnote-55)

It is a reference, as ever, anchored in reality. In June 2009 a series of attacks took place in south and east Belfast on the city’s small Roma community, hundreds of whom were forced from their homes (it later emerged 65 Roma flew out of Ulster in the following weeks).[[56]](#endnote-56) This has also to be seen in light of ongoing and steadily rising racist attacks since 2011, targeting Poles and other migrants in the same areas of Belfast.[[57]](#endnote-57) ‘We’re not very good with foreigners’ Jimmy observes early on, and – as McCafferty has inferred in press interviews – the relentless focus on the past can lead to a debilitating neglect of the present: ‘We see these two men who are concentrating on a situation specific to us. I think we have a tendency to do that here. While we’re busy concentrating on our own grief, we’re maybe not so aware of other things creeping slowly into society.’[[58]](#endnote-58) Neither is hostility to Eastern European immigrants solely confined to the northern part of the island. Hostility to foreigners was thought to have been an inculcation of the British Empire, which needed to make its own citizens feel superior to other racial groups, but surveys have highlighted that anti-immigration attitudes in the Republic of Ireland appear to have worsened following the 2008 economic crash and the 2011 coalition government’s ongoing austerity programme.[[59]](#endnote-59)

*Quietly* also ran at the Traverse theatre, Edinburgh, as part of the Fringe festival, and when the play moved on to London in May 2014 – where director Fay felt it did not play as effectively as in Dublin, Scotland or Belfast – reviews were still resoundingly enthusiastic. The *Evening Standard* critic praised McCafferty’s skill in rendering ‘this edgy dialogue-across-the-divide in wonderfully plausible everyday mundanity’, even picking up on an older syndrome of drama about Northern Ireland: ‘It's salutary to reflect that *Quietly* details events in our country. It seems to come from several worlds away.’[[60]](#endnote-60) Criticism tended to avoid analysis of the play’s complex and occasionally problematic portrayal of individual acts of violence. On his initial entrance Ian is flattened by a head-butt from Jimmy, a moment which has been justified as getting ‘the violence out of the way at once’.[[61]](#endnote-61) It is the major discordant note of a play which is otherwise astutely pitched, and unfortunately relates once again to the concept of a ‘victim’. In his own act of force, Jimmy must be seen to refuse victimhood and becomes instead a reactive actor in an ongoing conflict; ironically a reflex that Ian’s political background – Ulster Loyalism – is more associated with. During a performance in its short Belfast run in April 2014, this difficult moment was accentuated by some members of the audience reacting with laughter to the sudden assault – a response which would most certainly not have been McCafferty’s intention.

Another credible criticism made of *Quietly* on its initial appearance was the lack of a female perspective.[[62]](#endnote-62) However, aside from the fact that the vast majority of those who died and carried out acts of violence during the Troubles were male, there is much to be said for the theory that McCafferty writes about women – as he phrases it – ‘through men’. The overwhelmingly male dynamics of McCafferty’s work might be connected to his sympathy for the male-dominated Labour movement, but it is fair to say that he is simply more interested in men than women; a theme linked – once again – to the city of Belfast. ‘The male thing is definitely about here’, he confirms. ‘I see this as a very male place. It still is. People think it’s changed; it hasn’t changed that much’. McCafferty has commonly noted that the common communication skills necessary ‘for working and developing personal relationships’ are inhibited by Belfast’s masculine culture which encourages men to conceal their emotions.[[63]](#endnote-63) Such individuals stunt their own growth and are likely to end up partnerless and adrift in later life, like navvies Gerry and Iggy in another McCafferty play, *The Absence of Women* (2010) – a verbal exercise in male inarticulacy.[[64]](#endnote-64)

*Quietly* once more provides McCafferty’s most nuanced writing on the subject. The storyof how Jimmy’s mother ‘let grief and loneliness consume her’ feels like the play’s most devastating juncture.

**Jimmy** she lived on her own for seventeen years after my da died – never met another

man and as each year passed gathered up more illness – never away from the

doctor’s surgery – i told her it was all in her head – that she needed to live

life…she wanted me to notice her and i didn’t – she took ill – it was more

serious than a thought – it was more serious than i would let her believe –

brought into hospital for tests – she had cancer – i think she got it from worryin

– needed an operation – had the operation the next day – she died on the

operating table – i didn’t get a chance to talk to her – since the day and hour she

died i wanted to say to her – i’m sorry i didn’t notice what was happening to

you – i should’ve looked after you – and you see i can’t even put that in a

prayer now – after all this time i can’t hear my father’s voice any more – it’s

gone from my head – that time has passed – i can still hear my mother’s

though[[65]](#endnote-65)

In a symbiotic revelation immediately following, the first time Ian had sexual intercourse was directly after the killings as a ‘reward’ arranged by his Loyalist elders for bombing the pub. Unbeknownst to him the young woman became pregnant after the encounter (‘some fuckin circle of life that’, scorns Jimmy), before he learns during a chance meeting with her in another bar many years later that she had to travel to England for an abortion. Essentially she was ‘given to gunmen to rape’,[[66]](#endnote-66) a practice which conceivably occurred among paramilitary groups across the board. Seeing her so far on Ian is unsettled by how ‘haunted’ the woman looks,[[67]](#endnote-67) another ripple of the atrocity dawning on him. So while McCafferty is more preoccupied by men, he recognizes that the fall-out from acts of violence obliterates women as savagely as those who tended to be caught up in the actual incidents. The story of Jimmy’s late mother has indeed been told through him, a part of himself which is departed. For this reason he can never truly forgive Ian and warns him not to return to the bar ever again.[[68]](#endnote-68)

If *Quietly* appears an anomaly in Owen McCafferty’s canon, the one sense it resonates with his other work is in its reminder of a territory that is fundamentally parochial, with many of its inhabitants stranded in an intense, overly-defined world of their own. Early on in *Quietly* Robert jokes ‘this place doesn’t know the rest of the world exists’, and the playwright himself is even more forthright:

It has to do with the notion of people not travelling; of people being insular, seeing no

outside world – just their own and that’s it. Of being locked into a certain aspect of

your life that takes over everything else, and that’s all you see. They don’t see the

bigger picture, they just see the small thing. Nobody cares – the outside world, nobody.

If people could only get a grasp of this! Nobody outside of here cares about us and our

issues. They have issues of their own, especially in this economic climate. World

poverty’s a genuine problem. Constitutional politics are just people arguing about some

fucking type notion of something. ‘X’ amount of children die every day because they

don’t have enough food, whereas here we prefer to think about what flag we should

hang, or who owns what street. All of it is ridiculous.[[69]](#endnote-69)

The extended nub of McCafferty’s assessment is of course that poverty in Belfast is also a genuine problem, and – as with a fixation on the past – the more limited vision inhibits addressing it.

As a play, *Quietly* made no political waves in itself. Politicians had no inclination to see it, nor is it likely they would have been stung by its thesis if they had. Neither was it intended as any kind of intervention. It simply reflects a state whereby citizens deal with the limitations of a political culture in essentially personal, pragmatic ways. Lacking the requisite public frameworks, individuals are presented as circumnavigating a perennially deadlocked landscape to engage with their fellow citizens on more conciliatory terms than the majority of Northern Ireland’s political representatives convey. In this endeavour the example of Field Day once again looms large – as Stephen Rea noted of Stewart Parker’s play *Pentecost*, ‘despite all the rancour and bitterness between its characters at the end of the play, the sun rises and people are reconciled’.[[70]](#endnote-70) Most Northern Irish citizens are not members of paramilitary groups, though most of the political and historical books continue to be written about the minority who joined them. Nevertheless *Quietly* suggests an implicit danger in ignoring the past in the hope it will go away, with both Jimmy and Ian aware they must ‘form some pathway to understanding – because if you don’t do that, you get entrenched back into verbal tennis matches that can end up with grenades going off’.[[71]](#endnote-71)

South African lawyer Kader Asmal stipulated that ‘the heart of reconciliation is not the manufacture of a cheap and easy bonhomie. Rather, it is the facing of unwelcome truths so that inevitable and continuing conflicts and differences stand at least within a single universe of comprehensibility’.[[72]](#endnote-72) This is the state the characters in *Quietly* arrive at, along with – by implication – many others in Northern Ireland. In 2015 it emerged that Stephen Travers, one of the survivors of the Miami Showband massacre of 1975 – when UVF members and UDR soldiers loaded a bomb onto the back of a van transporting the Miami Showband group, murdering lead singer Fran O’Toole after it exploded – met for several hours with the second-in-command of the UVF. Travers later affirmed that he had been right to speak to those assailants who killed his friend: ‘Unless you do, you don’t understand people. It’s not excusing it, but it’s understanding it.’[[73]](#endnote-73)

In September 2014 it was announced that McCafferty had been appointed Playwright-in-Residence of Belfast’s Lyric Theatre for the year by its new executive producer Jimmy Fay, who sees *Quietly* as the final work in a centennial ‘trilogy’ of plays about Ireland, starting with St. John Ervine’s *Mixed Marriage* (1911), sequenced by Parker’s *Pentecost* (1987). In the days following his appointment McCafferty indicated that he believed the exploration of Northern Ireland’s past in drama was on its way out. Excited by the prospect of Fay’s stewardship of the Lyric, he claimed ‘we’re moving away from the notion of writing about ourselves all the time, and that includes work on the Troubles’, something inherently linked to the way many citizens in a small corner of Europe consider themselves to be at ‘the centre of the universe’.[[74]](#endnote-74) This went against the grain of *Quietly*; as if having written the play and cleared it out of his system, McCafferty was following its characters into some kind of closure. If indeed he has left Northern Ireland’s recent past behind – and more recent plays such as *Unfaithful* (2014) and *Death of A Comedian* (2015) suggest he has – it is nonetheless extremely likely that other dramatists, and the theatre itself, will continue to step in to the void left by a stagnant and regressive political culture.

1. Jackie Hewitt, ‘Recollections’, *Grassroots Leadership*, No. 3 (Newtownabbey: Island Pamphlets), 2005, p.28. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Louis Muinzer, ‘Foreword’, in Owen McCafferty, *Plays & Monologues* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1998), p.13. See also Mark Phelan, ‘Introduction’ to Owen McCafferty, *Plays One* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), pp.vii–xx. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interview with Patrick O’Kane, Belfast, 2 November 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Karen Fricker, ‘Seeking the writer within’, *Irish Times*, 24 September 2002, p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Interview with Owen McCafferty, Belfast, 28 March 2013. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes from McCafferty are taken from this interview. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Interview with Patrick O’Kane, Belfast, 2 November 2011. O’Kane felt confident enough to declare this a whole year before its premiere. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brendan Murtagh and Peter Shirlow, ‘Devolution and the politics of development in Northern Ireland’, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2012), pp. 46–61. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Owen McCafferty, *Quietly* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p.43. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See McKittrick *et al*, *Lost Lives*, pp.441–2, 445; Phelan, ‘Introduction’ to McCafferty, *Plays One*, p.xii. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.35. See also McCafferty, ‘Foreword’ to *Plays One*, p.xxii. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Fintan O’Toole, ‘Reviews: Closing Time’, *Irish Times*, 10 October 2002, p.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Jackie Hewitt, quoted *Irish Times*, 30 November 1993, p.15. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in *Irish Times*, 7 December 2012, p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Patrick O’Kane, quoted in *Irish Times*, 7 April 2014, p.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Eva Urban, *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), p.226. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Paddy Woodworth, ‘Field Day’s men and the re-making of Ireland’, *Irish Times*, 5 November 1990, p.10. See also Marilynn J. Richtarik, *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980–1984* (New York: Catholic University Press, 2001; 1st edition 1995) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Richard Pine, ‘Politicians need to show some leadership’, *Irish Times*, 22 July 2010, p.18. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Stephen Rea, quoted *Irish Times*, 11 October 2006, p.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. See Stephen Hopkins, ‘Sinn Féin, the Past and Political Strategy: The Provisional Irish Republican Movement and the Politics of Reconciliation’, *Irish Political Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2015), pp.79–97. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Trials, Purges and History Lessons: treating a difficult past in post-communist Europe’, in Jan-Werner Müller (ed.), *Memory & Power in Postwar Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.269. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. ‘Unionists threaten “graduated response” over parade’, *Irish News*, 4 July 2014, p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Interview with David Grant, Belfast, 7 November 2013. Grant directed Lalor Roddy in the original production. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. McCafferty, *Waiting List*, in *Mojo Mickybo*, p.53. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. McCafferty, *Waiting List*, in *Mojo Mickybo*, pp.51, 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For a concise account of the murder see David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton and David McVea (eds), *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2008; 1st edition 1999), p.493. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Owen McCafferty, *Court No. 1*, in Ophelia Byrne (Ed.), *State of Play: The Theatre and Cultural Identity in 20th Century Ulster* (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2001), p.141. Other playwrights who contributed short plays included Daragh Carville, Marie Jones, Martin Lynch and Gary Mitchell. See also Urban, *Community Politics*, pp.74–88. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Karen Fricker, ‘Seeking the writer within’, *Irish Times*, 24 September 2002, p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. McCafferty, *Court No. 1*, p. 141. See also Jane Coyle, ‘Welcome to hell’, *Irish Times*, 21 October 2000, p.52. Lalor Roddy once again portrayed McCafferty’s ‘Victim’. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Marie Breen Smyth, *Truth Recovery and Justice After Conflict: Managing Violent Pasts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp.68–9, 130–2. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See the plays of former Republican combatants comprehensively explored by Bill McDonnell in *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Malachi O’Doherty, ‘The compelling case for victims isn’t waning, it’s getting stronger’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 January 2012, p.5. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Phelan, ‘Introduction’ to McCafferty, *Plays One*, p.xi. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Paul Doherty, quoted in *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 December 2014, p.10. Doherty saw *Quietly* in the Lyric in April 2014 and contributed to a panel discussion following the show. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. See Eithne Shortall, ‘Theatre: Quietly’, *The Sunday Times*, 25 November 2012, p.34; Lyn Gardner, ‘Edinburgh Theatre: Quietly: Traverse, 4/5’, *The Guardian*, 8 August 2013, p.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Matthew Bell, ‘New play about Belfast captivates critics’, *The Guardian*, 22 April 2003, p. 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Interview with Jimmy Fay, Belfast, 25 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Fintan O’Toole, ‘“Quietly” does it: a pub play with potent purity’, *Irish Times*, 24 November 2012, p.46. The early work of Graham Reid and Frank McGuinness was premiered at a time when the theatre’s overall finances were in a perilous state. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Interview with Jimmy Fay, Belfast, 25 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Susan Dwyer, ‘Reconciliation for Realists’, *Ethics & International Affairs*, Vol 31, No. 1 (1999), p.93. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Fintan O’Toole, ‘“Quietly” does it: a pub play with potent purity’, *Irish Times*, 24 November 2012, p.46. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. McCafferty, *Quietly*, pp.30–1. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Dwyer, ‘Reconciliation’, p.92. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Dwyer, ‘Reconciliation’, p.89. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Dominic Cavendish, ‘Haunted by a sense of tribal belonging’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 2013, p.20. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.36. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.40. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Henry Patterson, ‘Interests and identities in Northern Ireland’, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict: Pathways toward terrorism and genocide*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), p.74. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Eamon McCann, ‘Troubles play is for real with no buddy-buddy end’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 2 April 2014, p.25. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 January 2014, pp.1–4. The dialogue was thought to have failed under pressure from an unelected Loyalist extreme hostile to Haass’s proposals. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. ‘Authors urged to withdraw £12k payment proposal’, *News Letter*, 28 January 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. ‘It’s time the PSNI stopped dealing with the past: Baggott’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 June 2014, pp.18–19. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Westminster House of Lords Debates, Vol. 756, Col. 708, 22 October 2014. For a breakdown of responsibility for Troubles killings see McKittrick *et al*, *Lost Lives*, p.1560. Ironically one of Bew’s own endeavours was thwarted amid the zero-sum approach to the past. He was attached to what was known as the ‘Boston College Belfast Project’, which brought together the oral testimonies of Republican and Loyalist ex-combatants on the proviso that the interviews would only be made public after their passing. The project was jeopardized as soon as the Police Service of Northern Ireland sought those tapes from Republicans – principally Dolours Price – whose testimony was believed to contain details relating to the unsolved case of the abduction and murder of west Belfast widow Jean McConville. By May 2014 the project was dead in the water. See *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 May 2014, p.16. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.53. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.55. ‘Three two’ (3–2) was the actual final score of the 2009 game, a Northern Ireland win. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Helen Meany, ‘Quietly – review’, *The Guardian*, 27 November 2012, p.32. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 June 2009, p.3; *Irish News*, 27 June 2009, p.11. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *Irish News*, 9 August 2011, p.10; *Irish News*, 9 May 2014, p.4. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.18; quoted in *Irish News*, 3 April 2014, p.35. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *Irish Times*, 30 April 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Fiona Mountford, ‘Theatre: Quietly’, *Evening Standard*, 2 June 2014, p.39. The original production also played in New York at the Irish Repertory Theatre, off broadway, from July to September 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.21; Fintan O’Toole, ‘“Quietly” does it: a pub play with potent purity’, *Irish Times*, 24 November 2012, p.46. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Emilie Pine, ‘Quietly’*, Irish Theatre Magazine*, 23 November 2012, <http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/Quietly> (accessed 3 March 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Quoted in *Irish News*, 25 August 2011, p.31. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Owen McCafferty, *The Absence of Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. McCafferty, *Quietly*, pp.50–1. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Interview with Jimmy Fay, Belfast, 25 November 2014. The case of Maíria Cahill, which surfaced in 2014, would appear to confirm that sexual abuse by members of paramilitary groups was more prevalent than initially thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.47. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.51. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. McCafferty, *Quietly*, p.14. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Stephen Rea, ‘Stewart Parker’, *The Guardian*, 5 November 1988, p.39. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Interview with Jimmy Fay, Belfast, 25 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Kader Asmal (with Adrian Hadland & Moira Levy), *Politics in My Blood: A Memoir* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2011), p.186. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Quoted in *Belfast Telegraph Online*, 30 July 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Quoted in Jane Hardy, ‘Owen McCafferty New Lyric Writer in Residence’, *Culture NI*, 12 September 2014, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/performing-arts/owen-mccafferty-new-lyric-writer-residence> (accessed 18 September 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-74)