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Book Review of *The Troubles and Their Aftermath*: James B. Johnston's *Memories of Northern Ireland*

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The Troubles and Their Aftermath

June 30, 2012 Dennis Ray Belfast, Exile Revisited, Ireland, Northern Ireland

James B. Johnston's Memories of Northern Ireland

by Ted Olson

When he was a young man living in Belfast, Northern Ireland during the late 1960s, author and publisher James B. Johnston met his future wife Ann. He was Protestant and by background was culturally British, while she was Catholic and reared in the Irish tradition. By the early 1970s “The Troubles” (a period of civil strife in Northern Ireland between 1968-1998) made living in Belfast difficult, as heightened sectarian conflict between Catholics and Protestants all-too-frequently erupted in acts of violence.

During 1972 and 1973, for example, over 700 people died in Northern Ireland from bombing and shooting incidents related to that conflict. Most of those who died were not personally involved in the fighting; they were simply victims of a conflict with deep historical roots and with no foreseeable resolution.

The Johnstons had strong family ties and satisfying jobs in Belfast, yet the proliferation of violence made a future in Northern Ireland seem untenable, and in 1974 they immigrated to Canada. They became exiles, as many of their fellow countrymen and women had been before them. While welcoming the relative stability of the New World, they were far from home and painfully separated from loved ones. And like others from Ireland who lived in exile elsewhere, James Johnston began writing about his experience of being apart from his past.

As he conveyed in the foreword to his 2012 poetry collection *Exile Revisited*, “[e]xile touches on the deepest emotions experienced by those who are separated, for whatever reason, from the people, places or things they love the most. In its early stages, it is characterized by a deep hunger for the past, a longing that, at times, is almost too much to bear. In such a context, exile places a premium on memory.”

Exile Revisited is, then, a book of memories communicated as poems. Johnston published an earlier edition of this collection in 1997 as *Exile* (as he states in the aforementioned foreword) in order “to gain first-hand knowledge about publishing.” Indeed, his experiment in self-publishing his poems of exile has been successful—he ultimately turned his newfound knowledge into an independent press, Celtic Cat Publishing, which since 1997 has issued approximately 20 literary or history books by other authors.

Recently, Johnston has returned to exploring his own perspective as an exiled person from Ireland living half a world away—presently, in Knoxville, Tennessee. In 2012, he issued two projects with Celtic Cat Publishing: *Exile Revisited*, which features the contents of *Exile* along with additional poems and a few essays, and *The Price of Peace*, a novel about contemporary experience in Northern Ireland. The two books are thematically interrelated in surprising and meaningful ways, and I’ll herein discuss them together.

A poem by Johnston, entitled “Ann,” serves as a visceral linkage between these two books—it appears as a central poem in *Exile Revisited* and is partly quoted on the back cover of *The Price of Peace*. The poem is haunting, as Johnston

remembers Ann Owens, his wife's good friend who was tragically killed by a bomb in 1972. Johnston wrote the poem from his wife's perspective:

I look at my last photograph of you,

Sitting on a cannon at Edinburgh Castle.

How soon weapons of war would steal away our time.

When I visited in hospital after the first bombing,

You smiled and said, I've had my turn.

I wish it was true.

How little we knew.

I think often of that Saturday, seven months later.

You phoned mid-morning and asked me to meet you in town.

I couldn't go, but you promised to visit on your way home.

I remember the first phone call, late afternoon, asking if

I'd heard about the bomb.

I brushed it off. I knew you weren't near it.

When your parents phoned to say you hadn't arrived home,

I told them not to worry, traffic had been disrupted.

But I was worried.

It was unlike you not to phone.

By bedtime I was in a panic.

I asked my dad to call your parents one last time.

When he said Oh Jesus

I knew you would never phone.

Adjacent to that poem in *Exile Revisited* is a photograph of Ann Owens; other poems are similarly accompanied by illustrative photos. Accordingly, the book is more than a collection of poems, as it has considerable documentary value for anyone interested in the history of Northern Ireland or in the emergent academic field of Peace Studies.

Another poem, “Last Ride,” recounts the 1976 massacre near the village of Kingsmills in County Armagh, when eleven mill workers were ordered out of a commuter bus by gunmen who demanded they “state their religion.” One person cited Catholicism as his creed and was freed, while the other ten proclaimed their Protestant faith and were shot beside the bus on the roadside. The poem succinctly presents the event in harrowing, detailed increments of information, while an adjacent photograph illustrates a memorial marker representing the names of massacre victims. When juxtaposed with photographs, Johnston’s poems become like cairns, guiding readers toward a deeper experience of the past.

In *Exile Revisited* and in his new novel *The Price of Peace*, Johnston chronicles the impact of The Troubles on the people of Northern Ireland. By the time of the ratification of the 1998 Belfast Peace Agreement, negotiated by U.S. Special Envoy for Northern Ireland George Mitchell, 3,500 people in Northern Ireland had died and 40,000 others had been injured in the violence. Yet Johnston’s concern for the future of Northern Ireland compelled him to examine a less often discussed outcome of the Peace Agreement: the mandated early release from prison of many of the people who committed the earlier acts of violence. This is the central concern of *The Price of Peace*. Since he personally understood the extent of the pain experienced by victims and their loved ones, having had friends perish in the violence, Johnston was particularly aware of such injustice imbedded in the terms of the Peace Agreement.

Employing fictional characters and an imagined situation—the trial of a woman, made a widow through paramilitary violence, accused of the revenge killings of the two men who had murdered her husband—Johnston’s novel seeks to explore the moral dimensions of the all-too-real situation of mandated releases from prison of convicted paramilitary prisoners—Republicans (people, generally Catholic, who support the unification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland) as well as Loyalists (people, primarily Protestant, who favor the existing union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain).

The Price of Peace is several things at once: a potboiler legal thriller; an astute portrayal of the complex legal system in war-weary, socially divided Northern Ireland; and an exploration of the philosophical implications of a peace accord

that brings to mind the words of Junius: “The injustice done to an individual is sometimes of service to the public.”

A fascinating aspect of this novel is that it encourages readers to speculate on the appropriate outcome of the trial of the defendant. At the end of Part I (on page 139), a note from the author invites the reader to log onto the book’s website (www.thepriceofpeace.net) and to cast votes reflecting that reader’s personal opinions on the protagonist’s guilt or innocence.

Part II of the novel features Johnston’s detailed and persuasive presentation of the court’s decision. For those who are visual learners, Johnston has produced a short, poignant video to accompany the book, and the video is posted on the book’s website and on YouTube. Readers of this column who view Johnston’s video—featuring sweeping cinematography and professional acting—will no doubt realize that *The Price of Peace* is no ordinary book; rather, it is a deep immersion into a complex historical era that many if not most Americans have heard about but that relatively few understand.

James Johnston is one of the few people living in the New World who does understand The Troubles and their aftermath. Anyone wanting to know more about this story—and indeed to feel vicariously the real human impacts of those tragic events—should read Johnston’s two new books.