Television Drama and Northern Ireland: the First Plays 1959-67

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Abstract:

This article sets out to map the largely forgotten history of the first television dramas about Northern Ireland by Northern Ireland writers during the 1950s and 1960s. It examines the first experiments in drama production by BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television alongside the work by Northern Irish writers produced by ITV companies and the BBC in London. It looks at the institutional and ideological contexts in which the work emerged before going on to examine the patterns of representation that resulted. Made prior to the emergence of the Troubles in 1969, the article considers the first attempts to show Northern Ireland in television drama and assesses the ways in which the individual plays - ranging from rural comedy to working-class realism- addressed – both obliquely and explicitly - the social tensions and anxieties of the time.

Keywords: BBC; ITV; Northern Ireland; television drama; Armchair Theatre; the Troubles.

Discussion of Northern Ireland and television drama has focused primarily on representations of the Troubles, the historical period initiated by the outbreak of violent conflict in 1969 and partly coming to a close in the wake of the republican and loyalist ceasefires of 1994. This is hardly surprising given how the Troubles – and the social and political divisions that characterised them – came to define international perceptions of the region while media reporting and representations of the conflict became the subject of intense political scrutiny, controversy and public debate (Schlesinger 1978; Curtis 1984; Savage 2015). By comparison, there has been relatively little attention to television drama (and, indeed television coverage of Northern Ireland more generally) set in, or about, Northern Ireland prior to 1969. McLoone's pioneering work on television drama dealing with Northern Ireland refers to 'a handful of plays' produced in the 1960s but focuses primarily on *Progress to the Park* (BBC2, 14 March 1965), a play about sectarianism set in Liverpool and written by the Welshman, Alun Owen (1996: 77). Braun's essay on 'the

dramatisation of Northern Ireland' concentrates on work from 1980 onwards and makes no mention at all of anything made earlier than 1976 (Braun 2000). The main work to have considered earlier work, therefore, has been Pettitt (2000: 231-2), who provides a short analysis of the work of John D. Stewart and Sam Thompson (based on more extensive but unpublished research). In a longer discussion, Andrew Hill (2006) also looks at a selection of 'pre-Troubles' BBC drama, although two of these, following McLoone, are the Alun Owen plays - *The Ruffians* (BBC, 9 October 1960) and *Progress to the Park* - both set in Liverpool.[1]

This relative neglect of early television drama dealing with Northern Ireland is not only due to the overwhelming weight of interest in Troubles drama but also the difficulty of identifying what programmes have been made. Much of the work produced in the late 1950s and 1960s has fallen into obscurity and remains largely forgotten. Thus, even the official historian of BBC Northern Ireland Jonathan Bardon (2000: 101) claims that *The Squad* (BBC 2, 20 August 1976) was the first play to be produced by the BBC in Northern Ireland even though the first local drama – *The Odd Pair* – was actually made in 1959. Work such as this, which was not broadcast across the UK network, has been particularly difficult to trace but even plays that were shown more widely – such as those written by Janet McNeill - have since dropped from historical view. The main reason for this, of course, is that the majority of the relevant plays were not recorded and have been impossible to view since their original transmission. Thus, only a small number of the plays identified in this article still exist, and one of these - *Worm in the Bud* - was only recently restored and made available to see.[2] Despite the obstacles, it is, however, possible to piece together the history of the first plays to deal with Northern Ireland and provide an assessment of them. This article will do so by first identifying just what was made, and by whom. It will then consider the institutional and ideological contexts in which the work emerged before going on to examine the ways in which the North of Ireland was first represented in television drama and the patterns that emerge.

Television Drama and Northern Ireland

Television was slow to come to Northern Ireland. Despite the resumption of BBC broadcasts in June 1946, the service in Northern Ireland did not arrive until May 1953 (via a high-power transmitter in Scotland) and it was not until 1957 that the service was extended across the majority of the region. In the case of ITV, transmissions in Britain began in 1955 but it was

not until the end of October 1959 that the Northern Ireland station, Ulster Television, was launched. In both cases, the proportion of time devoted to local programming was relatively modest and television drama, due to its cost and technical demands, was a low priority. For BBC Northern Ireland, the production of drama only became feasible with the opening of a new general-purpose studio in Belfast in February 1959, which provided an enlarged floor space housing a three-camera set-up. However, the studio was still small in comparison to television facilities elsewhere and only productions involving a single set and a small number of actors were envisaged. The first play to be made under these circumstances occurred as part of the magazine programme, Studio Eight, itself launched to coincide with the opening of the new studio of the same name. This was a weekly twenty-five minute programme devoted to 'different facets of Ulster life and interests' and, over different weeks, consisted of current affairs, arts coverage and occasional filmed features.[3] While, in some cases, this included the use of an excerpt from a current theatre production (such as the Group Theatre's performance of John Murphy's Irish comedy *The Country Boy*), the programme also undertook a drama production of its own.[4] This was the rural comedy, *The Odd Pair* (BBCNI, 20 March 1959), written by actor Diarmuid Kelly, a 25-minute production involving a small cast led by J.G. Devlin and Harold Goldblatt of the Group Theatre and produced by BBC Northern Ireland's radio drama producer Ronald Mason.

Mason himself regarded this as an 'experiment' that would encourage 'a fairly regular contribution of half-hour plays'.[5] However, this appears to have been Studio Eight's only production and subsequent television plays proved few and far between. It took two years for Cecil Cree's historical piece, set in 1798, *The Curate's Coat* (BBCNI, 29 March 1961) and Stewart Love's domestic drama, *The Sugar Cubes* (BBCNI, 21 June 1961), to emerge. It then took another two for Brian Friel's play about St. Columba's exile in Scotland, *The Enemy Within* (BBCNI, 30 March 1965) to be broadcast.[6] The latter production was the first to make use of BBC Northern Ireland's studio in Balmoral which appeared to offer the potential for increased artistic ambition. Running to 50 minutes (rather than half an hour), the play made use of more than one set, included filmed inserts (with the Northern Irish coastline substituting for Scotland) and involved a cast, led by Scots actor Tom Fleming, that was the largest so far. However, although the play was subsequently broadcast in Scotland it failed to secure a network transmission with the result that enthusiasm for more regular drama

production once again waned, particularly given the high cost of drama production in comparison to other programming. This was reinforced by Mason's departure for the London radio drama department and a delay in appointing his replacement. It was therefore another two years before a play produced in Belfast - Stewart Love's drama about marital break-up, *The Dark-Eyed Charmer* (BBC1, 7 October 1967) – eventually achieved a network transmission. Unlike *The Enemy Within*, however, this formed part of the BBC1 Out of Town Theatre series (BBC1, 1966-68) which was a centrally-driven initiative designed to showcase short dramas from across the UK's BBC nations and regions. It also only occurred in the wake of press criticism that Northern Ireland, unlike Scotland, Wales and the English regions, failed to feature as part of the first series.[7]

If BBC Northern Ireland's production of television drama in this period was intermittent, UTV's drama output was even more negligible, consisting of only two, arguably three, plays in its first ten years. Like BBC Northern Ireland, UTV was discouraged by the cost and technical demands of producing drama and it was not until 1965 that the company undertook its first play, a half-hour domestic comedy by local writer Sam Cree, *Ask Your Mother* (UTV, 17 February 1965).[8] This, however, proved to be a one-off and it was a further two years before another attempt at drama was made. Running to 50 minutes, and involving some location shooting, John D. Stewart's comedy, *Boatman Do Not Tarry* (UTV, 30 October 1967), proved to be a more ambitious project that subsequently succeeded in achieving a transmission on the ITV network. However, the production was partly undertaken in order to meet the expectations of the Independent Television Authority, then engaged in renewing ITV licences, and failed to signal a significant shift in programme policy. In the same year, UTV also launched an innovative new current affairs series, Flashpoint (UTV, 1967-8). Under its aegis, the station broadcast an intriguing two-hander, *The Scandalous Parson – An Historical Encounter* (UTV, 22 November 1967), produced by Derek Bailey (who had previously been involved in both *Ask Your Mother* and *Boatman Do Not Tarry).* Set in a contemporary television studio, it featured the UTV presenter David Mahlowe interviewing the historical figure, Jonathan Swift (when Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin). Made to mark Swift's tercentenary, the programme incorporated actual lines written by Swift as a way of investigating his ambivalent relationship to 'Irishness', dislike of both Catholics and Protestant 'non-conformists' and disdain for political

hypocrisy and social injustice. In this way, his work was imbued with a degree of contemporary relevance while simultaneously commenting upon, and 'making strange', present-day attitudes and assumptions (including, at the programme's end, the ethics of television journalism itself). This adventurous form of dramatised 'current affairs', however, also proved to be a one-off which meant that the totality of UTV's drama output during the 1960s amounted to just these three productions.

Given the low levels of investment in drama production by both BBC Northern Ireland and UTV, the bulk of plays about Northern Ireland, or involving local writers, during the late 1950s and early 1960s were mostly made outside the region. This was in large part due to the role played by the ITV companies in increasing the overall demand for plays for television, particularly for work from the regions. ABC' s Armchair Theatre (launched in 1956) was ITV's foremost drama strand at the end of the 1950s. Under the leadership of Sydney Newman, ABC's Drama Supervisor from 1958 until 1962 (when he departed for the BBC), there was an increased emphasis upon contemporary social issues and geographical range that helped to draw Northern Irish writers more firmly into its orbit. Thus, even before the launch of Ulster Television, John D. Stewart's Belfast-set play, *Worm in the Bud* (ABC, 27 September 1959), was broadcast as part of the Armchair Theatre slot. Joseph Tomelty's sombre rural drama, *A Shilling for the Evil Day* (ABC, 1 November 1959) was broadcast to coincide with the opening of UTV (and transmitted the day after the station's launch). Stewart Love's comic fantasy, *A Headful of Crocodiles* (ABC, 1 January 1961), and John D. Stewart's second play, set on a building site, *Danger Men Working* (ABC, 7 May 1961) followed. As with ABC, Associated Rediffusion and Granada also presided over their own drama strands – most notably Television Playhouse and Play of the Week – and these too were to provide a home for the work of Janet McNeill, Frederick Aicken and Sam Thompson. As a result, the ITV companies were responsible for broadcasting the first television plays of no less than six Northern Ireland writers during the relatively short period 1959 to 1961.

There is a degree of irony that it was the Independent Television companies that provided these writers with their first television productions as all had previously benefited from the patronage of BBC Northern Ireland's radio service. As a result, many of them acknowledged their debt to the BBC but found the opportunities offered by ITV too great to ignore. John D.

Stewart wrote to the Northern Ireland drama producer Ronald Mason (who had produced a radio version of *Danger Men Working* in 1957) to explain that it would have to be 'television from now on' as he could not afford to write radio plays if he was to succeed as a professional writer.[9] Mason had also produced the work of Fred Aicken who wrote to him in a similar vein. 'I've sold my soul to commercial TV', he reported, having recently signed a contract with Associated Rediffusion for *A Different Drum* (6 July 1961).[10] In this case, Aicken had initially offered the play to the BBC drama department in London but they had turned it down. With Mason's support, he also sought a London production of another play, *Mist in the Glen*, which Mason had previously produced for radio, but this too was declined. The BBC in London evidently lacked the same appetite for regional material as ITV and it was mainly due to the continuing efforts of Mason that the BBC in London did eventually accept a contemporary Northern Ireland play. As previously noted, Mason had joined the BBC in Belfast as a radio drama producer but subsequently developed an interest in television production as well which led to a six-month attachment to the London drama department in 1960. During this time, Mason took the opportunity to champion Stewart Love's *The Randy Dandy*, which the Group Theatre had premiered in Belfast in January 1960. While this too was initially rejected by London, Mason stood by the project, undertaking a radio version of the play in March 1961 followed the same year by a television version of Love's short play, *The Sugar Cubes*, dealing with the marital doubts of a husband-to-be. These productions appear to have convinced his colleagues in London of the viability of *The Randy Dandy* which Mason then went on to produce for transmission across the network (on 14 September 1961). This was followed by productions of another play by Love, set in the Belfast shipyards, *The Big Donkey* (BBC, 31 March 1963) followed by *A Child in the House* (BBC, 24 April 1962), the best-known work of Janet McNeill whose plays Mason had also produced for radio.[11] These then laid the basis for further productions not involving Mason. These consisted of two further plays by Love – a comedy about marital break-up, *Plain Jane* (BBC, 1 September 1963), and a second version of *The Sugar Cubes* (BBC2, 7 February 1966) which, due to the late arrival of BBC2 to Northern Ireland, was not actually shown there. Following a delay of some months, Sam Thompson's original play for television, *Cemented with Love* (BBC1, 5 May 1965), was also transmitted.

Representing Northern Ireland

Given their preceding scarcity, the upsurge of television plays by Northern Irish writers in the late 1950s and early 1960s does appear to have constituted a significant – if relatively short-lived – 'moment'. The work produced, however, could hardly be said to have comprised a coherent movement or 'new wave'. Not all of the plays by NI writers, for example, were about Northern Ireland. As Fred Aicken discovered, his play about an English public school, *The Different Drum*, held greater appeal for English broadcasters than his Northern Ireland play about a mixed marriage and religious intolerance, *Mist in the Glen* (which remained unmade). Stewart Love's television breakthrough (on ITV) occurred with *A Headful of Crocodiles*, a comedy about the escapist fantasies of a young office clerk set in England. Nevertheless, the vast majority of these plays by local writers were about Northern Ireland and clearly constituted a turn in the representation of the North of Ireland on screen. They were, however, an eclectic bunch. Some were small-scale local productions aimed at local viewers while others were more costly productions addressed to audiences UK-wide. Some were original works for television while others were adaptations - mainly by the authors themselves – of earlier plays, novels or radio productions. Some were relatively new while others had originally been written a number of years before. The plays also straddled different genres ranging from domestic comedy and family melodrama to historical drama and contemporary social observation. The writers themselves were predominantly male but also hailed from different class and religious backgrounds (though more were Protestants than Catholics). However, while it would be difficult to view the plays as constituting a unified whole, they do nevertheless demonstrate a clear opening-up and extension of television representations of Northern Ireland at a time when these had been virtually non-existent.

In doing so, many of them may also be seen to have engaged obliquely – and sometimes explicitly – with the emerging social tensions of the period. The late 1950s and early 1960s in Northern Ireland are often viewed as a period of growing discontent. The Unionist Prime Minister Brookeborough had been in charge since 1943 and was coming to be seen as incapable of driving forward economic and social reforms, eventually being replaced by the 'moderniser' Terence O'Neill in 1963 (Wichert 1991). The long-term decline of Northern Ireland's traditional industries – textiles, shipbuilding and agriculture – also meant a much higher rate of unemployment than in the rest of the UK. This, in turn, led to a degree of

break-up of the ruling Unionist political 'bloc', indicated by the success of the Northern Ireland Labour Party winning four seats at the Stormont elections in 1958 (Edwards 2009). The IRA also sought to revive the republican cause through the launch of a border campaign - Operation Harvest - in 1956 which, despite a strong unionist backlash and limited popular support within the nationalist community, carried on for a further six years. And, as the arrival of television itself evidenced, Northern Ireland was also becoming more exposed to ideas and attitudes associated with new forms of economic and social 'modernity' that themselves possessed the capacity to clash with the moral and religious beliefs of many of those living in the North of Ireland.[12]

These circumstances did, however, set limits upon what was likely to be produced. As various writers have noted, BBC Northern Ireland possessed a close relationship with the Ulster Unionist establishment and was generally reluctant to acknowledge the social, political and religious divisions that characterised Northern Irish society or the conflicts these could generate (Cathcart 1984; Butler 1995). BBCNI also played a role in policing the output of the BBC in London insofar as it was expected, under a directive initially agreed in the 1940s, that the Northern Ireland Controller, or other senior member of staff, should be consulted over 'any programme which deals with questions directly affecting Northern Ireland'.[13] This meant that coverage of activities such as the IRA's campaign or expression of views critical of the government of Northern Ireland were closely monitored. This can be seen in the case of an episode of *Highlight* (14 December 1956) in which Irish journalist Harry Craig, when asked about support for the IRA in the South, suggested that many took the view that the North was 'an occupied territory with foreign troops'. This prompted protests from both the Unionist government and the BBC in Northern Ireland with the result that the Deputy Director of Television Broadcasting, Cecil McGivern, was obliged to issue an apology and offer the Unionist Prime Minister, Lord Brookeborough, an interview on *Panorama* (Hill and Hill: 266-7). Subsequent objections to Alan Whicker's report from Belfast for *Tonight* (9 January 1959), featuring among other things Sinn Fein graffiti and references to unemployment, resulted in the withdrawal of further episodes while criticisms of Siobhan McKenna's reference to the IRA as 'idealists' in the US-produced programme, *Small World*, led to the cancellation of the following week's edition (Cathcart 1984: 190-5; Hill 2006: 154-6).

While controversies such as these mostly revolved around news and current affairs, they could also extend to drama. The clearest example of this occurred some years later when the Drama department in London commissioned Sam Thompson's *Cemented with Love,* a satire on NI elections involving references to sectarianism, gerrymandering and personation. In line with the D.G.'s directive regarding Northern Ireland (re-issued in 1959 in the wake of the *Tonight* and *Small World* controversies), the Controller of BBCNI, Robert McCall, expressed his objections to the play with the result that it was withheld from transmission until May 1965, after Thompson's death.[14] As this indicates, the sensitivity towards the image of 'Ulster' that television programmes, including dramas, might project, and the desire of BBCNI to exercise control over the circulation of material that might be construed as 'negative', meant that a proper acknowledgement of the fault-lines in Northern Irish society or expression of openly oppositional views were likely to be curtailed. It also provides a further explanation for the initial predominance of ITV over BBC London plays. Although themselves monitored by the Independent Television Authority (ITA), the ITV companies, as their broadcast of Thompson's earlier play *Over the Bridge* (Granada, 29 August 1961) indicates, were often less ideologically constrained in their choices of plays than the BBC provided that these could also be aligned with commercial imperatives.[15]

Representing the rural

Despite the novelty of these plays there was one play by an older Northern Irish writer that had already been adapted for television. This was *Boyd's Shop* (BBC, 21 February 1954) which had been made in London before there was any capacity to produce drama in Northern Ireland (or, indeed, transmit programmes across the network). The local Belfast station was, nonetheless, still keen to engage with the production, making proposals regarding casting and seeking to ensure that London preserved the 'Ulster interest'.[16] This was hardly surprising. Originally performed in 1936, *Boyd's Shop* was written by the Belfast man and firm unionist, St. John Ervine, and occupied a special place in the Ulster unionist imaginary for its idealisation of traditional village life and the Protestant virtues of the 'wee shop' (Kennedy 1951: 62). When the BBC in Northern Ireland embarked upon its first production some five years later, it might have been anticipated that this tradition would be carried on. While this was in part the case, there were also some points of departure. Set in a cobbler's shop in a small Ulster town, *The Odd Pair* (1959), may at first appear to be

reworking some of *Boyd's Shop*'s themes regarding the vicissitudes of business and the challenges to tradition. These are not, however, the narrative's primary focus which involves a 25-year feud between two cobblers, each of whom – as a result of past deceptions – holds just one of a matching pair of boots. In this way, the play, written by the actor Diarmuid Kelly, not only hints at some of the deep-seated tensions at the heart of its rural community but also alludes to the more general religious and political cleavages dividing both Ulster and Ireland as a whole.[17] As this might suggest, in spite of the overall unionist ethos of BBC Northern Ireland, radio and television drama still proved capable of offering some room for alternative, albeit not oppositional, perspectives to emerge, particularly when conducted under the guise of creative expression and 'culture'.[18] This was evident, for example, in the second of BBCNI's television dramas, *The Curate's Coat* (1961), written by school teacher Cecil Cree, which turns to the past and slyly subverts the sense of political and religious identity encouraged by contemporary unionism. Set in a Church of Ireland rectory in County Antrim, this historical drama deals with the aftermath of the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen in the north (where it primarily involved Protestants). The Unionist regime had sought to disavow the memory of these events and had been openly hostile to the commemoration of the rebellion in 1948 which it inaccurately characterised as exclusively Catholic and nationalist (Hill 2006: 130-2; Beiner 2018: 469-71). There was also some sensitivity within the BBC about the pitfalls involved in making a play on this subject.[19] *The Curate's Coat*, nevertheless, clearly identifies the role played by Protestant rebels in the north and, while the play begins with moral denunciations of the rebellion by the cleric and his daughter, the two characters nonetheless join forces to assist a rebel leader escape in the face of the brutality of the English yeomanry (and their indiscriminate hostility towards anyone Irish).

The complication of religious certainties and political allegiences apparent in *The Curate's Coat* may also be found in the first of Janet McNeill's plays *Search Party* (Associated Refiffusion, 26 July 1960), made in this case for ITV, in which a clergyman also features prominently.[20] Set at the foot of an imaginary mountain in the Mournes, County Down, the play brings together a microcosm of Ulster society as various characters gather to wait for news of a rescue party. In the face of confusion regarding just who is up the mountain and why, the characters' disappointments and doubts are laid bare as they are moved to reflect

upon the value of their beliefs and the quality of their lives. McNeill's critique of 'dreary, Ulster religiosity', as Cronin (2005: 128) refers to it in his study of her novels, is even more apparent in her second television play *A Child in the House* (1962) which, in this case, is set in the city rather than the country. In this, a well-to-do middle-class couple in Belfast are visited by their young niece who arrives to stay while her mother is in hospital. Locked in a joyless marriage and full of moral self-righteousness, the couple prove incapable of providing the love that the young girl needs and, by virtue of their repeated injunctions against 'sin', lead her to betray her own – irresponsible but nonetheless loving - father.

However, in terms of the 'Ulster' rural dramas made for television, the bleakest of these was undoubtedly Joseph Tomelty's *A Shilling for the Evil Day* (ABC, 1959), based on his original play 'All Souls' Night' (first performed by the Ulster Group Theatre in 1948). The decision to broadcast this 'Ulster story', as it was billed in the *TV Times*, to coincide with the arrival of Ulster Television appears to have been prompted by the link it provided to Halloween. However, as a representation of 'Ulster' it diverged considerably from the celebratory tone of the previous night's opening ceremony which included a short film introduced by the Governor of Northern Ireland, Lord Wakehurst, *Ulster Rich and Rare* (31 October 1959), which also took the rural as its focus but largely celebrated the endurance of local craftmanship in contemporary Northern Ireland. Set in a poor fishing village, *A Shilling for the Evil Day*, provided a contrasting 'hard primitivist' vision of rural life in which the villagers battle with the elements to eke out the barest of livings. Unlike *Boyd's Shop*, the community is Catholic rather than Protestant, though, as Smyth (1993: 17) suggests, the Catholicism of the main characters 'resembles nothing so much as the blackest stereotypical Calvinism – frugality, dourness, a life of meagre portions and a fearsome determinism'. In this respect, the play's criticism of the miserly mother (played by Elizabeth Begley), and to a lesser extent the ineffectual father (J.G. Devlin), for driving their sons to unnecessary deaths at sea, takes on a broader- albeit somewhat misogynistic- dimension. While this necessarily blunts some of the work's economic critique, the play's unrelenting emphasis upon poverty, and the damage to which it leads, makes its portrait of 'Ulster' unprecedented for television. How exactly this portrayal was then understood would have been mediated by the play's age, its status as a 'minor classic' and heavily stylised form of presentation in which the naturalist drive of the narrative is fused with elements of the gothic and the mystical. Nevertheless,

the play's vivid evocation of economic hardship and social unease, along with what Smyth (1993:10) refers to as 'a vestigial "class consciousnesss"', would have been hard to miss.

Working-class drama

Tomelty himself was a Catholic who had begun his working life as a house painter and had achieved immense popularity in Northern Ireland for his long-running radio comedy serial, *The McCooeys* (1949-57), about a working-class family in Belfast.[21] His work therefore possessed links with a group of other Northern Ireland writers from a Protestant background – John D. Stewart, Stewart Love and Sam Thompson – who were responsible for bringing the experiences of the – primarily urban – Northern Irish working class to the television screen. This may partly be accounted for by the socio-economic circumstances of the time and the growth in class politics associated with the rise of the Northern Ireland Labour Party in the late 1950s. Committed to both socialism and non-sectarianism, Parr (2017: 206) argues that the NILP provided a temporary 'political haven for writers and the artistic'. These included both Thompson, who stood as a NILP parliamentary candidate in the October 1964 general election, and Stewart, who appears to have joined the party relatively late, following a return from abroad, but had previously referred to himself as 'a sort of independent socialist ... [and] … ill-constructed Presbyterian humanist' (Stewart 1951: 20). The delivery of their work to the TV screen was, however, facilitated by the broader cultural movement in literature and the arts towards new types of working-class representation. In the case of television, much of the reputation of ABC's Armchair Theatre – which commissioned works by both Stewart and Love – derived from a commitment to contemporary dramas involving 'ordinary people'. Granada, the company responsible for producing Thompson's first play for its Play of the Week slot, had also, of course, launched the pioneering working-class television serial, *Coronation Street* in 1960 (Laing 1986: 141-92).

However, although all three writers shared a common interest in working-class themes their emphases varied. Stewart's *Worm in the Bud* (ABC, 27 September 1959) was the first of their television plays to be broadcast and also the first to be set in Belfast (albeit that this consisted of a studio (re)creation). Set in a working-class district, an elderly widow (played by the fearsome Elizabeth Begley) becomes unfairly suspicious of one of her neighbours whom it transpires is simply seeking to grow chrysanthemums indoors in the absence of a

garden. In common with the work of Janet McNeill, the play is critical of the narrow-mindedness and spurious moral rectitude of its central character. However, in a loose quasi-religious parable, it also makes a plea for greater tolerance amongst those who share the city, holding out the possibility of cultivating better lives. A sense of the constrictions imposed upon the working class are also to be found in the plays of Stewart Love whose work, in contrast to that of McNeill, characteristically focuses on a discontented male at odds with the circumstances in which he finds himself. Love was the youngest of this group of writers and was the most clearly influenced by the new currents in literature, drama and film. His first television play, not specifically about Northern Ireland, *A Headful of Crocodiles* (ABC, 1961), was compared to *Billy Liar* (which the BBC had broadcast, with Albert Finney in the lead, just a couple of months earlier) while *The Randy Dandy* (BBC, 1961) earned him the title of 'Belfast's John Osborne'.[22] As with his influences, his protagonists are disaffected and 'angry' with their lot both at work and at home. In the play, Dandy Jordan (played by an aggressive James Ellis) is a young shipyard worker who feels trapped by his marriage and home life. He is attracted to another woman but she too turns out to be a disappointment, branded by Dandy as 'shallow'. As in the working-class novels and films of the time, this shallowness is linked to the superficiality of contemporary mass culture and consumerism. However, in this case, it is not counterposed to traditional working-class culture. Dandy may be a shipyard worker but he is as 'alienated' at work as he is at home, deriving little satisfaction from what he does and opposing his fellow workers when they vote for a strike. In a manner typical of many working-class narratives of the time, the play then concludes with the prospect of individual 'escape' as Dandy makes ready to leave home (and the 'emasculation' that it is taken to represent).

The accentuated individualism and masculinism of the earlier play is also to be found in Love's second shipyard play, *The Big Donkey* (BBC, 1963), although its tone is somewhat different. According to the surviving rehearsal script, the play begins with a voice-over, spoken by the central character Joe (Tom Bell), praising Belfast as a 'prosperous city' in which there is 'plenty of work'. This is then followed by a scene in which he is given his cards by the foreman Doherty (played by Joseph Tomelty). However, the prosperity and opportunity identified at the play's opening proves elusive and Joe begins to sink into despair before stealing a job from his close friend Eddie (Brian Phelan) who accuses him not

only of personal betrayal but of setting the trade union movement (here represented by Joe's own father played by Patrick McAlinney) back 'about fifty odd years'. A defiant Joe ('the big donkey' of the play's title) remains unrepentant – having previously announced his lack of concern for 'other men' – but also seems to accept the nature of his moral downfall and responsibility for the breaking of personal bonds.

However, if *The Big Donkey* is more conscious of the economic precariousness underpinning the consumer society than *The Randy Dandy*, both plays share an emphasis upon individual acts of 'revolt' accompanied by a waning confidence in the possibilities of collective action. This makes them markedly different to John D. Stewart's *Danger Men Working* (ABC, 1961) in which working-class solidarity still performs a central role. The play had, in fact, taken a long time to reach television and was therefore less indebted to the more recent discourses of 'affluence' and 'classlessness' informing English culture. It was originally produced for the Festival of Britain in 1951 by Tyrone Guthrie and subsequently adapted for radio on two separate occasions. The play was then rewritten for Armchair Theatre when it seemed that the vogue for working-class realism had invested it with a renewed relevance. The production itself was an ambitious one. The original play had been confined to a single office but the television version was opened out to include scenes in the building site more generally, employing an elaborate set constructed by designer Assheton Gorton and communicating a much more vivid sense of men at work than most contemporary dramas. The TV production also cut back on much of the argument of the earlier versions while adding a new sub-plot concerning the attempt by the incoming managing director, Trumbull (Richard Pearson), to seduce the office secretary. Despite these changes the overall perspective of the play remained intact. Dealing with Trumbull's efforts to make the men work faster in order to reduce costs and maintain a tight schedule, the play makes the case for humane management and respect for manual labour. To some extent, this invokes a relatively conservative, backward-looking vision. Stewart had previously written a radio play, *We Built a Church* (first produced in 1947 but subsequently reworked in 1959), which celebrated the pride in work and 'triumph of craftmanship' in the building industry. *Danger Men Working* shares this reverence for craftmanship, exemplified in the play by the character of Doherty (Patrick McAlinney), an elderly craftsman and respected foreman, who believes he will get the best out of the men on the site by treating them the 'right way'. For

Trumbull, however, he represents a tradition that he regards as 'all finished', opting to replace him with a hard-driving ganger, Scanling (Barry Keegan), whose draconian treatment of the men provokes the threat of a strike (and indirectly leads to Doherty's near-death in an industrial accident).

However, in its defence of traditional craftmanship over profit-driven management, the play also invokes the role of collective action in resisting unfair working practices. In this way, the pride in work associated with craftmanship is linked to a call for industrial democracy and the rights of workers to retain some control over how their labour is deployed. As a result of his changes, Trumbull is faced with a deputation calling for Scanling's replacement. When he objects to the workers choosing their own boss, he is told by the men that it is a 'majority decision' demonstrating 'democracy at work'. The men's threat to strike then leads not just to Scanling departing but Trumbull as well. Partly as a result of changes from earlier versions of the play, this emphasis upon working-class solidarity also assumes additional connotations. In the case of *The Big Donkey*, the play, set in the Belfast shipyards, is focused on the Protestant working class and, apart from a disparaging remark about the Pope marching on the Twelfth of July, the play largely avoids references to religious division. *Danger Men Working*, by comparison, is set in a building site in Co. Derry, not far from the border with Donegal, where the Derry Construction Company are building a new hospital, St. Patrick's.[23] Although the play is not always precise about specific allegiences, it is evident, nonetheless, that the workers hail from different political and religious backgrounds and that, for the play, the success of their dispute has relied upon working-class unity across the religious divide.

As the managing director, Trumbull, is the only English character in the play, this also takes on an added dimension. Noting that this had led to some adverse criticism of the original play, Stewart had argued that while the character provided 'some light Anglo-Irish by-play' the character's nationality did not constitute an 'essential part of the theme'.[24] However, given the position he occupies in the play, it is difficult to avoid attaching significance to his presence. This is particularly so when the play concludes with the labourers' representative, McMahon, following the Englishman's departure, delivering a rendition of 'The Boys of Wexford', an Irish ballad commemorating the 1798 rebellion of the United Irishmen. This is a new addition to the play (probably not made by Stewart himself) and the words of the

song – ‘we are the boys of Wexford who fight with heart and hand to…. free our native land’ – clearly invest the end of the play with anti-colonial import. It is, of course, possible to see this as specific to the character who is identified – albeit not terribly clearly – as a Derry Catholic and accused of being a ‘communist’ by his English boss. However, the character is played by the production’s main ‘star’, the Australian actor Leo McKern, who is sufficiently important to open as well as close the play and performs the part with a generically ‘Irish’ accent (in line with a more general mixing of Irish accents within the production). In this way, Stewart’s original tribute to craftmanship and working-class harmony assumes, as a result of ITV’s production changes, some features of a ‘nationalist’ allegory as well.

A number of *Danger Men Working’s* themes may also be found in Sam Thompson’s *Over the Bridge*. If Doherty represents the virtues of traditional craftmanship, and respect for others, in *Danger Men Working*, it is the ageing, and idealistic, trade union leader Davy Mitchell (Finlay Currie) who represents the core virtues of working-class solidarity and collectivism in Thompson’s play. As the union secretary, Rabbie White (J.G. Devlin), explains to the young shop steward Warren Baxter (Rio Fanning), if it wasn’t for Davey’s commitment to the trade union, and continuing support for his fellow workers, the men would not now benefit from the ‘good working conditions’ and ‘twenty quid a week with overtime’ that they currently possess. But while the play is alert to the threats of unemployment and working conditions that hang over the workers (and the possibility of a return to the economic discontents of the 1930s), it is the challenge to Davy’s values of solidarity and social justice with which the play is primarily concerned. As in *The Randy Dandy*, there is some acknowledgement of how consumerism and individual aspiration (characterised by the desire for a ‘car and pebble-dash house’) may weaken trade-union ties. Egged on by his social-climbing wife Nellie (Elizabeth Begley), Davy’s own brother, George (John Cowley), for example, is revealed to have stepped back from union activities and undertaken overtime that keeps other men out of work. There is also criticism of union officialdom for the emphasis upon a ‘rule book’ that proves impotent in the face of real social divisions and results in the union’s failure to build ‘the great protective wall’ that it promises its members.

It is, however, religion (especially Protestantism), and its capacity to generate intolerance and bigotry, that the play identifies as the biggest threat to trade union solidarity. Indeed, while this theme is clear enough in the original stage play, the considerable trimming of the

play for television makes it even starker and more intense. The play's concern with sectarianism is initially dramatised in terms of the feuding between two union committee members, Archie Kerr (James Ellis), a loud-mouthed Protestant, and Peter O'Boyle (Donal Donnelly), a Catholic who is the victim of Archie's name-calling but is himself not above the use of sectarian epithets. Davey seeks to calm the situation but matters come to a head when the IRA are blamed for an explosion in the shipyard and the Protestant workers, who constitute the majority of the workforce, call for the expulsion of their Catholic counterparts. O'Boyle, however, refuses to stay away from work while Davey, himself a Protestant, feels obliged to stick to his union principles and stands alongside him in the workplace. In the violent melee that ensues, O'Boyle is hospitalised while Davey is killed (in a symbolic death of trade union values). The play concludes by underlining the religious dimension of this outcome. Warren wonders 'what sort of Christian will maim one man and murder another in the sacred name of religion' while a clergyman, in a speech added to the television version (adapted by Gerald Savory and Hugh Leonard), quotes Jesus's new 'commandment' that 'ye love one another'. While this involves a degree of avoidance of the economic and political forces underpinning sectarianism in Northern Ireland, and partly shies away from the full implications of discrimination against Catholics, the boldness with which the play acknowledges religious divisions within the work-place and its potential for the unleashing of loyalist violence was nonetheless unprecedented.

It was also these features that were responsible for the play's special place in the history of Northern Ireland theatre. Originally forming part of the Ulster Group Theatre's 1959 programme, the play was withdrawn at the behest of the UGT's chair of the Board of Directors, J. Ritchie McKee, who condemned the play for its capacity to provoke offence and 'give rise to sectarian or political controversy of an extreme nature'.[25] Insofar as McKee was a well-connected unionist whose brother was the Unionist mayor of Belfast City Council, this action was widely perceived to be an act of censorship on behalf of the unionist establishment. However, this did not prevent the play from being staged by a new company, formed by Thompson and the play's producer James Ellis, at Belfast's Empire Theatre in 1960 and subsequently in theatres across Ireland and Britain.

Intriguingly, the BBC in London revealed an early interest in the play which Ronald Mason communicated to Thompson (who was then prioritising a tour of the play).[26] However, at

much the same time, Ritchie McKee, who was also the BBC's Northern Ireland Governor, was continuing to maintain his campaign against the play by seeking to prevent any mention of the play on the BBC, never mind the possibility of a BBC production.[27] It was hardly surprising therefore that it was Granada, rather than the BBC, who went on to make the television version. Moreover, in contrast to the BBC's timidity, and fear of provoking controversy, ITV were happy to take advantage of the play's reputation. The popular ITV listings magazine *TV Times* featured the 'Play of the Week' production on its front page. The local version of the *TV Times*, *TV Post*, also did so but, in a surprisingly provocative fashion, it quite openly exploited the preceding controversy by asking in large typeface, 'Would You Ban This Play?' This, however, was largely a rhetorical question as the magazine had already run a feature expressing a sense of pride that this 'controversial Belfast play' involved so many local actors and could be held to possess a 'true Ulster ring'.[28] Indeed, such was the interest in the play's broadcast that it became something of a Northern Ireland event, achieving the highest ever rating for any ITV play broadcast in Northern Ireland. According to the *Stage and Television Today,* the play was viewed by 98 per cent of the viewing audience, representing 153,000 homes and a possible 600,000 viewers (out of an overall population of around 1,142,500).[29] Thus, a dramatic work that had achieved notoriety as a result of attempts to prevent it from being seen ended up achieving a Northern Irish audience far greater than for any previous Northern Ireland play (and in all probability any play at all).

The responses to the play's transmission on television do, however, raise some issues regarding the translation of the play for audiences in Britain. Although in Northern Ireland the production appears to have been generally well-received, criticisms of it tended to revolve around notions of 'veracity' and 'authenticity'. Politically, there were objections to the portraits of Protestant workers as 'murderers and troublemakers' and complaints that these were unfair or inaccurate.[30] More generally, there were also concerns about the 'confusion of accents' for a play that was so closely identified with Belfast.[31] For critics in England, however, these concerns registered in a different way. *The Observer*, for example, found it curious that the play was not primarily about the 'clash between workers and employers'.[32] The *Daily Mail* suggested 'the religious issue in Ireland' was 'pretty remote' and wondered 'how much the themes meant to the overwhelming majority of viewers'.[33]

This lack of engagement with the specificity of the play's concerns, or reluctance to accept their relevance, partly derives from some of the same features decried by local viewers. In an era when television dramas were primarily studio productions, spoken accents became particularly important signifiers of place. Thus, in the case of *Danger Men Working*, which was shot entirely in the studio, there is nothing about the set, apart from a sign indicating the build is taking place in Co. Derry, that would visually identify Northern Ireland as a specific, or distinctive, place. Moreover, as the casting of Leo McKern in this play indicates, it was also common to cast well-known actors in lead parts who were not themselves from Northern Ireland. The casting of the Liverpudlian Tom Bell as Joe in *The Big Donkey*, for example, provoked complaints that 'he never sounded or looked like a Belfast shipyard man' (Balor 1963: 6). In the case of *Over the Bridge*, the main role of Davy was taken by the Scottish actor Finlay Currie who played the part with a Scottish accent. Although local actors, such as Elizabeth Begley, J. G. Devlin, James Ellis and Patrick McAlinney, played important parts, a number of roles were filled by southern Irish or English actors whose accents lacked the same specificity. However, while the resulting variations of accent in these plays upset local audiences, they were less of an issue for audiences elsewhere. Indeed, the ITV companies deliberately sought to avoid an over-use of local accents that might be difficult for viewers to understand. The original theatre production of *Over the Bridge* had been regarded as too 'regional' when it reached London where it failed to find success. The casting of well-known actors, and mixing of accents, therefore guaranteed a certain degree of intelligibility for audiences unfamiliar with Northern Ireland and also helped to position the plays in relation to pre-existing expectations of working-class drama which might just as readily be located in, say, Glasgow or Liverpool.[34]

This tension between particularity and generality may also be seen in relation to the use of film inserts. Along with *The Randy Dandy*, *Over the Bridge* was one be the first NI dramas to include material actually filmed in Belfast. While this use of actual locations was praised for adding a new level of 'authenticity' to the portrayal of the city, it was also relatively limited in scope and consisted of a small number of overhead shots of the shipyards and men arriving for work ('over the bridge'). While such shots as these were undoubtedly a novelty in terms of the representation of Belfast in television drama they were also relatively anonymous and drew upon a visual vocabulary that linked the representation of the city to

other industrial locations in Britain. In this way, the addition of inserts tended to situate the drama generically in relation to similar working-class dramas rather than cultivate an iconography that was specific to Belfast or Northern Ireland.[35] While this had the benefit of indicating some of the shared issues faced by the working class across the UK, it may also have had the effect, as noted earlier, of encouraging generic expectations and critical responses that led to misunderstandings or questioning of the veracity of the play's less familiar – and regionally specific - features.

Conclusion

Due to the controversy associated with it, there seems little doubt that *Over the Bridge* was the most high-profile of the 'first wave' of plays to be set in Northern Ireland. It also seems clear that it was the rise of interest in regional working-class drama that in large part underpinned the high-point for production of Northern Ireland plays circa 1961-3. Although plays did continue to get made during the 1960s they did not chime with the times in quite the same way again. Although not billed as such, Thompson's *Cemented with Love* (BBC1, 5 May 1965), ended up, as a result of the delay in its transmission, being broadcast during a run of Wednesday Plays, then acquiring a reputation for its willingness to tackle uncomfortable social issues. Despite the boldness – and unprecedented nature - of its critique of the corruption and sectarianism underpinning elections in Northern Ireland, it failed to achieve the same level of impact as its predecessor, *Over the Bridge*, due, in part, to its over-reliance on a level of comic exaggeration that verged on the stereotypical.[36] Likewise, while John D. Stewart's comic tale, *Boatman Do Not Tarry* (1967), dealing with the a group of villagers' opposition to the building a bridge that would destroy the local ferryman's livelihood, clearly possessed affinities with his earlier play *Danger Men Working*, it was widely perceived to be a piece of backward-looking 'Oirish' whimsy rather than a challenging contemporary drama. The production's use of a filmed sequence involving a protest march on Stormont, accompanied by a band playing 'We Shall Not Be Moved', does, however, hint at the civil rights marches to come (albeit that the sequence also involves a degree of parody of an Orange parade). Stewart had, in fact, chaired a public meeting on civil rights in 1966, which helped to pave the way for the establishment of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association the following year. So, while the play involves a modest critique of the Unionist regime, its revival of the conventions of rural comedy (and

dramatisation of the main conflict in terms of tradition versus modernity) also suggests how an opportunity for a much bolder – and relevant - work was missed.

What the article reveals nevertheless is that much more television drama, set in Northern Ireland and written by Northern Irish writers, was produced in the 1959-67 period than has previously been thought to be the case. In an era before the outbreak of the Troubles it also identifies the concerns and patterns of representation constituting the first representations of Northern Ireland in television drama. Although highly varied, it identifies a certain shift away from the rural towards the urban-industrial in line with more general cultural trends at the time. In doing so, however, it has also sought to bring out some of the constraints governing drama production at this time. These include the political influence of Ulster unionism upon the BBC in Northern Ireland (and by extension London) as well as the more commercial pressures faced by ITV companies in bringing often unfamiliar Northern Ireland material to audiences in Britain. However, while these may be seen to have restricted the range and complexity of the material produced, the discussion also suggests how many of the plays were able to speak to the anxieties and tensions of the time and generate a wider range of perspectives than might have been anticipated.

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[1] Andrew Hill's essay grew out of a larger AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) project based at the University of Ulster which examined the more general emergence of television and Northern Ireland. See also John Hill (2006: 152-161), Andrew Hill (2007) and Hill and Hill (2007).

[2] As part of the AHRC-funded research project, 'The History of Forgotten Television Drama', based at Royal Holloway, University of London, *Worm in the Bud* was restored with the help of StudioCanalUK and subsequently featured in the Forgotten TV Drama DVD release, *Armchair Theatre Archive* Volume Two (Network, 2019). The discussion of plays in this article is based on a viewing of plays where they exist (*Danger Men Working*, *Over the Bridge,* the second version of *The Sugar Cubes, The Scandalous Parson* and parts of *Boatman Do Not Tarry*) or on scripts held in the BBC Written Archives. In some cases, the scripts for television productions do not exist either and I have had to rely on the scripts for radio versions along with other written sources. There are published versions of some of the plays discussed here (*Boyd's Shop*, *A Shilling for the Evil Day* (aka *All Souls' Night*), *Over the Bridge*, *The Randy Dandy*, *The Big Donkey*, *The Enemy Within*, *Cemented with Love*) but none of these are the same as the television versions (albeit that two of these – *The Big Donkey* and *Cemented with Love* – were original television plays).

[3] 'A larger television view of Ulster', *Radio Times,* BBC Northern Ireland edition, 13 February 1959, p.9. Although not labelled as such, it may be possible to characterise one of Studio Eight's now lost film features, *Day Out* (BBCNI, 3 June 1959), produced by David Close-Thomas of the BBC's Northern Ireland Film Unit, as an experimental TV drama. Dealing with the story of a young boy's adventures in Belfast, the production seems to have relied upon extensive dramatisation, including a 'mixture of fantasy and fact' (Ray 1959: 5).

[4] *The Country Boy* was subsequently turned into a television production for the BBC's Saturday Playhouse (23 April 1960). Although involving some players associated with the original production – such as Elizabeth Begley and Harold Goldblatt – the play itself is set in Co. Mayo from where the writer, John Murphy, hailed.

[5] Letter from Ronald Mason to John D. Stewart, 7 July 1959, BBCWAC NI20/14/1.

[6] Ronald Mason was an early supporter of Brian Friel, producing his first radio play, *A Sort of Freedom,* in 1958. He also produced a radio version of *The Enemy Within*, featuring Ray McAnally, in 1963, having failed to engage the interest of London in a television production.

[7] *Belfast Telegraph*, 21 October 1966, p.14.

[8] Sam Cree was a Belfast-based writer, popular with amateur dramatic groups. During this period he was involved in a series of adaptions for The Jimmy Logan Theatre Hour, produced by STV and broadcast live from the Metropole Theatre, Glasgow. As part of this series, he adapted a two-part version of Joseph Tomelty's Belfast comedy, *Mugs and Money* (21 and 28 November 1965), which was Tomelty's own re-working of one of his most popular plays, *Barnum was Right* (originally produced by the Group Theatre).

[9] Letters from John D. Stewart to Ronald Mason 11 and 27 July 1958, BBCWAC, NI20/14/1.

[10] Letter from Frederick Aicken to Ronald Mason, 17 October 1960, BBCWAC NI20/1/1.

[11] Mason himself moved full-time to London in 1966 before going back to Belfast as BBCNI Head of Programmes in 1970. He then returned to London in 1977 when he replaced Martin Esslin as Head of Radio Drama.

[12] In 1958, for example, there were criticisms of the 'immoral content' of some of the plays broadcast – on Sundays - as part of Television World Theatre (Memo from Controller, BBC Northern Ireland to BBC Director-General, 9 April 1958, BBCWAC R6/66/2). The 'suitability' of these plays for audiences in Northern Ireland was also discussed by the BBC Northern Ireland Advisory Council (Minutes, 18 April 1958, BBCWAC NI2/12/1).

[13] Directive from Director-General, 'Northern Ireland and Eire ', 20 October 1959, BBCWAC R34/1627/1. This was a revised and updated version originally circulated in 1949.

[14] The correspondence between Belfast and London relating to *Cemented with Love* may be found in the BBC file, BBCWAC T5/968/1. Hill (2007) provides a good overview of the controversy.

[15] UTV itself was strongly associated with the unionist establishment in Northern Ireland through its Managing Director, Brum Henderson, whose family owned the unionist daily

newspaper, the *Belfast News-Letter*. Butler (1995: 44) suggests that UTV's commercial need to appeal to the minority Catholic population was sustained by an 'apolitical populism'. However, this was still compatible with the suppression of programmes. Encouraged by the ITA, UTV was the only member of the ITV network, for example, *not* to show the Granada documentary, *The Troubles*, dealing with the 1916-23 period, in October 1963.

[16] Memo from H.W. McMullan, H.N.I.P., Belfast to Douglas Allen, Television Centre, 25 January 1954, BBCWAC T5/61. BBCNI's involvement may be seen to indicate a concern that the production not only incorporate as many genuine local accents as possible but, in doing so, evoke an 'Ulster' rural identity distinct from a more generic version of 'Irishness' associated with 'stage Irishmen' and rural romanticism.

[17] In a 1953 radio broadcast, the play is identified as taking place during the Second World War. This invests the play with an even stronger allegorical dimension insofar as the partition of Ireland occurred some twenty-five years before (in 1921). According to the local *Radio Times* (13 March 1959) the television version (which does not survive) is set during World War One which dilutes – but does not erase - the play's political dimension (which includes the men's decision to 'come together' at the play's end).

[18] A 'contrary' tradition within BBCNI radio during the 1940s and 1950s is commonly linked to a form of cultural regionalism, associated with figures such John Hewitt, Sam Hanna Bell and John Boyd, that challenged the orthodox regionalism of both the Unionist government and the broadcasting institution. See, for example, McIntosh (199) and Keane (2015).

[19] The original radio play, entitled 'Incident of 98' was referred upwards and, at the time of the commissioning of the television version, Ronald Mason wrote to Cree that a production in July (the traditional Orange marching season) was 'scarcely an opportune time for a play on this theme' (Letter from Ronald Mason to Cecil Cree, 9 June 1959, BBCWAC NI25/8/1).

[20] Janet McNeill was herself the daughter of a Presbyterian minister who was born in Dublin but lived a large part of her life in Belfast. Although she began her career as a writer for radio, it is her novels for which she is now mostly celebrated. Given the revival of interest in her work, and her diagnosis of the social constrictions faced by her female characters, it is unfortunate, if not altogether surprising, that both her television plays from this period have failed to survive.

[21] Although *The McCooeys* are an identifiably Protestant family, the series sought to avoid overt political and religious references. Tomelty's earlier work, however, also includes a play

The End House (1944) about the experiences of a Catholic working-class family – the MacAstockers - in pre-war Belfast. The play not only emphasises the poverty faced by the characters but also the oppressiveness of the Unionist regime, exemplified by the Special Powers Act and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) who shoot and kill an unarmed man at the play's end. Given the sensitivity of its contents, the play was performed in Dublin, rather than Belfast, and, unlike so much of Tomelty's work, was never adapted by the BBC for radio

[22] *Northern Whig* (13 January 1960) cited in Boltwood (2010: 17).

[23] The television play, produced by ITV, marks a clear difference here from the version recorded for radio for BBC Northern Ireland in 1957 in which the narrator refers to 'Ulster's great new General Hospital' being built in an imaginary location ('Kilrannan') in 'County Londonderry'.

[24] *Belfast News-Letter*, 19 April 1951, p.4.

[25] McKee quoted in *The Stage and Television Today*, 21 May 1959, p.2. More detailed discussion of the *Over the Bridge* controversy may be found in Mengel (1986), Pilkington (1995), Megahey (2009), and Ellis (2015).

[26] Memo from Ronald Mason, Drama Producer, to Sam Thompson, 15 February 1960, BBCWAC NI20/15/1.

[27] Memo from H.N.I.P. to C.N.I, 22 March 1960, BBCWAC NI20/15/1. Although this memo does not refer to McKee by name, the contents of the memo make it unlikely that it could be anyone else. Later the same year McKee also sought to prevent transmission of an arts programme on the director of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, Mary O'Malley on the grounds that it was likely to have an 'inflammatory effect' (Minutes of a meeting of the Board of Governors, 22 September 1960, BBCWAC R1/28/1). O'Malley was one of those who had previously been critical of the withdrawal of *Over the Bridge*.

[28] *TV Post*, 20 July 1961, p. 16

[29] 'Viewing Record for Ulster', *The Stage and Television Today*, 21 September 1961, p.10.

[30] Letters to the *TV Post*, 14 September 1961, p.3.

[31] *Belfast Telegraph*, 30 August 1961, p.4

[32] *Observer*, 3 September 1961.

[33] *Daily Mail*, 30 August 1961. The role of religion in Janet McNeill's *A Child in House* was met with a similar incredulity in Peter Black's review of the play in which he joked it had led members of his family to assume the period was 'Edwardian' (*Daily Mail*, 28 May 1962, p.3).

[34] It is worth noting in this regard that the cover of the *TV Times* (24 August 1961) featured a photo of Finlay Currie, rather than any of the local actors, and that the description of the play in its daily listings avoided making any mention of where the drama takes place. The *TV Post* (24 August 1961), produced in Belfast, did, of course, highlight the local connection but the main image of the city employed on the magazine's front cover does not, contrary to the impression given, appear in the actual play.

[35] This may also be seen in the short O. B. extract to have survived from *The Big Donkey* (BBC, 31 March 1963) which was recorded in Belfast. The scene involves a confrontation between the main character Joe (Tom Bell) and the foreman Doherty (Joseph Tomelty) and takes place by the harbour gates in the dockyard area. Consisting largely of anonymous buildings, there is, however, nothing distinctive about the scene's visual background that would identify the Belfast location. The planning of this insert is discussed in a memo from J. L. Ecclestone, Programme Organiser to E.I.C. Tel., 8 February 1963, BBCWAC NI20/5/1.

[36] Although the production was in some ways hard-hitting, including – according to the television script- film footage of a riot involving protestors, a burning bus and an armoured car, the Head of the Drama Group, Sydney Newman, who was responsible for launching the Wednesday Play, commented that the play and the acting were 'old-fashioned'. Despite the novelty of the play's emphasis upon sectarianism, and Unionist malpractice, the play's broad comedy, and use of recognisable types, also appears to have led him to suggest that English audiences were 'bored by the Irish' (Minutes of the Weekly Programme Review, 12 May 1965, BBCWAC).

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