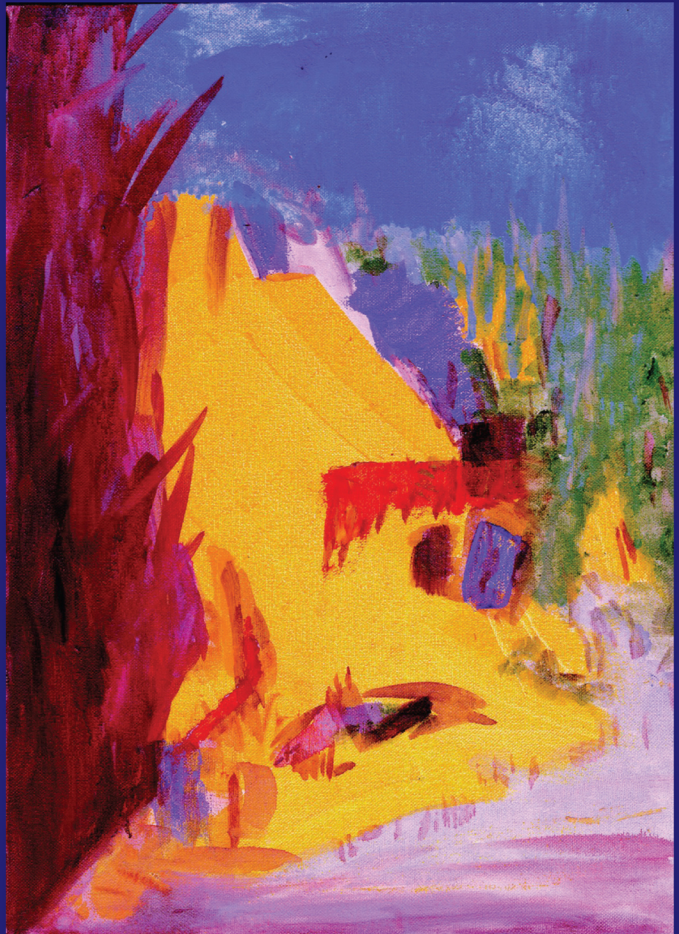


M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera (ed.)

# TELLING TRUTHS: EVELYN CONLON AND THE TASK OF WRITING



Evelyn Conlon is one of Ireland's most important writers. She has published four collections of short stories, *My Head is Opening* (1987), *Taking Scarlet as a Real Colour* (1993), *Telling: New and Selected Short Stories* (2000) and *Moving about the Place* (2021) and four novels, *Stars in the Daytime* (1989), *A Glassful of Letters* (1998) *Skin of Dreams* (2003) and *Not the Same Sky* (2013). She has also edited *Later On: The Monaghan Bombing Memorial Anthology* (2004).

*Telling Truths: Evelyn Conlon and the Task of Writing* is the first book to provide a critical assessment of her work. Drawing on a variety of perspectives such as feminism, ethics, famine studies, mobility studies, translation studies, short fiction, narratology and historiographic metafiction, the essays gathered in this volume reveal that Conlon's writing, characterised by sharp observation, insistently questions the predetermined course of female existence, explores alternative forms of freedom and ultimately reflects her commitment to seek and tell truths. The intersectional approach of the book is part of a current endeavour in Irish Studies to keep interrogating well established topics, to examine the elusiveness of others and to explore new boundaries through renewed epistemological and ethical positions.

M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera is Associate Professor of English at the University of Vigo (Galicia) in Spain. She is the author of *La estética modernista como práctica de resistencia en A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2000), the editor of *Vigorous Joyce: Atlantic Readings of James Joyce* (2010) and has been a member of the Editorial Board of *European Joyce Studies* since 2010. Her current research in the field of Irish Studies focuses on mobility, silence and vulnerability. She has coordinated the State- and ERDF- funded Research Project "INTRUTHS: Inconvenient Truths: Cultural Practices of Silence in Contemporary Irish Literature" FFI2017-84619-P AEI/FEDER, UE and is currently the Principal Investigator of "INTRUTHS 2: Articulations of Individual and Communal Vulnerabilities in Contemporary Irish Writing" PID2020-114776GB-I00 MCIN/AEI.



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This book offers a comprehensive critical guide to one of Ireland's most original writers. The highly interesting and engaging essays situate Conlon's work in its literary and socio-political contexts, but also illuminate her distinctive narrative voice, the subversive nature of her writing and its sustained commitment to social justice.

– Elke D'hoker, University of Leuven

This landmark collection definitively establishes the importance of the work of Evelyn Conlon. The political and ethical underpinnings of her fiction are winningly articulated. Above all, these searching explorations demonstrate her fine-grained skill as an author and copper-fasten her position as a pivotal, contestatory voice in the recent history of Irish women's writing.

– Anne Fogarty, University College Dublin



# Telling Truths

# Reimagining Ireland

Volume 117

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher,  
Technological University Dublin – Tallaght Campus



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# Telling Truths

## Evelyn Conlon and the Task of Writing

**M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera (ed.)**



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## 8 *Later On*, Later on, and in Another Country

### ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses Evelyn Conlon's *Later On* (2004), an edited collection of writings commissioned as a memorial for the town thirty years after the bombing of 17 May 1974. It explores how notions of trauma, collective and individual memory and in particular healing through telling and writing are relevant, not only to the collection but to subsequent responses. As the chapter reveals, in the process of preparing the volume, attention is drawn to the balming and recuperative function of memory, which functions to exorcise the negative emotions of horror and fear in a book which was for Conlon an act of restitution, a duty of commitment to be part of the trauma which affected her community of origin.

“What is the use, after all, of a silent intellectual?”

– Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, 2002

At around 5.30 p.m. on the afternoon of Friday 17 May 1974, three no-warning car bombs exploded in the centre of Dublin. The first two bombs went off within a minute of each other in Parnell Street, a major shopping area north of the Liffey, and in Talbot Street, a side street of O'Connell Street leading to Connolly Station. The third exploded a few seconds later in South Leinster Street, by the railings of Trinity College. They were followed by a fourth bomb which went off at 6.57 p.m. outside Greacen's pub in the centre of Monaghan, in the Republic of Ireland, near the border with Northern Ireland. Thirty three people were killed in the bombings, twenty six in Dublin and seven in Monaghan, the highest number of victims in a single incident of the whole period of the Troubles. Thirty one of the victims were Irish. The other two were an Italian, Antonio Magliocco from Casalattico near Frosinone in the south of Italy, visiting his brother who ran a fish and chip shop in Parnell Street, and a French student, Simone Chetrit, in Dublin to learn English.

Nearly thirty years later, in 2003, the Monaghan Memorial Committee decided to commission a commemorative sculpture and an edited collection

of writings which could begin to address some of the trauma occasioned by the event. The Committee asked Evelyn Conlon, as a well-known novelist and writer of short stories and native of County Monaghan, to put together the writings to be contained in this volume. She was initially reluctant – she had recently published a novel, *Skin of Dreams* (2003) in which capital punishment and its trauma occupied a central role, and, as she explains in the interview with Paige Reynolds in this volume, she “did not want to put [her] head through any other spaces like that” (174). Likewise, she relates how she accepted, eventually, because the arts officer from Monaghan “persisted pleasantly” (174). The motivation speaks for her customary openness and courtesy in relation to requests. But the acceptance of a task as difficult as a memorial collection to a violent trauma in a small community, one which still today has not achieved the closure that a full public inquiry could provide, is also witness to something else: a commitment to putting her writing to the service of the community and to representing, in language, the voices, perceptions, experiences and memories of those affected by the bombings. If writers and intellectuals are to have a “use” (148), as Michael Walzer suggests, silence is not an option which is open to them.

The resulting collection, *Later On*, published in 2004, and the sculpture by Ciarán Ó Cearnaigh at the site of the bombing in Monaghan, therefore formed the dual artistic commemoration of that tragedy. In discussing his work on the sculpture in his contribution to Conlon’s volume, Ó Cearnaigh makes a number of points which relate also to the work of the volume. First, given the delicacy and complexity of the task, he was aware that there would be a multiplicity of views and perspectives on the event, and that the piece thus would have to be “a combination of many views” (25). Moreover, as he was not from Monaghan, he felt that producing a commemorative statue for the citizens of the town could be felt as an intrusion, particularly if the “best suggestions from everybody involved” (36) were not listened to and, if possible, incorporated into the final sculpture. “After all,” writes Ó Cearnaigh, “these people have probably been building this memorial in their heads for decades before I ever arrived” (36). The precise placing of the work was also an issue: the commemorative statue rightly stands “on the most accessible site nearest to where the

bomb went off ... to place it anywhere else in the town would be wrong. It was vital to acknowledge the emotive and contextual power of the site of the tragedy” (36).

As Conlon states in her introduction, while solid sculptures as memorials are common, it was “indeed unusual to attempt to have a book play a similar role” (10). Despite this, in many ways the preparation of the book followed the same collaborative approach as the sculpture. The decision to commission both was discussed in an open meeting at the Hillgrove Hotel in Monaghan in 2003. This was the first time, after almost thirty years, that many members of the community had spoken openly about the events and its traumatic effects. Conlon describes the first moment of this encounter:

The discussions that took place around the tables when the business of the meeting had been concluded are what made this a unique event. It became, in fact, a tentative invitation to cast back, remember and discuss. Publicly. The room was full of people who talked and listened to each other. Some had not met since that day, which seems remarkable in such a small place. But then the circumstances of the bomb had obviously made people reticent and afraid to broach their memories in the intervening years. (*Later On* 10)

As she reveals in the interview, later, during a period as in which she was present in Monaghan, she had the opportunity to meet members of the community: “[T]wo weeks and a private room were set aside for me to sit in the Market House Arts Office, so people could come to discuss the project” (175). Although the occasion was intended as a moment for discussion about the form the book would take, it became, instead, on many occasions, a general conversation about the events of the fateful day (Conlon, “Postscript”).

The structure of the volume, too, reflects this dialogic and collaborative endeavour. It is made up of three types of text: pieces of fiction or poetry requested from writers born in or with a close connection to County Monaghan, contributions from the families of those killed by the bomb, and memory pieces from citizens of the county. Some pieces provide a general context for the bombing and the town. The volume opened with a broad historical and geographical survey of the town, “The Town of Monaghan: A Place Inscribed in Street and Square” by the historian from

nearby Cremartin, Patrick Duffy, which enables the reader to fit the traumatic event of May 1974 into a larger historical and geographical context. Margaret Urwin, the campaign secretary of the “Justice for the Forgotten” association, an organization founded in 1996 to campaign to persuade the Irish government to carry out investigations into cross-border bombings, contributed a piece which reflected on the difficult process of commemoration of the 1974 bombings. It was only in the 1990s, for example, that memorial plaques were put up in the Garden of Remembrance and in Talbot Street in Dublin. Paddy MacEntee, later involved in the compilation of a governmental report into the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, noted with sadness the ways in which even the sharing of sorrow and trauma could be difficult in societies still divided by religious faith and which still adhered to unwritten rules “whereby a man or woman could not enter the church of a neighbor with whom they had shared the same earth and sky and their common humanity” (84). Other writings – poems, memories or extracts from the work of pieces by writers, artists and journalists – reflected directly on the Monaghan bombings or more generally on themes of memory, violence and trauma.

There were also absences in the book which reflected the commitment of the editor to honour the feelings of some citizens. One particular absence is that of any visual material: maps, photographs or images of the town, for example. As a volume built upon personal and literary sensitivities to trauma, the editor decided that any visual focus would have been out of place, bringing attention to the specificities of the locality, the damage wrought and perhaps the physical injuries incurred. In this, the volume was purposefully different from the more common political or journalistic approach to divisive and traumatic events. It was felt, instead, that only by taking some initial distance from the physical specificities of the event could the book be effectively open to the reflections and sensitivities of the citizens.

In its inclusion of different perspectives, as we have said, the preparation of the volume was analogous to that of the sculpture. The plural nature of the work, however, does not detract from its core: the central section of the collection was set aside for seven contributions by members of the families or friends of the seven people who lost their lives, the names

of whom I report here, mindful of the need, in writing as well as in monuments, to “murmur name upon name,” as W. B. Yeats did in his poem *Easter 1916*: Archie Harper, George Williamson, Thomas Campbell, Patrick Askin, Peggy White, Thomas Croakin and Jack Travers. The book, then, stands as a testimony to the dialogic form that this act of writing took, the result of personal memories expressed publicly or privately, of a careful listening on the part of the editor of the volume, and the difficult weaving of these diverse testimonies into a finished written form.

The principal communicative frame of the volume, then, was the immediate one: the community of Monaghan itself, and this is reflected, as we have seen, in the collaborative process of the genesis of the book and the structure of the collection itself. Another important context, however, although perhaps a contrasting one, was that of the growing attention in Ireland towards the bombings. Don Mullan’s recent *The Dublin and Monaghan Bombings* (2000) had recounted the immediate political and historical background of the bombings – the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 and the opposition to it by loyalists through the Ulster Workers’ Council Strike of May 1974. It has also probed the issue of the responsibility for the bombings on the part of loyalist paramilitary groups and the probable collusion on the part of some elements of the British armed forces, an issue which had come to light in a TV documentary broadcast on Yorkshire Television in 1993 entitled *Hidden Hand. The Forgotten Massacre*. This heightened interest, however, in some ways could move contrary to the specifically local processes of recognition and commemoration, both in the sculpture and the book. The latter were concerned above all with the private and local impact of the event on a small town. As Conlon says in her introduction, a town is a “delicate balancing act” in which the proximity of its inhabitants, in “places where the houses are up beside each other” lives uneasily alongside their need to “carve out their own privacies” (10). And a brutal act of violence such as the 1974 bombing could interrupt and jeopardize this careful and delicate equilibrium. In many ways, the compilation and publication of the volume was an attempt to reinstate or reinforce this balance through a public, act of recognition, but it was one which eschewed entering into the immediate historical and political corollaries.

While both Ó Cearnaigh and Conlon shared a commitment to producing a work in close collaboration with the community, the finished products, as sculpture and text, have different communicative functions and modalities. Commemorative plaques, statues and sculptures have an expressive potential, tightly linked to place and physical experience, and their communicative framework is immediate and site-specific. By contrast, a volume operates in a wider context, floating free of any physical place, reaching out to communities and readers far away from the place of the event. Texts dealing with issues such as violence, trauma, memory and community also have a wider, potentially universal scope. Thus in 2005, the University of Bologna organized a workshop which took the events in Monaghan and the texts of Evelyn Conlon and Don Mullan as their primary focus, but which also examined these texts more generally with regard to issues of war, violence, trauma and commemoration.

The contributions from this workshop subsequently formed the basis of a dossier entitled *Remembering the Troubles*, published in the on line journal *mediAzioni* (Leech, 2005). One student reflected on her own experience in discovering trauma and memory in accounts of eye-witnesses of the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry “written inside their eyes” (Capuzzo 2005). Giulia Rinaldi delved into the particular language that many of those referring to the bombings used in the acts of remembering, in particular the ways in which the narrations often began with “a resolve to talk in the first person (with the uncovering of all the private sufferings and traumatic memories that this resolution might imply,” a methodology which contributed to a particular account of the event “from below” (Rinaldi 2005). Another paper reflected on the ways in which cities speak of traumatic events in their past through physical monuments, comparing Dublin and Monaghan to Bologna and its own experience of the bomb which exploded in the train station on 2 August 1980, killing eighty-five people (Bianchi 2005). The aspect of loss, beyond the loss of a loved one, was elaborated in another contribution: loss can be spatial, as in the physical disappearance of buildings; temporal, understood as the loss of a “normal” unfolding of quotidian habits interrupted by the trauma of violence; or expressive, as in the silences of the families, the citizens and the institutions subsequent to the event (Varney 2005). The contribution by Rosa Maria Bollettieri



Bosinelli went to the heart of the intent of the anthology, focusing on its foundation in a “belief that art can heal wounds.” This was true despite the “curious reticence” of the title of her piece, which related instead to the continued obscurity of the reasons behind the tragedy, a reticence or silence which “is probably the strongest message of the book.” Bollettieri Bosinelli is surely right in indicating that the writing of this volume was a partial antidote to this reticence and this silence, a filling, does he mean a “filling in of” these spaces with language relating to the private and personal (Bollettieri Bosinelli 2005).

These considerations were reinforced, in the symposium, with other more general discussions such as that by Raffaella Baccolini on issues of forgetting and remembering, commemoration, the need for closure, and memory as a form of hope (Baccolini 2005). There was also a stimulating reflection by Samuel Whitsitt on the particular relation between language and memory. He too focused on the absence, in the book, of visual signifiers in the form of photographs, maps or drawings which, as we have seen, was the result of a conscious choice on the part of the editor. The volume contains “no image that would claim to stand for a place, or bring us to a halt before the image of a person.” A visual image may invoke a particular type of response, one entirely justified, that of respectful silence. But the very absence of images makes speech possible, encourages a response to a need to put reactions into words and thus momentarily takes the event out of its rootedness in the particular and collocates it instead amongst other events, different but similar: “[W]ith the book, there is that continual murmur which tells us that whatever happened, did happen there, yet likewise elsewhere, and otherwise” (Whitsitt 2005). Participation in the complexities of commemoration in the presence of a physical object, a sculpture or a statue, has its own characteristics, clearly tied to space and moment. A commemorative volume, instead, working through language, enabled a larger and wider participation, in this case of students and teachers in Italy, who certainly did not share a cultural and physical intimacy with the events in Monaghan, but were able, maintaining a full respect for these citizens, to share in some of the horror and trauma of the event and reflect on issues of writing, remembering and commemoration.

The issue of intimacy brings in a personal note to this account. The link between the editor and the University of Bologna was the result, it should be mentioned, of personal contacts first between herself and Giovanni Nadiani, an attentive scholar of minority languages and well-known dialect poet in his own right, and subsequently with Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli, Joyce specialist, translation scholar and linguist. Both of these figures, alas, are with us no more, adding a further dimension of loss to the present writer and, indeed, to Evelyn Conlon herself.

*Later On* includes some pages from Conlon's own work, *Skin of Dreams* (2002). The extract focuses on the nature of grief, so apparent and obvious to the sufferer as to be experienced as "a living thing" (103) while remaining outside the immediate scope of even the most sympathetic outsiders. If Conlon's fiction often deals with issues such as these, the work of producing *Later On* was surely a different task, demanding a very different approach to that of the writer of fiction: a work of attentive and respectful listening, a work in which the individuality of the writer had to bend to accommodate the views, perceptions and sensibilities of those more immediately involved. It involved editing, sifting, choosing, ordering and juxtaposing brief essays, personal accounts, poetry and other writings, all the while mindful of the raw places and vulnerable sensibilities of those whose mental wounds of the memory of the event had still not healed. The resulting volume does not have the physicality and immediacy of the statue which was commissioned at the same time. But it may, perhaps, represent within Conlon's own work a sort of *stolperstein* (stumble stone) like those on the pavements of Berlin recalling the names and houses of Jews taken for deportation. The work is certainly a homage to the area of Ireland in which she was brought up, and an act of restitution, a duty of commitment to be part of the trauma which rocked her community of origin. But it is also more generally (and the workshop in Forlì, in its own way, was testimony to this) an example of the efforts of many writers and intellectuals, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, to speak out in order to keep the memory of Europe's dark past alive, not through any morbid impulses but because of the need to look into these dark places and resist the temptations to erase those aspects of the past which are traumatic. Drawing on the powerful words of Martin Luther King, the critic Max Page described memorials to

the victims of the atrocities of European fascism as attempts to “align, and bend, the arc of memory and the arc of justice in the pursuit of a better, more peaceful Europe” (337). Conlon’s *Later On* is, in the same way, both a monument to the Monaghan bombings and a part of the arc of memory and the arc of justice.

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