

**Abstract:** In the decade following the Irish Civil War (1922-1923) the radical republican, socialist and writer Peadar O'Donnell (1893-1986) began a campaign of political agitation and subversion against the newly founded Free State government of Cumman na Gaedheal. During this time he also published four novels and was a contributor to and editor of the IRA newspaper *An Phoblacht*. Substantial amounts of this material was written on the run, in incarceration, or under harassment from Free State Forces, as was his autobiographical novel *Storm* (1925). The novel contains many incidents that are of interest to the history of the period and into an understanding of O'Donnell's own life as an active participant in armed struggle. In particular, the violence within *Storm* can be identified with specific events in the Anglo-Irish War that throw light on that conflict and on the experiences that O'Donnell was able to utilise in the construction of the novel. These incidents, when read in conjunction with newly released witness statements and records from the Bureau of Military History, offer us a fresh insight in republican life writing and autobiography that can help us to better contextualise the period and enrich our understanding of the conflict.

**Keywords:** Peadar O'Donnell, Republican Autobiography, Life Writing, IRA, Violence, *Storm*.

As 2012 approached the Government of Ireland was busy preparing for the Decade of Centenaries, the ten years that would see the centenary of events such as the Third Home Rule Bill; the signing of the Ulster Covenant; the Dublin Lockout; the First World War; the Easter Rising; the Anglo-Irish War; the Partition of Ireland and the Foundation of the Free State. In a country so impacted by political violence and where history remains a site of contested claims, the right to remember and the question of who to remember has a particular poignancy.<sup>1</sup> The turbulence of the years between 1912 and 1922 has been captured in a vast array of material: in memoirs, letters, diaries, witness statements, interviews and pension records. For scholars of the period these records represent the best way to tell the stories of the men and women who contributed to this history and whose lives defined the era. However, sitting alongside these sources is a substantial body of fiction and autobiographical fiction that often remains unexplored as a site of historical information. One such example is the

novels of the radical republican, socialist and writer, Peadar O'Donnell (1893-1986). On the surface, these writings are dismissed from the historical record on the basis that they break what Philip Lejeune has called the 'autobiographical pact', the agreed terms between the reader and the writer that 'the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical' (5).<sup>2</sup> However, fiction itself can be an interesting historical source, in both informing our understanding of the period in which it was written and in our understanding of the lived experience and life of its author. O'Donnell's fiction then can be read with other historical sources to throw light on his own life and to add new insights into our historical knowledge. When read in conjunction with witness statements and pension records from the time, these represent something of a new source of life writing. O'Donnell has written three autobiographic texts in *The Gates Flew Open* (1932), *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (1937) and *There Will Be Another Day* (1963) that recount the Irish Civil War, the Spanish Civil War and the Land Annuity Campaign respectively. But it is O'Donnell's first novel *Storm* (1925) that will be examined here and read alongside recently released material from the Military Service Pensions Collection and the Bureau of Military History to throw light on the wider connections between history, literature, and memory in Britain and Ireland. In particular, the violence within *Storm* can be identified with specific events in the Anglo-Irish War that reveal the deep autobiographical experiences that O'Donnell was able to utilise in the construction of the novel and show us how the novel, memoir, and statement can be read together to create a record of the inner turmoil that must have accompanied these momentous events and social changes.

There already exist a number of celebrated republican novels and novelists that recall the early twentieth century and deploy first-hand experience of them in their writing. Authors such as Séan O'Faoláin, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor and Kate O'Brien have also produced memoirs, travel books, essays and other writings that explore their experiences and memories of the time. There also exists a body of critical scholarship investigating these texts and the role that autobiography plays within Irish literature, although, 'the sheer prevalence of autobiographical writing may even obscure awareness of a coherent tradition, even though there is broad agreement in practice about which

texts make up the core canon' (Harte 1). Important work has been done in reclaiming the intersection between memory, writing and class by scholars such as Michael Pierse, who have identified the centrality of life writing to the working-class experience. Clare Lynch has taken the genre of Irish literary autobiography itself as the subject of her study, noting that the weight of history is central to defining any version of autobiography in Ireland: 'for all the complexities involved with defining autobiography, Irishness presents a seemingly infinite enigma. Irishness and Irish identity are infamously difficult terms to define due to the multifarious history which has shaped them and the contrasting individuals and political forces who have claimed ownership of them' (2). The memoirs and autobiographies of revolutionary Ireland, a category into which O'Donnell's fall, have been examined and placed within a much wider English canon, and it is 'striking to behold the pervasive influence of the English literary tradition on even Anglophobic gunmen such as Ernie O'Malley, Peadar O'Donnell and Dan Breen' (Steele 123). If these twentieth century autobiographies have a debt to an Irish tradition it is to Theobald Wolfe Tone, Charles Gavan Duffy and other advanced Irish nationalists from the preceding centuries (Kelly). However, reading O'Donnell's fiction and autobiography together, informed by other historical sources, has not been comprehensively done. The most fruitful example of such a model is Francis Flanagan's impressive work *Remembering the Revolution* which looks at other neglected Irish nationalist writers and reads their fiction, poetry and other literary writings in light of the historical context of the Easter Rising and Irish Civil War. This essay will seek to emulate this approach and to review O'Donnell's writing and his novel *Storm* for new insights into the both his inner life and the history of the period.

In April of 1926 the Irish republican party Sinn Féin split and the IRA army council took control of its newspaper *An Phoblacht* and installed Peadar O'Donnell as editor. The journal was separatist, nationalist and culturally exclusive and to this O'Donnell brought a left-leaning internationalist perspective. However, even under O'Donnell it would maintain its attacks on national institutions, especially those that were perceived to be run by Anglo-Irish artists in support of an artistic programme in line with the imperial and class-based interests of the State. O'Donnell followed this

editorial line and had taken a decidedly anti-Abbey Theatre and anti-Anglo-Irish literature stance in *An Phoblacht*. Articles such as ‘The Psychology of the Abbey Theatre’ declared that:

the Abbey has been confiscated from the Irish people and handed over to an audience which desires not to see itself as part of the Irish people, but as a new “ascendency”. This class, which fears to be mistaken for “peasant” and Irish, acts as if it were a tourist in its own country and like the typical English tourist so familiar to us all laughs uproariously at every commonplace uttered in an Irish Accent (3).

*An Phoblacht* also led the campaign against Sean O’Casey’s Dublin trilogy of plays, including supporting *Cumman na mBan* and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington in their protest against *The Plough and the Stars*. They reported on a series of lectures and debates held after the play’s staging in the Abbey, claiming ‘any national theatre lost more than it received when it gave up its freedom and “kow-towed” to those in power, in return for its subsidy’ and that:

Mr O’Casey takes a short-sighted view of life. He sees in war only the tragedy and the horrors, and he calls it futile. He does not look beyond and see the ideals and the worthy causes for which such wars as ours have been waged. And so the high ideals, and the men and women animated by those high ideas have no place in his presentation of the events of 1916. And in that, it would seem, lies the real objection to his latest play (Anonymous 1926, 4).

The paper also extended to personal attacks on W. B. Yeats and other Irish writers for developing a specifically Anglo-Irish form of literature that would move the Irish closer to their English counterparts:

But the Yeats or Synge or Sigerson, who brought out all the hidden beauty of Irish by their Anglo-Irish writings were not masters of Irish. But they were masters of **English**. Mark how Anglo-Irish speech and Anglo-Irish Literature improve according as Irishmen gain mastery over English. Let this go on, and we find our Anglo-Irish writers separating themselves distinctly from the study of Irish (W. B. Yeats has declared that he tried to learn Irish and failed) (Fionn 3).<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to state exactly the extent to which O’Donnell exerted editorial control over *An Phoblacht*. During those years he was often on the run and was wanted throughout Ireland, but he still maintained a large presence in the paper, writing its editorials and providing copy. For example, in the same edition of the paper that attacked *The Plough and the Stars* there is also an anti-recruitment short story by him entitled ‘A Pair of Recruits’. This story is a rare example of fiction by O’Donnell in the pages of *An Phoblacht* until the serialisation of *The Knife* in 1931 and it points to the autobiographically informed style that later O’Donnell works would take.

'A Pair of Recruits' is typical of O'Donnell's early writings in its staccato style and vivid action; it tells the story of big Dan Ruadh, an Irish labourer looking for work in the Salvation Army model lodge in Glasgow. There, he is approached by Donald MacTain, a petty criminal and former soldier and asked to join the British Army in Ireland as a means to avoid penury and hunger, with the offer of 'regular meals, an' regular beer, and a real bed'. The story is fast-paced and melodramatic and reads like a cowboy novel with Dan being the epitome of rugged masculinity favoured by the genre. It also has the hallmarks of O'Donnell's writing as a propagandist, with poverty and social injustice defining the inhabitants of the lodge:

There were a couple of hundred other men in the room, old men with weary faces and bleary eyes, and young fellows, one here and there hopeless and staring, like the old men, others restless and nervous, some quiet and grim, looking at the future without fear and without hope.

The two down-and-outs approach a recruiting agent who was an acquaintance of MacTain from prison seeking work in the army. The agent is depicted in typically crude terms as a 'rat' and a 'weasel' (5). The story ends when the agent asks both men to stop and kill a republican gunman from Dublin arriving in Glasgow. It is here that Dan Ruadh's temper breaks and he throttles the agent unconscious, before stealing his money and decided to leave for America. 'A Pair of Recruits' is an early example of fiction published by O'Donnell (appearing four months after *Storm*), but it already contains some of the themes he would return to throughout his writing life: the compromises the poor are forced to make, the virtue of the Irish peasant, the need for immediate action in the face of oppressive collusion between imperialist and capitalist forces.<sup>4</sup> Despite its overwrought action and characterisation, 'A Pair of Recruits' does offer glimpses of O'Donnell's best writing, with a gripping and flowing style and a sympathetic eye for the travails and struggles of the working poor. One gets a real sense of the creative pressures that O'Donnell was operating under during this period in a letter to his publisher at Jonathan Cape, Edward Garnett discussing the composition of his later novel *Ardrigoole* (1929) which is headed 'On the Dodge in Erin':

I had come to Dublin before your kind invitation to look me up passing thro London overtook me. I was sorry for all tho' [Seán] O'Faolain's presence in the shadowography of things vaguely suggested an ambush where the alleged revolutionary in me would have come in for a bombing. I should have loved the talk. It may sound strange but I have not quite lost my awe of you: and it is not just a general awe of your likes. Perhaps it is that you do push me back against sunken hopes that I am not cultivating: I don't know. I am writing: umpteen times a day some false alarm makes me grab my work & prepare to run but so far I've been lucky. "There's no knowing what you'll come to if you're not ketched early & destroyed", a hard working farmer told me the other night. [...] But I'm working: I am trying to look into a glen [?] making the lives a struggle around food, reveal them just a little above that in a setting of elemental emotional [?] that, while it springs out of minds and bodies, is conditioned a good deal by the thinness of the crust separating it from hunger. "Empty stalls make biting horses" almost covers what I mean. If I'm "ketched" I shall probably not be allowed to write inside, so I shall try to get thro this as quickly as possible & I will then send it [?] for I am trying to do something bigger – which just means I feel richer in my subject – than I have done yet. Please tell O'Faolain that of course I think he has gone to the devil; that I think he's now becoming emotional & romantic like the English; that I did have hopes his wife would save him but that she, too, has failed me! I have lately worked for some days as an agricultural wage earner with the dullest minded folk I have ever met. It was a great experience keeping ones talk and range of interests within their reach. Did you ever see a dull mind startled by a remark that explodes within a conversation which had up until then followed a course within full view of his understanding? [...] Were you ever on the run Garnett? How much one misses being an Englishman! This letter should be mostly an apology for my delay in answering your letter addressed to me at Capes but while it does convey my regrets it is really [?] mostly written to say what a good boy I am, working hard on a new story; "if I'm not ketched early & destroyed" I think you will like it.<sup>5</sup>

This letter, written to one of the most important literary editors in the twentieth century, gives us some insight into O'Donnell's writing as a radical practice, both in aesthetic and real terms. As this letter reveals, his work, produced whilst on the run, is also an example of what later be termed a literature of commitment.

From O'Donnell's perspective, it is a source of radical propaganda for the IRA in their struggles against British imperialism. Although *Storm* was published by the broadly nationalist Talbot Press, ironically, its success allowed O'Donnell to widen his horizons and publish his future works in the colonial centre itself, amongst the Bloomsbury group, in the heart of literary London. O'Donnell was introduced to Garnett by another radical writer and rebel, Liam O'Flaherty. Although O'Flaherty was to bemoan O'Donnell's politics and hope for his continued development as a novelist:

I was delighted to get your enthusiastic note about Peadar O'Donnell's book *Islanders*, now I feel sure that it is all right. I have not been able to get in touch with him yet, as he had to go to Donegal on Saturday morning about the case of some peasant that beat a bailiff, or

something like that. [...] The book will undoubtedly have a big sale in Ireland, at least two thousand. Tell Cape that, the chap has already published a poorish novel which sold fifteen hundred copies here [*Storm*]. The Talbot Press wanted to print *Islanders* but they are outrageously vulgar people and they must not get a work of art (Kelly 184).<sup>6</sup>

In this light then ‘A Pair of Recruits’ is both radical propaganda and an example of the autobiographical fiction that O’Donnell engaged with, having undertaken trips himself to Scotland to work as a potato picker and seasonal labourer. O’Donnell would later report on the conditions of the migrant Irish poor in another Republican journal, Jim O’Donovan’s *Ireland To-Day*: ‘The housing, as I experienced it, was little changed from what Paddy McGill described. We swept up byres and shook out straw for ourselves. Boys and girls slept in the same open shed. On a farm near Ballintrae our one door dragged in an ooze on the fringe of the midden; and that in July’ (O’Donnell 46).<sup>7</sup> O’Donnell had been frequenting Scotland from an early age and his family and community had all been involved with the ‘tatie hoker’ seasonal labour. His work as a Trade Union organiser for the Irish National Teacher’s Organisation (INTO) had seen him travel from his school in Arranmore to Derry city and across to Glasgow, where he became exposed to more radical socialism and union activity.<sup>8</sup> It was his time in Scotland, in the company of Communists such as Willie Gallacher that encouraged him to successfully apply to Liberty Hall and the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union (ITGWU) for a role as an organiser in Ulster (Ó’Drisceoil 2001, 7). However, whilst O’Donnell’s trips to Scotland were undoubtedly where he experienced first-hand the conditions of the poor, he overplays the role labour organisation had in his motivations for being there. O’Donnell was also moved by radical nationalism and as early as the summer of 1918 he had been to Scotland as part of his work with the IRA, attempting to smuggle explosives back to Ireland from Donegal miners working there (Sweeney).

In fact, O’Donnell’s radical politics and military engagement extend right back to his family and his youth. His mother was a radical nationalist and his aunt was an organiser with the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO), whilst his uncle was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (‘Wobblies’) (Ó’Drisceoil 2001, 7). As one former IRA Volunteer recalled, O’Donnell’s family home was a safe-house during the Anglo-Irish War and his mother was happy to provide provisions when Peadar

arrived with his company of volunteers on the run from Derry city on the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 1920: ‘Cars arrived the next day which took them [the volunteers] to Dungloe and they landed at Peadar O’Donnell’s house where his mother greeted them in the real old Irish style. A meal was soon prepared which everyone thoroughly enjoyed. Billets were arranged and the Cead Mile Failte which the Boys received everywhere showed the warm hearts of the kindly people of Donegal’ (Brady, 72). This early engagement with nationalism and socialism pervades all of O’Donnell’s political writing and fiction and informs every level of the creative process for him as a writer. Later, as a mature figure of the left in Irish politics, it suited him to suppress the violence of his youth. But as fellow Volunteer, Donegal man (and later Chief of Staff of the Irish Army) Joseph Sweeney recalled, O’Donnell had been active from a young age: ‘My first contact with Peadar O’Donnell in the physical force struggle was in 1917 when he reported to me the formation of a company of volunteers which he had organised in Arranmore Island. This company proved itself a fine keen body of men who did good service throughout the whole struggle’. Sweeney also identified his talent as a leader and inspirational speaker, sending him to Scotland in 1920 to organise support and smuggle explosives: ‘I sent him across three times, the first, I think, around St. Patrick’s day 1920 and the last certainly in July 1920. His work was extremely useful’ (16).

Sweeney would eventually go on to take a leading role in the opposing side to O’Donnell in the Irish Civil War, but still thought enough of him to write in support of his pension application in 1945. O’Donnell was working as editor of *The Bell* (1940-1954) when he applied for his medals and pension from the Anglo-Irish War.<sup>9</sup> Of all O’Donnell’s novels, this crossover between the violence of his life and his fiction is best evident in *Storm*, where the exploits of an IRA organiser and activist are recounted in a heroic mode. The text centres on Eamonn Gallagher, a school teacher on Arranmore, who awakens the island’s inhabitants to a new national consciousness through their support for his disruptive IRA activities. The plot has an obvious autobiographical background, with O’Donnell also working as a National School teacher on Arranmore. Critically, it has tended to be received as a piece of romantic melodrama set during the Anglo-Irish War. However, there is evidence to suggest that

O'Donnell relied much more on his own experiences than has previously been thought for the major set-pieces of the text.<sup>10</sup>

*Storm* is remembered, if at all, as a sentimental account of Irish patriotism. Even O'Donnell's biographer and best critic Donal Ó Drisceoil finds it wanting: 'this apprentice work [*Storm*] is a crude propagandist glorification of the independence struggle. [...] The author came to share the universal low opinion in which the book is held, and inserted a clause into his will forbidding its reissue' (Ó Drisceoil 2003, 63). O'Donnell may have had other reasons for banning its re-issue, the same reasons that led to him burning his correspondence before his death, it was too revealing as autobiographical fiction and ran the risk of opening old wounds. However, *Storm* is also interesting for the insight it gives us into O'Donnell's style of writing, in that it was informed directly by several events that took place during the Anglo-Irish War and that O'Donnell used as set-pieces in his fiction. The origins of *Storm* as a text came to O'Donnell whilst he was imprisoned in Dublin's Mountjoy jail after his arrest following the fall of the Four Courts. O'Donnell was contributing to Liam Mellows's jail journal *The Book of Cells*. Like the protagonist Eamonn Gallagher, O'Donnell was alert to the potential of words and writing to capture the imagination of a reader and bind it to a cause:

I love making restless folk aware of themselves. On the island it had been an ambition of mine to induce articulation into the life we all lived. Here now there was a turbulence that must break into voice through a score of minds. [...] I wrote the opening scene of *Storm* but after a few weeks I forgot about it all and lived in the jail fever (O'Donnell 1965, 25).

Similarly, Gallagher too brings the island folk to a self-awakening by challenging their assumptions about Volunteers fighting in the Anglo-Irish War and their own latent nationalism: 'It is a shame to have folk like the people of this island talk bitterly of the boys who are striving to-day as Hugh Roe, and Tone, and Emmet, and all the rest of them strove in the past' (O'Donnell 1927, 37). This plea by Gallagher on behalf of the men fighting against the British on the mainland has clear echoes of O'Donnell's own experiences of pleading with local men on Arranmore to join his company of volunteers in 1917. By 1921, this talent for inspirational speeches had been recognised, O'Donnell had

been promoted to Brigadier of the First Northern Division and he deployed a plan of engagement that would later be fictionalised in his chapter ‘The Ambush’ in *Storm*.

O'Donnell sets the action in Cloghan, a village ‘on the mainland, about five miles distant from Arranmore’ (45). It is likely that this chapter was taken from a variety of sources from O'Donnell's skirmishes with the enemy in early 1921. During this period O'Donnell's troops were active throughout Donegal and Derry. As Volunteer Liam Brady (O/C. Derry Fianna Eireann, 1920-1922) recalled, O'Donnell's ‘Column took part in the following attacks on Crown Forces. A train carrying British Troops was ambushed at Crolly, Co. Donegal where a stiff fight between the two Forces took place. Another attack on a Troop Train, leaving Burtonport for Derry took place at Kincasslagh on February, 14th, 1921. Several RIC Barracks were attacked and Lieutenant Bracen of the Dorset Regiment was arrested in Sweeney's Hotel, Dungloe’ (74). In *Storm* Gallagher and his men take up positions surrounding Cloghan where ‘there was a military post in the village, and in addition the local RIC barracks had a strong garrison’ but a few telling details point to another location as the source for O'Donnell's account here (O'Donnell 1927, 45). According to Brady, on April Fools' Day 1921, ‘Brigadier O'Donnell landed in Derry and ordered the Derry City Battalion to carry out the following raids that night: an attack on the Lecky Road RIC Barracks, the Rosemount RIC Barracks and the Strand Military Post. Plans were hurriedly made to put this order into effect’ (75). The fact that Derry had both a strong RIC presence and a military outpost outside of the city makes it a good probable source for ‘The Ambush’, and Lecky Road barracks as a possible model, albeit modified with his other IRA actions in the Anglo-Irish War. In addition to this, O'Donnell offers some other details that suggest Lecky Road was in his thoughts whilst writing *Storm*: ‘A policeman was dead: two others badly wounded lay on the road: a policeman sat on the grass near the barbed wire, blood streaming from a gash in his temple’ (51). This account accurately reflects Brady's own recollections of the attack at Lecky Road, including the specific detail of a headwound to one of the RIC Officers: ‘Peadar O'Donnell arrived in Derry on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1921 and ordered the attack on the Lecky Road Barracks Rosemount Barracks, the shooting of Policemen and the attack on the Military Post, Strand Road. Sergeant Higgins, RIC was killed that night. Constable

McLaughlin received a shrapnel wound on the forehead. [...] Peadar's Column remained in Donegal for about three months' (100). O'Donnell's account of the attack is likely blended here with an assault on a military outpost at Burnfoot, outside of Derry city. O'Donnell was on this dangerous raid with his brother Frank and it was part of a two-pronged assault on Molenon House and on the outpost based on the main Burnfoot-Derry road. The camp was very heavily guarded with 'a strong garrison of police, military and Specials with armoured cars and machine guns' and the fighting was conducted by about thirty IRA riflemen from the First Northern Division overseen by experienced commanders from Cork and led by Sean Lehane O/C' (O' Donoghue, 235). The fighting that night was characterised by a hit and run assault on superior forces, fought in the ridges, boreens, gullies and drains that are so vividly described by O'Donnell in *Storm*.

This outburst of violence led to a massive response from the British Army in Donegal which was again recounted by O'Donnell in *Storm*:

on the second morning following the capture of the barracks, British troops swept down on West Tirconaill [...] the leaping tongues of flame shoot up from the thatched roof of their home; policemen in black coats and khaki trousers — the notorious Black and Tans — laughing, boisterous, hilarious; the soldiers of a great Empire, confident in their power, thoughtlessly satisfied with their rights, devilishly proficient in their work, were burning the homes of "suspects" (104).

In reality, O'Donnell himself almost became a casualty of this counter-offensive, he was severely wounded and nearly caught. Again, Liam Brady recalled the scale of the British retaliation and O'Donnell's attempts to evade capture: 'as British Troops moved in whole districts were combed out and every able-bodied man arrested. Some of the Donegal Divisional Staff, I.R.A. were suddenly surrounded in Sweeney's Hotel and captured. Peadar O'Donnell escaped the dragnet but got a severe wound while making his way from John Mullan's house in Glendowan' (75). O'Donnell would again use this experience of being wounded on the run in his vivid account of Eamonn Gallagher's shooting and eventual capture: 'He rose suddenly, the broken arm hugged to his side, and shot across the hillock that had been so fatal to him. Amid the burst of firing that accompanied his dash he found

himself listening for another shock that would announce a further hit. [...] A terrible thirst troubled him. He longed to stoop to drink of the little rivulets through which he splashed' (118).<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the most obviously autobiographically informed moment in *Storm* comes in the chapter titled 'The Offensive'. In it Eamonn Gallagher leads his brigade in an attack on the RIC barracks in Milford in County Donegal. There are a number of telling features to this raid in *Storm* that suggest that the account that O'Donnell is describing is actually based on an attack that he was involved in on Ballytrain Barracks in County Monaghan on the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1920. As Eamonn Gallagher describes the scene: 'Once in the town where the barracks was, positions covering the barracks front and rear would be occupied, and a section of engineers would break into the lock-up shop next door to the barracks and lay a charge of gelignite against the gable. The successful use of explosives was beginning to become a feature of I.R.A. operations in the winter of 1920' (93-94). This attack was led by the Monaghan Brigade O/C Eoin O'Duffy and was central in establishing his reputation in the IRA where he would later become Chief of Staff. Also on this raid was a young Ernie O'Malley.<sup>12</sup> Central to identifying this attack at Ballytrain are three features described in *Storm* and unique to the attack, namely, the use of explosives on the gable wall of the barracks, the brigade O/C deploying a megaphone, and the occupation of a lock-up shop adjacent to the barracks. One Volunteer's account of that night is worth quoting in full:

The three principal positions for the attack were: No. 1 - Mitchel's shop, where I and about five others took up positions armed with rifles at the upstairs windows of the premises, where we could control the front of the barracks with our fire and cover the movements of the men in and out of Mitchel's Lock-up store, from where the barrack gable was being mined. In the No. 2 post - Mitchel's Lock-up store - Dan Hogan was, I presume, in charge, as his principal responsibility was the successful mining of the barrack gable. He was, however, moving in and out of the various posts before the attack actually commenced. No. 3 position was at the rere [sic] of the barrack premises where Ernie O'Malley and a number of men were posted to prevent any attempt by the police to evacuate by the rere [sic]. The post office, a short distance from the barrack on the same side of the street, was occupied and used by Eoin O'Duffy as a sort of command headquarters, and from there he coordinated, and directed the attack (Marron, 1-4).

O'Donnell actually goes as far as to name Mitchel's store directly in *Storm* when he accounts for the rifle fire exchange between the IRA and the RIC trapped in the barracks: 'The first report came from

Mitchell's lock-up shop; some fool in the rear was firing into the party there. Eamonn dispatched a message to the officer in charge of that section' (98). Interestingly, the officer in charge of covering the rear of the barracks was Ernie O'Malley and it would seem O'Donnell here could not resist this slight on his fellow writer or the men under his charge for not failing to control their firing on the barracks. O'Donnell also has Eamonn Gallagher deploy a megaphone in communicating with the besieged barracks: 'He put a megaphone to his mouth: "*Surrender now*," he demanded, "or I'll blow you up"' (99).

The raid on Ballytrain Barracks was initially conceived as an attack for arms and the IRA medics treated the wounded RIC men. However, it marked the turning point for violence in Ulster to escalate during the Anglo-Irish War and cemented the reputation of Eoin O'Duffy as a capable military leader (Lynch 2017, 621). O'Donnell captures something of the civility of the attack where exact political allegiances had yet to be polarised and both sets of combatants believed they were acting in the interests of the Irish nation, with the RIC shouting their own nationalist credentials, "No surrender," they yelled. "God save Ireland". O'Donnell perhaps overplays this mutual respect in *Storm* and understates the violence, but nevertheless it captures something of the mutability of nationalism before the increasing sectarian tensions in Ulster were crystallised by the formation of Northern Ireland:

"What are you going to do with us?" the Head Constable asked again. "Well I can't hold you prisoners," Eamonn said, "you would bankrupt any townland I took you to, feeding you. You will leave the town by the 7.30 train this morning; the doctor will see about your wounded and have them removed to hospital." And then Eamonn, having seen that all the arms were collected from the police, ordered his men out. As he himself walked towards the door the Head Constable called the garrison to attention and saluted. Eamonn took the salute gravely and walked out (100, 103).

If the salute was perhaps an example of artistic licence on behalf of O'Donnell, other events on that night correspond with eyewitness accounts. As Volunteer Philip Marron recalled:

After the explosion there was complete silence in the barracks and we all immediately rushed into the upstairs portion of the barracks by climbing up the inclined upstair floor from the gateway. We found the police constables huddled in a corner against the opposite gable.

Apparently they knew we were exploding a mine at the opposite gable and got as far away as possible from it. Their rifles were neatly placed against the wall. We found the sergeant near the bottom of the stairs covered with a rubble of laths and plaster, etc. None of the police was seriously wounded; superficial cuts and bruises were all the damage suffered. They were, however, suffering from the shock effects of the explosion. We captured all the garrison's rifles and revolvers and a supply of ammunition (4).

Some of the detail of this raid is contradicted by another eyewitness account from Volunteer James McKenna, although the sequence and results are confirmed, including IRA medics treating the wounded garrison. McKenna confirms that O'Duffy ordered an IRA charge on the collapsed barracks and only contradicts Marron in his recollection about collecting arms afterwards:

When all was silent General O'Duffy ordered us to charge the building. We rushed into where the store had been. The barrack gable was in a heap of rubble. The first floor upstairs was sloped down resting on the rubble. We scrambled up this floor and found the floor of the second room poorly supported by the second wall. On reaching the third room upstairs we found the police in a corner at the gable, and they all said: "Thank God we're safe". Only one member of the garrison complained of an injury. He was Constable Gallaher, who had a slight abrasion on the side of his head. Dan Hogan gave him a first-aid outfit. There were two Sergeants and about six constables in the barrack. We had some difficulty in finding the firearms as most of them were covered with rubble (3).

O'Donnell again deploys these events in *Storm* including the charge ordered by O'Duffy after the detonation of the mine that destroyed Mitchel's lock-up shop and a large part of the gable wall of the barracks, "Steady now," Eamonn ordered, "and no nervous shooting, remember. Wait a second — Ready, Shout, in God's name *Charge!*" Out they dashed from the archway and up the street. Mitchell's lock-up shop was roofless. Part of the barracks was blown away. Eamonn and Conal O'Boyle were in the ruin together, each shouting "*Surrender, Surrender!*" (101-102). For O'Donnell his first-hand experience of leading IRA men in combat surfaces throughout *Storm* and in his later work *The Knife* (1930).

One experience that O'Donnell manages to capture in *Storm* that is again idealised is the difficult job of telling the parents of Volunteers that their son has been killed on active service. In *Storm* the protagonist Eamonn has fled through the hills of Donegal to a friendly house with 'James Mór's people'. Whilst there the son of the house, Conal, comes in to bring news of British Army patrols in the area. Once Eamonn sets to leave he realises that Conal is determined to leave with him:

He said good-bye to the old man and to the kindly bean-a-tighe [woman of the house], and then turned to shake hands with Conal. It thrilled him to meet the latter's gaze, so searching, so appealing, so reliant. "There's a spare rifle," Conal said. "I'm going with you." There was silence in the Kitchen. Eamonn slowly turned to look at the boy's father. He was as much in the grip of excitement as his son. He never spoke a word. His gaze turned towards the mother. Pale as death she stood in shocked silence before her son (81).

Later in the novel when Conal and Eamonn are caught in a crossfire with a Crossley Tender and some Black and Tans, Eamonn is injured and captured, but Conal is killed crossing a bridge. It is here where the novel betrays its didactic and sentimental tendencies, with O'Donnell unable to resist inserting his own dream of a new socialist republic rising from the blood sacrifice of young men such as Conal: 'Conal O'Boyle, great, big lion-hearted Con, shot down like that! He prayed for the soul of his dead comrade. [...] How sorry the hill folk would be to hear of Conal's death. What splendid, splendid people are on the hillside, their kindness, their loyalty, their prayers! And then the cowardice of others! He puzzled over it' (121).

It is again likely that O'Donnell had a specific incident in mind when he wrote this scene. As he would later recall in *There Will be Another Day* (1963), such events were a required part of the dirty work and sacrifice of nation building. Here O'Donnell is also offering a specifically working-class vision of a new Irish society, one in which the interests of the peasant farmer and the urban poor were aligned; the moral 'cowardice' of others belongs to those classes that have managed to invest in the imperial state through their ownership of property. As the commander of a company and later O/C for the entire Northern Brigade, O'Donnell would have spoken to bereaved parents on a regular basis. Although Conal O'Boyle's death is the model of heroic working-class self-sacrifice, O'Donnell captures perfectly the tension that exists when such young men leave their homes to join with the volunteers. However, the reality of telling parents that their children had been killed is excluded from *Storm* and one particular incident was so traumatic that O'Donnell was able to recall it over forty years later:

A woman who lost her boy in the fight in the defence of the Republic unloaded on to me the bitterness she had hidden from everybody else; by great good luck I had called on her by myself so that she got the opportunity. Her boy was working in a field when I went by and he left his work and went with me and was killed. She bolted the door behind and went on her knees and she cursed me and cursed me, and as she cursed, short bursts of words escaped

and they told the story. I was very sorry for her. When the storm ended I took her by the hand and helped her to her feet and scolded her for doing her boy so great a wrong, by making him out, in her own mind, a poor fool with no mind of his own, taken by the hand into danger when, in fact, he was a thoughtful, even brilliant man. It was natural she should begrudge him, but she should not make little of him in her own heart (40-41).

O'Donnell's belief in the necessary value of such sacrifice is understandable, after all he was willing to make that sacrifice himself. What is perhaps more difficult to reconcile is his dependence upon the faith and Catholicism of his own people, which put O'Donnell's religion directly in conflict with mainline Marxist thinking.<sup>13</sup>

Another central autobiographical strand in *Storm* is the presence of Catholicism as a marker of purity and the alignment of religion and the nation. O'Donnell's projection of the self is embodied in Eamonn the main protagonist of the novel and leader of the IRA company. His death at climax of the book is consecrated by the presence of the republican priest Father McAllister. Eamonn briefly regains consciousness after the priest anoints him and recites a decade of the Rosary. He lives long enough to instruct his young republican apprentice Charlie Beag: 'You'll take my place with the boys. Send them back to the hills at once' (142). The motivation for republicans during this period was as varied as the number of men and women who took part in the struggle themselves. However, one way or another, as a political and personal force the Catholic Church had to be engaged with. As Tom Garvin recognised, O'Donnell was unusual but not unique in his attempts to reconcile Catholicism and Communism: 'James Connolly and other socialists found that they had to tailor their ideas drastically to placate Catholic tradition, and even then had little success in penetrating the minds of many people. Instead, odd syntheses of Catholicism and socialism emerged, sometimes combined, as in the case of Peadar O'Donnell' (126). With the Catholic Church so vocally opposed to any movement that smacked of socialism or communism, it can be difficult to untangle any sense of personal faith from the public persona of the figures on the Irish left who opposed its political engagement and had a radical vision for Irish society. O'Donnell is a good case in point here, although his vision for a free Ireland was one of liberation from British control and for a reorganisation of Irish life in the interests of workers and small farmers, he always maintained his own personal Catholic faith. As Michael O'Donoghue recalled,

he was shocked to hear an expression of religious faith from such a notorious left-wing agitator as O'Donnell:

Peadar at this time was accounted 'Red' in Ulster, and his assertion that he always said his night prayers, or rather, to direct his mind towards God and heaven each night, met with some incredulity. Peadar was a jocular dissembler and it was never easy to detect when he was serious and when he was 'doing an act'. But his vocabulary was vast, and his speech eloquent, and it was a pleasure and an education to hear him airing his views on a variety of subjects (276).

This loquacious and theoretical aspect to O'Donnell would ensure that he was an accomplished public speaker and recruiter of men to the nationalist cause. However, it also meant that he was not ideally suited to the regular drilling and routine of effective military campaigning. O'Donnell was too peripatetic by nature to stay in any one location and too expansive in his thoughts to stay committed to any one action or incident for long, even if his overarching commitment to Irish nationalism or socialism remained undimmed. As the war progressed and the Civil War was developing these traits manifested themselves in a loss of control over the troops on the ground. In particular, O'Donnell's frequent absences and trips across the country became evident in the discipline of the Northern

Divisions:

All was confusion throughout the area of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Northern Division. In our absence, discipline had collapsed, Peadar O'Donnell, Div. Adj't., and his assistant, Pat Lynch from Ballyjamesduff, Cavan, as the senior Div. officers, tried to keep things in order, but failed. Peadar, a revolutionary thinker and writer, was of the rover type, too volatile for an efficient Volunteer officer, sublime in theory - military, economic, social, political - but in practice a wash-out. He had no control over the I.R.A. under him and was constitutionally unfitted for military campaigning of any kind, guerrilla above all. Lynch was an ex-bank clerk, forced on the run by his I.R.A. activities and too young and too soft to enforce discipline on the motley assortment of refugees, volunteers, wanderers and camp-followers which made up the greater part of the Republican forces in the 1<sup>st</sup> Northern Division (O'Donoghue, 292).

O'Donnell's inefficiency at the macro scale of organisation may have been an issue with his superiors in the IRA, but at a more micro level his enthusiasm and bravery would have been apparent to any serving under his command.<sup>14</sup>

O'Donnell's writings are never far from his own experience, both as a radical and as a novelist. He is now remembered as the grand-old-man of the Irish left and as an editor and novelist. However,

the violence of his youth and his consistent agitation, firstly against British rule in Ireland, and secondly against the Irish Free State are present in his early autobiographical novel *Storm*. His decision to prevent reissue of the novel has been traditionally attributed to its ‘leaden’ and ‘didactic’ style (Hegarty 19). However, it is just as likely that O’Donnell felt the novel was too thinly veiled to hide his own youthful ideals the identity of the men and women who were willing to kill and be killed for Ireland. These autobiographical moments in the text are revealed by the witness statements and records available today, but would also have been obvious to its initial readership. With the changing political landscape after Partition and the Civil War the process of forgetting had to take precedence over the process of remembering. It is timely that we can now again read O’Donnell in the context of his time and use his barely fictionalised accounts to enrich our historical understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> The difficulty in preparing for such events can be found in the anonymously authored *Initial Statement by Advisory Group on Centenary Celebrations* which acknowledges as central ‘multiple readings of history’. Available: <https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/wp-content/uploads/publications/Initial/Initial/index.html> . The political pitfalls of commemoration were evidenced after the fallout from the Government’s ill-advised decision to commemorate the Royal Irish Constabulary and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. For more on this see (McGreevy).

<sup>2</sup> Lejeune also takes to task the idea that the novel can be closer to the ‘truth’ than autobiography, seeing instead that novels are true only to the degree that they represent some deeper autobiographical truth: ‘What is this “truth” that the novel makes more accessible than the autobiography does? Except the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author, that is to say, the truth to which any autobiographical project aspires? So we might say, it is as autobiography that the novel is declared the truer’. (27)

<sup>3</sup> Iolann Fionn ran a series of articles discussing Anglo-Irish literature and denouncing figures such as W. B. Yeats and George Bernard Shaw. In this he was influenced by arguments first popularised by (MacDonagh) and (Corkery).

<sup>4</sup> *Storm* was published in November of 1925 and was immediately acclaimed for its realism: ‘the novelist’s main trouble would seem to be not to address fiction in the guise of fact, but to address fact in the guise of fiction’ (Anonymous 1925, 4).

<sup>5</sup> Peadar O’Donnell to Edward Garnett (n.d.), the Edward Garnet Collection, MS-1541, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>6</sup> There were a number of incidents involving conflicts with bailiffs in Donegal during the land annuities campaign, but the case mentioned here is possibly that of Robert J Harron who sued John Farrell of Carrickbreeny for alleged assault. By January of 1927 the Land Commission had over eighty decrees against tenants for failure to pay their annuities. For more on the case and other legal proceedings see (Anonymous 1927, 2).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick McGill was another Irish working-class novelist and poet from Donegal whose work describes the extremes of hunger and destitution endured by the poor of Great Britain and Ireland. See (McGill).

<sup>8</sup> O’Donnell joined the INTO in 1917 and travelled to Scotland as a seasonal labourer in 1918 (Hegarty 39-43).

<sup>9</sup> O’Donnell wrote to the Pension Committee on *The Bell* headed notepaper, remarking with his usual good nature: ‘Your letter of the 18<sup>th</sup> of October arrived while I was in England and got misplaced. I only came across it yesterday. I accept, of course, the findings of the committee: had I been finding for myself I’d have given myself a total of seven years, but then I’m not notorious for my modesty!’. Peadar O’Donnell to the Secretary, Office of the Referee, Military Service Pensions Board (30 October 1945) (MSP).

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<sup>10</sup> Donal Ó Drisceoil has written of the influence of politics in O'Donnell's writing and much has been made of O'Donnell's place in the Four Courts at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1922. However, there has been no attempt to date to link O'Donnell's fiction with specific events in the Anglo-Irish War and little is known about his IRA activities. This process has been greatly helped by the release of a new tranche of documents by the Bureau of Military History in Ireland. For more on politics in O'Donnell's fiction see (Ó Drisceoil, 2003) and (English).

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, O'Donnell would later recall that it was whilst recovering from this brush with death that the idea for *The Big Windows* would take shape: 'I had been wounded in 1921 and I was lying on a bed of straw on the floor of a house where they had given me shelter, and the two women, the mother and daughter-in-law were chatting happily at the fireside. They thought I was asleep and I thought it was unusual to hear two women of the house so friendly, and I liked it; I like happiness. Well, going off the next day I said to the fellow with me, "Do you see that young woman at the big windows? They are unusually big windows. He said she was from the islands and he didn't know much about her. I imagined that woman going to live in the Glen, away from her islands which are so full of light and she must have found her glen house very dark from the shadows of the mountains and the half-door, so she must have put in the unusually big windows. I don't know if that was the answer, I've never been back' (O'Donnell 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Ernie O'Malley wrote the most celebrated accounts of the Anglo-Irish War and the Irish Civil War, the most famous of which is *On Another Man's Wound*.

<sup>13</sup> O'Donnell was likely to have seen no conflict with between his faith and his political views. In this he was following the lead of James Connolly who wrote that religion was a private matter and it was left 'to the individual conscience of each member [of the Socialist Party of Ireland] to determine what beliefs on such questions they shall hold' (Connolly).

<sup>14</sup> Dan Black, a junior officer from Derry claimed that, 'Peadar O'Donnell came to my rescue with 100 men' when he had ambushed a police force in Clady, Co. Tyrone. See (Anonymous 2016).

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