

Childhood, Time, and Gender in Martin Seeds' *No Country for Young Men* (2020)

Dr Edwin Coomasaru, The Courtauld Institute of Art

Children are deeply bound up with how we conceptualise time. Martin Seeds' series, *No Country for Young Men* (2020), takes photographs from a Belfast Catholic Boys' School 1965 yearbook – blowing them up to huge proportions and printing them on newspaper. What does it mean to look back, at these boys in 1965, and find them staring at us? How did their lives unfold after these portraits were captured, and what are they like now? And what might the work tell us about wider cultural ideas about both youth and masculinity in Northern Ireland? The portraits stare out at the viewer, as though they were gazing across decades: some with hostility, others with curiosity. The pixelated grain distorts the figures, as they teeter on the brink of abstraction or dissolution into formless patterns. To look back, in 2020, is to ask complex questions about what these pictures mean then and now. A school yearbook is both a record of identification, and an elegiac marking of time passing. If the rhymes and repetitions of these images might be suffused with a sense of loss, it is not just the loss of the childhood represented by photos of teenage boys on the cusp of adulthood – it is also because their imaged future, for both their own lives and for Northern Ireland as a whole, was about to radically change.

In 1966 a Loyalist paramilitary group declared war on the IRA, and carried out three sectarian murders. Many Catholics, dispossessed by the way the state had been set up and run since partition from Ireland in 1920-21, took to the streets to march for their civil rights from 1967. With escalating paramilitary violence, the 'Troubles' erupted in 1968: a thirty-year civil war between Loyalists, Republicans, and the British state over whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or form a United Ireland. In 1998 the Good Friday Agreement introduced power sharing between all political parties in Northern Ireland: a system of government that is fragile, running uninterrupted from 2007-17 – before collapsing and later resuming in 2020. For many touched by violence and its after-effects, the conflict is not over or resolved: it continues to haunt. Psychoanalysts insist that trauma disrupts how we experience time: rather than linear, the past can repeat and reoccur in the present.¹ Seeds' photo-series is all the more complex for the questions it asks about time. Queer theorists like Lee Edelman have pointed out that metaphors of childhood are often used to conceptualise the future, with talk of generations to come.²

The poster used to advertise the Good Friday Agreement referendum in 1998, for example, depicted a hetero-normative family gazing out over a sunset. Newspapers *Belfast Telegraph* published ads for the 'Yes' campaign with photos of babies born that year, with captions like 'Hannah Louise Davison was born in Royal Maternity Hospital yesterday ... Give her a future'. But it was not only peace campaigns which used rhetoric about infants as metaphors: paramilitary murals and visual culture (particularly Republican) also created images of new-born life as a symbol of militarism. In one Republican mural on the Falls Road painted in 1988, a mother presents a baby to a male character in a deathly reclining pose of soldierly sacrifice. On the other side of the image, a portrait of the boy – now fully grown – marches off into battle, fists clenched. The conceptual chronology of heterosexual procreation is narrated through a distribution of gendered labour through the prism of

¹ Kelly Noel-Smith, *Freud on Time and Timelessness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.97-132.

² Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p.11.

militarism. An ex-IRA member described how the organisation saw women 'being a mum as the most important role to the struggle'.³ One Republican feminist explained the choice presented in such a context: '[e]ither we shoot them or we outbreed them'.⁴

Northern Ireland was a very conservative society – and whatever the differences, there was also profound overlap between ideas of gender and sexuality held by Protestants and Catholics. Ideals of men as soldiers and women as domestic-bound mothers, alongside widespread and intense homophobia, were all bound up in the ways in which militarism shaped society in Northern Ireland. Commonly held understandings of masculinity during the conflict were shaped by earlier rhetoric from the decade leading up to partition. A Republican prisoner during the 'Troubles' described how '[s]tories were told of the 1916 Rising ... My heroes were those men (typical of the sexist nature of my environment then) who had died glorious deaths for the Republic'.⁵ In 1913, Republican paramilitary Patrick Pearse insisted '[w]e must re-create and perpetuate in Ireland the knightly tradition ... the noble tradition ... the Christ-like tradition'.⁶ He argued that 'bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood'.⁷ Writing a year later, Liam de Roiste – future Sinn Féin politician – demanded the Irish 'grow up' and 'realise the dignity of manhood'.⁸ Loyalist attitudes were similar: Reverend W. Witherow gave a 1913 sermon to the East Belfast Regiment in which he likened Ulster to 'brave, unconquerable Spartans at Thermopylae'.⁹

So what does it mean to look back at Seeds' 1965 yearbook photos of boys on the cusp of adulthood from the perspective of today? Northern Ireland is deeply haunted by its past – as the fragile and faltering peace process is testament to. But decades of feminist, queer, and anti-war activists have also brought pressure to bear on Northern Irish society. Although many progressive policies have been implemented by the UK Government in Westminster rather than Stormont's locally devolved power sharing administration, recent changes matter. In 2019, abortion was decriminalised and same-sex marriage legalised. The 'Troubles' themselves had a deep impact on collective understandings of masculinity: experiences of trauma and violence often shattering militaristic ideals of macho stoicism and endurance. In recent years it has been reported that more men commit suicide in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK.¹⁰ In Seeds' *No Country for Young Men*, we peer into the faces of children on the cusp of becoming adults in the midst of what would become a thirty-year civil war. The futures they imagined for themselves in that moment were lost, as were many lives

³ Lorraine Dowler, 'And They Think I'm Just a Nice Old Lady': Women and War in Belfast, Northern Ireland', *Gender, Place & Culture*, 5:2 (1998), pp.159-176, p.168; Kathryn Conrad, 'Women Troubles, Queer Troubles: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Selfhood in the Construction of the Northern Irish State', in Marilyn Cohen and Nancy Curtin eds., *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp.53-68, p.54.

⁴ Conrad, p.54.

⁵ Brendí McClenaghan, 'Letter from a Gay Republican: H-Block 5', in íde O'Carroll and Eoin Collins eds., *Lesbian and Gay Visions of Ireland: Towards a Twenty-First Century* (London: Cassell, 1995), pp.122-130, p.124-125.

⁶ Séamus Ó Buachalla ed., *The Literary Writings of Patrick Pearse* (Dublin: The Mercer Press, 1979), p.40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.84.

⁸ Aidan Beatty, *Masculinity and Power in Irish Nationalism, 1884-1938* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p.36.

⁹ Jane G.V. McGaughey, *Ulster's Men: Protestant Unionist Masculinities and Militarization in the North of Ireland, 1912-1923* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012), p.55-56.

¹⁰ Claire McNeilly, 'Relentless rise in male suicide sparks call for urgent action', *Belfast Telegraph* (Published 19/12/2018, Accessed 19/12/2018, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/relentless-rise-in-male-suicide-sparks-call-for-urgent-action-37639017.html>).

– the cycles of violence unleashed would both feed traditional notions of manhood, and in turn profoundly undermine them.