CHRISTINA REID

PLAYS: 1

TEA IN A CHINA CUP

DID YOU HEAR THE ONE ABOUT THE IRISHMAN?

JOYRIDERS • THE BELLE OF THE BELFAST CITY

MY NAME, SHALL I TELL YOU MY NAME?

CLOWNS

Introduced by Maria M. Delgado

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Christina Reid
Plays: 1

Tea in a China Cup, Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?, Joyriders, The Belle of the Belfast City, My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?, Clowns

Christina Reid's plays reflect the traditions, loyalties and psychological schisms of divided Northern Irish communities with flinty realism and 'all the warmth and wit and passion, the complex tenderness and irritations of women talking about their family' *Guardian*. This collection of six plays is introduced by Maria M. Delgado, Senior Lecturer in Drama and English Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University, who has lectured widely on Reid's plays.

Tea in a China Cup won the Thames TV Playwrights Scheme Award in 1983. 'From a succession of small revelatory incidents a tapestry of humour, prejudice, affection, courage and pretence is woven over a ground of sympathy' *Irish Times*

Did You Here the One About the Irishman . . . ? won the UTV Drama Award in 1980: 'the audience is caught between a desire to laugh . . . and a recognition that to do so is to collaborate in the oppression' *Time Out*

Joyriders: 'Tough, funny . . . the Troubles have a habit of producing strong drama, and this is just one strong link this play has with O'Casey' *Financial Times*

The Belle of the Belfast City, winner of the George Devine Award 1986, is 'full of richness and subtlety in its view of the paradoxical Province: the common ground shared by extremist Protestant right-wingers and reactionary Catholics over divorce, abortion and sexual morality' *Financial Times*

My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name? is a 'beautifully constructed, achingly eloquent two-hander . . . one of the most powerful pacifist plays to have come out of that troubled state' *City Limits*

Clowns, 'set on the eve of the IRA's ceasefire . . . the sequel to the decade-old *Joyriders* is far more about the personal consequences of surviving a war than its political dimensions' *Guardian*

Christina Reid was born and bred in Belfast and lived in Northern Ireland until 1987, when she moved to London. She was Writer-in-Residence at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1983–4, and Writer-in-Residence at the Young Vic, London, 1988–9. Her stage plays, which have been performed around the world, include *Tea in a China Cup* (Thames TV Playwright Scheme Award 1983; Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1983; Riverside Studios, London, 1984); *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* (RSC US tour 1985; King's Head, London, 1987); *Joyriders* (Paines Plough, Tricycle Theatre, London and tour, 1986; Lyric Theatre, Belfast, 1995); *The Belle of the Belfast City* (George Devine Award 1986; Lyric, Belfast 1989; Contact Theatre, Manchester 1990); *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (Dublin Theatre Festival 1989; Young Vic Studio, London 1990); *Les Miserables* (adaptation, Nottingham Playhouse, 1992); *Clowns* (The Room at the Orange Tree, Richmond 1996). Radio plays include *The Last of a Dyin' Race* (Giles Cooper Award 1986); *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (1987); *Of All The Gin Joints* (1987); *The Unfortunate Fursey* (adaptation, 1989); *Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland* (1989); *Citizens* (6 episodes, 1989); *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1990). Her television work includes *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* (Ulster TV Drama Award 1980); *The Last of a Dyin' Race* (1987); *Streetwise* (13 episodes, 1991), and episodes of *Pie in the Sky* (1996). She is currently writing a commissioned screenplay based on an amalgamation of *Joyriders* and its sequel, *Clowns*, entitled *Mighty Belfast.*

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Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?
Joyriders
The Belle of the Belfast City
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Clowns

with an introduction by Maria M. Delgado

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The photograph on the front cover is of the author's mother and
Tommy the Banjo-player, circa 1938

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Contents

Chronology

of first performances
of stage plays

1983 *Tea in a China Cup*, Lyric Theatre, Belfast; Riverside Studios, London, 1984
1985 *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*, RSC US tour; King's Head, London, 1987
1986 *Joyriders*, Paines Plough, Tricycle Theatre, London and tour
1989 *The Belle of the Belfast City*, Lyric Theatre, Belfast; Contact Theatre, Manchester 1990
1989 *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?*, Dublin Theatre Festival; Young Vic Studio, London, 1990
1996 *Clowns*, The Room at the Orange Tree, Richmond

Introduction

'Beyond the Troubles': The political drama of Christina Reid

Although Irish drama has been largely perceived as a male-dominated phenomenon, since Lady Gregory at the turn of the century women have played an important role in the country's theatrical culture; a role often overlooked in histories of Irish theatre, which tend to focus on a male literary canon. Women's prominence as directors, designers and performers, both in the theatrical mainstream and in the alternative structures of music-hall, fringe, children's and community theatre, as well as theatre-in-education, has rarely been chronicled or commented on. Nevertheless, as women in Eire and Northern Ireland enjoy greater prominence in the varied areas of theatrical production, it is not surprising to note their growing visibility as dramatists.

Christina Reid is one of a number of women dramatists who emerged in the 1980s. Born in 1942 into a fiercely Protestant Belfast working-class family, Reid left school at fifteen, working in a range of menial and administrative jobs before returning to full-time education in her mid-thirties, as a married mother of three. She had already written *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* (1985)[1], winner of the UTV Drama Award in 1980, when she began a degree in English, Sociology and Russian Studies at Queen's University, Belfast. When *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) won her a Thames TV Award and a residency at Belfast's Lyric Theatre in 1983, Reid abandoned her studies to concentrate on her writing. Since then, she has proved herself a prolific dramatist, drawing on her own family experiences to provide a series of plays which have daringly interrogated issues of

[1] Dates are those of the first stage production and not previous television or radio productions or rehearsed readings.

nationalism and colonialism through a concentration on those whose experiences lie outside of 'official' history – particularly working-class women.

Contemporary Irish drama itself has defied and continues to defy easy categorization. Critics have avoided classification based on the North–South divide because so many Northern Irish writers have stated that they perceive themselves as Irish rather than British. The poet Derek Mahon, for example, a Belfast-born Protestant, thinks of Ireland, despite the border, as a single country.[2] Reid too states that she considers herself Irish. 'We don't speak English the same way,' she claims, 'our speech patterns are different, how we say things is different.'[3] As such, classification has taken place largely according to genre and subject matter, with certain dramatists like Tom Kilroy, Marie Jones and Marina Carr associated with a poetic, Beckettian or allegorical tradition, whilst others like Reid, Martin Lynch and Anne Devlin are too often pigeonholed rather pejoratively as 'political' dramatists, engaging in a pseudo-documentary, largely realist dialectic with the Troubles. As Reid's work, like that of Frank McGuinness and Brian Friel, indicates, such classification is fraught with problems. Political drama is not by definition dependent on simplistic agit-prop techniques. Genres have become anything but fixed, with dramatists drawing on both recent and distant cultural and political history to provide plays which destabilize any stable notion of what an Irish play is. Reid's work, as the plays in this volume clearly indicate, playfully deconstructs established genres, and cannot be easily attributed to a 'realist' or 'poetic' tradition. What her plays do constantly demonstrate, however, is the fact that political theatre can be witty, dynamic, challenging, formally inventive and wickedly humorous.

[2] See Jane Eisner, 'Using art to break down barriers', *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 9 September 1986, pp. 1c, 5c.
[3] Quoted in Michael Herbert, 'Across the Great Divide', *The Irish Post*, 22 September 1990, p. 4.

Although plays about the sectarian struggles in the North of Ireland are by no means a recent phenomenon – St John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage*, for example, was written in 1911 – the 1980s saw a concerted attempt on the part of an emerging generation of dramatists to engage with the debate by presenting the multiple consequences of the entry of British troops into Northern Ireland in 1968. During the 1970s, works about the Civil War raging in the North of Ireland rarely reached the British stage. Rob Richie, former literary manager of the Royal Court Theatre, cites numerous reasons for this, writing of 'the stifling pressures that affected more general coverage and debate [of the subject] in the 1970s', the censoring of potentially controversial material by the BBC as well as a hesitancy on the part of fringe companies to deal with issues beyond the immediate isles.[4] Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City*, produced in 1973, did provide a controversial reading of the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972 where fourteen civilian civil rights marchers were killed in Derry by British paratroopers, but it was one of the few exceptions in a decade where the sectarian conflict stimulated only a limited dramatic response.

The 1980s and 1990s, however, have seen Northern Ireland become, in Christina Reid's words, 'flavour of the month'.[5] The traumatic Maze Prison hunger strikes of the early 1980s – Bobby Sands's funeral providing the largest mobilization of Northern Ireland's Roman Catholic population this century; the 'shoot to kill' policy allegedly in operation by the security forces; and the Government's restrictions over the broadcasting of interviews with members of Sinn Fein resulted in an interrogation of issues generated by the situation in Northern Ireland through drama: a medium perhaps perceived as less susceptible to censorship in the conservative political climate of the 1980s. Whilst Hollywood limited the scope of representation, reducing Belfast to a convenient battletorn backdrop for

[4] Rob Ritchie, 'Out of the North', *Rat in the Skull* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 3–4.

[5] Quoted in Jane Eisner, 'Using art to break down barriers', 1c.

thrillers, with IRA terrorists presented as aberrant and robotic villains, programmed to kill and synonymous with evil itself, dramatists such as Reid sought to question such simplistic portrayals by chronicling the support provided by the Catholic and Protestant communities for the paramilitaries, and discussing the supposed differences between the nationalist and loyalist communities. In addition, the steady increase in loyalist violence in the 1980s generated a number of textual explorations of loyalist paramilitary violence – conspicuously Reid's *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989), which examines the tensions present when three generations of women in a Belfast Protestant family come together during the week of an anti-Anglo–Irish agreement rally in which the National Front displays an ominous presence. Also, as the British Government's broadcasting ban restricted the airing of views held by factions of the Catholic population, dramatists took up the challenge of representing the views of these communities. Not that dramatists like Devlin and Reid have limited themselves to dramatizing the concerns of their own communities, although both found initial recognition with such works: Devlin with *Ourselves Alone* (1985), and Reid with *Tea in a China Cup*, a work which like the later *The Belle of the Belfast City*, interrogates the traditions and loyalties which govern the behaviour of the city's fiercely Protestant working classes. Rather, both have gone on to deconstruct the problematic issues of identity and self-definition facing both Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland.

Christina Reid's plays are often centred around the domestic environment and the disenfranchised. Significantly, many of her protagonists are working-class women whose stories and memories form the backbone of the plays. In *The Belle of the Belfast City*, Dolly, the seventy-two-year-old grandmother who struggles to keep her fractured family together is a former music-hall star whose bawdy songs and unconventional antics conjure a magical Belfast far removed from that represented by her nephew Jack, a hardline loyalist politician. It is equally distant from the harsher puritanical ethos of her daughter Vi, and vastly

different again from her black granddaughter Belle's incomprehension of a society which she has never visited. *Tea in a China Cup* focuses on the differing experiences of three generations of women in a working-class Belfast Protestant family, but here the tapestry of tales is linked by the presence of a single central character, Beth, torn between the influence of the particular traditions she has grown up within and the pull of a future away from the rhetoric of gentility and respectability to which her family has slavishly adhered. *Joyriders*, commissioned and produced by Paines Plough in 1986, grew out of the work Reid did with residents at the notorious Divis Flats estate while she was writer-in-residence at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. The play is structured around the day-to-day activities of four Catholic teenagers on a youth training scheme running at a now-disused textile mill in Belfast. The four teenagers feel themselves to be on the periphery of a society which they regard as having already rejected them. At seventeen, they have no illusions about the future that awaits them and view their training as largely futile, offering little possibility of eventual employment. Cynicism prevails, as they read the scheme as a government joyride – a cheaper means than official imprisonment for the authorities to keep them off the streets and supposedly out of trouble. The joyriding motif is important, not simply in narrative terms or as a means of crystalizing the anarchy prevailing on the streets where 'speed' provides temporary power and prowess to the disenfranchised, but also as a comment on the British Government's position within Northern Ireland. They too are presented as joyriders, hijacking a country and ransacking it in the insatiable desire for imperialist speed – Britain 'driving the world', conducting those whom it perceives as primitive and/or incapable of ruling themselves and relegating them to the backseat of colonialist subjugation. All four teenagers, to varying degrees, organize a culture of resistance. Tommy's class analysis, although naïvely simplistic, does display an awareness of the carceral structures at work in society. In the opening scene of the play, Tommy comments on 'the fur coat brigade' (p. 106) in the theatre where the teenagers have just

seen a production of O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman*. This functions not only as a clear reference to those who are the largely exclusive patrons of established theatre venues, but also to the class who employ Kate, the social worker in charge of the Youth Training Programme, and who have the right to come to the centre to observe and comment on the teenagers' work. Kate is perceived by Tommy and Sandra as a regulator, employed to monitor them. The teenagers function under her watchful glance and are all differentiated from her in a number of ways, most conspicuously through discourse: her eloquent language contrasted with their slang and colloquialisms. Tommy and Sandra attempt to steal food from the centre and drink from Kate's home. Arthur and Maureen believe that this is stealing from their own but Sandra and Tommy clearly associate Kate with the regimental regime, a regime Arthur and Maureen are increasingly sucked into. Observing and regulating Tommy and Sandra's behaviour, Arthur and Maureen function, in effect, as part of the watchful regime. As in *The Belle of the Belfast City*, where Janet's behaviour is vigorously observed by her brother Jack, systems of surveillance are shown to operate as a means of regulating and constraining behaviour. Tommy is even attacked by the IRA, those who purport to be on his side, for transgressing what they define as acceptable codes of behaviour. As Beth's position in *Tea in a China Cup* also indicates, all are to some degree or other, implicated in the subjugation that is witnessed. *Joyriders* is in many ways more daring than *Tea in a China Cup* for it indicates how imperialism, seeking to teach and modernize its subjects, relies on institutions like the YTS to continue that process: a process which Tommy notes begins in schools with a colonialist education that concentrates almost exclusively on the history of England whilst pertinently ignoring the history of Ireland. Irish history is inextricably bound up with the history of England, but to focus exclusively on England, as Reid recalls occurred at her school, negates the existence of an Irish history.[6]

[6] See Michael Herbert, 'Across the Great Divide', p. 4.

Colonialism, in the words of the critic Edward Said, disfigures the past. Only through the imagination, Said argues, can it be reappropriated and recovered.[7] Tommy espouses a recognition of the need to end the British claim to guide Northern Ireland but fails to acknowledge his own implication in this geographical violation.

This is also the case in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*, where both nationalist and loyalist are shown to depend on each other. The perpetuation of the conflict necessitates an agreement of intransience on the part of both sides. Allison Clarke and Brian Rafferty, the play's protagonists, negate this agreement. Their annihilation is a gesture on the part of those whose existence is verified by a continuation of the sectarian dispute. The play's parallel structure – scenes with the Catholic Raffertys following those with the Protestant Clarkes – and pertinent doubling – the IRA and loyalist terrorists Joe Rafferty and Hughie Boyd are played by the same actor and quote similar messages in their respective conversations with Brian and Allison – comment on a crisis numerous factions have an interest in maintaining. In addition, the emphasis on doubling suggests the identities of Joe and Hughie as social constructs, shaped by the bigoted environment which Allison and Brian are attempting to overcome.

Empty rhetoric, as Joe and Hughie's diatribes indicate, can be seen to play a crucial part in perpetuating the crisis. In *The Belle of the Belfast City*, Jack, the Unionist politician, articulates a rigid rhetoric which celebrates misogynism, sexual repression – linked interestingly with sectarian hatred – and racism. In *Joyriders*, rhetoric sustains the characters' illusions. For Maureen, it is the rhetoric of romance which signifies stability and security, a magical land of Oz where she can live happily ever after with her student lover. For Tommy, it is the rhetoric of nationalism. He enjoys elaborating on his clandestine activities as a runner for 'the lads', i.e. the IRA, and articulates complex concepts which

[7] See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 352–53.

he simply fails to comprehend. Pertinently, *Joyriders* begins with the closing speeches of Sean O'Casey's 1923 play *Shadow of a Gunman*, the opening play of the Dublin trilogy. The reference functions in a number of ways. Firstly it establishes parallels between the Dublin slums of O'Casey's trilogy, and the Divis Flats estate in which the teenagers of *Joyriders* live, reputedly one of the worst housing estates in Western Europe. The characters repeatedly comment on their poor living conditions. As Tommy succinctly states, 'it would take more than a licka paint to make any of them flats fit to live in' (p. 114). Additionally, the opening reference to O'Casey's play sets up several analogies with O'Casey's trilogy. Maureen's mother, for example, was shot by a plastic bullet. Maureen too is shot in the play's penultimate scene. This circularity, the sense of events repeating themselves, negates any sense of progress. The fate of generations seems predetermined. Maureen is destined to repeat the fate of her mother and that of Minnie Powell before her. Kate, in describing herself as a 'shadow of a socialist' (p. 132) equates herself with *Shadow of a Gunman*'s Donal Davoren – a cowardly idealist. Arthur undercuts Tommy's pompous comments by reducing the political to its sexual level; in this, he echoes the irreverent Fluther Good in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). Tommy's hands are broken by the paramilitaries, and so he falls victim to those who are supposedly fighting to defend his own interests, the IRA. As in all three plays of O'Casey's trilogy, dangers are faced from within the community. Schisms exist as much within communities as between them. *Tea in a China Cup*, *The Belle of the Belfast City* and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (1989) all deal with the questioning of Protestant traditions by a younger generation of women who refuse to accept the intransigence and inflexibility of a particular masculine loyalist ideology which would dictate their behaviour. All these plays also link the construction of masculinity within the family to sectarian politics. Too often it is a destructive inflexible masculinity. All also draw sharp attention to the imposition of domestic roles on women by both Protestant and Catholic iconography. In Catholicism, we see woman as

angelic virgin figure reworked by the nationalist movement into Mother Ireland; in Protestantism, woman as loyal steadfast servicer and nurturer of men willing to die for Queen and country. In *Tea in a China Cup* and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?*, Reid uses the Battle of the Somme during World War I as a powerful symbol of loyalist devotion to the Crown. Both plays, like Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster, Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), present the incompetence of an officer class which led Protestant servicemen to the widescale carnage that was the Battle of the Somme. As with the Easter Rising of 1916 in *The Plough and the Stars*, the loss of life is equated by male characters with unimpeachable heroism; a holy crusade in whose realization the women should be honoured their husbands have died. Reid has argued on numerous occasions that the Protestant and Roman Catholic hierarchies are unified in their attitudes to women; that women are primarily presented through objectionable and limiting stereotypes, and are conspicuously absent from existing histories of Ireland. 'The public faces of the Protestant and Catholic paramilitaries,' Reid has stated, 'are all men. All the people who talk about religion and the Church are all men. The politicians are all men. Women are never the leaders, the faces, the voices. Ian Paisley and the Pope are basically in total agreement over what a woman's role in the home should be.'[8] This is a view articulated by Rose, Dolly's younger daughter in *The Belle of the Belfast City*. Reid's work, whether dealing with Protestant or Catholic communities or both, as in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*, presents Northern Ireland as a deeply patriarchal society where women are unequivocally subordinated and categorised into neat, compact categories – mothers, sisters, wives. As Janet states in *The Belle of the Belfast City*, 'there are no women in Ireland. Only mothers, sisters and wives' (pp. 209–10). The myth of motherhood is exploited by both the nationalist and loyalist communities to inspire uncompromising devotion. As the intransigent grandfather,

[8] Quoted in Michael Herbert, 'Across the Great Divide', p. 4.

Andy, reflects in *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?*, 'The men go off to war, and the weemin' and the children stay behind and keep the home fires burnin' till the men get back' (p. 259). The feminization of Ireland into an idealized Mother Ireland who protects her sons from impending perils and/or is prepared to sacrifice all for the worthy cause is seen in Reid's plays to suit both colonizer and colonized. Through the character of Sandra in *Joyriders* and its sequel *Clowns* (1996), both currently being adapted by the author into a single screenplay, we are reminded that death is 'not lovely, an' its not romantic like in stupid friggin' plays' (p. 170). Romantic myths and glorified idealizations imprison rather than emancipate. By confining women to narrow constructed spheres of behaviour, stereotypes are perpetuated by each tribe in which men and women are segregated. Reid's plays portray a society in which women are disenfranchised; not that they reduce gender relations to a simple polarized view of woman as good and man as bad. Women comply with their own oppression, appropriating the standards of their oppressors, as demonstrated by Sarah in *Tea in a China Cup* and Vi in *The Belle of the Belfast City*. Equally men, often background figures in the plays, are not indiscriminately aggressive. Although the majority are presented as wayward fellows, easily led astray, falling prey to political whims, drunken, weak or unreliable, a number display instincts for non-violent means of communication – that which is traditionally read as being the realm of the feminine. Brian, for example, in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* is patient, caring and understanding; he possesses a temperament habitually seen as passive, and his sense of humour equates him with many of the dynamic women characters who form the backbone of Reid's plays. Constantly aware of the difficulties inherent in affirming a 'female' identity, Reid's plays do deconstruct traditional dichotomies by concentrating on the plurality of women's experiences in Northern Ireland. Often this is articulated by the intersecting storylines merging past and present, dreams and memories, oral traditions and visual metaphors. Multiple tales are told in plays whose fluid structures mark a

healthy move away from the conventions of the classic realist text.

Importantly, Reid's plays also present women in environments outside the domestic sphere. As such, they point to the societal institutions which perpetuate the strict gender divide. In *Joyriders*, the YTS scheme on which the teenagers are employed, situated in a disused linen mill where women were grievously exploited economically and regularly died of lead poisoning, encourages women to work on knitting machines while men train as mechanics. 'Weemin don't repair cars' (p. 109), Arthur argues when Sandra inquires as to the possibility of transferring to the mechanics' workshop. Equally, however, Arthur is aware of the problems surrounding his choice of career. 'Men don't cook in West Belfast,' he informs Kate (p. 123). All the characters, to a greater or lesser extent, are trapped within gender stereotypes; roles in which they have been cast by society. Sandra rejects the rhetoric of O'Casey's *Shadow of a Gunman* just as she rejects the dominant images of femininity society imposes on her. Equally, however, she sees those definitions reproduced in the socialist organisation Tommy is part of and thus his attempts to recruit her to the party are met with sharp retorts. 'What for?', she asks him, 'To end up typin' letters fer wankers like you?' (p. 138). Even in supposedly radical parties campaigning for a new utopia, women are still trapped within limiting roles clearly associated with nurturing and servicing the men who are on the frontline, so to speak. Sandra reads the possibilities for women of her class as offensively restrictive: 'A bride of Christ or forty years' hard labour . . . my mother thinks anything in between is a mortal sin' (p. 175). Kate, supposedly a liberal product of the struggles of 1968, recognizes the danger of the gap between bride and bride of Christ and fears it. The independent woman, like Arthur's single sister, is read as an 'old maid' – another social construct imposed on women who refuse to conform. In *Tea in a China Cup*, Beth's dilemmas are a dramatic realisation of this struggle between acquiescence and defiance. In a society where the feminine is too often perceived in essentially

negative terms, Reid's plays attempt to undermine this ideology. *Tea in a China Cup* and *The Belle of the Belfast City* especially announce women as creative sources of energy. The humour displayed by many of the women in Reid's plays, especially when no longer under the watchful eye of prying men, is presented as subversive and challenging. Reid has spoken repeatedly of the radical potential that humour offers. 'Women', she has claimed, 'have humour and humour, of course, is what I think can ultimately destroy bigotry and prejudice.'[9] It's worth contrasting the phallocentric masculine humour of the comic in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* with the feminine humour shared by the women in *The Belle of the Belfast City*. In *Clowns*, equally, Sandra's punchy stand-up routine as enacted by Maureen is a fierce antidote to that of the offensive comedian in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* She daringly articulates a politics of reappropriation and blisteringly exposes a tradition of writers from Congreve to Wilde appropriated by the British: '. . . why should Bernard Manning and Jim Davidson make a living out of slagging off the Irish, when we can do it better for ourselves. And with more wit and style. That's the real joke. You forbade us to speak our own language. You forced us to speak yours and we took it and turned it into poetry' (p. 306).

Issues of gender surface in all of Reid's plays. They are, however, commented on in relation to the specific socio-political context in which Reid worked until 1987 before moving to London, where she lives today. Like Devlin, Lynch and Graham Reid (no relation), she interacts with her own traditions, traditions she finds both attractive and repulsive. *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* uses the device of the comic to interrogate our complicity in the Troubles: the audience's complicity in the laughter signals their involvement as part of an oppressive apparatus which fuels the conflict. As I mentioned earlier, the fiercely loyalist community in which Reid grew up provides the backdrop for numerous of her plays – notably *Tea in a China*

[9] Quoted in ibid., p. 4.

Cup, My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name? and *The Belle of the Belfast City*. Rather than idealizing such a community, these plays expose its fissures, often overlooked by simplistic readings of its united opposition to the threat of domination by a Roman Catholic Ireland. The Protestant and Catholic communities of Reid's plays are anything but united entities. Each is riven by contentious disputes, and oppositions of class and creed. *The Belle of the Belfast City* and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* especially provide a sharp critique of the conservativism of the Protestant ethos: a debilitating system of beliefs which allows no real possibilities for rational discussion with the republican movement. The dependency on Britain must be maintained unquestioningly and is preferable to any type of discussion with Irish nationalists. This single-minded view is expressed by the Protestant politicians Reid creates in her work. Uncle Henry in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* and Jack in *The Belle of the Belfast City* are familiar types in Reid's work, gangsterish figures who exist outside the law, if you like – the maintenance of the Union with Britain read as a moral crusade which justifies all tactics, however lawless. Blame is not attributed solely onto these characters. *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*, *The Belle of the Belfast City* and *Tea in a China Cup* all cite the complicity of the middle classes in the current situation: those who run the factories and shops and employ a segregated workforce are clearly implicated in the perpetuation of the conflict. Reid has spoken in interviews of misunderstandings regarding the wealth of the Protestant community: 'People seem to think that all the Protestants are rich and all the Catholics are poor. But there is a massive Protestant working class who were a totally loyal workforce because they were always told that, if they went on strike, they would let the Nationalists in. It's a perfect example of divide and rule. So you had this Loyalist workforce who worked in appalling conditions in the mills and factories for bad wages'.[10] History is thus used to validate economic

[10] Quoted in ibid., p. 4.

exploitation. *Joyriders* also makes reference to the problems experienced by Protestants working in a Catholic area where if not faced by intimidation in the workplace, they leave because they are anxious of the dangers of working in a hostile environment.

Reid creates a strong sense of time and place in her plays. All are located in specific historical moments where the political is seen to impinge on the personal in a whole series of complex and vivid ways. In *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?*, set in 1986, the disputes at Greenham Common and racist attacks to which her partner is subjected are palpable presences in Andrea's politicization. In *Clowns*, Reid's most recent play, the Lagan Mill YTS centre has now metamorphosized into the Lagan Mill Shopping Centre. Eight years on, on the eve of the IRA ceasefire, Arthur is about to open his new café–bar. Sandra returns from London where, haunted by Maureen's ghost, she has been working as a stand-up comic, and confronts the society she left behind soon after Maureen's death. Debates on the ceasefire ensue as the characters come to terms with what the future may bring. For Molly, Arthur's mother, the death of her gambling husband brings a new lease of life, higher education and financial independence. Johnnie, Maureen's wayward brother is now a drug dealer: 'king of the only scene in Belfast that has nothing to do with religion, class or creed' (p. 330). For Sandra he is a manifestation of 'The ultimate joyride. You do the driving, and the passengers get killed' (p. 329). Although, as with *Tea in a China Cup*, the dramatic environments and situations depicted suggest parallels with Reid's own experiences, what strikes the reader is the manner in which the play skilfully captures the essences of a particular moment in contemporary Anglo–Irish relations without recourse to heavy-handed lecturing. Reid's stagecraft displays an effective use of dramatic imagery to express her concerns as a writer commenting on the complex ways in which larger political events affect the lives of those experiencing them. In *Joyriders*, the graffiti described in the introduction clearly situates the drama within a particular social mileau. The Royal Shakespeare Company production

of *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* juxtaposed portraits of the Pope and the Queen as emblematic metaphors for the two communities: providing a clear indication of the civil strife which informs the play. Additionally, however, they are ambivalent symbols in that they are subject to simplification and can too often reduce the conflict to a series of clear cut binary oppositions. Binary oppositions provide a selective way of reading the conflict and as such are problematized and indeed systematically undermined by the play. In *Tea in a China Cup* too, Beth and Theresa laugh at the myths each have been told about the other's religion. Humour, so absent in the make-up of a substantial percentage of the characters in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*, here works to deflate potential tension and ensures that both women reflect with a healthy distance on the fables promoted by their respective families. *Joyriders* too interrogates myths surrounding the representation of Ireland. The propaganda advertising a holiday scheme for Northern Irish children in America puts forward archetypal visions of Ireland as a rural backwater or a dark violent maelstrom – two sharp binary opposites: primitive rural idyll versus strife-torn urban metropolis. The limitations of both are systematically undermined by the characters' dialogue and behaviour.

Perhaps too often overlooked when examining Reid's work is the playful manner in which her plays are structured. *Tea in a China Cup* and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* both display a hearty awareness of the poetic possibilities of the stage; with scenes merging into one another in a fluid dreamlike manner. *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?* too is not segregated into a traditional scene/act structure. Rather it consists of a series of juxtaposed episodes punctuated by the comedian's rude jokes. The cabaret format is also employed, although less rigorously in *Joyriders* and *Clowns*. In the former, the narrative is fractured by musical interludes which comment on the environment in which the play is set, the characters and the action witnessed. Each song (except the opening Belfast Street Song which serves to set the scene), has a clear association with the scene

that precedes it. In *Clowns*, Sandra's abrasive routines seek to clarify her ambivalence to the environment to which she has returned. Equally in *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman . . . ?*, the context in which the comic performs affects our reading of his material. The significance of events, quotations, songs, gestures and symbols is thus subject to constant modification. Reid's work doesn't provide happy endings or produce easy answers to the questions it poses. Rather, it seeks to interrogate the conflicting and disparate ways in which a certain political situation affects those who function within it. What emerges is a body of work that constantly displays a humanity and understanding of people struggling to make sense of the ideologies within which they have to exist. Few dramatists have provided such compassionate or stimulating social studies of the post-1968 period or such enthralling theatre.[11]

Maria M. Delgado, October 1996

[11] This article is based on a lecture delivered at the University of Barcelona during my time as a visiting lecturer on an Erasmus exchange scheme in 1995. I am grateful to Henry Little and Jacqueline Roy for their comments on earlier drafts and to Christina Reid for her generous assistance with and support of my research.

Tea in a China Cup

For Christina my mother
and my daughters Heidi, Tara and Siubhan

Tea in a China Cup was first produced by the Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast on 9 November 1983, with the following cast:

Sarah	Stella McCusker
Beth, *Sarah's daughter*	Paula Hamilton
Theresa, *Beth's friend*	Frances Quinn
The Grandmother	Trudy Kelly
The Grandfather	Louis Rolston
Great Aunt Maisie	Sheila McGibbon
Samuel, *Sarah's brother* **Sammy**, *Sarah's son* **A Youth**	Adrian Gordon
Council Clerk **Fortune Teller** **Mrs Jamison**	Margaretta D'Arcy
Army Officer, *Second World War* **Modern British Soldier** **Valuer**	John Hewitt

Note. In this production only, the valuer in the final scene was male and became female in subsequent productions following rewrites.

Director Leon Rubin
Set Designer Ken Harrison
Lighting Designer Trevor Dawson
Costume Designer Ivor C. Morrow
Wardrobe Jacqueline Berryman and Ivor C. Morrow
Set Construction Jim Carson
Stage Manager Rose Morris
Deputy Stage Manager Karen Kerr
Assistant Stage Manager Maggie Burge
Acting Assistant Stage Manager Adrian Gordon

The action of the play is set in Belfast and spans more than three decades (from 1939 to 1972) in the life of a Protestant family in Belfast.

A velvet sofa symbolizes Beth's elegant house.

A china cabinet plus three large framed photographs of: the grandfather in First World War uniform; his son Samuel in Second World War uniform; his grandson Sammy in modern army uniform, symbolize the little house that is occupied first of all by the grandparents and subsequently by Sarah.

Changes of lighting indicate changes of time and place.

Act One

The stage is in darkness. Offstage, in the distance is heard the sound of an Orange band playing 'Up Come the Man'. As the music increases in volume, stage left lightens to show a velvet sofa by a window. This is **Beth***'s house in 1972.* **Beth***'s mother,* **Sarah***, a woman in her mid-fifties, walks slowly out of the darkened stage area and lies down on the velvet sofa. She is wearing a dressing gown, and is obviously very ill. She listens to and watches the Orange band as it passes by with great enjoyment. Offstage a crowd is heard singing and cheering 'Up come the man with the shovel in his hand, and he says boys go no farther, for we'll get a great big rope and we'll hang the bloody Pope, on the twelfth of July in the morning.' The music and singing increase as the band marches past.* **Sarah** *sinks back on the sofa and closes her eyes. She smiles and sings softly to herself 'Up comes the man with the shovel in his hand . . . and he says . . . boys go no farther . . .' The lights darken around* **Sarah** *and lighten on stage right where* **Beth** *is standing at a desk facing a female* **Council Clerk**.

Beth (*nervously*) I want to buy a grave . . .

Clerk (*briskly*) It'll have to be in the new cemetery, the old one's full, you know.

Beth Yes, I know.

Clerk A single or a double?

Beth What?

Clerk Plot . . . a single or a double?

Beth A single . . . please . . .

Clerk When's the burial?

Beth The burial?

Clerk The time and date of the funeral?

Beth I don't know . . .

Clerk Today's Friday, this office closes at the weekend you know. If the interment is to be on Monday you'll have to arrange for the grave to be opened today.

Beth Oh, I don't want it opened . . . not now . . . not yet . . .

Clerk Oh, I see, you don't have a dear departed, you just want to buy a grave plot.

Beth Yes, that's right.

Clerk Right, then we won't need the blue form for the gravediggers, just a straightforward sale docket.

The **Clerk** *writes details on a form,* **Beth** *watches nervously.*

Beth It's my mother . . . she's . . . she's terminally ill . . . she insisted that I buy a grave now . . .

Clerk She wants to know where she's going to lie . . .

Beth Yes, that's exactly what she said . . .

Clerk That's very responsible of her. The older generation are more sensible about these things.

Beth We have a family plot in the old cemetery, but it's full.

Clerk Yes, they all are. The new cemetery's very nice though. The council are always being complimented on the flowering shrubs . . . something in bloom all the year round . . . does your mother like flowers?

Beth (*slightly startled*) Yes, yes, she does actually.

Clerk (*pleased*) Well, there you are then.

Beth Would it be possible to have a plot near the old cemetery wall . . . ? She wants to be as near her mother and father as possible . . .

Clerk Ah now, that depends . . .

Beth On what?

Clerk On whether you want a Protestant or a Catholic plot.

Beth You're joking.

Clerk Indeed not. The new cemetery is divided in two by a gravel path. Protestant graves are to the right, Catholic graves to the left. Now what side would your mother want?

Beth The right, definitely the right.

Clerk Ah good, you're in luck, the Protestant graves go right up to the old cemetery wall . . . now let me see . . . I can offer you a choice of two . . .

The **Clerk** *shows* **Beth** *the plan of the cemetery.* **Beth** *looks at it and then hands it back to the* **Clerk**.

Beth I can't . . . I just can't . . . you pick one for me.

Clerk There's a lovely hydrangea behind this one . . .

Beth That'll do . . .

Clerk Or this one has a forsythia . . . absolutely laden with yellow blossoms in the spring . . .

Beth The hydrangea will do nicely, thank you.

Clerk Yes, you're probably right, they have a much longer flowering period . . . now if you'll just sign here.

Beth *signs the docket.*

Clerk And your address here . . . You know, I wish there were more people like your mother.

Beth Dying?

Clerk Oh no no . . . organized . . . buying their final resting place in advance of the event. It saves the relative a lot of trouble when the call comes from above, makes it easier to organize the funeral. You've no idea how difficult it all is, if people go and die at the weekend and the family has no burial plot.

Beth I suppose you own a grave plot.

Clerk Oh indeed, yes, in the old cemetery. I bought one years ago when I saw how quickly it was filling up . . . (*She leans forward and speaks confidently in hushed tones to* **Beth**.) Laid

my Jack to rest there the year before last . . . my husband . . . cancer . . . very nasty . . .

Beth Yes, it is.

Clerk Your mother? . . . Same thing?

Beth Yes.

The **Clerk** *pats* **Beth***'s hand.*

Clerk I hope she doesn't linger too long.

Beth *pulls her hand away, angrily.*

Beth Oh, I do.

Clerk Oh no, my dear, take it from one who's been through it . . . You won't want her to linger . . . my Jack lingered . . . very nasty when they linger, for them and for you . . . is your mother in the hospital?

Beth No, she's in my house.

Clerk A little bit of advice, dear . . . at the end . . . don't let them take her into the hospital . . . all they do is drag it out . . .

Beth I really must go, I don't like leaving her alone for too long . . .

Clerk Now, this is only a sales docket. I'll post you out the deeds to the bit of ground some time next week, all right? That will be fifty pounds, dear. Just make the cheque payable to the North Down District Council.

The **Clerk** *compares the cheque with the cheque card.*

Beth Tell me something . . . why is the new cemetery segregated? The old one wasn't, was it?

Clerk Not officially, but the people sort of segregated it themselves. If you walk around the old cemetery you'll see what I mean. There's clumps of Catholics and clumps of Protestants. The odd one buried among the wrong crowd stands out like a sore thumb.

Beth So the council decided to make it official in the new cemetery?

Clerk They did, makes it easer for everybody.

Beth What happens in a mixed marriage . . . do you bury them under the gravel path?

The **Clerk** *is not at all amused by this sort of levity.*

Sorry . . . it was only a joke . . .

Clerk Is your family mixed . . . will the segregation bother your mother?

Beth Bother my mother? . . . She'll be tickled pink when I tell her.

Beth *moves out of the council office to the street outside. She takes a deep breath, relieved that the episode is over.* **Theresa** *approaches.* **Beth** *doesn't see her.*

Theresa Excuse me, missus, could you direct me to Sandy Row? I've a date with a big sexy Orangeman.

Beth Theresa . . . I thought you weren't coming home from London till next weekend.

Theresa I said I'd *see* you next weekend. I'm going to Dublin this week for our Danny's wedding. Pay attention when you're reading my letters.

Beth I forgot . . . God, I'm so confused . . .

Theresa So what else is new? Beth, are you all right? . . . You look . . . strange. What were you doing in there?

Beth You'd never believe me if I told you. Theresa, come and see me as soon as you get back to Belfast . . . I need to talk to you.

Theresa Let's go and get a cup of coffee and talk now.

Beth I can't . . . I've got to get back to my mother.

Theresa How is she?

Beth Surviving . . . Theresa, I'm sorry . . . I'll have to go. I'll see you soon.

Theresa I'll phone you the minute I get back. Give my love to your mother.

Beth *walks to where* **Sarah** *lies on the sofa.*

Beth You promised to stay in bed till I got back.

Sarah The bands have been out practisin' for the twelfth, came right past the house, so they did. You should have heard those boyos play.

Beth You could have fallen.

Sarah I took it slowly.

Beth You've exhausted yourself, your face is all flushed.

Sarah It's the sound of the flute bands . . . always gets the oul Protestant blood going. I tell you, a daily dose of the True Blue Defenders would do me more good than them hateful transfusions they give me up at the hospital . . . how long is it now till the twelfth?

Beth Ten days.

Sarah I'll see it one more time before I go, if God spares me.

Beth You'll have a ringside seat at that window.

Sarah If I'm well enough on the day will you take me down to the end of the driveway in the car? I want to sit with the windows rolled down and be a proper part of it one last time.

Beth It's a wonder you don't want me to drive you to the Field at Finaghy.

Sarah If I thought I could manage it, I would. But sure what's the point of kiddin' myself. I'll be lucky if I can make it to the gate, even in the car.

Beth You'll make it.

Sarah God willing . . . Did you get that wee bit of business done for me?

Beth Yes.

Sarah And were you able to get a plot near the old cemetery?

Beth Right at the wall . . . do you know if you'd been a Catholic, you'd have been out of luck.

Sarah How do you mean?

Beth The new cemetery is segregated. Prods to the right, Fenians to the left. The Protestant graves are alongside the old cemetery.

Sarah *finds this very funny. She laughs delightedly.*

Sarah God, isn't it great to know that you'll be lying among your own.

Beth'*s face contorts and she turns her head away.*

Sarah Ach now, child, I didn't mean to upset you . . . don't look like that. You have to face up to these things. I'm sorry I had to ask you to go to that place for me. If I'd been fit enough I would have gone myself.

Beth I'm all right, honestly, I'm all right.

Sarah And now my mind's at rest knowing it's done and we don't need to think about it or talk about it any more . . . I think I'll go back to bed for a wee while . . . hearing the oul bands has took more out of me than I thought.

Beth Would you like a cup of tea?

Sarah I would love a cup of tea.

Beth and Sarah (*together*) In a china cup.

They both laugh. **Beth** *helps* **Sarah** *to her feet.*

Sarah You're a good child. I don't know what I'd do without you.

Beth What am *I* going to do without *you*?

Sarah Grow up . . . change, the way everybody does when their mother dies . . . now you go and make the tea, I'll go to bed myself.

Beth I'll help you in first.

Sarah No, I want to manage myself for as long as I can.

Beth *watches* **Sarah** *as she walks slowly towards the darkened part of the stage. At the edge of the light* **Sarah** *turns around.*

You know, if I'm well enough on the twelfth of July, we will go to the Field, you and me. I'd like to stand there with you beside me, one more time, just like when you were a child. I carried you to the Field at Finaghy when you were a few months old, do you know that?

Beth (*smiling*) Yes, I know that.

Sarah You mind it now, you mind all the old family stories, tell them to your children after I'm gone.

Sarah *turns and steps into the darkness.* **Beth** *makes an involuntary gesture as if to stop her from leaving.* **Beth** *walks forward and addresses the audience.*

Beth She carried me to the Field when I was four months old. She was sitting on the grass, her back to a hedge, giving me a bottle, when a gentleman in a clerical collar came up and patted us both on the head. 'I'm proud of you, daughter,' he said to my mother, 'coming all this way with a young baby. Women like you are the backbone of Ulster.' She knew he was a gentleman, because apart from the clerical collar, he had a hard hat and white gloves. The upper-class Orangemen always wear a hard hat and white gloves. She was very proud that a man like that had stopped to pay the likes of her such a compliment. I have an image in my mind of that day . . . the hedge littered with empty bottles and bits of red, white and blue paper, my mother feeding me as she sang along with the Orange bands. I couldn't possibly remember it, I was only an infant, but I've heard that story and all the other family stories so often that I can remember and see clearly things that happened even before I was born . . . like the day my mother's brother Samuel went off to fight for King and Country.

The centre of the stage lightens to show the home of the grandparents, **Sam** *and* **Annie** *in the year 1939. An enlarged sepia photo of the grandfather in First World War uniform hangs in an ornate frame on the back wall. The* **Grandmother** *and* **Sarah** *(aged about twenty-*

three) are sitting looking miserable. Offstage an Orange band is playing and people are singing 'On the green grassy slopes of the Boyne, Where King Billy and his men went to war, we will fight for our glorious deliverence . . . Where? . . . on the green grassy slopes of the Boyne.' The **Grandfather** *comes dancing in, highly excited.*

Grandfather Man, they're going to see the lads off in great style, so they are. Are the two of yous not comin' out?

Sarah Where's my wee Sammy? Where's the chile?

Grandfather I left him playin' with the childer next door. He's all right, he'll come to no harm. You fuss too much about that wain . . . Women!

Grandmother I suppose you think I fuss too much about *our* Samuel?

Grandfather Our Samuel's not a wain any more, he's one of the King's men now.

Grandmother He's still only a child. This is all your doin', filling his head full of nonsense abut the great times you had with the lads in France during the First World War.

Grandfather It'll make a man of him.

Grandmother He's only eighteen. I want him to grow into a man here, in his own street with his own ones all around him, not in some stinkin' hole in the ground in France among strangers.

Grandfather I was in the trenches in France when I was little more than a lad. It never did me no harm.

Grandmother Oh aye, I suppose you were born with that bit of shrapnel in your leg.

Grandfather I'd do it again gladly, if they'd have me, for my King and Country.

Grandmother But they won't have you, will they, because your oul chest is still full of gas from the last great war.

She says the word 'great' with contempt. **Sarah** *goes and looks outside.*

Grandfather My son will represent me. You should be proud of him, not sittin' here mopin'.

Grandmother You're on oul fool, you always were.

Sarah He's comin' up the street. Now don't be arguing, you two, you don't want to upset him. God knows when we'll all be together again.

Offstage there is cheering from the crowd. **Samuel** *comes in dressed in Second World War uniform.*

Samuel The band's marching with us to the boat. I've never seen anything like it. It's like the twelfth of July out there.

Grandfather Don't yous all deserve it? The young men of this road are doing Ulster proud.

Grandmother I've made you some sandwiches, son, in case you get hungry.

Samuel Ach mammy, I can't go off to war with a packet of sandwiches in my hand. Do you want me to be a laughin' stock?

Grandfather Take a bit of advice from an old campaigner, son. Put them sandwiches in your pocket. Army life's grand, but you'll not get the good food you're used to at home.

Samuel *puts the sandwiches in his pocket.*

Samuel I'll probably get my pay docked for ruining the line of my uniform.

Grandmother The line of your uniform'll be well ruined after a night sleepin' rough in thon oul boat.

Offstage there is more cheering from the crowd.

Samuel I'll have to go. They're lining up . . .

Grandfather Good luck, son.

Samuel Thanks, father.

They shake hands awkwardly. The **Grandfather** *turns away, overcome with emotion. To hide this, he blows his nose noisily. The* **Grandmother** *embraces her son.*

It won't be for long . . . I'll be back before you know it, with a string of medals on my chest.

Grandmother Never you mind the medals, Samuel. You just keep your head down, and come home in one piece.

Grandfather And go easy on the oul French water son, it's not like the good clean stuff you get here. They're awful clarty people the French . . . Catholics, you know . . .

Sarah *embraces her brother.*

Sarah Now, you take care of yourself, do you hear? No heroics.

Samuel And you take care of mother.

Sarah I will.

Samuel Where's my namesake?

Sarah He's next door, playin' . . .

Grandfather I'll go and get him. He'll have to see his uncle off . . .

As the **Grandfather** *goes out, the* **Grandmother***'s sister* **Maisie** *rushes in.*

Maisie They're linin' up, ready to go. Ach, boys a dear, don't you look great? . . . How's about a big kiss for your aunt before you get stuck intil them Germans.

She hugs **Samuel** *exuberantly.*

God bless you, love. You show them Germans what the Ulster Protestant boys are made of. Here's a wee something for you from your Aunt Maisie.

She puts some money into his hand. **Samuel** *is embarrassed.*

Samuel There's no need . . .

Maisie You put it in your pocket. Always have a wee roughness of money about you when you're away from home . . . for emergencies.

The **Grandmother** *removes her wedding ring and places it on* **Samuel***'s finger.*

Grandmother Don't take it off, no matter what. It'll guard you, bring you home safe.

Samuel *kisses her and moves away. He is close to tears.*

Sarah Don't forget to write . . .

As he goes out the crowds outside cheer and the band begins to play.

Maisie Come on, the pair of you, we have to see him off . . .

Maisie *rushes out.* **Sarah** *puts her arms around her mother and walks her to the door. The sounds of the bands are replaced by the sounds of war.* **Sarah** *comes back on stage reading a letter from* **Samuel**. *At one side of the stage the lights brighten on* **Samuel**. *He is in an army billet somewhere in France sitting on the floor, leaning on his kitbag, writing the letter that* **Sarah** *is reading. They read the letter together.*

Sarah and Samuel My darling sister, this is to let you know I have arrived safe and well. We got here late as the boat was held up for days because of fog, and we had our Christmas dinner in the middle of the English Channel. My father was right when he said that the food's not what we're used to at home, but then nobody can cook a dinner like my mother. The drink here is dirt cheap, best rum about 1/6 for a ten-glass bottle. If it was that price at home, the men on our road would never sober up. It's just as well that I don't drink, not that I could afford to set the town on fire even if I wanted to. They only give us thirty francs a week while we're here, that's roughly 3/6. It means that I'm saving about seven bob a week, so that by the time I get leave, I hope round the beginning of June, I'll have a nice wee bit put by to bring home to my mother. The life here is okay. The locals are nice but funny, you know, different from us. We are billeted in an old chapel, which is dry and quite comfortable, although,