Demystifying Irish History in Roddy Doyle's A Star Called Henry*

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Abstract: *Despite its appearance of rigour, the claims of reliability put forward by history have been repeatedly contested. Although this discipline pursues an accurate recollection of objective facts, it seems that it has been exposed to subjective criteria and ideological constraints that have often resulted in biased considerations of particular events. In the case of* A Star Called Henry *(1999), Roddy Doyle approaches life in Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century, a period in which the Irish nationhood underwent a decisive transformation. The novel, however, explores these crucial years from the perspective of an ordinary character, Henry Smart, whose sceptical approach to the turbulent reality of his time clashes with the atmosphere of patriotism and nationalistic fervour of the pro-Irish combatants. The aim of this study is to analyse Doyle's re-examinations of Irish history, which, in the novel, emerges as the metaphorical landscape that embodies the entire narration. My analysis will, therefore, seek to detect the way* A Star Called Henry *subverts and ironises about assumptions that have been long unquestioned, presenting, instead, a vision that demythologises key moments in Ireland's past.*

Whenever history or particular historical moments are approached or debated, it seems very difficult to overlook the controversies that have been traditionally associated with this discipline. However, when it comes to Irish history, these discrepancies are further intensified since the attempts towards objectivity and reliability have often collided with Ireland's stagnant binarisms. Furthermore, it could be also argued that Irish history encapsulates some of the most influential and painful events in the socio-political construction of the British Isles. Being such a decisive matter, it is no wonder that Irish authors have found in history a source of themes and motifs through which to anatomise their country as regards both its internal affairs and the complexities underlying its relationship with Great Britain. From Jonathan Swift to Oliver Goldsmith, Maria Edgeworth and George Bernard Shaw, among others, Irish writers have problematised on issues related to Britain's colonial policy over Ireland and the responses it had from

the country's political and intellectual spheres. In this line, Swift's "The Drapier's Letters" or "A Modest Proposal", Edgeworth's "An Essay on Irish Bulls" or Shaw's play *John Bull's Other Island* sought to evince that, in spite of their conspicuous geographical and linguistic proximity, Britain always regarded Ireland as a colonial or, as Timothy Mo would denominate, an insular possession. These works, therefore, manifested a deeply critical attitude towards Britain's positioning and the dreadful conditions in which the country was immersed due to the metropolis' harsh treatment.

Although this question has formed and still forms intrinsic part of the Irish historical background and has permeated the writings of most Irish authors, some of them, among whom we should mention Roddy Doyle, approach Ireland's history from a more sceptical and even demystifying stance. Their views, in this sense, have challenged the self-inflicted victimisation the country has historically endured to present Ireland as co-responsible for the situation it has undergone in the past centuries. From his *The Commitments* (1987) to *Paddy Clarke Ha, Ha, Ha* (1993) and the so-called *Barrytown Trilogy* (1992), the narratives of Roddy Doyle explore contemporary Ireland from various angles; being themes such as poverty, domesticity and familiar relationships reccur; in his entire literary production.[1] Nevertheless, up to *A Star Called Henry* (1999), Doyle had never attempted to tackle such an ambivalent issue as Irish history, although as he himself confesses: "This time the storyteller in me wanted to write about big history and big politics" (Davis 1999). *A Star Called Henry* appears as the book that opens the trilogy Doyle entitles *The Last Roundup* and which the author devises as an examination of key moments in Ireland's historical development through the figure of Henry Smart, a roguish Dublin-born character whose attitude allows the novelist to picture the miseries of twentieth-century Ireland. The purpose of this study is, thus, to study how this novel – though built on strictly historical facts – emerges as a serio-comic demythologisation of events such as the 1916 Easter Rising that bear such an important symbolical and sentimental meaning for the Irish.

As suggested above, *A Star Called Henry* narrates the life of a Dublin underdog, Henry Smart, son of Melody Nash, his alcoholic mother, and Henry Smart, a one-legged brothel bouncer and killer-for-hire. Henry's birth in 1902 symbolically represents Ireland's turn of the century, a fact that, as the novel will show, epitomises a crucial moment in the country's history. Through the character's physical and psychological growth, Doyle manages to delineate a series of parallelisms with the events that took place in the first two decades of the twentieth century, a period that determined the consolidation of Ireland's social, political, economic and cultural foundations. In this like manner, Henry can be categorised as a self-made individual whose practical vision of reality clashes with the heroic mysticism of the 1916 Easter Rising and of those figures that took part in it. Doyle creates a character that challenges assumptions that have been historically taken for granted and which, as the following passage reveals, leads Henry to hold a visibly sceptical – and occasionally critical– attitude towards Ireland in a moment in which political commitment turned out to be a must: "Ireland

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was something in songs that drunken old men wept about as they held on to the railings at three in the morning and we homed in to rob them; that was all" (69).

Nevertheless, the protagonist cannot eschew being involved in the outbreak of the Rising, the Anglo-Irish War and the War of Independence, facts that, instead of awakening Henry's dormant Irishness, strengthen even more noticeably his pragmatism. Contrarily to the ideals that were utopically defended by the Citizen Army's and Volunteers' leaders, Henry's sheer detachment unmasks the incongruities that lay beneath the causes that triggered the 1916 uprising. In this sense, the Easter Rising emerges as a central event in *A Star Called Henry* since it constitutes the first step in the formation of the character's own thoughts about the ongoing events. Henry's ironic coming of age, represented by his participation in the seizure of Dublin's General Post Office on Easter Monday, 1916, gives an idea of his uncommitted stance and of the peculiar reasons that move him into action. In the following passage, Doyle accurately describes the atmosphere that surrounded the outburst of military operations:

> There was nothing outside, beyond the broken windows and the pillars, except the street and the usual noises that came with it – whining trams, the yells of children, shoe nails on cobbles and pavement, the women at the Pillar Stall shouting the prices and varieties of their flowers. Only the shock and curses of people dodging the falling glass outside stamped significance on the morning. (87)

According to Kostick and Collins, the moments that preceded the charge against the G.P.O did not in the least predict that a rebellion was about to take place, let alone the ensuing Proclamation of the Irish Provisional Government. Everything in Dublin, as Doyle depicts and as Kostick and Collins bear out, was so apparently normal that the impact of the rebel's strike was insignificant: "The Post Office was open for business on that fateful Easter Monday morning when the order was given by James Connolly to charge for the building. The public had by now grown accustomed to the Irish Citizen Army commandeering buildings in mock attacks" (88). Historians agree that the revolt's leaders, especially Padráic Pearse and James Connolly, wanted the G.P.O's take-over to be a symbolical turn of events in the British domination of Ireland and also, and more importantly, to demonstrate the Irish determination towards an independent and self-governing rule, although, as Coogan suggests, they assumed that the Rising was "bound to fail" (19).

However, once Doyle's narrative moves inside the G.P.O, readers appreciate how these ideals of patriotism and national identity begin to backfire. Henry's response to the confusion he perceives reinforces the aimlessness of the rebellion and the lack of logistic effectiveness of the Irish troops. He, thus, becomes the vehicle through which Doyle reveals the foundational weaknesses of the Rising, since, as this character, demonstrates, a significant number of revolutionaries were not moved by their Irish

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fervour but simply by their own personal interests.[2] This is precisely Henry's case, who contemplates Dublin's post office as the perfect place to get some money: "We were locked into the biggest post office in the country, and even though it was now the centre of the new republic, it was still a post office, a land of opportunity, a great big building full of money. And I wanted some of it. My conscience wouldn't let me ignore it" (89). During the initial stages of the upheaval, Henry feels that Ireland must make up for all the suffering and destitution he and his family had been forced to endure. Curiously, the British assailants are no longer his primary target but all the shops that had declined to help out Henry and his little brother, Victor. The scene Doyle describes is tinged with very meaningful contrasts, since, whilst some soldiers only seek to keep up the patriotic spirit, Henry simply aims at quenching his personal rancour against Ireland:

> My aim was true and careful; every bullet mattered. Two for Lewer's & Co., and their little boys' blazers, suits and knickerbockers…. But I kept on shooting. A bullet for Dunne & Co., and their hats danced in the glass…. I shot and killed all that I had been denied, all the commerce and snobbery that had been mocking me and other hundreds of thousands behind glass and locks, all the injustice, unfairness and shoes – while the lads took chunks out of the military (105).[3]

This passage also points to considerations that hint at Henry's dubious involvement in the course of events. Besides their tactical and technological inferiority, the Easter Rising rebels realised that they could not guarantee a firm opposition to the British troops because soldiers lacked weapons and ammunition.[4] It is well known that the hopes of the leaders lay on the shipment of military supplies that was expected to arrive in the *Aud*, a German steamer that was eventually intercepted by British troops on its approach to the Irish coast.[5]

In relation to this event, Doyle also recounts the "Magazine Fort" fiasco, in which a group of Irish Volunteers planned to blow away this British arsenal as the signal that would mark the outbreak of the Easter Rising. In spite of the impact – both physical and psychological – the rebels were seeking to attain, history demonstrates that it was another blatant failure. Doyle manifestly proves it for he simply devotes an aside comment in which Henry listens to a soft explosion in a park nearby: "And a soft thud that might have been an explosion; the Magazine Fort up in the park" (91). The lack of transcendence of this operation reinforces the demystifying intention of Doyle's novel and points to the fragile foundations that sustained the Rising. Once again, the expectations generated by the effect of particular events such as the Magazine Fort takeover clashed with the harsh reality of a totally unprepared and ineffective move. As Kostick and Collins suggest: "Rather than a huge boom, the explosion was more like a dull thud. As a signal for the Rising to begin this action was, therefore, a failure, but as a tactical move the rebels could at least derive satisfaction from the partial destruction of the Magazine Fort" (46). Henry's reaction to the explosion enables Doyle to strengthen the idea that the

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mythology of the Rising and the symbolical implications that its ideological leaders aimed to bestow upon it vanished in an atmosphere of vacillation and detachment, which Smart clearly evinces.

Bearing this issue in mind, Henry reveals himself as a character whose unrestrained individuality clearly challenges the spirit of comradeship that was postulated by the leaders of the Rising. For him, Pearse's haranguing speeches, the fight for his country's freedom or his expected self-sacrifice are only abstractions that do not fit into his earthly conception of life. It is precisely as an ironic debunking of all these ideals that Doyle creates and shapes the character of Henry Smart. There are certain figures that historians have lately recuperated which point to highly significant contrasts with respect to Henry and which Doyle draws on in order to highlight these differences. As the following conversation shows, there is a moment in which Henry becomes a kind of blue-eyed apprentice to Connolly, a position that seems to be an excessive reward for his dubious merits: "'Is there anyone better than you, Henry?' 'No, Mister Connolly.' That's right. No one at all. Do you ever look into your eyes, Henry?' 'No, Mister Connolly.' 'You should, son. There's intelligence in there, I can see it sparkling. And creativity and anything else you want" (127). What history tells us is that Connolly actually had a kind of young apprentice whom the leader highly trusted. His name was John MacLoughlin and he was a sixteen-year old medical volunteer who embraced the spirit of the Rising unreservedly. The parallelisms that can be traced between these two characters reveal oppositions that heighten the novel's intention. Whereas Henry appears as a roguish, selfish and conceited character, MacLoughlin is described as a gregarious and devoted individual, always ready to serve the demands of the rebellion: "MacLoughlin had already earned a reputation for himself as a clear thinker and a brave fighter. He had been taken messages between the Mendicity Institution, the Four Courts and the GPO – so he had learned the hard way where British positions were and had dodged many a sniper's bullet" (Kostick and Collins 99).

In a highly representative episode as the 1916 Rising was, Henry deflates some of the icons that were supposed to be an emblem of pride for the combatants. Uniforms, in this vein, were not only part of the soldier's outfit but also a symbol of their Irish activism. In *Irish Rebellions* (1998), Helen Litton includes a document in which the Irish Volunteers asked their members to be appropriately equipped for the fight (1998, 103). Nevertheless, Henry shamelessly affirms that his uniform of the Irish Citizen Army has been the result of his forgeries and robberies: "It was Monday, the 24th of April. Just after noon. A beautiful, windless holiday. And Henry Smart, stark and magnificent in the Uniform of the Irish Citizen Army, was ready for war. In a uniform, he had bought bit by bit with money he had robbed and squeezed. In the uniform of the workers' army" (1999, 90). Henry's open declaration of his delinquent activities can be linked to historical facts Doyle also debunks in *A Star Called Henry*. Kostick and Collins argue that rebels were warned by the officers in charge not to take any economic advantage of the chaos brought about by the Rising, since they insisted that lootings would surely stain the image of the new republic to be (55).[6]

Doyle's demythologisation of the 1916 Easter Rising also seeks to dissect events that were considered epitomes of the fight for Irish freedom. In this sense, Liberty Hall became one of the key enclaves during the revolt since it garrisoned the most subversive and, occasionally, anarchic positions in the city of Dublin. Yet Liberty Hall was also protagonist of an emblematic event in the course of the Easter Rising. Responding to the growing accusations that Ireland depended on Germany in its struggle against Britain, James Connolly – at that moment leader of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union – decided to stretch a huge banner across Liberty Hall's façade. The banner – which read: "We Serve Neither King nor Kaiser, but Ireland" – was taken as a token of the Irish opposition against British rule and also as a declaration of the nation's capacity to establish an autonomous state. However, Henry soon deflates the sentimental significance of the banner, offering, instead, an alternative slogan that faithfully captures his sceptical personality: "I liked it that way. *We Serve Neither King Nor Kaiser*. So said the message on the banner that hung across the front of Liberty Hall, headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union. If I'd had my way, *Or Anyone Else* would have been added, instead of *But Ireland*. I didn't give a shite about Ireland" (91).

With this statement, Henry sounds as a mercenary who is not concerned with anything but himself, an attitude that explains why he is often characterised as a conceited and egotistical figure. He prides on believing that he has become a legend, when, in fact, he is often exposed to his own mediocrity. It is even more paradoxical that the character that most frequently boasts on his manliness throughout the novel is repeatedly discredited by the courage of women characters that take part in the Rising. In this case, Miss O'Shea – Henry's wife-to-be – seems to be a fictional correlate of Countess Markievizc, one of the leaders and co-founders of the so-called Cumann na mBan or Woman's League. Miss O'Shea's readiness for combat, which contrasts with Henry's cowardice, defies commonly accepted stereotypes and points to facts that took place during the revolt. When the Rising broke out, men assumed that women's sole function would be to serve food and tea to rebels as well to provide first aid, although members of the Cumann na mBan – at least fifteen – were allowed to participate in the military action (Kostick and Collins 76). In the following two passages, it can be appreciated how these traditionally accepted male-female roles are inverted, producing, thus, a highly ironic contrast. In the first one, Henry hides away when the British troops begin to shoot at the barricaded G.P.O:

> … and I could see the bullets, the air was packed with them and, for a fragment of a second, I could think and I jumped at a doorway and hid…. And there was Plunkett, held up by two men, trying to hold his sword up, one spur hanging crookedly and alone from one of his boots. He saw me. He stopped and made the two men stop in the sea of bullets and shouted. "Come out and fight, you cowardly cur" (134)

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Whilst Henry runs away from the confrontation, Miss O'Shea claims that: "'I can fire a gun as well as any man'" (132), proving that her fighting disposition clearly surpasses that of the "legendary" rebel.

It was argued above that the merit of *A Star Called Henry* is the way Doyle selects crucial episodes during the development of the Easter Rising in order to lay bare their lack of transcendence. One of these moments was the Proclamation of the Irish Provisional Government, a document that was elaborated by Pearse and Connolly and signed by Eamon Ceannt, Joseph Plunkett, Thomas McDonagh, Sean McDiarmada and Thomas Clarke. The military and ideological leaders of the Rising conceived it as a kind of *magna carta* where they put forward the social and political upon which the prospective Irish Government should be sustained. The Proclamation emerges, thus, as a partly political, partly literary writ in which Pearse's language permeated his exaltation of Irish myths, traditions, folklore and language.[7] According to George Boyce, Pearse arouse as the poet who gave voice to the Irish sagas that encumbered the warrior figure of Cuchulain and all the pagan heroes of pre-Christian Ireland (168). Politically speaking, Pearse's conception of Ireland was founded on all the ideals Henry repeatedly debunks and, which according to Boyce, were based on "intensely communal and totally insular" premises (1996, 168).

This image of passionate defender of the Irish nationhood was reinforced at the most crucial moment of the Easter Rising, the Proclamation of the Irish Provisional Government, in which Pearse proceeded to read the aforementioned manifesto outside Liberty Hall. For the spirit of the rebels, the Proclamation bore a deeply symbolical significance, for they perceived that the military operations and blood sacrifice were worth the effort. However, this event leads Doyle to enlarge his demystifying vision of the upheaval and, more specifically, of the blind patriotism Pearse conveyed during the reading of the Proclamation. Instead, he presents a completely ridiculous image of the leader, who is suddenly interrupted by her sister's command to return home: "Connolly was on the steps now, and Pearse behind him, and other officers coming out of the Hall…. A woman ran up the steps and shouted at Pearse. 'Come home!'…. 'Who's your woman?' I asked Paddy Swanzy who was standing to my left. 'Can't say that I know,' said Paddy. 'She's put the colour into Pearse's cheek, though, look it.' 'She's his sister,' said Seán Knowles" (93).[8]

It seems that Doyle that does not only seek to produce laughter but also to unveil a historical reality that ensued the Easter Rising and its aftermath. Although the rebel leaders pursued the strengthening of an Irish consciousness – so far restrained and ostracised by the British domination –, they eventually realised that the public reaction to the Rising became unexpectedly hostile. As Brendan O'Brien puts it: "When [the Rising] was over, much of central Dublin lay in ruin and many of the city's working-class slum areas were damaged by stray over-fire. The people were not amused by the antics of the insurgents, their seemingly farcical Proclamation and their extraordinary claim to be the provisional government of the country. Political and press reaction was hostile in the extreme" (11). It is also historically acknowledged that Dublin citizens

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adopted a vituperative stance against those who took part in the Rising, a fact that Doyle draws on in order to reinforce the demystifying tone of *A Star Called Henry* and also to question the nature and validity of a revolt that, in the long run, proved to be a failure. Like many other Irish writers before him, Doyle portrays Dublin and, generally speaking, Ireland itself, as passive and conformist, which, as the following conversation between Michael Collins and a Dubliner reveals, led many people to claim for the preservation of the British rule over their country:

> "Get down out of that now, missis. There's a war on." "I know there's a fucking war on," said the woman back at Collins. "Over in France, with my Eddie." "This a fuckin" post office,' said another one who was climbing up beside her. "You can't come in," said Collins. "Who'll stop us?" "The Army of the Irish Republic."? "he Irish wha.'?" "Republic." "e don't want a republic." "That's right. God save the fuckin' King" (102).

The previous passage points first to the fact that Dublin citizens did not know anything about the outbreak of a revolution and, as the woman states, the only war they were aware of was the First World War, in which Irish soldiers were massively called up to enrol in the British troops. Secondly, this woman gives voice to the generalised position adopted by the Irish during the Rising, that is, they felt that the establishment of a Republic and the subsequent withdrawal from the British crown would be a complete disaster for the country.

Nevertheless, historians also suggest that this initial opposition turned into sympathetic reactions once the executions of the Rising leaders began. Although Pearse publicly stated that the path for the salvation of Ireland would be sacrifice and martyrdom, the killings orchestrated by the British government and effected by General Maxwell caused consternation among Dubliners.[9] These executions, therefore, emerged as the best exponent of the spirit of self-sacrifice defended by Pearse and which was undergone by the rebels.[10] For Henry, however, the shootings of the rebel leaders did not arise any particular emotion or mourn because, as Doyle satirically describes, he was making love to a prostitute while the executions were taking place:

> One more exee-cution! One more exee-cution! John Mac Bride. *It is hoped,* said General Maxwell, *that these examples would be sufficient to act as a deterrent against intrigues, and to bring home to them that the murder of His Majesty's liege subjects, or other acts calculated to imperil the safety of the Realm will not be tolerated*… "Four more exee-cutions!" Heuston, Mallin, Con Colbert, Éamonn Ceannt. Annie was out foraging. I pushed away the sacks she used for curtains and looked down from her window at the top of the house (143-44).

It has been argued above that Henry's attitude towards the Rising is marked by the irreverence with which he faced crucial events in its development. While for some Irish

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rebels, the blood shed during the combat was a sign of patriotic commitment, Henry once more is more inclined to safeguard his most personal and selfish interests.

The demythologisation of Ireland's history has been a motif among Irish authors of all times. However, the significance of Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* is that he tackles a historical moment that encapsulates a profoundly symbolical meaning for the Irish. Through the eyes of Henry Smart, Doyle approaches the Easter Rising and its aftermath from a position of relative detachment, which enables him to endow the narration of such tragic week with recurrent serio-comic tinges. It is no wonder, thus, that Doyle's biting novel debunks leaders and soldiers alike, disregarding the political faction or ideological foundations they might stand up for. *A Star Called Henry*, in this sense, emerges as a story in which idealism is repeatedly flouted whereas Henry's egotism eventually finds its way in the ever-lasting complexities of Irish history.

Notes

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1 For a comprehensive study on Roddy Doyle's fiction, see Caramine White's *Reading Roddy Doyle*, 2001.

2 Related to this idea, Davis points out that: "Many of the revered heroes of the Irish war of indepedence whom Henry encounters, Doyle implies, were really more interested in improving their own fortunes than in freeing their country", 1999.

3 A similar reflection is elaborated by Brooke Allen who states that: "When it is Henry's turn to wield a gun, he betrays the real object of his rage by his unconventional choice of targets" (Allen 61).

4 In this respect, Helen Litton points out: "However, the commandants who assembled on Easter Monday morning found that most of their troops had simply not turned up, and those who had were very poorly armed and very short of ammunition" (Litton 102).

5 It is also very ironic that Henry's most recurrent weapon is his father's prosthetic leg, which does not only reveal the rudimentary military equipment of the rebels but also becomes the banner of the Republic: "'Henry,' said Connolly, 'Get out your father's leg.' 'Yes, sir,' I said. I took my daddy's leg and lifted it into the air. The Citizen Army had seen it before, and seen what it could do; it had broken heads and rozzers's fingers during the Lockout. 'Up the Republic,' I shouted" (133).

6 Doyle also refers to this fact in *A Star Called Henry* and, once again, the pretended idealism of the rebel leaders clashes with the pragmatism of the combatants. Whilst Henry and Paddy Swanzey consider that looting Irish shops is feasible since they are being robbed by Irish citizens, some others argue that this would constitute a shameful drawback in the process of the country's maturity (Doyle 114).

7 These were precisely the premises that originated the so-called Gaelic League, promoted by Eoin McNeill, who considered that Ireland should revive a past that had been historically overshadowed by the British rule.

8 The deflated image of Pearse responds to Doyle's intention to present a more human and down-to-earth image of a series of characters that had been long regarded as myths: "I wanted them all

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to be human beings. When I was eight, in 1966, for the 50th Commemoration of the 1916 Rising, these men were presented to us as mythical figures as saints" (Watchel 55).

9 In this respect, J. J. Lee points out that: "The consensus among historians is that an initially hostile public opinion was transformed by the executions into retrospective support, and romanticisation of, the rebels" (Lee 28-29).

10 Especially painful was James Connolly's execution. After being severely wounded in his leg and shoulder during the besiege of the G.P.O., Connolly was sent to Kilmainham Prison where he was tied to a chair and shot on May 12, 1916.

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