

# Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation": A Civil War Story of Brother Against Brother?

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## Abstract

This article argues that one of Ireland's literary greats Frank O'Connor (1903–1966) utilized the Irish War of Independence (WOI) as a backdrop for "Guests of the Nation," one of the most famous works about the Irish revolutionary period. The 1931 short story is set during the Irish WOI (1919–1921). This essay, however, wishes to explore the notion that a subsequent but separate conflict—the Irish Civil War (1922–1923)—was at the forefront of O'Connor's mind at the time of writing, with concepts of duty, brotherhood, and the questioning of hegemonic military codes suggesting the Civil War undercurrent throughout. Although the cast of characters presented in the story includes two captured English soldiers, Belcher and Hawkins (as well as their Irish captors Bonaparte—the narrator—Noble, and Jeremiah Donovan), the cottage and its inhabitants function, for the writer, as a literary prop that acts as a free landscape to create a "better world." This, it is argued here, allowed O'Connor to articulate his primary thoughts around the societal influences formed during the Civil War, a conflict of which, in contrast to the WOI, the writer had direct experience.

## Keywords

Civil War, duty, hauntings: a better world

## Introduction

"Guests of the Nation" concerns two English soldiers, Hawkins and Belcher, who are being held prisoner by a group of Irish Republican Army (IRA) volunteers somewhere in rural Ireland during the Irish War of Independence. Remarkably, the cottage resembles a familial arena of tranquility and quiet reflection, with the long days culminating each night with a friendly game of cards after an evening meal. The congenial nature and affection that pervades the atmosphere within the cottage belies the reality of events that are taking place in the outside world. As Bonaparte, the narrator relates: "it's my belief they never had an idea of escaping and were quite contented with their lot" (O'Connor, 1931, p. 3).

At its heart of the work is the conflict between political or military causes and the ethical concern for the individual. "Guests of the Nation" has come to be seen as a literary symbol of the anxieties and contradictions of war, as combatants on both sides of the military divide are united toward human kindness, transcending the social, political, and military world beyond their immediate orbit. Several characters express the wish to create a "socialist world" where their newfound friendship can continue free from the shackles of the dominant codes that dictate their lives. Overall, the piece provides an insight into the moral dilemmas that individuals face as they carry out their "duty" in response to the demands imported by their superiors.

Although set during the War of Independence (WOI) its author, Frank O'Connor, drew on his personal experiences of the Irish Civil War in writing the story—this is never made explicit. Indeed, as Jim McKeon has indicated, "The author's painful involvement in the Civil War was still fresh in his mind and writing these stories, getting them off his chest in a way, excoriated the spirits and the torment of that whole experience" (McKeon, 1998, p. 80). Significantly, the story was included in a three-play radio broadcast performance for Radio Éireann on February 1, 1959. The broadcast included O'Connor's stories entitled "The Martyr" and "Private Property." Intriguingly, the collective title for the broadcast is noteworthy for themes presented within this article; a surviving text of all three scripts lists the title as "Three plays of Civil War" (see Evans & Harp, 1998). This article outlines the clear resonances, explaining why O'Connor transferred the story to a different context.

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## The Man

Born in Cork in 1903, Frank O'Connor was the only child to an ex-British soldier and a mother entirely devoted to her son. The ill-fated 1916 Easter Rising and its aftermath influenced his revolutionary politics; joining the Gaelic League, he met and was heavily influenced by the writer Daniel Corkery, who cemented his pre-independence nationalism. O'Connor joined the Volunteers during the WOI but, at a young age, his contribution to the cause was very restricted, although he "once took a chance by limping along the length of Ballyhooly Road with a useless old rifle stuck down his trouser-leg. If caught, he would have been sent to jail" (McKeon, 1998, p. 35). Taking the anti-Treaty side in the eventual Civil War, here again he saw little combat but instead utilized his writing skills for propaganda for the Republican cause. O'Connor was eventually captured by Free State forces in February 1923 and remained imprisoned until his release in December that year. Interestingly, O'Connor came to view his internment as enabling an intellectual renaissance in him, as he considered his incarceration to be his surrogate university experience. He attended classes within the camp and met literary figures of the period. This awakening, including his experiences as a "guest of the nation," fuelled his literary ambitions and he went on to write a number of short story collectives (see McKeon, 1998; O'Connor, 1964).

## The Prisoner of Sunday's Well

O'Connor's only real conflict experience came with the Civil War, not the WOI. General Liam Deasy<sup>1</sup> sent O'Connor to Kilmallock, County Limerick, with dispatches and warned of possible enemy troops within the area and to check with the officer in charge at Charleville. O'Connor tells of this within his memoir, recalling how he "checked with the local commandant. He was still in bed but he assured me that there wasn't any enemy soldier within miles" (O'Connor, 1964, p. 217). This was reassuring, but the circumstances of that particular morning during the Civil War period were dictated by the need for the "whole Irish race" to attend mass on Sunday. Consequently, every roadblock, machine gun post, and picket was unmanned to attend the service. Therefore, the journey was initially quiet, but following mass another desire came into play, as O'Connor related:

But a considerable number of the enemy facing us were from the neighbourhood of Charleville, and after a longing for mass, an Irishman's strongest characteristic is his longing for home and mother, and anyone who new Ireland would have guessed that on that fine summer morning our whole front was being pieced in a dozen places by nostalgic enemy soldiers, alone or in force, all pining to embrace their mothers and discover if the cow had calved. (p. 218)

Consequently, enemy troops were in the area and approached O'Connor and his driver with rifles leveled. Fearful that important documents would fall into Free State hands, O'Connor was encouraged to eat the dispatches. However, it was apparent that "a horse couldn't have got down Deasy's dispatches in the minute or two that remained to me" (O'Connor, 1964, p. 218). O'Connor's inglorious Civil War combat experience came to an abrupt end then and there, on his first day of action. Nevertheless, Republicans were in force along the Kilmallock front. General Eoin O'Duffy of the Free State forces, who took control of the South Western Command, was acutely aware of the strong Republican presence within the area as "a pro-Treaty force of thirty had been surprised and captured between Kilmallock and Bruff" (Hopkinson, 2004, p. 151). Indeed, O'Duffy considered the complement of anti-Treatyites in this area to be "their best fighting men" (p. 151). Thus, O'Connor's eventual release from Free State captivity was secured thanks to this Republican presence coming to his aid.

Taken to a farmhouse, which acted as Free State headquarters following capture, O'Connor witnessed the horrors of Civil War at firsthand. A resulting firefight led to casualties and as O'Connor had misplaced his cap, and "as caps cost money," he lifted one off the floor. Tellingly, writing in his memoir, "Nowadays I merely wonder at my own behaviour with revulsion that I once wore a dead-boy's blood-stained cap" (O'Connor, 1964, p. 223). Returning to Cork city, O'Connor was eventually arrested following a visit to the French family who were sympathetic to the Republican cause. Unbeknown to O'Connor, the house was under constant surveillance and he was detained. He described his subsequent capture and imprisonment as a relief in the first instance. However, ghastly events within the Woman's Gaol in Sunday's Well Cork city, coupled with his farmhouse ordeal with Free State forces, would haunt the writer throughout his life and provide him with the raw material to construct the signal lines within his short stories.

Conditions within the prison were dire; O'Connor was locked in a cell with three other prisoners and the rat infested, filthy floor acted as their beds. Of greater significance, McKeon (1998) describes the overriding tension that existed within the prison:

Worse still was the feeling of uncertainty, of not knowing if they were to live or die, if they were the next to be dragged out and shot. There were daily executions and the inmates could hear the abuse, the screams, the crash of bullets followed by the deadly silence. (McKeon, 1998, p. 48)

Writing in his memoir, O'Connor recalled the barbarity meted out within Sunday's Well Gaol and a fellow inmate, an ex-British soldier, delivered a snarling protest toward his captors as a defenseless man was being tortured, shouting "Look at that . . . Skewered through the ass with bayonets"

(O'Connor, 1964, p. 243). Mckeon rightly highlights that O'Connor's Civil War experiences haunted him, and this was to reveal itself through his writing.

### **“Guests of the Nation”: A Story of Brother Against Brother?**

Whether O'Connor drew upon personal experience when he wrote “Guests of the Nation” will be explored at greater length; however, the writer would certainly have been aware of the occasionally friendly terms that existed between IRA Volunteers and captured British soldiers, as the writer James Matthews (1983) has pointed out: “I overheard a group of country boys talking about two English soldiers who had been held as hostages and who soon got to know the countryside better than their guards” (Matthews, 1983, p. 392). Another variation tells of a remote farm in County Kerry where two prisoners were sentenced to death, but the farmer on whose land they were captive “objected to disallowing the men benefit of clergy” (p. 72).

Similarly, “Guests of the Nation” conveys the perception that all the soldiers, who are relaxing after an evening meal, are comrades in arms. Previously, the Second Battalion held them captive and passed them onto Bonaparte's unit when “the search for them became too hot” (p. 2) and, again, they were treated as brothers and invited to local dances “seeing they were such decent fellows, our lads couldn't well ignore the two Englishmen” (p. 2). In conveying the camaraderie between all who encounter the Englishmen, O'Connor presented the humanity that exists between perceived enemies when they are free from the shackles of the overriding political and military ideologies that bind them. Indeed, in the cottage, they play cards as “chums” and the “old woman of the house” is symbolic of the longing for home and hearth, as Belcher, O'Connor wrote, cared for her as if she was his “kith and kin.” O'Connor endeavored to express these brotherly morals within the story, but the disguise of a WOI narrative permits him to project the horrors of the Civil War and the barbarity of executions within a narrative depicting the honorable fight against the British Crown forces. “Guests of the Nation” does not reflect the positive spirit of the Irish Volunteers and their cause for Irish freedom. O'Connor is tormented by his Civil War experiences, and they are played out within the narrative and the genuine brotherly affection that grew within the cottage represents the WOI Volunteer spirit. For the captured soldiers, the sense of genuine human warmth and tranquility permeates the cottage; nevertheless, the reality of war is about to destroy this happy scene. The eventual executions signify the Civil War with all its barbarity.

The haunting prospect of Civil War enmity is expressed through Jeremiah Donovan, the unit commander; although he plays cards as congenially as the rest of the group, the writer surreptitiously points out that his character, Donovan,

was able to emotionally detach himself from the human bonds that were created in the cottage: “Though he was a shy man and didn't speak much, it was easy to see he had no great love for the two Englishmen, and I was surprised it hadn't struck me so clearly before” (p. 5). Donovan—whose name, pointedly, closely resembles the famous physical force republican Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa—represents the fratricidal division of Civil War. Despite the English captives becoming “brothers” with their IRA captors, he is still able to give the order to kill them. Through Donovan, therefore, O'Connor was confronting his Civil War pain through the acceptable and convenient backdrop of the WOI. As discussed below, he would repeat this device throughout the story, displacing his narrative to an earlier and less divisive context.

### **Unquestioning Duty and a Better World Within “Guests of the Nation”**

The bonds of brotherly friendship are central to O'Connor's story. Through them, O'Connor conveys his inherent distress and longing for a better world. Throughout the narrative, the writer offers the notion that duty toward the bond of friendship is of greater importance to a pledge of political/military allegiance. This, then, will create the better world, the more brotherly world. O'Connor endeavored to harness this notion that duty toward one's brother is of paramount importance compared with the military codes imposed on combatants during conflict. This was not evident during O'Connor's Civil War.

Within “Guests of the Nation,” the captured soldiers are portrayed as British within the story, but the writer attempts to convey to the reader that they are all but natives of Ireland, who possessed a common bond and respect for the country and its peoples. The writer within the following extract conveys the sense of brotherly affection:

... for it was my fixed belief you could have planted that pair in any untended spot from this to Claregalway and they'd have stayed put and flourished like a native weed. I never seen in my short experience two men that took to the country as they did. (p. 2)

O'Connor has elevated his characters and frees them from the structures that bind their lives and, stripped of these, we are aware that they are human beings who freely integrate and embrace all they encounter and are happy to associate themselves with a perceived enemy. The two Irish captors, Bonaparte and Noble, contribute to this peaceful co-existence and all individuals are able to express themselves freely. Bonaparte and Noble, despite their position of power, treat their hostages with respect and are never domineering. What O'Connor is highlighting at this point is that actors, from whatever social, cultural, and political standpoint if

left to their own devices, will naturally find methods to live freely and harmoniously without outside interferences.

And again:

... Awkins made us look like right fools when he displayed that he knew the countryside as well as we did and something more better. You're the bloke they calls Bonaparte? he said to me. "Well, Bonaparte, Mary Brigid Ho'Connell was arskin about you and said ow you'd a pair of socks belonging to er young brother." (p. 2)

If the dialogue is a little parochial, it does display a great deal of intimacy and warmth considering how the conflict conveyed within the narrative divides these characters. O'Connor endeavors to show allegiance to the British soldiers, to the point where they are British only in name, and within their hearts and minds they are Irishmen having embraced the Irish people and its culture. It is also evident that Belcher and Hawkins are emotionally and socially interwoven with the Irishmen, so the distress that would be felt by executing both men was tantamount to killing one's own countrymen.

O'Connor presents the sense of genuine astonishment and revulsion felt by his character Bonaparte and his moral concern that both the British and the Irish will place humanity, honor and respect toward a captured enemy before the brutality of executions:

it is more likely the English wouldn't shoot our men, and anyhow it wasn't to be supposed the Brigade who were always up and down with the second battalion and knew the Englishmen well would be likely to want them bumped off. (p. 9)

O'Connor's Belcher is a quiet and dignified Englishman with genuine human qualities and a delicate appreciative love of home. This is his "better world": "my missus left me eight years ago. Went away with another fellow and took the kid with her. I likes the feelin' of a 'ome (as you may 'ave noticed) but I couldn't start after that" (p. 17). Indeed, Belcher is an integral actor within this egalitarian society that is the cottage, as his attention is entirely focused on the old lady who lived in the cottage—breaking sticks, carrying turf—to encourage and assimilate into this social utopia.

To accentuate that the cottage is free, albeit momentarily, from the realities of conflict, the Englishman Hawkins is the grand inquisitor who dutifully allies himself with the socialist principles he holds dear. O'Connor employs this character to unpick the dominant institutions that were present within Irish society at the time of writing. Indeed, in contrast to the subservient and ever willing Belcher, Hawkins questions the political and religious institutions that dominate their lives. The verbal spat between Noble, the Christian devotee, and Hawkins demonstrates O'Connor's determination to confront the hegemonic forces

that have infiltrated civil society: "The capitalists, says Hawkins, pays the priest to tell you all about the next world, so you won't notice what they do in this!" (p. 6). O'Connor is suggesting that this should be the ultimate aspiration for all actors, unfortunately, it is short-lived as an enmity rooted in O'Connor's experience of Civil War and the notion of "brother against brother" is evident as the story unfolds. From a leftist perspective, the dialogue speaks more to the political dynamic of *internal* struggle rather than the anti-imperialist imperative of national liberation from an *external* foe.

For Hawkins, to create a "better world" would be to model the social arena on socialist principles and free from the cloak of organized religion. However, the execution scene reveals that actors often have no choice but to submit to the political institutions that rule their lives and, with ruthless efficiency, their fate is sealed as the hierarchies induce the former friends to inflict acts of barbarism.

Donovan is conveyed as the most ruthless of IRA men, and as the British have executed captured Irish Volunteers, he intends on killing the British soldiers in reprisal, hence violating the harmony that existed within the egalitarian cottage stating "I want those two soldier friends of yours" (p. 10). In response to the news that Belcher and Hawkins are to be executed, Bonaparte's anguish is palpable, as he has befriended the captured Englishmen. Indeed, Averill (1969) notes that the execution scene "transforms the friendship into a paradigm of human brotherhood" (p. 34). It is precisely this "paradigm of human brotherhood," that is present from the first instance and the execution scene lays bare O'Connor's Civil War hauntings. His Civil War incarceration within Sunday's Well Gaol and a tortured young soldier was ever-present in his thoughts; the horror inflicted by fellow Irishmen is now played out as the narrative unfolds.

Hawkins acts as the inquisitor who attempts to salvage the human bond and the social utopia that was so present within the cottage, for he insists that despite their orders to carry out the executions, they should place their friendship and camaraderie before the orders of their superiors. Hawkins tries to resurrect the bond of brotherly friendship, if the tables were turned and the Englishmen were in a position of power to decide their fate:

What had he done to us? Weren't we all chums? Didn't we understand him and didn't he understand us? Did we imagine for an instant that he'd shoot us for all the so-and-so officers in the so-and-so British Army? (p. 8)

Hawkins is stating here that as friends, they must relinquish their commitment to the dominant political codes ruling their worlds—to reject this domination would be to realize the spirit that had evolved within the cottage. O'Connor's own critical stance toward the war, and the dominant orders

that have inflicted suffering on both sides, is that an individual must endeavor to question injustices that fly in the face of our inherent moral codes. He highlights this point where Hawkins turns again to his friendship with Noble if the tables were turned:

What do you think I'd do if I was in his place, out in the middle of a blasted bog?

"What would you do?" asked Donovan?

I'd go with him wherever he was going, of course. Share my last bob with him and stick by him through thick and thin. No one can ever say to me that I let down a pal.

For the last time, have you any messages to send?" said Donovan in a cold, exited sort of voice.

Shut up, Donovan! You don't understand me, but these lads do. They're not the sort to make a pal and kill a pal. They're not the tools of any capitalist. (pp. 8–9)

O'Connor utilizes the Englishman Hawkins, to herald the ideals of Republican socialism rather than an uncomplicated nationalism; he indicates that Bonaparte and Noble possess a common understanding with the Englishmen, and they would never, at any time, execute a comrade—particularly one who champions socialist principles. Certainly, O'Connor endeavors to depict Bonaparte's distress at the news that his "chums" are to be executed; however, the writer portrays the conflict between Bonaparte and Donovan as predominately ideological.

Although historians are agreed that the Irish Civil War was not played out along the lines of a conventional left-right split, this dialogue does illuminate how an anti-imperialistic socialism infused the ideological stance taken by prominent Republican leaders, with some arguing for a workers' republic. For example, in response to the disastrous fall of Limerick and Waterford in quick succession to Free State forces on July 20 and July 21, and the questioning of republican leader Liam Lynch's tactics and policies, the *Workers Republic* set out their stall for a new Ireland within their Editorial:

Under the Republic all industry will be controlled by the State for the workers' and farmers benefit.

All transport-railways, canals etc.—will be operated by the State, The Republican State, for the benefit of the workers and farmers. (Greaves, 2004, p. 358)

Moreover, although the Republican leadership was characterized by men of the gun, the prominent voice of Liam Mellows, later executed, advocated a socialist agenda to enhance, and give direction to, the Republican cause. His

captured notes were published in the newspapers as propaganda to highlight the Republicans' socialist ideals:

Free State equals capitalism and industrialism Equals empire . . . A political revolution without a coincident economic revolution merely means a change of masters. (Bourke, 2004, p. 96)

Although Mellows' words echoed those of executed Easter Rising leader James Connolly, it is important to note that a unified Irish socialist worldview did not culminate during the Irish Civil War. Republican socialist Peadar O'Donnell was less than flattering when it came to the republican leaders who occupied the Four Courts in April 1922, dismissing them as "uninspired, confused and feckless" (Ó Drisceoil, 2001, p. 25). In addition, O'Donnell said "The anti-Treaty Republican leadership had no clear policy" (McInerney, 1974, p. 55) and the singular desired move was for a change from British to Irish government: "they wanted no change in the basis of society. It was a political not a social revolution" (p. 42). During his journey around the west coast of Donegal, fellow republican and memoirist C.S. Andrews recalled O'Donnell's enthusiasm to embrace socialist principles. Nevertheless, this radical movement was not at the forefront of Andrews' mind:

The "class war" about which Peadar spoke so convincingly would have been unknown—even as a phrase—to almost everyone in the Movement. There were the British with their dependants and hangers on, of whom the objectionable group was the castle Catholics, and there were the Irish. (Andrews, 2001, pp. 213–214)

Significantly, "Guests of the Nation" teases out these tensions of idealism and pragmatism. O'Connor introduces this as an ideological split whereby the socialism/egalitarianism that was present within the cottage is countered by the orders of the Brigade officers to execute the English soldiers. As Stanley Renner (1990) correctly points out that "O'Connor's Englishmen are more humane than his Irishmen" (p. 373). In fact, O'Connor is drawing on this ideological split to highlight that for him, like O'Donnell, class, not nationalism, is a worthy bond. Renner (1990) described this overriding force in the story with the notion of "hidden powers" that subjugate their morals and the brutality inflicted on "human beings is dealt out by forces beyond their control" (p. 372). O'Connor, however, had no direct experience of the *national* struggle and instead drew on his experiences of the civil one.

Belcher's demise within the story reveals both humanity and inhumanity played out with equal intensity. Certainly, Belcher personifies the actor who freely submits to the dominant codes and, with a resigned acceptance, welcomes his execution to the point of tying his blindfold in readiness. Nevertheless, the theme of "duty" versus the concern for a human being is brought to the fore at this juncture. Again,

Renner suggests “institutional power that human beings have imposed on themselves is the military organization which holds the intangible power of duty over the soldiers in the story” (p. 372). Belcher is quietly dignified in acceptance of his fate and this dignity symbolizes the bond that exists between men who find themselves on opposing sides. It is left to the usually uncommunicative Belcher to bring to light how “duty” to a political cause will violate the principles of justice and brotherly affection:

“You don’t want to say a prayer?” asked Donovan. “No chum,” he said. “I don’t think it would help. I’m ready, and you boys want to get it over.” “You understand that we’re only going our duty?” said Donovan . . . “I never could make out what duty was myself,” he said. “I think you’re all good lads, if that’s what you mean. I’m not complaining.” (p. 11)

Atanasov Bogdan (2002) posits the question: “Does loyalty to your own people make it your patriotic duty to murder a helpless unarmed prisoner in cold blood?” (p. 78). The word “duty” is of great concern for this article, as it relates to the act of duty to a political/military institution as opposed to the moral and ethical concern, that is, a duty to the “brothers” within the cottage. In conflict, a set of ethical rules is maintained that inculcates the soldier to carry out the orders of high command in the knowledge that they are “doing their duty” in the face of questioning human morality. Indeed, as Bogdan (2002) suggests the protagonists within the story could have followed a more humane path: “Each of the characters could have acted otherwise. They could have followed their moral code” (p. 84). Indeed, a moral code that embraces all as brothers; a moral code that transcends the fratricidal division that Civil War brings.

Within his memoir, O’Connor quite sensitively and delicately related the anguish he felt following Erskine Childers<sup>2</sup> execution. Childers acted as Head of the Republican publicity department in Cork city, O’Connor “saw him on the Western Road during the evacuation of the city, merrily waving from the running board of a speeding lorry” (Borgonovo, 2011, p. 97). Arrested and carrying a small pistol tied to his braces, Childers—famous English author and Irish republican convert—was sentenced to death as the “Public Safety Bill, known to republicans as the ‘Murder Bill’” (Ó Drisceoil, 2001, p. 29), secured his fate. Consequently, the possession of arms was punishable by execution, and this moment captured O’Connor’s re-occurring Civil War hauntings:

And yet again and again in my own imagination, I have had to go through those last few terrible moments with him almost as though I was there: see the slight figure of the little grey-haired Englishman emerge for that last time into an Irish daylight . . . concerned only lest inadvertently he might do or say something that would distress some poor fool of an Irish boy who was about to level an English rifle at his heart. (O’Connor: p. 237–238)

O’Connor’s recollection of the death of the English-born Childers demonstrates how his consideration of English captives did not belong exclusively to the WOI; rather, it was built on direct experience of Civil War. The “terrible moments” of Civil War and the unfolding years, for the writer, neither produced a better world or a society that was concerned for all of its citizens and “young men and women would emigrate to the ends of the earth, not because the country was poor, but because it was mediocre” (O’Connor, 1964, p. 210).

Certainly, the sense of guilt felt by Republicans in the knowledge that pro-Treatyite friends were killed during this fratricidal conflict became apparent when the news reached anti-Treatyites that Michael Collins was dead. O’Connor confessed his outward joy when first hearing Collins had been killed, “but it was only later I remembered how Childers slunk away to his table silently, lit a cigarette, and wrote a leading article in praise of Collins” (p. 232). Liam Deasy offered his opinion, despite positioning himself in opposition to Collins:

“I considered him then to be the greatest leader of our generation and I have not since changed that opinion . . . His death caused nothing but the deepest sorrow and regret and brought about us a real desire for the end of the war.” (Deasy, 1998, p. 81)

The Béal na Bláth monument, erected and dedicated to General Michael Collins, August 30, 1924, is the reminder of a fallen leader but as Anne Dolan (2003) significantly points out, the monument represents a tragedy of Republican regret: “Sonny O’Neill, the man generally believed to have fired the fatal shot, only muttered ‘May the Lord have mercy on his soul’, and kept his secret for almost thirty years” (Dolan, 2003, p. 68). Jim Hurley, who also took part in the ambush, faced Seán Collins (Michael Collins’ brother) in 1923 with floods of tears, “all he could say was ‘How could we do it?’” (p. 68). Indeed, O’Connor certainly captured this overriding feeling of loneliness and regret within the story, and Bonaparte expresses his isolation in taking part in the executions: “I was somehow very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow” (O’Connor, 1931, pp. 11–12). The perceived “enemy,” the Englishmen, possess genuine appealing human attributes and embraced, initially, as brothers within Irish customs and culture. Indeed, the camaraderie is fractured, he is alone like a child lost in the snow, and something had “changed forever” within O’Connor’s soul.

### Civil War Unwritten: “We loved each other and were ignorant”<sup>3</sup>

Robert Evans and Michael Probst (1998) have rightly highlighted the “parallels—in phrasing, rhythm, and meaning of final sentences” (pp. 194–195) within both the short story and a horrific account within Sunday’s Well prison during O’Connor’s Civil War internment. The final sentence offered

in “Guests of the Nation” reads “And anything that happened to me afterwards, I never felt the same about again” (p. 21). The sentence taken from his memoir, *An Only Child* (O’Connor, 1964) reads: “Certainly that night changed something forever in me” (p. 244). Introducing the extract in full captures the sense of despair within his memoir:

A Free State officer was standing by the door of one cell, and we went in. Under the window in the gas-light that leaked in from the corridor what seemed to be a bundle of rags was trying to raise itself from the floor. I reached out my hand and shuddered because the hand that took mine was like a lump of dough. When I saw the face of the man whose hand I had taken, I felt sick, because that was also like a lump of dough . . . A few days later the boy was shot . . . the battered face of that boy wasn’t in any book, and even ten years later, when I was sitting reading in my flat in Dublin, the door would suddenly open and he would walk in and the book would fall from my hands. Certainly, that night changed something forever in me. (O’Connor, 1964, pp. 243–244)

Eight years had passed when the collection of stories, *Guests of the Nation* (1931) was published; however, the distresses of these events are apparent within his writing. The killing of fellow Irishmen infected his thoughts and tarnished every aspect of O’Connor’s life—“anything that happened afterwards” would always be tempered, and comparisons made, in the knowledge that Irishmen perpetrated gross acts of inhumanity, most infamously the March 1923 Ballyseedy massacre in neighboring County Kerry. Ballyseedy was itself retaliation for previous republican attacks in the area. Atrocities perpetrated by both sides sewed the deep bitterness between pro and anti-Treatyites, and the result lingered long in Irish society. For O’Connor, the Civil War combatant, these hauntings “will be guests of his memories, his thoughts, his notions—guests of his notions—from that point on” (Renner, 1990, p. 121).

Evans and Probst (1998) have drawn comparisons with “Guests of the Nation” and its author’s experiences during the Civil War. They suggest that “fact” and “fiction” seem to “blur, merge, and combine” (Evans and Probst, 1998, p. 195). In addition, both writers acknowledge that “His habit, notoriously, was to revise even his most accomplished works” (p. 191), and with this in mind, let us consider an important omission.

A comparative analysis of the 1931 first edition of “Guests of the Nation,” with the subsequent same short story reprinted in 1966 entitled *Collection Two*, reveal that the writer omitted a paragraph that was included within the original publication. What is so important about this omission is that it refers to the Civil War. The paragraph reads:

So I Lay there half the night, and thought and thought, and picturing myself and young Noble trying to prevent the Brigade from shooting Awkins and Belcher sent a cold sweat through

me. Because there were men on the Brigade you daren’t let nor hinder without a gun in your hand, and at any rate, in those days disunion between brothers seemed to be an awful crime. I knew better after. (O’Connor, 1931, p. 9—my emphasis)

In omitting this paragraph from the later edition, this version of “Guests of the Nation” has a common theme and flow that directly addresses the tensions O’Connor experienced firsthand during the Irish Civil War. By removing this paragraph, O’Connor extinguishes the underlying hauntings of the Civil War haunting him. The absent paragraph testifies that the war of “brother against brother” was at the forefront of his mind at the time of writing, and the “awful crime” of “disunion between brothers” resulted in atrocities whereby “poor boys from the lanes” (O’Connor, 1964, p. 254) were executed without trial, after being ruthlessly tortured. His memoir reveals the acknowledgment that these crimes “changed something forever” in O’Connor’s mind, and writing in 1931, his nightmares revealed themselves.

## Conclusion

Read in a Civil War light, O’Connor’s “Guests of the Nation” provides insight into the anguish of Irishmen ordered to execute Irishmen. The figure of Donovan, by contrast, displays the sense of detachment that was necessary to implement the official policy of executions of captured Republicans, and men of his ilk were called upon during the Civil War. The “chums” within “Guests of the Nation” crossed the divide that was the “Tan War,” but this did not stop their executions as “duty” toward their respective political positions took precedence over human life. This was mirrored during the Civil War, as the Free State government sanctioned executions on those who opposed the Treaty. Furthermore, “anything that happened afterwards” inevitably included the writing process, and within “Guests of The Nation,” the text exhibits the “terrible moments” of Civil War. O’Connor grapples with his thoughts within the story and human emotions and military principles are interwoven throughout the narrative. The “brothers” within the cottage personified the human bond of friendship and genuine affection, what lay outside was the horror of war, but O’Connor’s war was a civil conflict. Certainly, this added grief of a war against brother was at the forefront of his mind at the time of writing “Guests of the Nation.” Indeed, O’Connor fittingly described his thoughts of the Civil War period within his autobiography: “It was clear to me that we were all going mad, and yet I could see no way out” (O’Connor, 1964, p. 240).

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## Notes

1. Liam Deasy Born 1888 died 1974; sided with the anti-Treatyites; commander of experienced fighting men; following arrest, he called for an end to Civil War hostilities.
2. Erskine Childers Born 1870 executed November 24, 1922. Served as Irish secretary during the treaty talks; took the anti-Treaty side; Propagandist and censor for the *Examiner*; this was the IRA “mouthpiece throughout Republican-controlled Munster” (Borgonovo, 2011, p. 48).
3. William Butler Yeats (2000).

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