

‘Never justify. Never explain’: Some Thoughts on Irish Political Memoirs

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The title of this chapter comes from the late Charles J. Haughey. When interviewing the former Taoiseach for a biography of Martin Mansergh, his longtime advisor, I asked for his thoughts on putting pen to paper on his own life story. ‘Never justify. Never explain’, was his initial response.¹ He proceeded to express distain at former political leaders who had engaged in retrospective analysis of decisions taken when they held governmental office. Bob Hawke, the former Australian prime minister, was singled out for specific mention. The pages of Hawke’s autobiography – Haughey contended – made for turgid reading as the author sought to explain decisions that would have been better left to others to judge in the fullness of time.

1 Kevin Rafter, *Martin Mansergh: A Biography* (Dublin, 2002).

Haughey is a member of a significantly large club of former Irish politicians who have refrained from telling their life stories in book form. None of his six predecessors as head of government wrote a memoir. Indeed, by the time Garret FitzGerald's *All in a Life* was published in 1991 no other former Taoiseach, and only one other former member of cabinet, had penned a published memoir.² Autobiography has been described as the 'Cinderella genre' of Irish literature.³ Political autobiography or memoir fares even worse. There was reference in 1996 of 'the dearth of Irish political memoirs'.⁴ Eighteen years later, Tom Garvin could still lament 'the short shelf of books written by Irish political leaders'.⁵ Yet, from an era of almost complete absence there has been a relative boom in Irish political memoir writing in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This increased activity – even from a low base – is evident by the fact that in the period since FitzGerald's first memoir appeared in 1991 up to the end of 2014 two more former Taoisigh (and a second memoir from FitzGerald) have been published alongside several books by other senior political figures.

This chapter focuses on Irish political memoir published since 1922. The term 'memoir' is used throughout the text

2 Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life* (Dublin, 1991).

3 Liam Harte, 'Introduction: autobiography and the Irish cultural moment' in Liam Harte (ed.), *Modern Irish Autobiography Self, Nation and Society* (London, 2007), p. 1.

4 Martin Mansergh, 'Foreword' in J. Anthony Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly – A Founder of Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 1996), p. 11.

5 See Garvin's endorsement on back cover of Desmond O'Malley, *Conduct Unbecoming – A Memoir* (Dublin, 2014). I was involved in the preparation of the pre-publication draft of O'Malley's memoir. Several books discussed in this chapter were written with the assistance of an academic or professional writer; in some instances the extent of this assistance is acknowledged in the memoir foreword, even in some cases going as far as listing the contributor as a 'co-author'.

although the difference between memoir and autobiography is not always clear-cut and is contested.⁶ Autobiography is generally viewed as more inward looking and personally reflective while the concentration in a memoir is on the external career. In reality, the terms are interchangeable as illustrated by the book titles by politicians examined in this chapter. Life-stories penned by Irish politicians generally trade as ‘memoirs’. It is the descriptive label favoured by most authors. The word ‘memoir’ features in the title of several books by many politicians including Barry Desmond, Conor Cruise O’Brien, Mary O’Rourke, Ivan Yates and Desmond O’Malley.⁷ Interestingly, Ivan Yates’s 2014 life story is labelled ‘a memoir’ in its title but the former Fine Gael minister uses both memoir and autobiography as descriptive terms on the opening page of the book.⁸ Elsewhere, Bertie Ahern’s preference was ‘the autobiography’ while Albert Reynolds opted for the more personal, ‘my autobiography’.⁹

The value of political memoir

Memoirs are frequently the most widely read form of political writing. They undoubtedly have a higher readership than most academic publications. Moreover,

6 Stephen Hopkins, *The Politics of Memoir and the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Liverpool, 2013), pp 5–6.

7 See, for example, Barry Desmond, *Finally and In Conclusion – A Political Memoir* (Dublin, 2000); Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Memoir: My Life and Themes* (London, 1998); Mary O’Rourke, *A Memoir Just Mary* (Dublin, 2013); Ivan Yates, *Full On – A Memoir* (Dublin, 2014); Desmond O’Malley, *Conduct Unbecoming – A Memoir* (Dublin, 2014).

8 Yates, *Full On*, p. 1.

9 Bertie Ahern (with Richard Aldous), *The Autobiography*, (London, 2009); Albert Reynolds (with Jill Arlen), *My Autobiography* (Dublin, 2009).

extending a point made about political biography, most memoirs by well-known politicians attract a readership 'beyond the purely scholarly interest or the political junkie market'.¹⁰ The value of political memoir, however, goes beyond general readership levels. For example, in the United Kingdom both parliament and government are in agreement that 'there is a strong public interest in the publication of political memoirs and diaries'.¹¹ This view is primarily influenced by a belief that these publications provide valuable insights into the operation of the political, governmental, and official systems.

In the wider context of Irish literary autobiography Claire Lynch argues that life stories can provide 'insight into the thoughts and experiences' of important authors.¹² A similar case can be made for political memoir. As source material these publications can have historical validity. Moreover, in his study of memoir in Northern Ireland Stephen Hopkins comprehensively makes the case that 'careful reading and interpretation of these memoirs can provide genuine insights into the lived experience and retrospective judgments of key protagonists'.¹³ Well-written memoirs can – as Andrew Gamble observes – 'contribute something to our understanding of how policies were

10 Tracey Arklay, John Nethercote and John Wanna (eds), 'Preface' in *Australian Political Lives: Chronicling Political Careers and Administrative Theories* (Canberra, 2006), p. xii.

11 See *Whitehall Confidential: The Publication of Political Memoirs: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report of Session 2005–06*, Public Administration Select Committee, Fourth Special Report of Session 2007–08, HC91 (Nov. 2007).

12 Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography – Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Bern, 2009), p. 5.

13 Hopkins, *The Politics of Memoir*, p. 189.

actually formulated and implemented'.¹⁴ Insider accounts bring readers into rooms not normally accessible. They offer a sense of the atmosphere that prevailed at the time when decisions were taken, away from the public domain, that no official document released many years later can ever provide. Memoirs from political colleagues – and indeed, foes – can present different perspectives of the same event. Historians and political scientists may prefer to settle on a definitive version of an event but real politics – and the reality of government – is often less precise.

The genre of political memoir is not without its critics, particularly from within the academic community. These books have been dismissed largely on account of what has been described as 'their self-serving perspective' as authors seek to establish their place in the history books.¹⁵ Memoirs are different from official history, or the work of a historian or a political scientist. They are primarily motivated by a desire to cement political legacy and achieve what has been described as 'historical impact'.¹⁶ They are partial accounts from one individual's perspective, most aptly captured by Desmond O'Malley in his 2014 memoir as, 'mere impressions, not history'.¹⁷

Irish politicians tend not to maintain personal papers or to keep diaries. Their works of memoir generally do not contain footnotes or references to source materials. Even Garret FitzGerald – in what can be described as

14 Andrew Gamble, 'Political memoirs' in *Politics*, 14 (1) 1994, pp 35–41 at 39.

15 Conor McGrath, 'Policy making in political memoirs: The case of the poll tax' in *Journal of Public Affairs*, 2 (2) 2002, pp 71–84.

16 David Richards and Helen Mathers, 'Political memoirs and New Labour: interpretations of power and the 'Club Rules'' in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 12, 2010, pp 298–522.

17 O'Malley, *Conduct Unbecoming*, p. ix.

the most comprehensive Irish political memoir in terms of length and detail given to specific events – felt the need to acknowledge that he only briefly kept a diary. FitzGerald did, however retain papers and documents, which at intervals from 1977 he lodged with the archives department at University College Dublin.

The political sections of this book are firmly based on this archive, supplemented by my memory, of the fallibility of which in the absence of a contemporary record I am very conscious ... The material upon which I have drawn in relation to Northern Ireland and the Department of Foreign Affairs include memoranda, notes of discussions, letters, and summaries of phone calls, as well as extensive reports, usually in dialogue form, that I dictated immediately after Ministerial meetings that I attended as Minister for Foreign Affairs in the absence of civil service participation, as well as negotiating meetings in connection with the Anglo-Irish Agreement.¹⁸

FitzGerald is, however, somewhat of an exception as an Irish political memoir writer. Most Irish politicians in their memoirs draw primarily on personal memory rather than extensive collections of personal papers or even making use of government archives released from their period in office. As Patrick Lindsay informed his readers, 'this book is called *Memories* because that is what it is. I have never kept a diary or a fee book, so everything which follows is based purely on my recall of events past'.¹⁹ Similarly, Pádraig Faulkner

¹⁸ FitzGerald, *All in a Life*, p. ix–x.

¹⁹ Patrick Lindsay, *Memories* (Dublin, 1992), p. vii.

admitted his memoir was based on ‘memories of events as I saw them’.²⁰ In the same vein, for Joseph Connolly, his life-story was ‘a simple record of what I knew, saw and experienced during an eventful period of our history’.²¹ The emphasis in all cases is every much on the ‘I’ – the personal perspective and individual recollection of the writer.

A reliance on memory can be a problem in recalling past events, and highlights another weakness with this genre of political writing. A further difficulty emerges when the writer either sidesteps, or simply ignores, controversial episodes in their own career. We see this, for example, in Eamon Gilmore’s 2010 book *Leading Lights*, which glosses over the more controversial aspects of Workers’ Party membership at a time in the late 1980s and early 1990s when allegations of criminality engulfed the party.²² The memoir writer may, of course, even with full recall, be selective in the treatment of events in which they directly participated or even observed at close quarters. This is not an unexpected feature of memoir given we are dealing with an individual’s personal interpretation of specific events. Pádraig Faulkner’s memoir is a case in point. When discussing the 1977 Fianna Fáil election manifesto, Faulkner dismissed criticism of the controversial document:

... the negative attitude towards the Manifesto persists to the present day. It is reinforced by the writings of some social observers, most of whom uncritically recorded the myths as fact. In reality

20 Pádraig Faulkner, *As I Saw It – Reviewing Over 30 Years of Fianna Fáil and Irish Politics* (Dublin, 2005).

21 J. Anthony Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly – A Founder of Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 1996), p. 432.

22 Eamon Gilmore (with Yseult Thornley), *Leading Lights* (Dublin, 2010).

the Manifesto introduced many of the major reforms necessary for Ireland's progress today. I am still convinced that it was an excellent programme that brought many lasting benefits for the Nation.²³

Alongside retrospective justification of decisions taken during political careers authors may also seek to reinterpret past controversies to suit their personal narrative. In relation to memoirs written by participants associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland it has been argued that authors may be 'tempted to embellish or invent aspects of their narrative for the purposes of their overarching political vision'.²⁴ Authors may also use the opportunity of writing a book to continue past battles and to settle old scores. Noel Browne most famously spared few former colleagues in his memoir, *Against The Tide*, although he presented his motivation in writing the book as correcting wrongs:

Being neither a diarist nor a historian, I cannot claim that this book is a definitive history. It was written with some reluctance, and only after long consideration, in order to correct the inaccuracies of other accounts about a number of important incidents.²⁵

Browne's portraits of his cabinet colleagues in the inter-party government formed in 1948 are biting and, in truth, a rarity in Irish political memoir. As a minister, Browne claimed, he sat in 'a cabinet room full of dull, earnest

23 Faulkner, *As I saw It*, pp 126–27.

24 Hopkins, *The Politics of Memoir*, p. 10.

25 Noel Browne, *Against the Tide* (Dublin, 1986), p. vii.

and dutiful plodders'.²⁶ The problem with personal score settling is that later memoir writers can hit back. For example, Browne's 1986 memoir met sharp criticism in subsequent books written by Conor Cruise O'Brien (1998) and Barry Desmond (2000). O'Brien admitted that after the 1969 general election – when the two men had shared an office in Leinster House for a number of weeks – he quickly came 'to regard him [Browne] as half-mad and dangerous to know'.²⁷ Desmond described Browne's book as a 'poisonous denigration of some 90 persons he came across in his career' that contained 'grossly offensive' and 'ill-judged' portraits of political figures.²⁸

Memoir in Irish politics

As a publishing genre the Irish political memoir is a relatively recent phenomenon. Few Irish politicians, as noted previously, from the initial decades after independence felt compelled to write memoirs. In Table 1, twenty-seven books by twenty-six Irish politicians are identified as being published from 1922 to 2014 – all but eight of these memoirs have a publication date of the year 2000 or afterwards. Garret FitzGerald having written two books explains the discrepancy between the total number of authors and the total number of books.

A number of reasons may explain the initial restraint in Irish political memoir activity. First, the post-independence generation of political leaders rarely elaborated in detail on their personal involvement in the violence that transformed

²⁶ Ibid, p. 197 and p. 189.

²⁷ Cruise O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 323.

²⁸ Desmond, *Finally*, p. 118.

Ireland after 1916. A preference for self-imposed silence would not have been sustainable with memoir writing. Second, some retired political figures may have adhered to an acceptance of the need for lasting confidentiality so that government could continue to function effectively. Third, the spirit of cabinet confidentiality – more recently given constitutional protection – may also have hardened adherence to a form of secrecy about governmental involvement that prevailed over memoir writing. This outlook is captured in discussions in a British context where it has been argued that, ‘cabinet government would not be improved if those around the table were aware that any one or more of them was intending to publish their own account of Cabinet the moment the meeting had ended’.²⁹

Explaining and defending decisions taken in office alongside framing a legacy have been identified as among the main reasons for penning a political memoir. It is difficult to ascribe the change in attitude towards memoir writing amongst a more recent generation of Irish politicians as exclusively driven by a greater awareness of legacy over those who served in the initial decades following independence. Profit and personalisation may offer better explanations. The increase in this particular book genre may well be influenced by changes in the wider book market. Publishers are now more aware of the strong sales potential of political life stories. Writers are also aware of the royalty cheques on offer although in a limited Irish book market the sums involved are still relatively modest.

29 *Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs*, Public Administration Select Committee, Fifth Report of Session 2005–06, HC 689 (July 2006), p. 21.

Alongside sales and profit the trend towards more memoir publication may also be a by-product of the increased prevalence of the ‘personal’ in political life.

The list of book titles in Table 1 is subject to qualification and exclusion. The earliest published work on the list is Dan Breen’s revolutionary era memoir from 1924.³⁰ Breen’s book, published shortly after he was first elected to Dáil Éireann, is, however, more properly placed in the catalogue of nationalist memoir including books by individuals such as Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, Tom Clarke, Tom Barry, Ernie O’Malley and Maud Gonne. Following Breen’s book it was another half century before another political memoir appeared – Noel Browne’s *Against the Tide* in 1986. In that intervening period, however, Joseph Connolly did compile a memoir including significant detail on his time as a minister in the 1930s.³¹ Connolly’s manuscript, however, while written in the late 1950s, was only published posthumously in 1996. Similarly, the memoir of Seán McBride (who died in 1988) – and which concludes with the end of the inter-party government in 1951 – was only published in 2005.³²

Books by some public representatives have been omitted. The trilogy of post-Arms Crisis books penned by former minister Kevin Boland contain some personal reflections but are primarily concerned with his re-assessment of Irish politics following his acrimonious split from Fianna Fáil.³³ In a similar view Ray MacSharry’s co-authored book on the Irish economy and John Horgan’s book on the Irish

30 Dan Breen, *My Fight for Irish Freedom* (Dublin, 1924).

31 Gaughan (ed.), *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly*.

32 Seán MacBride, *That Day’s Struggle: A Memoir 1904–1951* (Dublin, 2005).

33 Kevin Boland, *Up Dev* (Dublin, 1977); *The Rise and Fall of Fianna Fáil* (Cork, 1983); *Fine Gael: British or Irish?* (Cork, 1984).

Table 1: Irish Political Memoirs

Name	Party	Elected	Positions Held	Political Retirement	Publication Date
Taoiseach					
Garret FitzGerald	FG	1969	Min 1973–77; Taoiseach 1981–82; 1982–87	1989	1991 & 2012*
Albert Reynolds	FF	1977	Min 1979–81; 1982; 1987–91; Taoiseach 1992–94	2002	2010
Bertie Ahern	FF	1977	MoS 1982; Min 1987–94; Taoiseach 1997–2008	2011	2010
Minister					
Joseph Connolly	FF	1928	Min 1932–36	1936	1996**
Seán MacBride	CP	1947	Min 1948–51	1961	2005
Noel Browne	CP/Ind/FF/ NPD/Lab	1948	Min 1948–51	1982	1986
Patrick Lindsay	FG	1954	MoS July 1956–Oct 1956; Min Oct 1956–Mar 1957	1973	1992
Pádraig Faulkner	FF	1957	MoS 1965–68; Min 1968–73; 1977–80	1987	2005
Paddy Harte	FG	1961	MoS 1981–82	1997	2005
John O’Connell	Lab/Ind/FF	1965	Min 1992–93	1993	1989
David Andrews	FF	1965	MoS 1970–73; 1977–79; Min 1992–94 & 1997–2000	2002	2007
John O’Leary	FF	1966	MoS 1977–79	1997	2015
Desmond O’Malley	FF/PD	1968	MoS 1969–70; Min 1970–73, 1977–81; 1982; 1989–92	2002	2014
Conor Cruise O’Brien	Lab	1969	Min 1973–77	1977	1998
Barry Desmond	Lab	1969	MoS 1981–82; Min 1982–87	1994	2000
Gemma Hussey	FG	1982 (F)	Min 1982–87	1989	1999
Ruairi Quinn	Lab	1977	MoS 1982–83; Min 1983–87; 1992–97; 2011–14	–	2006
Ivan Yates	FG	1981	Min 1994–97	2002	2014
Mary O’Rourke	FF	1982 (N)	Min 1987–92; MoS 1992–94; Min 1997–2002	2011	2012
Austin Currie	FG	1989	MoS 1994–97	2002	2004
Eamon Gilmore	WP/DL/Lab	1989	MoS 1994–97; Min 2011–14	–	2010
John McGuinness	FF	1997	MoS 2007–09	–	2010
Other					
Dan Breen	FF	1923	TD 1923–27; 1932–65	1965	1924
Mary Robinson	Lab/Ind	1969	Senator 1969–89; President 1990–97	1997	2012
Dana Rosemary Scallon	Ind	1999	MEP 1999–2004	2007	2009
Dan Boyle	Green	2002	TD 2002–07; Senator 2007–11	–	2012
David Norris	Ind	1987	Senator 1987 – present	–	2013

*FitzGerald published two separate books of memoir – All in a Life in 1991 and Just Garret in 2010. **Connolly was a member of the Free State Senate from 1928 to 1936. Although never a member of Dáil Éireann he served as a minister from 1932 to 1936 following a nomination by Eamon de Valera.

Labour Party – while both drawing on personal insider knowledge – do not qualify as memoirs.³⁴ The multiple memoirs of Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams deal with his life and career in Northern Ireland and were published before his election to Dáil Éireann in 2011.³⁵ Gordon Wilson lost his daughter in the Provisional IRA's bomb attack in Enniskillen in 1987, in which he was also injured. On account of his work for peace in Northern Ireland Albert Reynolds appointed Wilson to the Seanad as a Taoiseach's nominee in 1993. His memoir had, however, been published three years previously.³⁶ Longtime member of Seanad Éireann Fergal Quinn has written a number of books on business but none, as yet, on his career in politics.³⁷

In terms of qualifications to the titles in Table 1 it should be noted substantial parts of the life-stories of some memoir writers were located in Northern Ireland although they had political involvement south of the border. Specifically, Austin Currie³⁸ a Fine Gael TD from 1989 to 2002, minister of state from 1994 to 1997 and unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1990 and Dana Rosemary Scallon³⁹ an unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1997 and MEP from 1999 to 2004.

34 Ray MacSharry and Padraic White *The Making of the Celtic Tiger The Inside Story of Ireland's Boom Economy* (Dublin, 2001); John Horgan *The Price of Power* (Dublin, 1986)

35 Gerry Adams, *Falls Memories* (Kerry, 1982); *Before the Dawn: An Autobiography* (Kerry, 1996); *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland* (Kerry, 2003).

36 Gordon Wilson (with Alf McCreary), *Marie: A Story from Enniskillen* (London, 1991).

37 See, for example, Fergal Quinn, *Crowning the Customer: How to Become Customer-Driven* (Dublin, 2006) and *Mind Your Own Business: Survive and Thrive in Good Times and Bad* (Dublin, 2013).

38 Austin Currie, *All Hell Will Break Loose* (Dublin, 2004).

39 Dana Rosemary Scallon, *All Kinds of Everything* (Dublin, 2007).

Several memoirs suffer, to a degree, due to the timing of their publication. For example, John O'Connell's memoir was written prior to his elevation as Minister for Health in 1992.⁴⁰ The book concentrates on his two-decade membership of the Labour Party but has less to say about his time in Fianna Fáil, the party he joined in 1983. Ruairí Quinn's memoir in 2006 chronicles his extensive political career up to the end of his period as Labour Party leader but obviously pre-dates his unexpected subsequent return to cabinet from 2011 to 2014 at the height of the economic crisis.⁴¹ There are also limitations with Patrick Lindsay's memoir, specifically as his senior ministerial career included a mere five months at the cabinet table at the end of the life of the second inter-party government in 1956–57.⁴²

Most memoirs are written and published when political careers have reached their end. More recently, however, a number of serving politicians have penned memoirs. In the case of Dan Boyle and John McGuinness there was obviously a desire to capture the immediacy of their recent political involvement. Few non-ministerial politicians write memoirs primarily because they are outside the main centres of power and decision-making. Removed from the principal action their stories have less appeal to the public and also to publishers. Boyle's account of Green Party involvement in the 2007–11 coalition government with Fianna Fáil is a rare example of a book by a senior political insider who did not hold ministerial rank. One

40 John O'Connell, *Doctor John – Crusading Doctor and Politician* (Dublin, 1989).

41 Ruairí Quinn, *Straight Left – A Journey in Politics* (Dublin, 2006).

42 Patrick Lindsay, *Memories*.

of the strengths of Boyle's book is his use of internal party minutes and direct quotations from key colleagues as Brian Cowen's government was collapsing in late 2010. For example, Green Party leader John Gormley is recorded as telling his colleagues on 17 November 2010, 'It's so hard to get to the truth; very difficult to get a clear picture at Cabinet'. A day later, he admits, 'I know why we're leaving. We can't work with them any more'.⁴³ The capture and publication of this type of verbatim account of private meetings is unusual in Irish political memoirs.

McGuinness's focus on his time as a minister of state at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (2007–09) is dominated by his poor view of the civil/public service. His frustration with the pace of activity on his work programme is evident throughout the text. The following passage is a typical example:

I discovered quickly that it is very difficult for a reforming Minister to work in an environment where some colleagues are stuck in another age, unionised, unmoving and lacking in flexibility. There was no drive or direction among the staff in the Department despite the fact that there were some very good, committed and hardworking people among them.⁴⁴

The book stands out from other Irish political memoirs in offering this type of unrelenting criticism of the

43 Dan Boyle, *Without Power or Glory – The Greens In Government* (Dublin, 2012) p. 217 and p. 220

44 John McGuinness and Naoise Nunn, *The House Always Wins – Time to Turn the Tables* (Dublin, 2010).

administrative system. But McGuinness actually follows a conventional approach in not naming individual civil or public servants or going into specific detail about the advice they offered. A good example of this general approach towards non-identification of public officials is evident in an extract from Garret FitzGerald's second memoir in relation to policy discussions on Northern Ireland: 'In the subsequent discussion in a wider forum, including Jim Dooge [Minister for Foreign Affairs] and the civil servants, we also discussed the proposed parliamentary tier to the planned Anglo-Irish Council'.⁴⁵

A similar convention at Westminster regarding the treatment of civil servants emerged in 1992 with the publication of Nigel Lawson's memoir, based on his period as Chancellor of the Exchequer under Margaret Thatcher. The book – *The View from Number 11: the Memoirs of a Tory Radical* – 'provoked concern within the Government because of its accounts of discussions between Cabinet members and its references to advice from named civil servants'.⁴⁶ A British cabinet committee subsequently examined this matter and, in a written memo in 1993, advised that memoir writers:

... refrain from publishing information destructive of the confidential relationships of ministers with each other, and of ministers with officials. In particular, references to individuals and their view of particular circumstances may be permitted provided that their disclosure would not damage

⁴⁵ Garret FitzGerald, *Just Garret: Tales from the Political Front Line* (Dublin, 2010), p. 325.

⁴⁶ See *Whitehall Confidential?* (2007), p. 10.

either ministers or officials—particularly those still in office—in their work ...⁴⁷

Along with the memoirs from McGuinness and Boyle, Eamon Gilmore's *Leading Lights* is another recent book published while the author was actively involved in political life.⁴⁸ While not a full-blown memoir, Gilmore's book contains elements of life-story and is strongly modelled on a book written by Gordon Browne, then leader of the British Labour Party.⁴⁹ These books follow a similar structure based around biographical essays of individuals from various walks of life who offered the author personal and political inspiration. There is even editorial overlap with both books having chapters on Martin Luther King. Gilmore and Browne published their books in advance of national elections to strengthen their connection with their respective electorates. In the latter regard, the motivation underpinning publication is similar to that more evident in the United States where presidential candidates now use campaign memoirs as a form of personal manifesto to introduce themselves to their voters.⁵⁰

Memoir is the most common life-story method among politicians. Diaries are less popular despite having an advantage over post-retirement memoir in that even allowing for editing for style and repetition they are not contaminated by memory. At Westminster the political diary

47 Cited in Whitehall Confidential? (2007), p. 10.

48 Gilmore, *Leading Lights*.

49 Gordon Browne, *Courage: Eight Portraits* (London, 2007).

50 Ryan Neville-Shepard and Kirsten Theye, 'Writing a candidacy: campaign memoirs and the 2012 Republican primacy' in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57 (12) 2013, pp 1704–715.

has been described as ‘rarest form of memoir’ even with such a rich tradition of diaries from the likes of Richard Crossman, Tony Benn, Alan Clarke and, more recently, Chris Mullin.⁵¹ In an Irish context, Gemma Hussey’s ministerial diaries still stand in splendid isolation.⁵² Part of the reason why so few political diaries appear is because of the personal discipline required in maintaining a record of daily events over an extended busy period. Hussey captures this challenge only a week after her appointment as Minister for Education in December 1982 when she records in her diary, ‘God, how little time there is to write anything in this book – and how much has happened since last week’.⁵³

Shared characteristics

In 1994 Andrew Gamble provided a typology for analysis of political memoir based on ‘the kind of insights they give into party politics; ethos and style; argument and doctrine; policy formulation and implementation’.⁵⁴ This chapter does not offer such detailed analysis of the books listed in Table 1, not least for reasons of space. But across the various texts considered it is possible to see the dominance of a historical-impact and agency-centred account of political careers, a characteristic also evident in British political memoirs. There is a predominance of focus on achievements in office as shaped by the confines of Leinster House politics. Few of these office holders could

51 Andrew Gamble, ‘Political Memoirs’, at 142.

52 Gemma Hussey, *At the Cutting Edge: Cabinet Diaries 1982–1987* (Dublin, 1999).

53 Ibid, p. 21.

54 Gamble ‘Political Memoirs’, at 35.

be classified as agenda-setters with a specific plan to break up status quo policy formation.⁵⁵

Irish political memoirs share a number of common characteristics, some of which are worth highlighting. First, in terms of length, the prevailing approach has been for relatively short books, certainly when compared to the Westminster tradition of memoirs in excess of 500 pages, although, as is pointedly asked, ‘does this mountain of paper promote a greater understanding of events?’⁵⁶ Whatever the answer to the latter question, the one advantage of greater length is undoubtedly the possibility of more detailed treatment of events. The truncated length of many Irish political memoirs means detail is often lost. These books frequently give scant attention to key events and often gloss over episodes deserving fuller political and historical treatment.

Second, most Irish political memoirs followed a familiar – and conventional – narrative structure. Facts and experiences are selected and ordered in a structure that at the outset gives some family and personal background. Bertie Ahern’s memoir in 2009 offers a good illustration of this common approach with an opening chapter entitled ‘A Boy From Drumcondra’ while the first paragraph begins: ‘Drumcondra. It’s where I’m from. And it’s who I am’.⁵⁷ With varying degrees of personal detail politicians writing memoirs follow this approach, moving from early chapters on family backgrounds and childhood recollections to concentrate on their entry into political life and electoral politics, before elaborating on ministerial elevation and

55 Richards and Mathers, ‘Political Memoirs’, at 502.

56 Gamble, ‘Political memoirs’.

57 Ahern, *The Autobiography*, p.1.

dealing with the challenges of holding governmental office. Detailed policy analysis – perhaps because sometimes policy formation is dull and uneventful – rarely gets equal treatment.

Third, little if any personal vindictiveness appears on the page. In terms of personal attacks Browne's memoir is an exception. Irish politicians generally tend to avoid overtly hostile and personal attacks on political foes. In general, they offer only mild criticism. A good representation of this general characteristic is Mary O'Rourke's passive description of her ministerial sacking by Albert Reynolds in 1992. The encounter ended – the reader is told – when O'Rourke 'flounced out of the room'.⁵⁸ Despite the clear sense of unfairness and subsequent tears shed O'Rourke holds back in revealing exactly what she thought of the new Fianna Fáil leader. Moreover, a 'club' mentality in avoiding outright criticism is also evident in the treatment of public officials – unless offering praise, Irish political memoir writers adhere to shared strictures in not naming individual civil servants.

They have also tended not to specialise in immediacy or the provision of previously unpublished insider gossip. They are focused on the political selves of their writers although this characteristic may be changing. A recent trend in memoir writing has been the inclusion of more personal material including details on private lives even when such revelations add little of value to our understanding of public events. As noted about British political memoirs, 'ex-ministers (with one eye on their own publishing potential) have recognised that frankness has increasingly

58 O'Rourke, *Just Mary*, pp 101–02.

become the order of the day'.⁵⁹ A drive by publishers to exploit the commercial potential of memoir writing with more headline-grabbing tit-bits helping to drive sales may be another contributing factor. The personal revelations in Ivan Yates's 2014 memoir are an example of this nascent trend.

Fourth, the focus on political life allows – when taking these books as a collective – the accumulation of an over-arching picture of differing political roles – and, importantly, to see how in some areas little has changed over time. These authors have interesting views on many aspects of Irish politics ranging from John McGuinness's staunch defence of constituency-based (clientelist) politics to John O'Connell lamenting how being a government backbencher was 'hell' on account of taking the rap for things over which he had no control.⁶⁰ The attention to local issues and constituency matters features strongly across all these books as illustrated by Barry Desmond when, as a young politician, he encountered the clientelist activities of Liam Cosgrave, then leader of Fine Gael:

He had been a Dáil deputy for the area for 26 years when I was first elected. He was a venerated local institution in almost every household. Church and State reposed to him. If I was to stay the pace with Liam Cosgrave, I had little option but to match him in constituency service. Dermot Boucher [Labour supporter] pointed out: 'It is very little exaggeration to say that no lamp post is erected, or no zebra crossing is painted in Dun Laoghaire

⁵⁹ Richards and Mathers, 'Political Memoirs and New Labour'.

⁶⁰ McGuinness, *The House*, pp 72–76; O'Connell, *Doctor John*, p. 115

without receiving the personal public imprimatur of the senior Fine Gael deputy'.⁶¹

Most of these memoir writers have served as government ministers. They tend to focus on their work in office – generally from the perspective of their departmental responsibilities to the detriment of wider political issues, even when those latter issues may have been more important to the overall governmental process. This narrowing characteristic is evident in the earliest ministerial memoir to the most recent ones. For example, Joseph Connolly (1932–36) provides a detailed recollection of his period in the Department of Lands and Forestry but has relatively little to say about other policies adopted by Fianna Fáil in power after 1932. Similarly, Ivan Yates who was Minister for Agriculture from 1994 to 1997 concentrates on developments in his ministerial brief but gives only passing reference to wider governmental challenges. For example, neither Yates – nor for that matter Ruairí Quinn who was also a minister in the ‘Rainbow coalition’ – devote any significant space to consideration of the situation in Northern Ireland after the Provisional IRA ceasefire ended in early 1996. It is one of the difficulties with political memoir that key national events may not receive much attention, or may not even be mentioned at all, depending on the vantage point of the writer.

Another issue worth mentioning is the non-politician political memoir. The total number of Irish political memoirs contrasts sharply with output in the United Kingdom where few senior politicians fail to produce a memoir of their career in public life. Writing in 1994

⁶¹ Desmond, *Finally*, p. 45.

Andrew Gamble observed of the memoir collections then available that the ‘coffee tables in the Home Counties must be groaning under the weight’.⁶² Many more publications have increased this book pile over the last two decades. In his extensive study of political memoir in Northern Ireland, Stephen Hopkins examines different categorisations including the writings of those who have held the position of Secretary of State. The list of holders of the latter office who have penned memoirs – dealing with their time in Northern Ireland among other topics – is significant. The list is worth outlining, if only to contrast with the equivalent output from counterparts in Dublin: William Whitelaw (1972–73); Merlyn Rees (1974–76); Roy Mason (1976–79); James Prior (1981–83); Douglas Hurd (1983–85); Mo Mowlam (1997–99); Peter Mandelson (1999–01); and Peter Hain (2005–07). These memoirs are further augmented by sections in books written by former British prime ministers – including most recently Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair – all of which give comprehensive space to Northern Ireland.

This level of memoir publication in Britain and in Northern Ireland only further highlights the weak tradition of Irish politicians penning their life-stories. Others on the verges of political life in Ireland have also been hesitant. Only a handful of civil servants have written memoirs – Leon O Broin, T. K. Whittaker, Noel Dorr and Eamon Delaney stand out, but their books vary in their level of personal reflection not to mind political insight.⁶³ Having

⁶² Gamble, ‘Political Memoirs’, at 35–41.

⁶³ Leon O Broin, *Just Like Yesterday – An Autobiography* (Dublin, 1986); Eamon Delaney, *An Accidental Diplomat – My Years in the Irish Foreign Service 1987–95* (Dublin, 2001); T.K. Whitaker, *Interests* (Dublin, 1983).

had a career away from the public view most civil servants apparently prefer continued anonymity in retirement. They also seek to avoid having any negative impact on the work of government even after they have left the employment of the state. The publicity generated by the memoir of former senior British diplomat Sir Christopher Meyer illustrates the rarity of such books in a Westminster system of governance with impartial and anonymous officials.

A richer vein of publication has been memoirs by non-civil service staff employed by politicians. The small number of political and media advisers who have penned memoirs in Ireland in recent times have been highly forthcoming and revealing in many respects about their work inside the system. In this category can be included memoirs by Fergus Finlay, Frank Dunlop, Seán Duignan and John Walsh. Ray Kavanagh's memoir of his period as general secretary of the Labour Party is a rarity from a paid party official.⁶⁴

The issue of political memoirs has exercised the authorities at Westminster for some time, and in some detail. The prevailing rules and conventions governing memoir writing have been addressed in several reports from the Public Administration Select Committee at the House of Commons. At Westminster and in Whitehall there have been detailed discussions to agree principles governing the publication of memoirs of politicians and civil servants. The Public Administration Select Committee has issued several reports exploring guidance for authors to ensure

64 Fergus Finlay, *Snakes and Ladders* (Dublin, 1998); Frank Dunlop, *Yes, Taoiseach: Irish Politics from Behind Closed Doors* (Dublin, 2004); Seán Duignan, *One Spin on the Merry-Go-Round* (Dublin, 1995); John Walsh, *An Education* (Dublin, 2014); Ray Kavanagh, *Spring, Summer and Fall: The Rise and Fall of the Labour Party 1986–1999* (Dublin, 2001).

trust between politicians and civil servants is maintained. The British rules include requirements that authors of memoirs and diaries avoid including content in their publications that:

... may cause damage to international relations; may cause damage to national security; may cause damage to the confidential relationships between ministers, and between ministers and civil servants, or which would inhibit the free and frank exchange of views and advice within government.

While in the main not governed by legislation, the British rules recommend that prospective authors adhere to a clearance process although they stop short of specifying a fixed time period before publication. The pre-publication clearance guidelines did not, however, stop the release of Sir Anthony Meyer's memoir although Jeremy Greenstock's account of his time as British Ambassador to the United Nations prior to the war with Iraq was prevented from being published in 2005. Interestingly, the British government accepted that as a 'last resort' it would be prepared to take legal action in appropriate circumstances to protect confidentiality in government. No such rules exist in Ireland although the most recent contract of employment for special advisers does deal with memoirs:

It is a condition of your employment in the above-stated capacity that the copyright in any book, article or other publication which you write or publish, containing unauthorised disclosures of official information is vested in the Government of Ireland. If in breach of the said condition you write

or publish any book, article or other publication containing unauthorised disclosures of official information, any copyright in the said book, article or other publication which but for this clause would vest in you will belong to the Government of Ireland.

Despite this contact clause no action was taken in the autumn of 2014 when a former special adviser – who only a few months previously has departed government employment – published a book based on his time working for a cabinet minister.⁶⁵

Conclusion

Despite some scholarly reservation there is considerable academic work to be undertaken on Irish political memoir not least because it is a genre that will continue to expand. These books present lived experiences – and specifically, personal reflections – in which the authors reveal how they perceived they shaped events. These publications present a clearly contested version of history. They do not necessarily tell us the ‘truth’ especially as in many episodes and controversies there may not be a single version of the truth. It is one person’s narrative, and it is open to challenge not just by others present – and by historians and political scientists adopting impartial distance – but also by official documentation.

Notwithstanding, weaknesses these books do include valuable historical source material. Indeed, it is generally better to deal with a lasting personal written record

⁶⁵ John Walsh, *An Education* (Dublin, 2014).

– self-justifying as it may be – than to have nothing left in book form, as is the case with so many senior Irish political figures. In his discussion of Anglo-Irish relations between the civil war and World War II, Joe Lee highlighted the challenge with interpreting past events:

Differences of emphasis among the specialists about the motives and the achievements of de Valera serve as a reminder of the extent to which historians must still, even after sifting the documents, form their verdicts on his performance on the basis of their overall assessment of the way his mind worked.⁶⁶

The absence of memoir by a senior political figure like Eamon de Valera only increases a less than satisfactory reliance on second guessing a politician's inner motivation. Whatever about de Valera, if Charles Haughey had chosen to write his memoirs following his retirement from political life in 1992 it is debatable if he would actually have justified or explained many significant episodes from his controversial career. But the value of the book – somewhat like Bertie Ahern's flawed 2009 memoir – would have lay in examining what was left out of the narrative as much as what was actually put down on the page. Perhaps it should be part of the contract of election that senior political figures – and specifically those who hold the office of Taoiseach – should be obliged to write their version of history.

66 J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985 Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 211, fn. 158.