

## Beyond violence: Vincent Buckley and Australian responses to the struggle for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland. 1968-1981.

By John McLaren

Mary Lynch, John Feeney, and Val Noone have all written about the responses of Irish Associations in Australia to the Troubles in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1981. Lynch, in an unpublished thesis, analyses the attempts in Melbourne in 1970 to establish a united organisation supporting civil rights in Northern Ireland, and the reasons for its failure.<sup>1</sup> Feeney examines the specific responses of Victorian organizations between 1969 and 1972.<sup>2</sup> Noone places the events in the context of the history of Ireland in the twentieth century and of events in Australia, including the ALP split, the Cold War, and the controversies over the Vietnam war, and attempts to establish an independent cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> He gives particular attention to the treatment by the Australian media of events in Northern Ireland. This paper draws on these accounts to show how responses in both Australia and Ireland led the Irish Australian poet Vincent Buckley to an understanding of Irish events that drew on Irish traditions of resistance to point beyond violence towards a new mode of resistance and a new model of the warrior.

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Bobby Sands started his hunger strike in Long Kesh prison, Belfast, in March 1981. The Australian poet Vincent Buckley, an Irish nationalist and a long-time supporter of civil rights in Northern Ireland, became involved when he arrived in Dublin at the end of March. At first he was confused at reactions in the South, where press, politicians and the public seemed opposed to the strikers. Buckley's account of his own responses is itself confused, shifting constantly between his attempts to understand the politics and the attitudes of the public, his mistrust of attempts to encourage or exploit the strikers, and his admiration for their heroism.<sup>4</sup>

By their actions, the strikers condemned both the intransigence of their enemies and the sanctimony of their critics, and offered an alternative path to community and a liberated future for all oppressed people. They redefined the meaning of warrior, but no one was listening. 'Bobby Sands', Buckley wrote, 'is dying for a foregone conclusion: he is negotiating his life without anyone to negotiate with. He is speaking with his bones to someone who does not answer ...'<sup>5</sup>

Matters in Northern Ireland were further confused by Sands' nomination by Sinn Fein for a seat in the British Parliament at Westminster. Although he was supported by other nationalist groups, the campaign was poorly reported in the South.. The responses of Seamus Heaney and Buckley's other friends in Dublin convinced him that the strike was of vital importance to Irish nationalists and to humanists everywhere, and that an election victory might open the way for proper negotiations. But the establishment contempt towards Sands' eventual victory showed him there would be no relenting. 'Croppies and teagues were not supposed to win an election; the purpose of elections was to frighten them, to ...push them under.'<sup>6</sup> This contempt persisted as the strikers resisted to their deaths. When the strike finally collapsed, under pressure from the governments church, , the prisoners' families, the British Secretary of State issued a statement claiming that it had ended voluntarily, although the government still refused to concede any special status to political prisoners within its 'modern and humane' system of penal detention.

The few concessions made met some of the prisoners demands, and may have avoided the deaths had they been made earlier. Any appearance of concession under pressure was avoided by extending most of the improved conditions to all prisoners.<sup>7</sup>

The Troubles that culminate in the hunger strikes started in 1969, although there origins can be traced much further back to the first arrival in Ireland of the Normans in 1169, to the Elizabethan suppression in the sixteenth century, the Protestant plantations and the later Cromwellian suppression of the seventeenth century, to the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, to the formation in 1913 of the Ulster Volunteers to resist Home Rule, or to the partition of Ireland in 1920-21. Each of these events has its place in the competing mythologies that helped to fire the latest cycle of violence. This started in December 1968 when the then Northern Irish Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, publicly conceded some of the claims of the Civil Rights Movement. According to James Kelly, who later became one of the chief sources of Buckley's knowledge of events in the North, O'Neill's motive was not to bring justice but to reconcile the Catholic community to continuing Orange rule. However, the hard men among the Unionists could not accept even this concession. They attacked electricity and water supplies, the Royal Ulster Constabulary blamed the IRA. O'Neill was forced from office, the new Prime Minister condemned the IRA as murderers. and the Reverend Ian Paisley launched a 'great battle of biblical Protestantism against popery'. Fighting broke out in August 1969 when Protestant mobs under the protection of armed police, including the B-Specials, invaded Catholic areas of Belfast and Derry, driving Catholics from their homes. For a time, the British Army stepped in to protect the locals, but after the election of the Heath government in Britain they increasingly sided with the Protestant authorities. On Bloody Sunday, 1972, they invaded the Bogside in Derry and fired on peaceful demonstrators and locals.<sup>8</sup>

Buckley had been in Australia during these events, but he soon became involved. The most prominent Irish republican in Melbourne was John Murray, who after the Derry massacre organized a meeting in the Richmond Town Hall at which both Sinn Fein and the Ulster Association were represented. In September 1969 he convened a meeting of local Irish associations in the North Melbourne Town Hall. Buckley was one of the speakers, along with Dinny O'Hearn, Sid Ingham and John O'Brien. But Murray was not a person for consensus. At the end of the meeting he moved a series of motions that were carried without discussion. Buckley was irked, and with O'Hearn and others walked out of the meeting and went across town to his office at the university. Here they set up their separate Committee for Civil Rights in Ireland, with Vin as founding President. This body described itself as a 'Committee of University Tutors and Lawyers to collect, analyse and publish accurate information about the critical situation in North-East Ireland ... [which was] not primarily the result of religious differences.' It was also concerned with social justice in Ulster.<sup>9</sup>

The Committee received many letters from victims of the violence in Northern Ireland. The writers were anxious to make their fate known in the wider world, and to express their gratitude for those who helped them in this. One, a Mary Kennedy, described herself as 'not an extremist or M.P. or anything important. Just a mother who has to bring up four children by myself, who was an innocent victim, my children and myself losing everything, because we were R.C.s.' She was one of those driven from their homes by Belfast rioters.<sup>10</sup> When a cutting from a Melbourne paper describing her situation was sent to the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in Belfast, a Reverend Donald

Fraser wrote to Buckley asking for more details so that the church could help her from funds available for such purpose. He also sent details by church calls for both sides in the conflict to cease from violence. David McKenna replied on behalf of the Committee for Civil Rights, thanking Fraser for his 'kind enquiry', sending Kennedy's address, and letting him know that the Association had been able to 'give her some financial assistance'.<sup>11</sup>

The Committee also made direct representations to the Irish Ambassador to Australia, protesting to him in 1972 against legislation which would tighten even further controls over illegal organizations in the Republic. This legislation was, they wrote, an affront to freedom, and a capitulation to British interests that would lead to 'injustice, social fragmentation, distrust and bitterness.'<sup>12</sup> In July 1970, after the police carried out violent house searches in the Lower Falls area of Belfast,

Later that year, the Committee organised more positive action when they hired Melbourne's Assembly Hall to present on an evening of Irish folk songs, poetry and readers. The readers included Vincent Buckley and Dinny O'Hearn.<sup>13</sup>

In July 1970, after further violent searches in Belfast, this association joined with the Plunkett Society and the O'Donovan Rossa Society to convene a meeting in the Collingwood Town Hall. Nominations were called for a provisional committee for the Northern Irish Civil Rights Association, which would bring together all the local organizations in a united front to work for civil rights. The first meeting of this group was held in September 1970.<sup>14</sup> The political and personal differences however proved insurmountable. There were differences over the respective authority of the Official and the Provisional Civil Rights Association in Northern Ireland, and over the peace activists who were prepared to postpone the question of unification until peace had been restored. Eventually, on 14 April 1971 the c<sup>15</sup>ommittee passed a motion dissolving the Association. although a narrower group continued to meet. Buckley continued as President of the Committee for Civil Rights, which saw its function as making the situation in Northern Ireland known in Australia.<sup>16</sup> To this end, in August 1972 it published a brief account of events there.<sup>17</sup>

By this time British actions, including mass arrests and house searches, had become more bloody, polarising the community until there were virtually two systems of authority: the parliament at Stormont and the dissidents. The British tried to restore their authority by abolishing the parliament and instituting direct rule in March, 1972.<sup>18</sup>

In 1973, Buckley returned to Ireland, where he met Jim Kelly, a former Captain in the Irish Army who in 1970 had been set up by associates of Charles Haughey over a deal to supply arms to Northern Ireland. The ostensible purpose of the deal was to supply arms to Ulster Catholics to use to defend themselves against attack by loyalist mobs on government forces. The jury accepted Kelly's argument that he was at all times acting on lawful instructions from his military superior and the Minister for Defence. Despite the prosecution tampering with the evidence, he was acquitted, but his career was in ruins. Buckley went with him to the Annual General Meeting of the Irish Civil Rights Association, presumably in Dublin, and was prepared to accept election to its executive if the members decided to have an Australian representative. He also wrote to Mary Lynch, recommending that Kelly be invited to visit Australia, which he did in 1975. He apparently visited Melbourne, Adelaide, Churchill, Geelong, Sydney and Wollongong, for he dedicated *The Genesis of Revolution*, the book he published after his return to

Ireland, to groups of Irish and Irish Australians in these cities, as well as to 'those many Australians not of Irish descent who have shown their concern for a just and lasting solution to the conflict in Ireland'. He also thanked Buckley for his help in the book's production.<sup>19</sup>

During the decade between Bloody Sunday and the hunger strikes, the situation in Ireland, according to Buckley, 'became both bloody and tangled.' British initiatives became more systematic, and both wings of the IRA responded with armed attacks. In the South, public opinion saw both sides as forming a single pattern, while in the North they saw each other as 'utterly different types'.<sup>20</sup> Kelly, on his lecture tour of Australia, attributed Southern indifference to the issues to the official censorship that forbade the expression of any nationalist feeling, and so prevented the public from gaining any understanding of what was happening in the North.<sup>21</sup> The Melbourne Committee for Civil Rights and other support organizations worked to support the nationalists and to make their struggle known in Australia. Their efforts were hampered both by the differences amongst themselves and by attacks from the Australian police and press.<sup>22</sup>

The Australian activist James Doughney expressed the feelings held in common by most republican supporters. At the end of an essay describing a walk along Falls Road, where he was searched by British troops and saw children throwing rocks at an army truck, he wrote that 'These young fighters are expressing anger at the foreign troops and the poverty and alienation they impose on the community ... The explanation of the anger of children so young is the same as for everything I have witnessed on my walk. Belfast is the heart of occupied Ireland.'<sup>23</sup> Although this observation identified the economic cause of the Troubles, it took no account either of the reasons for the loyalties of the Ulster Protestants or of the reasons that the British army, who had at first been welcomed as guardians against Protestant violence, were now so bitterly resented by the Catholic inhabitants of the Bogside. Yet even this partisan solidarity was not sufficient to hold together the various groups of republican supporters.

The interests of the Ulster loyalists, understandably, received little attention in Australia, except from sectarian organisations like the Orange Lodge. When Vincent Buckley, at a seminar at La Trobe University on 'Ireland: a possible solution', rejected a two-state solution, even one giving rights to the nationalists, a Siobhan McHugh responded that a united Ireland would be an affront to the Protestants. She argued that the Catholic Church continued to interfere in civil liberties, education, entertainment and the arts, community services, social welfare and the economy. But among republican supporters the issue of peace or justice remained the chief cause of division.

As early as 1966 Mary Lynch, in an oration to the Easter 1916 commemoration in Melbourne, had condemned the peace movement in Northern Ireland.<sup>24</sup> We have seen how the attempt in 1970 to form a united front in support of civil rights in Ireland failed when the different factions could not agree on a common program. In 1981 the Australian Republican Movement and the Connolly Association were split internally over support for the hunger strikers. Then an Australian, Eamon Ned O'Connor, commenced his own hunger strike in Sydney. From NSW, the ARM President, Bob Cunningham, hoped that by endorsing him they would satisfy him that his stand had won support and he would abandon his strike. These divisions were exacerbated by disagreements with the Sinn Fein executive in Ireland, which ordered O'Connor to desist. The committee denounced Bob Gould and Seamus Flynn as enemies for agreeing with the Irish committee. In the

Connolly Society, Rosemary Gillespie and others associated with the Socialist Workers Party supported O'Connor. The Connolly Society refused a request to amalgamate with the ARM on the grounds that such an alliance would ignore the political reasons for republicanism. In 1983 it rejected a request for affiliation from Australian Aid for Ireland.<sup>25</sup>

Internal divisions were matched by external opposition. In 1979, an article by Robin Bromley in the *National Times* accused Irish support groups of supporting the IRA. The argument that assistance to the victims of government violence in Northern Ireland was used to support terror was developed by John Laffin in a 1987 article in *The Bulletin*.<sup>26</sup>

The divisions among the local Irish organizations matched Buckley's personal conflicts. He supported a united Ireland, cared passionately for the rights of the Catholics in the North, detested the British government and army, but could not support violence by the IRA or anyone else. The hunger strikers seemed to offer a way beyond these dilemmas. He celebrated and mourned their defiance in a sequence of poems he published first in *The Bulletin* in December 1981.<sup>27</sup> Buckley wrote the sequence 'in great and thwarted passion' while the strike still had six weeks to run. He claimed it was not a political poem, and in a sense he is right.<sup>28</sup> The sequence puts the strikers in the heroic company of all ordinary persons who have found the strength within themselves to defy tyrannical power. He had earlier seen this heroism in the person of the old IRA activist Peadar O'Donnell. O'Donnell, after a lifetime of defiance, could still argue that the Provisional IRA had taken up arms prematurely, before they had gained the support of the people, and could insist that even the bigoted Orangemen of the B-Specials were good Irishmen and the victims of economic forces.<sup>29</sup> Buckley regarded Kelly and O'Donnell as heroes, and as his people.<sup>30</sup> They connected with images that had stayed with him for more than thirty years, of the freedom fighters of crushed like frogs on the buckled tramlines of Budapest in 1956. It was his business as a poet to remember them, but the memory only made him realise 'how useless poets are, how feeble their anecdotes and promises'. Now, as history repeated itself in Northern Ireland, he accepted his duty of keeping alive the voices of both sets of victims, just as he himself had to keep alive the voice of his forebears. 'Each of us,' he wrote, 'has lost a language, to be cherished and built back, piece by piece, into the mind.'<sup>31</sup> He identifies his own lost ancestral language with the Hungarian voices that the west failed to heed and the claims made by the hunger-strikers on a state that would not listen.

The Irish poet Theo Dorgan considers that Buckley had a clearer understanding of the significance of the strikes than either republicans or the British government. He pointed out that Buckley was particularly fitted to observe the peace process because he understood that violence corrupts ideals, and that a republic cannot be constructed at the point of a gun. But he also understood the energies that drive the armed struggle, and the older energies summoned by the hunger strikers, who re-enacted Bronze Age traditions of fasting against injustice.<sup>32</sup> This tradition shows itself today around the Sinn Fein headquarters in Belfast. The militant murals have gone, and opposite a peace garden of remembrance a mural of Bobby Sands watches amid pictures of earlier martyrs, of Nelson Mandela, and of Gaelic football. On it is the inscription, 'Our revenge will be the laughter of children'. In contrast, the UVF murals up the street quote Cromwell against Catholics, and across the lawns a hooded IJDA terrorist follows passers-by with his eyes

and the muzzle of his gun. More peaceably, the rather crude murals on the Shankill road 'peace Wall' are covered by tourist graffiti, some calling for peace, one reading 'G'day from Australia. Kylie Minogue'.

For all the passion of its political commitment, Buckley's sequence remains strangely bereft of its political dimension. His strenuous bouts with Australian Communists left him with little taste for class analysis, and he makes no attempt to relate the strikers' predicament to the economic and social complexities that since the nineteenth century had shaped the development of religious divisions and national loyalties in Ireland. He sees the British occupation of Ulster as simply a continuation of colonial rule, and the Troubles as the same kind of national uprising against brutal oppressors that he had watched from afar when it took place in Hungary in 1956.

Buckley was concerned with an existential morality beyond and beneath politics, but, whatever his intentions, the poems were read as political, and he had difficulty getting them published in Ireland.<sup>33</sup> He builds the poems around the opposition of the strikers on the one hand, awaiting their fate, and those who speak around or at them, but never to them. Yet the sequence is about violence and its alternatives, and its emotional resonance comes from its sense of justice and humanity denied. The strikers, by choosing to become warriors above the conflict, leave the battlefield to politicians and executioners, and so reduce the English to knaves and fools. Like the native American warrior Geronimo, whose name Buckley invokes for Sands, they win the moral victory by asserting the value of their lives to the point of death. Those who try to ignore them, change them or condemn them only diminish themselves by their failure to recognise that the act of fasting fulfils a humanity their enemies cannot grasp.

The poems take us back to Buckley's time in the Apostolate to the University, where he developed the idea that individuals fulfil God's purpose by being completely themselves. Except that in these poems it is the incarnate spirit of the human rather than of God that is fulfilled. Francis Hughes' funeral traverses the lanes he used to pass along as a boy going to Mass, but it is his sacrifice, not that of the Mass, that sanctifies them.

The poems seek to make sense of their histories by recounting scenes and events almost without form or commentary. They highlight the individual deaths against the background of personal lives and political manoeuvres, yet paradoxically this approach deprives the strikes of their political dimension. The meaning they are given lies between the images, in rhythms that hold the moments up for our inspection. Yet this meaning is rooted in the mythology at the heart of the politics of nationalism. '

Weeks later, it was his face  
that loomed on the hourly news,  
tilted back, laughing, fragile.  
To whom someone said, on the 58th day,  
do you want a drink of milk?  
He was blind now. He said, I don't know. (p.53)

Buckley believed that the British repeated this story in an attempt to make Raymond McCreesh appear the victim of family and supporters who refused to allow him nutrient.

The action of the poem is more elemental as it moves from a matter-of-fact glance at the news to a looming face, which immediately become an image of fragile laughter. The offer of milk becomes sacramental; the refusal sacrificial. The trajectory of his life is

gathered up, beyond the comprehension of his enemies who want to make him victim of some mad priesthood—a sly reference to McCreesh's brother, who was to offer Mass at his funeral. Their attempt to belittle his death is their shame as they reveal themselves as eloquent assassins.'

The following poem, 'Interlude for Exploration', drips with contempt as the poet portrays educated and powerful men deploring the violence the strikers are defying to their deaths. The politicians and churchmen search for ways to evade their moral responsibility for the violence they all deplore (p. 54). Then, in 'Interlude for Execution', the poet shows the meaning of their evasion. A man is shot on waste ground. His dying screams kill the natural life around him, the life in the heads of those who hear them. The poet does not identify the executioners and victim as loyalists or republicans, so placing the execution beyond politics. It identifies the violence the educated men affect to deplore as signifying only death. Its horror provides a stark contrast to the struggle of the hunger strikers. The men with the guns destroy their own humanity along with their enemies. The fasting warriors demand that their enemies recognise their humanity (pp. 54-55). Their failure to give this recognition destroys any validity of their cause by placing them outside the bonds of human community.

This contrast has been set up by the first poem in the sequence, 'To redefine "Warrior"'. Like the Falls murals, this poem shows a different kind of warrior, One who makes no war, except with the electric pain of his body. The strikers redefined the warrior by living their revolutionary nationalism to the death. Their nationalism, like that of their enemies, may have had its source in mythology, but like all mythology it has real effects in politics and history. For both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, contending mythologies have produced a sense of community. Both communities believe they possess religious truth. But where one believes this truth guaranteed continuity with an immemorial past, the other dates its origins only to relatively recent acts of defiance that ushered in an age of individualism and modernism. With the disintegration of the industrial economy it has nowhere left to go.<sup>34</sup>

Buckley shared the nationalist mythology, which came from the imaginative sources of his own identity, and which for more than a century had nurtured poets like Yeats. Its deep affinity with the land and its people gave strength to northern nationalist poets like his friend Seamus Heaney, and provided an alternative to the despairs of modernism. By contrast, poets like Tom Paulin, who came from a northern Protestant background, could find little imaginative support in their own communities. When Buckley observed this society in the 1970s, both sides had taken to the streets, and the bonds of community that held each together had turned to hatred for each other. The strikers did not so much refuse these hatreds as transcend them. Instead of the machines of terror, the armed men, the bombs, the hijacked milk-lorries of which Heaney had written so memorably, and their monstrous dream prototypes of tortured heads and hanging corpses, the striker in Buckley's verse endures like a lark, '... at the window. caught, crying, by the foot'. The lark's strength is its fragility, but it is also a reminder of the inextinguishable beauty of song. The image comes from Bobby Sands himself, who wrote that 'the imprisonment of the lark is a crime of the greatest cruelty because the lark is one of the greatest symbols of freedom and happiness.' He then told a story of his grandfather's of a lark caged by a tyrant. When its gaoler demanded that it sing for his pleasure, it refused, and the gaoler covered its cage with a dark blanket, keeping it from

the sun until it died. The story is a metaphor for Ireland's fate under the British. The strikers refusal to accept the will of their gaolers differentiates them entirely from the ordinary prisoners.<sup>35</sup> Their lost song endures as a measure of loss as Buckley follows the strikers to their successive deaths, each sustained to his individual death by the sense of solidarity they have found through their joint protests. Sands ends his story with an account of the lark's terrible revenge; Buckley continues to the immediate outcome, noting that Sands's death came in 'a clean place ... the Pope's crucifix beside him, his mind' open as o galaxy.' The difference is between the fighter and the warrior that Buckley saw Sands had become.

The power of the poems comes from the opposition they produce between violence, in the prison or on the waste lands, and the simple pleasures the strikers have found in their lives. All they demand is that they be recognised as people, not relegated to the deadly bureaucratic classification of criminal. Yet this opposition, while accurately describing the inhumanity of the British government, does less than justice to the prisoners' own case. They did not just want recognition of their human rights; they explicitly wanted to be treated as political prisoners; that is, as prisoners in a war. Bobby Sands was explicit about this. He wrote in his diary, 'I am a political prisoner because I am a casualty of a perennial war that is being fought between the oppressed Irish people and an alien, oppressive, unwanted regime that refuses to be withdrawn from our land.'<sup>36</sup> By ignoring this belief, which fuelled the intransigence of the strikers, Buckley distances the strikers from their politics. He ignores the question, central both to nationalist politics and to his own search for an identity, of who the Irish people are and who has claims to the land of Ireland.

Buckley's interpretation of the troubles is, like his contribution to the debate about the Australian identity, nationalistic and anti-imperial. He is not interested how in the nineteenth century class identities were tangled with competing religious and national loyalties, or how these were constructed to serve particular economic interests. His analysis of the conflict in Northern Ireland is political and moral rather than ideological, but it is driven by the passion for justice and a revulsion at blind hatred.

The division Buckley shows is between the British and the Nationalists, and he is saved from the danger of rendering this as Protestant against Catholic by his recognition of the complicity of the Catholic hierarchy in the official rhetoric of law and order. He aptly identifies the falsity of this rhetoric, and the moral status of the opposing forces, through their slogans: the Biblical 'Blessed are those who hunger for justice' against the naked hatred of 'Die in your cell you bastard'. He was acutely aware of the deprivation of the Catholic working classes that gave the IRA a base for their struggles in Northern Ireland. He recognised that Thatcher's policies were a powerful recruiting instrument for the IRA, but he also understood that in the strikes themselves the IRA had released forces beyond their command or understanding. These forces are central not only to Buckley's poems, but to the whole nationalist struggle to which the IRA was committed. They are the forces which were harnessed in the nineteenth century to unite the Irish people whose name Sands invokes. They constitute the traditions that sanction an independent Irish state. But in themselves they are a product of nineteenth century imagination, when they gave authority to the Catholic middle classes while depriving the Anglo-Irish ascendancy of its legitimacy. The social origins of the nationalist movement marginalised the rural poor, and the nature of the traditions necessarily pitted it against Ulster unionists who

saw themselves as a modernising force bringing civilisation to the primitive Irish.<sup>33</sup> A united Ireland was therefore as improbable in the twentieth century as a united Iraq is in the twenty-first.<sup>37</sup>

The divisions that had marked Ireland were less strong in Australia, despite the formation of Irish societies that were predominantly Catholic and the provocative response of Orange societies. Settlers from Anglo-Irish and Ulster Protestant backgrounds tended to prosper, and like the Scots identified with establishment and Empire. But many Protestant settlers came from similar rural backgrounds to Catholics and shared the same economic and social circumstances.<sup>38</sup> Buckley writes of these families when the speaker in one of his early poems attributes their poverty to the Protestants. 'It's the black Orangemen who own these farms, Crushing us with their pious arms.' His father responds, 'Ah they're no worse than our own, Who'd strip you to the shuddering bone. I curse the day I saw this place..'<sup>39</sup>

British imperialism had tolerated the Famine that led to both Protestant and Irish emigration to Australia. Here they found themselves in the same economic predicament Buckley had experienced when he was growing up during the Great Depression. In an essay on Celtic identity in Australia, without taking account of religion, he distinguishes the Irish as remaining apart from the British establishment.<sup>40</sup> If he sees the Irish settlers as one community in Australia, he naturally sees the Irish people as one in their homelands. Consequently, he can agree with Bobby Sands that the source of the troubles is an unwanted foreign occupation, rather than an alternative ideal of the nation as part of a larger United Kingdom.

Buckley incorporated some of the poems from 'Hunger Strikes' in the prose account of the deaths he later published in *Memory Ireland*. This narrative is more expansive, more explanatory of the politics than the poems. His initial discomfort that the strikers may have been encouraged by others gives way to a recognition that they have chosen their own course. He makes it clear that the strike was not the act of suicide identified by various clerical commentators, but a challenge to power using the only authority the strikers had left, the control of their own bodies. The choice of death was not made by the strikers, but by those who refused to act on their demands. His account is a case study of power subverted by an apparent weakness it cannot understand. The occasion of the protests was the intolerable conditions of imprisonment, themselves a product of the British government's determination to treat the prisoner as criminals, and Margaret Thatcher's insistence that 'a crime is a crime is a crime'. Buckley shows how the hunger strike turned a protest against particular circumstances into an assertion of humanity. The strikers died while awaiting an answer to their requests, an acknowledgement of their humanity. The government did in time grant most of the prisoners' demands, but not until ten had died. As Buckley points out, it had failed in its duty to those it insisted were its subjects. Sands had in fact during this time demonstrated his communal support by winning election to parliament. The refusal of the government to listen to him or his comrades demonstrated its illegitimacy as much as its inhumanity. Buckley points out that British intransigence arose from its imperial history and was about to be demonstrated anew in the Falklands. At the same time, the refusal of southern politicians and clergy, and most of the press, to attend to the strikers, despite evidence of wide support for them, demonstrated the loss. The violence in the streets of Belfast and Derry, and in Dublin, where police beat up peaceful ordinary Irishmen, was reduced to the

helplessness that had characterised their history. Buckley concludes his account of the strikers by showing how each of them had been driven to militancy, prison and death by exactly this helplessness, intensified by being denied education and jobs in that part of Ireland that refused to admit them to its community.<sup>41</sup> Yet in the end his accounts leave the community divided in two by the opposing mythologies and ideologies that lead to bitter enmity, violence that begets guilt, and guilt that leads to further senseless violence, beyond any political or military justification, and turned against neighbours going about peaceful pursuits.<sup>42</sup> Despite their recovery of a form of resistance that went beyond violence, the hunger strikers remained locked within this pattern.

Buckley's sequence of poems may stand as the most eloquent and explicit Australian response to the hunger strikes, but his deepest response may be in his sequence 'Soft War Poems'<sup>43</sup>. In these he brings together his own experience of wartime military training in a meditation on the whole phenomenon of war and its victims. The opening poem places the image of a new-born child against the memory of the Christ child and the reflection that war-poems bring only bad dreams. The sequence then holds up for our contemplation instances of the dehumanisation wrought by war, regardless of its causes. The sequence transcends violence as it pits the vainglorious figure of Margaret Thatcher against the selfless but equally vain action of the war hero, before the sequence concludes with a vision of the end of our world through the common fate of war:

When it comes,  
squeezing our souls together in darkness,  
you will not have chosen  
morning or evening for it  
and you will not be able to choose  
whether to die indoors or out ...  
whether infolding your children's bodies  
or shredded, alone on black grass,  
whether by sucking wind or fire,  
by lightning bolt or crushed brainpan,  
you will not even choose  
whether to die as man or as woman. (p. 180)

The physicality of the loss in these lines emphasises the value held in the lives being destroyed. By isolating the phenomenon of war from any particular cause, the poem shows what is at stake in every war.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Lynch, *N.I.C.R.A.—an analysis of united front Irish literary organisations*, Honours thesis, n.d., (Politics?) unpublished, in the possession of Carol Lynch.

<sup>2</sup> John Feeney, *Catholics, Civil Rightists and Loyalists: three aspects of Victorian responses to the events in Northern Ireland, 1969-1972*, Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, unpublished, 1984. (Politics?).

<sup>3</sup> Val Noone, 'Vietnam and Ireland in the 1960s conflicts about Australian identity', First Biennial Conference, Irish Centre for Australian Studies, University College, Dublin, 1996; unpublished.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Buckley's account of Sands' death, the reactions he observed to it from Dublin, and his own responses, is given in *Memory Ireland*, Ringwood, Vic.:1985, pp. 119-40...

<sup>5</sup> *Memory Ireland*, p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> *Memory Ireland*, p. 122.

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- <sup>7</sup> Statement by James Pain, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, issued by the UK High Commission in Canberra, 7.10.81.
- <sup>8</sup> James Kelly, *The Genesis of Revolution*, Kelly Kane, Dublin, 1976, pp. 7-12; Paisley's words are quoted on p. 10. In his introduction to this book, Kelly thanks Vincent Buckley for his assistance in its production.
- <sup>9</sup> John Feeney, *Catholics, Civil Rightists and Loyalists: three aspects of Victorian responses to the events in Northern Ireland, 1969-1972*, unpublished Honours thesis, University of Melbourne, 1984. (Politics?); Mary Lynch papers, Minutes of inaugural meeting at the University of Melbourne, 9.9.69.
- <sup>10</sup> Penelope Buckley papers, 'Ireland' file, Mary Kennedy to V. Buckley, 28.10.69.
- <sup>11</sup> Mary Lynch papers, Rev Donald Fraser to Vincent Buckley, 9.2.70, and David McKenna, Treasurer, CCLNI, to Fraser, 4.4.70, and statements by the Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland.
- <sup>12</sup> Mary Lynch papers, letter from Vincent Buckley, George Russell, DJ O'Hearn, M. Crennan and Mary Lynch, for Committee of Civil rights in Ireland, 8.10.72.
- <sup>13</sup> Mary Lynch papers, leaflet on behalf of Committee for Civil rights in Ireland. The evening was to be held on 6 December, and I have assumed that the year was 1972.
- <sup>14</sup> Mary Lynch, Honours 'N.I.C.R.A.—an analysis of united front Irish literary organisations', Honours thesis, n.d., unpublished, in the possession of Carol Lynch.thesis, p. 11.
- <sup>15</sup> Mary Lynch, thesis.
- <sup>16</sup> Based on account by Mary Lynch,
- <sup>17</sup> *Ulster: Why?*, compiled by Vincent Buckley and others for the Committee of Civil rights in Ireland, [Melbourne], 1972.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ulster: Why?*, pp. 36-39.
- <sup>19</sup> James Kelly, *The Thimble-Riggers: the Dublin Arms Trials of 1970*, the author, Dublin, 1990; *Captain James J. Kelly: a brief biography*, accessed January.2007 through [www.captiankelly.org/bio.htm](http://www.captiankelly.org/bio.htm), Although these accounts are partisan, they are fully supported by the evidence they cite.
- <sup>20</sup> Buckley, ms notes for *Cutting Green Hay*, n.d., in Penelope Buckley papers.
- <sup>21</sup> Mary Lynch papers, cutting from the *Advocate*, 10.4.75. See also 'Lost Liberties: the Offences against the State Act', anon., An Roinn Poiblíochta, Sinn Féin, Dublin, 1972. Copy in Mary Lynch papers.
- <sup>22</sup> Lynch thesis.
- <sup>23</sup> James Doughney, 'A Day in Occupied Ireland', in *Ireland Unfree: essays in the history of the Irish struggle 1169-1981*, edited by Martin Mulligan, Pathfinder Press, Sydney, 1981, p. 118.
- <sup>24</sup> Mary Lynch papers, script, 10.4.66.
- <sup>25</sup> Mary Lynch papers, Connolly Association circular, 3.6.83.
- <sup>26</sup> Robin Bromley, *National Times*, Sydney, 8.9.79; Mary Lynch, letter to *The National Times*, 3.9.79; John Laffin, *The Bulletin*, Sydney, 15.9.87; cuttings and script in Mary Lynch papers.
- <sup>27</sup> 'Hunger Strike', *The Bulletin*, Sydney, 22-29 December 1981; *Last Poems*, pp. 50-56.
- <sup>28</sup> *Memory Ireland*, p. 173.
- <sup>29</sup> Penelope Buckley papers, 'Ireland' file, undated notes for an interview with a newspaper in Calgary, Canada.
- <sup>30</sup> Phone conversation with Penelope Buckley, 9.11.06.
- <sup>31</sup> 'A Tincture of Budapest', *Last Poems*, p. 103.
- <sup>32</sup> Theo Dorgan, interview with JMcL, Dublin, 16.9.06.
- <sup>33</sup> Vincent Buckley papers, NLA ms 7289, series 1, box 15, Theo Doran to Buckley, reporting that he has not been able to arrange publication for the 'H.S. poem' [Hunger Strike].
- <sup>34</sup> Discussion of competing nationalisms, see Jim Mac Laughlin, 'Theorising the Nation: 'Peoplehood, and nationhood as 'Historical Happenings'', Chapter 4, *Reimagining the Nation-State: the contested terrains of Nation-building*, Pluto Press, London, 2001; available on Cain Web Service, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/conflicumaclaughlin01.htm>
- <sup>35</sup> Bobby Sands, 'The Lark and the Freedom Fighter', *The Writings of Bobby Sands*, Sinn Féin POW Department, Dublin, 1981, pp. 33-35. Sands has also remarked that the sound of a lark, the blue sky, or full moon ... to me ... mean existence, peacefulness, comfort, entertainment, and something to view, to help forget the tortures ...', and the reference no doubt stuck in Buckley's mind.
- <sup>36</sup> Bobby Sands, *Diary*, Sinn Féin Publicity Department, Dublin, 1981, p. 7.
- <sup>37</sup> See Mac Laughlin, above.
- <sup>38</sup> O. McDonough, 'The Condition of Ireland 1788-1850', David Fitzpatrick, 'Irish Immigration 1840-1914', Trevor McClaughlin, 'Protestant Irish Settlement', Richard Reid, 'Irish in New South Wales 1835-

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1836', in James Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961, pp. 553-556, 560-65, 573-76, 583-85.

<sup>39</sup> Buckley, 'Father and Son', *Masters in Israel*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1961, pp. 36-37.

<sup>40</sup> Buckley, 'Identity: invention or discovery' in Penelope Buckley papers, ts. Nd.

<sup>41</sup> Buckley, *Memory Ireland*, Part Two, 'A Fast to Death', pp. 117-181.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of this cycle, see Fintan O'Toole, 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 6.9.07, p. 35.

<sup>43</sup> Buckley, 'Soft War Poems', *Last Poems*, pp. 13-18.