

**REWRITING IRISH HISTORY (1916-1921) IN POPULAR CULTURE:
BLOOD UPON THE ROSE AND AT WAR WITH THE EMPIRE
BY GERRY HUNT**

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Blood Upon the Rose: Easter 1916: The Rebellion That Set Ireland Free (2009) and its sequel, *At War With the Empire: Ireland's Fight for Independence* (2012), written and drawn by Gerry Hunt, have been identified as something new in the cultural landscape of Ireland (McCann). Hunt, an architect turned cartoonist who had authored two previous volumes set in Dublin, *In Dublin City* and *Streets of Dublin*, has been acclaimed as the standard-bearer of Irish comics. Over the last decade, sequential art has proved successful in Ireland: Cló Mhaigh Eo edits comic strips and graphic novels in Irish; Moccu Press and O'Brien Press publish comic books on Irish subjects, mostly Celtic sagas. Throughout its long history, sequential art has often tapped into and popularised national history and culture (see Porret 11-41). *Blood Upon the Rose*, which focuses on a major national event and primarily addresses Irish readers, proved a great commercial success,¹ showing that "sequential art can be successfully employed to transmit Irish history to a wider demographic" (Poyntz). As young readers are no longer receptive to war stories, popular culture plays a new role in the transmission of social memory (Keren 3). However, the relations between sequential art, popular culture, and memory need to be probed deeper.

Hunt's retellings of Irish history are difficult to situate. Their conventional graphic style is reminiscent of the American periodical war comics that the author used to read from a very early age, but the detailed settings betray his concern for historical accuracy. Though the two volumes have been analysed as children's literature (Cahill 42), their protagonists are adults, and history is revealed with all its intricacies. If the two books are endowed with a strong commemorative dimension and can be dismissed as partisan (Cahill 41), their author has delved into the archives of the National Library to render the complexity of history. For all that, his aesthetic and discursive choices do not coherently evidence an anti-nationalist interpretation. Eventually, Hunt's graphic novels fall into the realm of popular culture without eschewing some of the controversies over the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence.

Though comic strips have often been thought of as conservative and reductive, their relation to history, memory, and commemoration has changed. In the 1960s, war comics targeted readers interested in military paraphernalia and extolled virtues such as courage and patriotism. In historical graphic novels, which since the 1980s have

1 "The appeal of the book has been enormous and to the widest audience possible," a spokesman for O'Brien Press told the *Irish Independent* (Sweeney).

enjoyed ever-increasing success (Porret 31), history has often been subservient to the plot or used as a mere exotic backdrop (Groensteen, *La bande* 91). However, sequential art has recently turned more critical of mainstream narratives and has acquired a new role in the popularization and commemoration of history. Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta*) and Howard Zinn (*A People's History of The United States*) provide dystopian or critical interpretations of history. One may also observe a growing tendency to divest war comics of heroic fantasies and to foreground anti-heroes.² Once overlooked as mere illustrators (Groensteen, *La bande* 91), the authors of historical graphic novels (such as Art Spiegelman, Jacques Tardi, or Joe Sacco, to name just a few) have meanwhile been acclaimed for their understanding of history. The graphic reportages of Sacco, conveyed through a personal graphic style, the documentary minuteness of Tardi's panels, or the evidential status of John Stuart Clark and Jonathan Clode's *To End All Wars* evidence the new status of historical graphic novels. Some volumes are edited with a collection of primary documents and encyclopaedic articles written by established historians.³ *To End All Wars*, an anthology commemorating WWI, is based on real facts and offers the soldiers' points of view. Clode asserts that "graphic novels are a great way of encouraging young people in subjects which may be alien to them. [...] They are no different to film as a serious medium to convey ideas" (Sherwin). Compared with other historical graphic novels, Hunt's critical voice sounds slightly muted. Are *Blood* and *At War* historical comics or comics interpreting history (*la bande dessinée historique*) (Pierre 94)?

Gerry Hunt tackles a much contested period of Irish history, as the years 1916-1920 lend themselves to interpretative divergences: "few events in Irish history have been so remembered, re-enacted, and re-imagined" (McGarry 4). A mythologised event, the Easter Rising, "has become the touchstone and lightning rod in the Irish popular imagination" (Higgins 5). For some it constitutes an example and "a standard against which to judge all subsequent events," while for others it epitomises an excessive sentimental nationalism vindicating violence (Higgins 5). Since the 1966 fiftieth anniversary state commemoration, which was "an opportunity through which to galvanise nationalist opinion" (Higgins 15), revisionist interpretations have gained ground (Boyce 166), with Conor Cruise O'Brien and Fr. Francis Shaw criticizing the myth-making around the Rising and its importance in Irish history. As the Rising "legitimized the physical force tradition" (Higgins 7), the violence plaguing Ireland during the Troubles affected its interpretation. In 2006, eight years after the Good Friday Agreement, as commemorative parades were restored,⁴ new debates flared over its democratic legitimacy, the personality of Pádraic Pearse, or the motives and political agendas of the leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. The most recent com-

2 Emmanuel Guibert's *La Guerre d'Alan*, for example, is an intimate narrative of WWII seen through the eyes of a soldier.

3 *Normandie Juin 44; Le Mur de l'Atlantique; Putain de Guerre!*.

4 Parades commemorating the Rising had been suppressed in 1972 by the Irish government due to the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland (McCarthy, "Introduction").

memorations were held in memory of all victims regardless of religion, status, or nationality⁵ and were followed by ceremonies commemorating those who died on the Somme.⁶ However, the Rising and the War of Independence remain moot events. Can such interpretative intricacies be echoed in sequential art? Though graphic novels may popularise history without endorsing nationalist canons, one may wonder whether Hunt's appropriation of a genre new to Irish readers entails a revised interpretation of the events. Gramsci's hegemony theory, which views popular culture as an arena for the struggle between the dominant class and subordinate groups, may provide a theoretical framework in which to consider Hunt's historical volumes as the manifestation of a "compromise equilibrium" (Storey 10), an area of negotiation between nationalist history and individual or alternative memories, in other words, a terrain of resistance and incorporation (Storey 8) where diverging viewpoints are articulated through a popular visual idiom.

Historical Effect and Dramatization

Gerry Hunt and his editors' choices of covers seemingly situate the two novels in a pro-Irish perspective. The subtitle for *Blood, The Rebellion that Set Ireland Free*, celebrates the 1916 Rising as a foundational moment in Irish history. In fact, historical comic strips, often based on the exemplary stories of great heroes or pivotal moments in national history, have often been vehicles for nationalist propaganda (Louwagie & Weysow 11; see also Strömberg). Though they dramatise national history, Hunt's volumes nonetheless offer a multi-faceted account of the events.

5 Liz McManus, the Labour party Dáil member on the cross-party committee organising the ceremony said: "we should commemorate the civilians who died and people who were doing their duty in the police and the British army as well" (Bowcott).

6 "There should be symmetry in recognising the sacrifice made by 50,000 Irishmen who died in the first world war," commented Fine Gael's Ciaran Conlon (Bowcott).

Figure 1

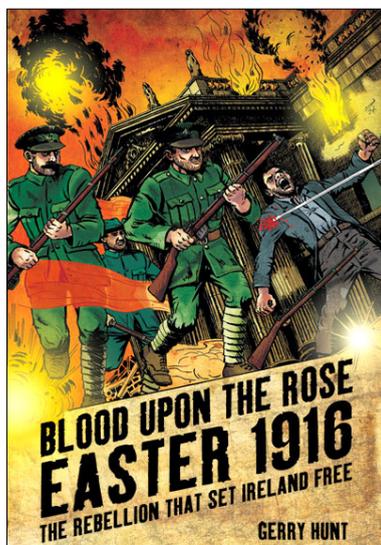
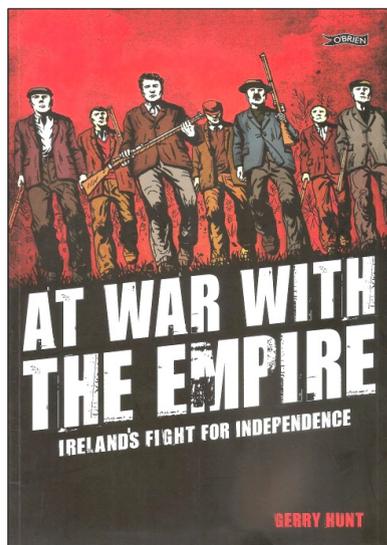


Figure 2



The cover for *Blood* (fig. 1) displays all the ingredients of 1960s popular war comics (such as *War at Sea* or *Fightin' Marines*). Commandant Michael Mallin and his officers are shown in military gear, rifle in hand, racing to battle while a member of the Irish Citizen Army, in civilian clothes, is shot. The scene is set in front of the iconic Dublin General Post Office, set ablaze by the British. The numerous diagonals, the conventional graphic signs representing explosions, rifle shots, and flames, as well as the fiery colours emphasise war-related violence. Hunt adopts the visual grammar and distinct graphic language of war comics, while other authors (Joe Sacco, *The Great War: July 1, 1916*, or Jacques Tardi, *It Was the War of the Trenches*) opted for subdued colours or black and white to evidence their documentary approach and disjoin their personal narrative from reality. The cover for *At War* (fig. 2), equally constructed on a dynamic aslant line, shows an army of volunteers in civilian outfits, holding guns. In *At War*, the red background of the cover conjures up images of bloodshed and revolution. In the two covers, the low-angle point-of-view heightens the impression of danger. It is noteworthy that the typography for the two titles, the parchment-like brown background of *Blood* or the large white letters imitating old printed pages of *At War*, gives an impression of authenticity. Similarly, the detailed drawing of the GPO creates “*un effet d'histoire*” (Fresnault Desruelle 98) or an historical effect.

The two covers, which enable the readers to identify the genre of the books, dramatise history and attempt to elicit an emotional response. Will Eisner defines sequential art as “the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (*Comics* 6). Similarly, Michel Thiébaud argues that graphic novels give

life to history by providing much implicit information on distant time periods and involving readers emotionally (447-464). Thierry Groensteen also claims that comics enable the readers to live the events vicariously ("Why are Comics" 39-41). This distinctive dramatization, which recurs throughout Hunt's volumes, may be compared to cinematic reconstitutions of history. If, as Martine Robert holds, memory is constructed through visual representations and transmitted through narratives, graphic novels are ideal vehicles for historical memory (Robert 217). Requiring from the reader an active deciphering of text and image, comics transform memory into images and, simultaneously, images into memory (Robert 217). They stress action while showing, in the background, the mores, behaviour, and mentalities of a given period. This is amply exemplified in Hunt's books. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis regarding the cinema on its direct and compelling representation of man's behaviour and attitude to the world through gestures, gazes, poses, and facial expressions, can be applied to graphic novels (Robert 231): "because it confers a form to human experience through a complex network of signification endowed with a distinctive rhetoric, sequential art makes it known" (Robert 231; my translation). American historian Alison Landsberg, who explores the issue of historical remembrance through television and films, argues that new popular artefacts and technologies generate "prosthetic memory" (2-3) conveying stories of the past to large and heterogeneous audiences who can identify with the experience of war. Popular works are, she argues, "powerful," "experiential" and "interpellative" (19). Prosthetic memory, which is neither inherently progressive nor inherently reactionary, is transgenerational. It emerges as an interface between collective and individual memory and blurs the distinction between history (maintaining some distance with the past) and memory (a subjective affective relationship to the past) (19). Arguably, historical comics are 'transferential spaces' transmitting the experience of war through embodied narratives endowed with affective power. Blending text and images, emphasizing colours, atmosphere, and bodily gestures, they propel the readers onto the battlefield. Hunt's mixture of conventional comic style and historical realism reinforces the experiential power of his volumes.

None of the episodes narrated by Hunt are fictionalised: *Blood* and *At War* are based on archival material. The external focalization and the concise disembodied narrative texts give an impression of neutrality and distance. In some of the speech balloons, the transcriptions of the Irish accent add to the impression of authenticity. However, the impression of historical realism is more efficiently conveyed through visual elements. The inside back cover of *Blood* features two primary documents: a 1916 map of Dublin published by *The Irish Times* and the original poster of the 1916 Proclamation of Independence. A former architect, Hunt paints the settings and backgrounds faithfully in a style reminiscent of the documentary realism of Alain Paillou (*Normandie Juin* 44). Hunt's depictions of Liberty Hall (*Blood* 28), the barricades (*Blood* 29), and the Royal College of Surgeons (*Blood* 28), are in all respects similar to archival photographs (fig. 3).

Figure 3

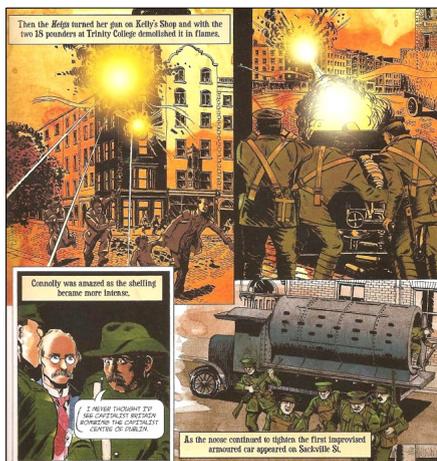
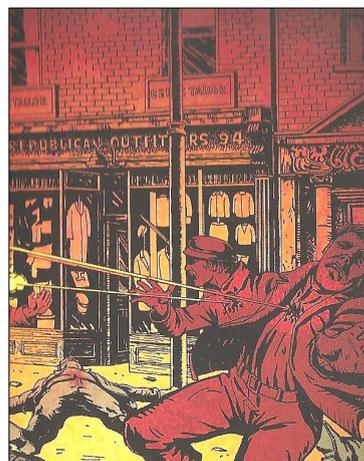


Figure 4



The streets of Dublin and its slums are minutely reproduced and much attention is lavished on the architectural features of Dublin Castle (*Blood 44*) and Kilmainham (*Blood 45*). In *At War*, the same minuteness can be observed. The background is never neglected, even when shootings are depicted in the foreground (*At War 41*; fig. 4). These visual details are crucial to the sense of place and time. Through a few large framings, Hunt creates a convincing atmosphere and documents people's living conditions. However, as Michel Pierre warns, the masterful depiction of historical details and the placing of accurate minutiae should not be mistaken for historical truth (Pierre 90). Even if they play a documentary role, Hunt's visual choices influence the readers' understanding of the events.

Visual Segmentation and the Interpretation of History

To understand the discursive impact of the visual organization of the panels, one must consider the two volumes separately, though there is much historical continuity between them. In sequential art, the segmentation of the story – i.e. the organization and assemblage of frames on the double page – is of paramount importance (Peeters 39). While the succession of frames in a film is linear, in sequential art, the frames are inter-related and perceived simultaneously (Peeters 23-24). Their variable sizes, numbers, and relations (of continuity or contrast) affect our reading.

Hunt's graphic style is mostly rhetorical: the expressivity of the drawings complements the story and creates a congruent atmosphere (Peeters 48-49). The fact that Hunt wrote the scenario and drew the panels accounts for the solidarity between text and image. *Blood* is composed in a dynamic, irregular, and expressionist way which contributes to the impression that the 1916 Rising was a reckless, ill-prepared undertaking (fig. 5). The time frame is very narrow, as in about fifty pages Hunt narrates

events taking place between 23 April and 3 May 1916. The swift and staccato rhythm of the narration as well as the numerous ellipses reinforce the impression of unpreparedness. Hunt juxtaposes events taking place in different areas and at different times on a single page, thereby disrupting classical homogeneity. Some frames overlap, thereby accelerating the rhythm of the narration (Peeters 116). Many people are portrayed on a double page and there are few continuous dialogues or sequences. The impression of disorganization is at times heightened by the thin diagonal lines separating frames of different sizes or shapes. The chromatic richness adds to the atmosphere of utter agitation. The narrative texts, printed on a yellow background and replete with temporal adverbs, bridge the temporal or spatial gap between frames. The overall disruption of visual unity is both expressive and relevant to the author's perception of events (Groensteen, *Système* 59).

Figure 5



Figure 6



At War shows a much more coherent composition (and the author's greater mastery of sequential art) which reflects the more organised guerilla war waged against the British. A sense of calm pervades the first pages. The panels are regular and straight, the gutters – i.e. the white stripes separating the frames – are preserved, and there are fewer boxes on each page (fig. 6). Though the points of view or angles are varied, the emphasis is on clarity and continuity. Each page narrates events taking place in the same place and at the same moment so that the eye can track elements repeated in several frames and follow the plot easily. The texts and the speech balloons are often redundant, which strengthens the pedagogical assets of the book. The events unfold at a more sedate rhythm with anecdotes being recounted (10) to increase suspense. Colours are used sparsely and in a coherent way with red as a background for violent scenes. As violence escalates, leading to passages of extreme ferociousness opposing the Black and Tans to the Volunteers (44-46), red and yellow hues dominate, and the layout becomes irregular and expressive.

The visual devices thereby serve to convey an understanding of the conflict as a succession of attacks and reprisals culminating with the reckless attacks of the Black and Tans, eventually leading to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty.

Heroes of History: Framing, Focus, and National History

In comic books, some devices borrowed from the cinema – framing, changing distance or scale in travellings or close-ups, montage (Eisner, *Le récit* 76) – may be used to enhance the main protagonists. Influenced by illustrated magazines and press photography (Porret 168), historical comics display many close-ups of heroes which construct collective memory but reduce history to a single chain of events. The heroes of graphic biographies⁷ commonly are “charismatic leaders, presented as saviors able to embody the nation and whose ideal portraits compound all sorts of qualities” (Amalvi 1). The narratives of the 1916 Rising have placed national heroes on a pedestal and emphasised their heroic deeds. Besides, many historians agree that the leaders of the Rising “prioritized heroic gestures over practical objectives” (McGarry 3). Blood sacrifice was what was aimed at (Githens-Mazer 113). Nationalist history transformed the rebels into venerated martyrs⁸ embodying patriotism and independence (Stevens 343; Githens-Mazer 95). In Irish schools, the 1916 Rising was taught as “a standardized tale of do-gooders and Catholic martyrs” (Higgins 17). Avoiding the pitfalls of nationalist history, Hunt refrains from eulogizing the participants and relies on research:

My father took part in the Rising but he died when I was 11 years old so I too had to rely on research and therefore I did not set out to make heroes of any of the Irish involved, just to present the facts with regards to the action and to let the readers decide for themselves.⁹

In comics, the author’s view at times filters through the speech balloons, the captions, the panels, and the lay-out. Hunt uses speech balloons and captions to distance his narrative from that of nationalist history. The dialogues and the texts are used differently. Some famous statements made by historical figures featured in the novels are quoted to highlight the anti-colonial scope of the Rising. In *Blood*, Connolly says “our sacrifice today will sound an alarm bell ringing throughout the British Empire that won’t stop until our people are free” (9). In *At War*, De Valera’s Boston speech is quoted: “Our struggle for independence is just the same as America’s gallant war with the British one hundred and fifty years ago. Britain’s occupation of Ireland is comparable to that of Germany in Belgium.” The success of this speech is

7 The series entitled *Grands Capitaines*, dedicated to the great heroes of history and edited by Dargaud from 1981 to 1984, includes a volume dedicated to the Easter Rising: *De Valera. Les Pâques sanglantes*.

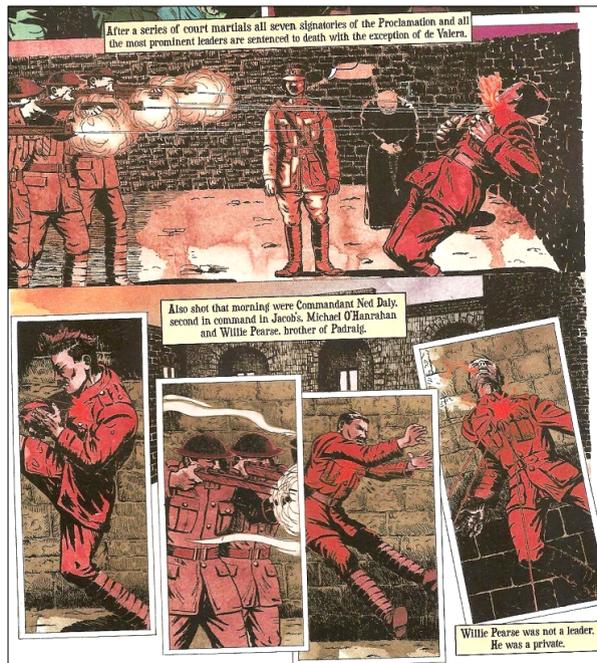
8 Representations of Catholic martyrdom have played a role in the perceptions of the Rising (Githens-Mazer 96; Higgins 15; Centlivres & Losonczy 7).

9 Hunt interviewed by the present author, 15 May 2010.

indicated by the huge crowd of listeners (23). Anti-colonialism, which is hinted at in the two titles, is not expounded in the narrative text however, nor is it at the core of the two volumes.

The speech balloons merely individualise the narrative; which is conducted by the omniscient narrator more clearly identified with the author's voice. Several balloons evidence the protagonists' readiness to shed blood for the nation and blend religious and nationalist forms of martyrdom. Connolly says, "there will be losses. We are all making a huge sacrifice" (*Blood* 8, 9). As they lie in ambush near South Dublin Union, Cathal Brugha's men,¹⁰ ready to die, sing: "God Save Ireland cried we all, whether the gallows high or battlefield we die" (*Blood* 37). The Proclamation read by Pearse asserts: "we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the causes of its freedom" (*Blood* 12). The narrative texts do not echo these values but recount the events factually, identify the characters and places to help the reader follow the plot or give indications of its duration. The theme of sacrifice, which recurs in the dialogues, is visually enhanced in the last page of *Blood* showing the execution of the jailed insurgents. Red hues prevail, and the vignette in the middle, which first catches the reader's eye, stages four soldiers firing at a leader's throat (fig. 7).

Figure 7



10 Cathal Brugha was Vice-Commandant, 4th Battalion of the Dublin Brigade of the Irish Volunteers at South Dublin Union under Eamonn Ceannt during the 1916 Rising.

Hunt's expressionist emphasis on the execution matches many historians' analyses of the fifteen executions as a trigger for widespread radicalism (Githens-Mazer; Boyce 172-173). A text on the inside back cover explains how the population's mood began to change after the executions of the leaders: the latter, as Githens-Mazer writes, "were now starting to be reinvented and rehabilitated as 'misguided' but brave and selfless" (142). Hunt's declaration of neutrality is contradicted by the text printed on the back cover of *Blood* ("an unlikely band of freedom fighters – teachers, poets, writers, patriots, trade unionists – declare an Irish Republic. From this dramatic gesture, a nation is born"). Similarly, in *At War*, the back cover reads: "A guerilla war for independence, fought against the might of the British Army on the streets of the towns and cities and in the fields and lanes of the Irish countryside." The word 'might' and the repetition of 'and' bestow an epic dimension on the book and betray a tendency to memorialisation. The protagonists of *Blood* and "The Irish" fighting in *At War*, 24 men, are portrayed in bust on the inside front covers. In the latter volume, "The British," reduced to five leaders, are portrayed on the inside back cover. This opposition enables the readers to identify the 'goodies' and the 'villains.'

Hunt represents history as a collective impetus rather than the result of individual leadership. Both the covers and the framings focus on groups of combatants. Some recently published historical graphic novels tell history through the eyes of ordinary citizens, thereby echoing the growing importance of social history.¹¹ Tardi explains that, in *The War of the Trenches*, "there is no 'hero,' no 'main character' in the deplorable collective adventure of the war" (Porret 33). Hunt does not privilege the voice of the oppressed but highlights the collective dimension of history. In the two volumes, the leaders and protagonists are individualised through distinctive visual signs but never glorified. In *Blood*, even though the first two pages focus on Joseph Plunkett's marriage to Grace Clifford before his execution, Hunt refrains from telling more about the rebel's private life (O'Leary). Plunkett, Connolly, and Pearse are featured amidst the other combatants. Whenever larger boxes are devoted to key moments in which Connolly or Pearse are involved, the leaders are not seen in close-up (36, 12). The opening *in media res* is written in the present in internal focalization, but the rest of the story, told in flashback, is narrated by an omniscient narrator. Visual internal focalization – showing things as if they were seen by the character to facilitate identification – is used only once when the horror of a scene is reflected on Pearse's appalled face (42).

Because the War of Independence was more organised than the Rising, its leaders are more prominently represented in *At War*. The sequences are organised around key figures, whether they are Collins, De Valera, or Seán Hogan. The framing is tighter than in *Blood*; the distance and scale within each box are more varied with

11 As Merino observes, "comics, as a cultural space, incorporate both testimonial and documentary forms offering the possibility of representing subaltern subjects who in and of themselves form a part of the construction of the text" (Merino 2).

light often enhancing one given character. Though the detailed narrative texts give no indication as to the life or temperament of the protagonists, many fighters or victims are named and thereby given importance. However, what is stressed throughout the book is the existence of various networks of volunteers taking part in the guerrilla warfare.

Rather than privileging one viewpoint, in *Blood* and *At War*, Hunt creates a social fresco including women fighters, children, and the local population. Female combatants are featured in the GPO or in the streets and hospitals as they convey key information and look after the wounded. Hunt leaves room for criticism: after Pearse tells women fighters to leave the GPO, one of the female soldiers blames him for failing to respect equal rights (38). The local population’s hostility to the Rising is also made clear.

Figure 8



The People

In the mid-1910s, the Irish people were far from being united under the Republican banner: though attempts to achieve Home Rule seemed to stall, radical republicanism was not commonly viewed as an alternative. Indeed, in Easter 1916, 150,183 Irishmen were serving with the British forces on the Continent, another 1,121 were members of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, and 9,501 were members of the RIC (Royal Irish Constabulary) (Boyce 165). Consequently, the Rising was not a unified national uprising: “the bulk of Irish opinion was concerned that these ‘crazy and criminal characters’ [i.e. Sinn Féin] would jeopardise the political victory of Home Rule” (Githens-Mazer 59). Only after the realities of war became clearer (conscription, taxation, etc.) did radicalism grow more popular.

In *Blood*, the lack of national cohesion is unmistakable. Aware of archival materials evidencing the attitude of Dubliners left speechless by the unexpected spectacle of the 1916 Rising, Hunt's framings include crowds of onlookers. His undramatic depiction of the reading of the proclamation echoes many historians' claim that this event perplexed those who witnessed it (Githens-Mazer 130).¹² The dimly-coloured crowds of people in the background shout "clear off" or "Go Home shiners" (10; fig. 8). The proclamation is nonetheless reproduced on the inside back cover and restored to its central place. Throughout the story, some citizens are shown helping either the insurgents (*Blood* 19) or the British (*Blood* 37). Historians have indeed noted that many Dubliners offered British soldiers tea, chocolate, and cigarettes (McGarry 169), and that many Dublin poor benefited from the war (Githens-Mazer 112). Hunt was eager to present divergent stances:

There was great poverty in Dublin at that time and a large number of families relied totally, for their survival, on the money they received from the British Government on behalf of their husbands and sons who were then fighting in World War 1 for the British. When the General Post Office was taken over by the rebels those people could not get their cheques and, to me it was an important part of the Rising.¹³

Hunt communicates this aspect in images: on page 15, a woman fears she may not be given her pension. In several frames, a hostile crowd calls the Volunteers *shiners* (*Blood* 10, 12, 18). Dubliners' hostility reaches a peak when the insurgents are walked to Kilmainham Gaol. Sticking to historical records of the scene (Githens-Mazer 124), Hunt writes: "On Sunday morning, they were marched to Richmond Barracks and were jeered and pelted by crowds in the slums" (*Blood* 45). However, Hunt also pictures poor Dubliners rejoicing in the looting of Sackville Street (*Blood* 15, 18) in a fit of lawlessness, as the text indicates. Again, he is faithful to historical records insisting on people's concern with food supplies (Githens-Mazer 124). The looters are threatened by a Volunteer into bringing the stolen objects back, which shows the Volunteers' eagerness to behave morally so as to rally people to their cause. The local people are portrayed, almost caricatured, as extremely poor, but imagery in comics often relies on stereotypes (Eisner, *Le récit* 21). Ordinary citizens are also represented in scenes of shooting. The panels depicting the killing of civilians are particularly expressive, and the back cover of *Blood* notes that 254 civilians were killed.

In *At War*, the lesser visibility of the population is in keeping with the atmosphere of secrecy surrounding the various battles: as in espionage comics, night scenes, unforeseen attacks, and secret encounters abound. Those witnessing shootings are not directly involved and remain in the background, mere grey figures. Throughout the volume, Hunt uses colour and light to introduce a hierarchy among the characters: the fighters in the foreground are brightly-lit while the crowds are pictured in grey and often reduced to extras observing the scenes or expressing their bafflement. When

12 Though in reality, the reading of the proclamation did not draw crowds, soon after the Rising there were dramatic tales of its reading in front of an approving crowd (Higgins 9).

13 Hunt interviewed by the present author, 15 May 2010.

Police Inspector Hunt is killed in the context of the campaign against the RIC, the people do not help him: the author writes that the inspector's cries for help went unheeded by the passersby (24). The horror of the Black and Tans attacks is often reflected on people's faces (25, 31, 49; fig. 9). Civilian victims are also brought to the fore in a large frame illustrating the killings which took place in Belfast (32); women and children are seen fleeing their homes (32, 42). As is the case in *Blood*, the scenes of violence are an opportunity to paint the British as excessively brutal.

Figure 9



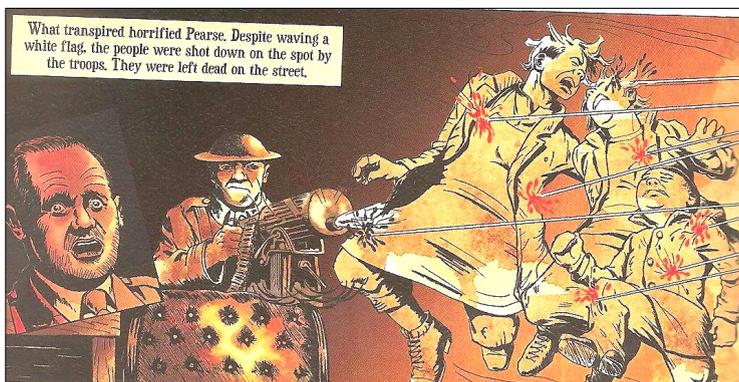
An Anti-British Visual Grammar of Violence

During the 1916 Rising, the lines dividing the British and the Irish were at times blurred. Some Irish soldiers fought in the Battle of the Somme next to their British counterparts. Some British soldiers sent to Dublin are known to have sympathised with the Irish population. In *Blood*, Hunt hints at the British soldiers' unpreparedness and inexperience (31). In *At War*, he depicts a British soldier helping volunteers carry the body of an injured republican fighter and implicitly supporting their cause (20). Many contradictory testimonies evidence savagery from both sides so that people were equally outraged by the killing of civilians, the shelling of the city, the behaviour of the Volunteers, and the reaction of the British (Githens-Mazer 126). Though he is cautious not to eulogise the rebels Hunt fails to portray violence in a balanced way.

One of the most deadly episodes of the Rising was the Battle for Mount Street, to which Hunt devotes three pages. Two narrative texts explain that "the young British were slaughtered" (32) and that "the Volunteers left two hundred and thirty troops dead or wounded behind them" (33). Hunt uses red as a background in three frames to evoke the bloodshed and notes that "corpses were piled up." The episode ends with a full page showing British Colonel MacOnchy being acclaimed by the people as he leaves the battleground (34). The Volunteers were thrilled by the carnage until the triumphant British were acclaimed, as Hunt shows, by local residents. Compared to other accounts and narratives mentioning the "appalling spectacle" that the "devasta-

tion” and “decimation” of British soldiers offered (McGarry 171), Hunt’s depiction does not give the episode its full strength. The depictions of the British attacks are much more expressive. In *Blood*, the brutality of the British soldiers is stressed in several frames through graphic signs of bomb explosions, through the distorted positions of the characters, the expressionist facial features of the wounded, and the blood they shed (fig. 10).

Figure 10



The portrait of Colonel MacOnchy amidst the ruins of Mount Street, occupying one full page, recalls equestrian statues of emperors while the low-angle viewpoint reinforces the impression of disproportionate mightiness (34). In another frame, General Maxwell towers above Pearse as the latter is signing surrender notes (43). Some narrative texts accuse the British explicitly: “innocent men were condemned just for being there”; the words ‘slaughter’ and ‘massacre’ are used. The faces of the civilians executed by the soldiers give an impression of horror, while those wounded by the insurgents are said to have been killed accidentally: “A child hiding behind the door was accidentally killed” (39). However committed to neutrality Hunt may declare himself to be, *Blood* nonetheless offers a pro-Irish view. What is more, there is little attempt at denouncing violence.

Conversely, on the first pages of *At War*, the legitimacy of violence is brought to the fore. During the Soloheadbeg attack,¹⁴ a volunteer says, “now we don’t kill unless we have to”; his companion retorts, “we won’t start a war without killing” (6). The killing of two Irish RIC members stirs a debate, and a priest is seen condemning this murder (8). Similarly, De Valera’s political strategy is opposed to Collins’s advocacy of an armed struggle. The violence of British reprisals for IRA attacks is visually empha-

14 On 21 January 1919, some Irish Volunteers, acting on their own behalf, killed two RIC constables in Soloheadbeg, Co. Tipperary: James McDonnell and Patrick O’Connell, both Irish-born Catholics (McGarry 39).

sised through the use of red and the brutal gestures of the soldiers (25). The British are “caricatured as brutal, aggressive, and cartoonish” (Cahill 42). The killings by the RIC and the Black and Tans are depicted as moments of uncontrolled brutality and lawlessness. Hunt shows terrorised Catholic families fleeing their homes in Belfast (33, 35). Compared with the representation of IRA killings, resulting from cold-blooded strategic decisions, the reprisals of the Black and Tans are drawn as impulsive acts of barbarianism (31-32). Conversely, the IRA’s attacks on civilians refusing to collaborate with them or collaborating with the British are mentioned in a factual way (28). After the death of Kevin Barry, while 26 policemen were shot, only a small frame is dedicated to this campaign, while a large frame with six inset pictures the Tans’ reprisals and a text explains “the Tans again reacted with fury” (46) or “in Tralee, their reign of terror lasted a week” (47). When narrating the Croke Park shootings (known as ‘Bloody Sunday’), the narrator explains that “the Tans began shooting at random, completely out of control.” While the lettering is generally neutral, here, capital letters (‘BAM BAM’) mimicking the sounds of bullets emphasise the violence of the attack. The Tans are said to fight viciously and their gestures systematically evidence their bloody rage (44). The depiction of physical movement in graphic novels enables the readers to live the experience of war by proxy (Venayre 10). Will Eisner stresses the role of body language in comics, comparing the author to a theatre director choreographing the action (*Comics* xi). Therefore, the difference between the controlled positions of the IRA and the ample, aggressive gestures of the British is significant. Hunt may not exaggerate the ferocity of the indiscriminate shootings and wanton destruction perpetrated by the Tans (Ainsworth 3-6). He nonetheless consistently understates the violence of the Irish fighters.

Conclusion

A close scrutiny of Gerry Hunt’s two volumes, *Blood Upon the Rose: Easter 1916: The Rebellion That Set Ireland Free* and *At War With the Empire: Ireland’s Fight for Independence*, reveals that they articulate the social memory of Irish history tinged with nationalist undertones and alternative voices. Hunt’s documentary approach and his commemorative intentions are interwoven in the fabric of his popular retelling, which proves a place of resistance and incorporation. Both form and genre are opportunities to popularise history and to create prosthetic memory, as well as limitations for thorough historical scrutiny. Many aspects of the Rising which may not be easily pictured in a graphic novel are overlooked, whether they are the role of the Home Rule movement, the history of the trade-union movement and the Irish Citizen Army, the impact of the anti-conscription campaign, the role of the Aud,¹⁵ the interna-

15 The German ship Aud, which was to supply the Volunteers with arms, was intercepted by the Royal Navy on 21 April 1916. The shipment of arms had been negotiated by Roger Casement, who had met the German ambassador in New York (see Foy & Barton 58-71).

tional context or the ideological divergences between the leaders. Like Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* (1996), Hunt's graphic novels embrace the style of gangster movies or war and spy comics which privileges violence to the detriment of thorough analysis. Unlike underground historical graphic novels or investigative comics, their inscription within a popular genre explains both their commercial success and their compromised equilibrium: the memory of the 1916 Rising is activated without being transformed deeply. Neither history, as a narrative practice, nor the construction of memory through images, is directly addressed. The rhetorical function of the graphics and the visual emphasis on violence in Hunt's volumes perpetuate the iconisation of memory that some more self-reflexive comics address (Morisson). The remembrance of the past remains mediated by national imagery and the visual repertoire of comics.

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