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## Death of the Soldier and Immortality of War in Frank Ormsby's *A Northern Spring*

# ABSTRACT

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The paper analyzes the collection of the Northern Irish poet Frank Ormsby entitled *A Northern Spring* published in 1986. On the basis of selected poems, the author of this paper aims to examine the poet's reflections about World War II, the lives of the soldiers, and the things that remain after a military combat, which are both physical and illusive. The poems included in the volume present the author's reflections upon the senselessness of war and dying, short lives of the soldiers, the awareness of their own meaninglessness in comparison to the broader picture, and the contradictory and desperate need to be remembered nevertheless. They also show what is left of the soldiers and the war, as well as how life goes on, with or without them.

**Keywords:** Frank Ormsby, war poetry, Northern Ireland.

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Terence Brown states in his review of Frank Ormsby's *A Northern Spring* (1986) that "[p]oets from the north of Ireland have in the last twenty years been much concerned with the First World War. It is as if the current troubles cannot be addressed directly, so, by analogy, the Great War supplies metaphors for contemporary feeling" (79). Examples can be found in poems like John Hewitt's "Portstewart, July 1914" or "The Volunteer," Derek Mahon's "A Kensington Notebook," Seamus Heaney's "In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge" or Michael Longley's "Wounds," to name just a few. Terence Brown emphasizes that because Ormsby had decided to focus on World War II, the volume "make[s] for interesting reading" (79). This departure from the common canon sounds refreshing; still, one has to bear in mind that there were also other poets who were inspired or influenced by the war. John Brown observes:

World War II was witnessed by John Montague as a boy in Tyrone and Armagh; Seamus Heaney was aware early of "war coupons" on the farm; Roy McFadden's family were evacuated when he was a young man and pacifist in Belfast; Michael Longley recalls the war as a dim infant memory (supplemented by family experience and later reading of the war poets). (132)

There is no denying that the war had its influence on poets and writers all around the world. However, Ormsby recalls that

[t]he war ended before I was born but there had been an American military hospital camp in the woods near our house and as children we played in the air-raid shelters and on the stone floors in the undergrowth. Both the Catholic and Protestant graveyards in Irvinestown contained the graves of Canadian and American airmen, mostly the victims of training accidents. Maybe eight or ten years after the war, you would find rusty beer cans among the bluebells. Some of the Nissen huts were to be seen in local farmyards, serving as outhouses. The GIs had related particularly well to the Catholic community and stories about the "Yanks" were part of local history and folklore. (J. Brown 133)

Ormsby, born in 1947, admits that it was only the remnants of the war and American soldiers that allowed him to get into contact with this gruesome event. As a child he might not have understood the weight of the stories and the seemingly meaningless objects. Nonetheless, the "local history and folklore" (J. Brown 133), as he puts it himself, had a strong influence on him as a poet. In *A Northern Spring* published nine years after his first collection of poems, *A Store of Candles* (1977), he focuses on the topics which were distinguishable in the folk stories and were meaningful

to such an extent that he goes back to his childhood memories as an adult man and writer.

Ormsby explores the senselessness of war and dying, the truncated lives of the soldiers, the awareness of their own meaninglessness, as well as the contradictory and desperate need to be remembered. Finally, he also shows what is left of the soldiers and the war in the face of the fact that life goes on with or without them. Although the subject is grave, he tackles the issue with wit and irony. The economy of form of the poems adds to the clever and bitter remarks, as well as to the impression that the volume makes on its readers. Conleth Ellis comments in a review that “few of the pieces which comprise the sequence are self-contained poems. They support each other and they reverberate off each other” (169). This makes the volume more complex, as the themes intertwine and the poems are not just randomly selected. They do convey messages individually; however, after absorbing all of them, one has a fuller and more meaningful impression.

In *A Northern Spring* the poet demonstrates his attitude to the war in general. In poems such “The Flame Thrower,” “Apples, Normandy, 1944,” “The Night I Lost World War II” and “A Cross on a White Circle” Ormsby shows the senselessness of a military conflict, which is visible from the perspective of a dying young soldier. “The Flame Thrower” starts with harrowingly accurate lines:

We were all in the lap of the gods, as Smokey said,  
an unpredictable, tumescent place.  
You might be dandled there or due a caress  
or fucked quick as lightning if your tree camouflage  
wasn't just right. (Ormsby 13)

The excerpt constitutes two thirds of the whole poem, yet it is enough to provoke a feeling of admiration for the poet's aptness of perception. The language is acute and humorous; it draws attention to the grotesque narrative in a way that is economical and straightforward. The soldiers feel like puppets in the hands of a mightier and more important master. This being in power can be understood quite literally, as some divine entity which controls mortals, or as people in power who have the final say in national politics. Men who are more powerful, experienced or have a different perception of life decide about the lives of the younger generation who are more eager to fight as they thrive on ideologies and patriotism. The soldiers in Ormsby's poems are aware of their hopeless situations and try their best not only to survive, but also to stay sane. The atrocities take their toll, as the soldiers find different preoccupations which would enable them

to escape the surrounding reality. In “Apples, Normandy, 1944” Ormsby presents “a war artist [who is] sketching apples” (Ormsby 16):

“I’m sick of tanks,” he said. “I’m sick of ruins.  
I’m sick of dead soldiers and soldiers on the move  
and soldiers resting.  
And to tell you the truth, I’m sick drawing refugees.  
*I want to draw apples.*”

For all we know he’s still sitting under a tree  
somewhere between the Seine and Omaha,  
or, russet with pleasure, striding past old dugouts  
towards the next windfall—  
sketch-books accumulating as he becomes  
the Audubon of French apples,

or works on the single apple  
—perfect, planetary—of his imagination. (Ormsby 16)

The soldier in the poem is tired of the images and the connotations that the war brings. He is not devoid of sympathy, yet he perceives the world as broken and irreparable. Consumed by his fascination, he repeatedly draws the apples—simple fruit, which allow him to cope with his trauma and devastation—trying to achieve the perfection of the “planetary shape.” Because the whole world is involved in the war, his aim is to create a perfect fruit—an apple, a circular shape which will reflect the opposite of the chaos and destruction that the soldier is experiencing. The man is rebellious in that he defies the war by searching for peace in his own work. Defying expectations connected with his drawings and actions, he emphasizes his needs and juxtaposes them with the situation around him. On the more modern and contemporary mode, Ormsby admits that “Apples, Normandy, 1944” is, on one level, a reaction against journalistic pressures on Northern poets to write about the Troubles (J. Brown 133). For the editor of the *Honest Ulsterman* and numerous selections from Northern Irish poets, it is a typical one as “[t]hroughout his career [Ormsby] has been a vigorous enemy of what in Northern Irish literary circles we call ‘Troubles trash,’” adding that “[a]rt is the opposite of propaganda” (Longley 11).

In addition, to the same theme of the pointlessness of the war and the actions of an individual there is a poem entitled “The Night I Lost World War II,” which starts like the small-talk one could experience at a local pub while chatting with a veteran sipping his drink in a corner. “How do you lose a war? I’ll tell you how” (Ormsby 18) begins the soldier who might want to give his interlocutor some friendly instructions. The speaker is

brief in summarizing the hardships: "Parachuting after dark . . . so far off course the maps were useless" (Ormsby 18). When the readers' attention is already caught, they expect the plot of the story to thicken and so the poet delivers what is anticipated:

At dawn the war found me, asleep in a barn.  
The first man in the regiment to see the Rhine,  
I starved in Bavaria for another year  
as a guest of Wehrmacht.

Then home to Nebraska without firing a round. (Ormsby 18)

The defeat of the soldier is mixed with the only triumph that distinguished him from his regiment in a positive way. Ormsby looks at the life of the war survivors and is not afraid to brutally strip them of the glory and honour associated with most people who came back from war. It is a risky attempt considering the reactions of the broader audience, yet one that pays off as it contributes to a more complete and bittersweet image of the survivors. To put the reports in balance, in "A Cross on a White Circle" the poet presents a situation where soldiers fell into their own traps and died an unnecessary and senseless death:

A cross on a white circle marked a church  
And a cross on a black circle a calvary.  
Reading the map too hastily we advanced  
To the wrong village and so had gone too far  
And we were strafed by our own fighters.  
In the time it takes to tell Bretteville sur Laize  
From Bretteville le Rabet, twelve of us died. (Ormsby 28)

A mistake was all it took for a dozen men to die. What is ironic is that they were shot by their own countrymen, because a rapid decision was made. Ormsby allows, however, the soldiers themselves to speak of the tragedy that had nothing to do with bravery and commitment. Talking about his preparation for writing *A Northern Spring*, he expresses the same objectivity:

While *A Northern Spring* was in progress I read a lot about the Normandy landings and about America before, during and after the war. The absurdities could be harmless or poignant or lethal. The wry and ironic elements in the sequence emerged from these stories. In some cases I adapted actual experiences or built on passing references, in other cases I invented. (J. Brown 134)

Ormsby de-glorifies the incidents that show the hopelessness of war and the failures, which were the fault of no particular originator.

While the poems like “Apples, Normandy, 1944” or “A Cross on a White Circle” summon the reflection about the futility of the war, the brevity of human life is also demonstrated in *A Northern Spring*. The ever-present irony is used as a means to help cope with death. In a collection devoted to war, which comprises over fifty poems, there is an abundance of examples commenting on the brevity of life. As Ian Kendrick says: “The thematic unity of the collection is impressive when one considers the unlikely leitmotif of wartime death and its attendant ironies which runs throughout the title sequence” (25). The irony and humour with which the poet tackles the issue work well, not evoking aversion or indignation. “I Died in a Country Lane” is one of the poems which appears early on in the collection, and evokes the emotional turmoil that takes place throughout the ten lines which constitute the whole piece:

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I died in a country lane near Argentan,  
 my back to a splintered poplar,  
 my eyes on fields  
 where peace had not been broken  
 since the Hundred Years War.  
 And a family returned to the farm  
 at the end of the lane.  
 And Patton sent his telegram: “Dear Ike,  
 today I spat in the Seine.”  
 And before nightfall Normandy was ours. (Ormsby 9)

The fact that the story is told from a perspective of a dead person makes it an even more poignant record. Horrifying details of this particular death are conjured, and yet the soldier takes his time to evoke an epiphany related to the land where he died. The subsequent lines zoom out on a family, which continues to live in the area affected by the bloodshed. Finally, Ormsby enlarges the perspective to include General Patton reporting to the future president of the United States—Dwight Eisenhower—that he has accomplished his mission. From the calm report of the dead soldier, the poem proceeds to the presumptuous and crude bragging of the commander. The humility is replaced with a conceited comment. Nonetheless in the end the dead soldier is proud to report that they—collectively as the Allies, as the soldiers fighting on the same side, as his regiment—have regained Normandy. Tom Clyde states that in *A Northern Spring* “a sudden change of gear can make your head swim” (115). Ormsby repeats this approach of a deceased man relating his passing in the poem “I Stepped on a Small Landmine.” The short life of the soldier here is not ended in solitude:

"I stepped on a small landmine . . . / and was spread, with three others, over a field / of burnt lucerne" (Ormsby 11). The life again ends abruptly; but the dead man continues to relate how his "bits" (Ormsby 11) were shipped with the parts of the bodies of his fellow comrades in arms. The poet also tackles yet another distressing issue—racism:

The bits they shipped to Georgia at the request  
Of my two sisters were not entirely me.  
If dead men laughed, I would have laughed the day  
the committee for white heroes honoured me,  
and honoured too the mangled testicles  
of Leroy Earl Johnson. (Ormsby 11)

The afterlife-like comment expresses bitterness, sharing the comic irony of this situation. The lives, which ended in this tragic accident, were equal in death as they were equal on the battlefield. Ormsby admits that "[r]acism is certainly a theme in the 'Northern Spring' sequence, especially the grim irony that not even a World War against a racist regime could annul such prejudices" (J. Brown 134).

The poet presents different aspects of a premature death, although one could assume that sudden shock and bitterness are all that is to be expressed in the poems. Nonetheless, the works entitled "Among the Dead," "From the German" and "My Memory Collected Places" evoke the theme of short lives from yet a different perspective. The "Among the Dead" poem conjures an image of "a bronze statue: the Spirit of American Youth" (Ormsby 35) in a cemetery—a common image commemorating the bravery of the youngest soldiers, who never came back from the war alive. As Ormsby puts it: "There were two score of ours among the dead / on the first day, none older than twenty" (35). The poem demonstrates that the soldiers were almost children—ordinary boys, immature and intoxicated with the sense of duty: "Grease-monkeys, farmhands, hash slingers, their names are rare / between the town registers of Birth and Death. / They look out of school photographs where their promise / has turned to a yellowing of unfinished lives" (Ormsby 35). Ormsby puts aside duty and higher motives and focuses on the possibilities that the young soldiers were deprived of. The bitterness evoked in relation to the lives spared and, at the same time, the lives wasted, lacks the ironic tone which opens the collection. The same happens in "From the German," in which the reader is confronted with the other side of the conflict. The poem emerges from the soldier's depths of regret and remorse after the war, in correlation with the German soldiers, who also, indisputably, died in combat. The work starts with an account from the past: "When I delivered the grenade cleanly through the slit / of the gun emplacement, /

I buried my face in seaweed and covered my ears” (Ormsby 36). It is forty years later, when the same person realizes the consequences of his actions, that he is reading a “wheelchair-veteran’s book of reminiscences / ‘translated from the German’” (Ormsby 36), and that is where and when he finds out “what ended there”: “Walter’s dyspepsia, Heinrich’s insufferable snores, / big Hoffmann’s correspondence course in Engineering” (Ormsby 36). The poem evokes the strangely normal and humane afflictions and interests of the supposedly cruel and heartless German soldiers. By means of a story told from the opposite perspective, the soldier, so brave at the beginning of the poem, is not faced with measurable consequences, but with an insight into the tragedy of the war-time enemies. As the veteran speaks: “elusively they rise / to baffle grief with an inviolable presence, some treacherous gift of innocence restored / I cannot believe in and would not refuse” (Ormsby 36). This is the only poem in the whole collection which presents glimpses of the German deaths; however, through this text Ormsby again comments on the short lives and abruptness of death on the battlefields. Presenting it from the German perspective enriches the volume and emphasizes the sympathetic side of the poet, as well as his open-mindedness.

Moreover, “My Memory Collected Places” continues to share this nostalgic and sentimental tone. The poem is brief, although it succeeds in calling up the torment which accompanies the soldiers. As the speaker admits, he carried home the locations, the places to which his mind was clinging. Again, as in “Apples, Normandy, 1944” one could say that memorizing the names and views of the passed places, a fascination of a kind, is a way of coping with the surrounding chaos. The places recalled by the soldier are “those Northern villages where I thought of death / and clung to living more than before or after— / Lison, Isigny, rising through the dawns / of a dangerous summer” (Ormsby 37). The man describes his fear openly, admitting that his life was dear to him and that he did not want to die. The fact that he returned to his hometown safe and sound makes the confession even more moving, as the reader realizes that the speaker was painfully aware that each moment on the warfront could be his last. With no irony and no humour the soldier recounts the images of places he visited during his campaign. Terence Brown, who in his reading of *A Northern Spring* focuses less on the previously-mentioned irony, states that:

Nostalgia is, perhaps, the ruling mood; for Ormsby clearly regrets the simple ordinary lives disturbed or destroyed by change. . . . But while nostalgia, and a wry humour, make these emotionally accessible and enjoyable poems, there is also a sense throughout that Ormsby is seeking, with an understated intelligence which saves the book from sentimentality, to re-define our understanding of contemporary violence. (81)



The contemporary violence, as he further explains, is understood as a reference to the Troubles. However, putting this connection aside, one may challenge the notion that the aforementioned mood dominates throughout the volume. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that it is clearly visible in the three discussed poems: "Among the Dead," "From the German" and "My Memory Collected Places."

The images that evoke the futility of war, as well as the poems that involve the speakers' abrupt deaths, are strictly connected with the ever-present sense that the lives of the soldiers do not really matter. In "The Flame Thrower" the soldiers feel like marionettes, as if they were controlled by some higher entity, cursed and condemned to be at the mercy of cruel gods, who are not in the least concerned with their well-being. "The Night I Lost World War II" presents a more personal story of a man who never had an opportunity to test himself in combat, a single unit, who in no way contributed to the result of the war. These men are painfully conscious of the lack of meaning their contribution had. A poem which exemplifies the notion in a prominent way is "Cleo, Oklahoma." The young soldier is leaving his hometown, afraid and uncertain about what the future will hold for him. Regrettably, the people who surround him, his closest family and the mayor of the town, already treat him like a lost cause. "I knew he'd be a big shot.' My mother's words, / in the third person, as though I'd already gone" (Ormsby 6) starts the soldier, sourly commenting on his mother's behaviour. The unconditional pride of the woman makes one think that perhaps this young man will have a chance, any chance in the confrontations to come, yet the very fact that he is going to fight in a war makes her treat him like a hero who will fall one way or another. The poem continues: "the Mayor spread his arms / and had trouble with History . . . / 'We've had History before now, folks, in this town. / There'll be more History soon" (Ormsby 6). The city manager spreads the same falsehood, presumption and self-righteousness, as he poses "for a possible statue" (Ormsby 6). And the town name here is a telling one too. Translated from Greek it may mean "pride," "fame" or glory." But all these attributes remain at home. The parade lasts until the soldiers leave, waving their goodbyes, uncertain of their future. They know, however, that the lack of meaning is there to haunt them through the nights to follow. The young man reflects: "Already I belonged / to somewhere else, or nowhere, or the next / photograph" (Ormsby 6), and that "[i]t was too late to cry / or too early" (Ormsby 6), emphasizing the confusion and anxiety that he is experiencing. To develop further the commentary on the participants of the war, Ormsby presents a story of a totally different soldier in the poem "For the Record." This man is not welcomed by anyone, has a difficult personality, and causes trouble all over the place, even in his own regiment. The soldier is transferred to

the country for stabbing a man in Belfast and has to endure “enough fresh air to poison a city boy” (Ormsby 12). The rebellious army man continues to take part and causes fights with his fellow comrades, which evolve into incidents of much bigger repercussions than just a black eye. Finally, when he gets to the front, when he can “gloriously” channel his anger and energy, one realizes that this is another confession of a deceased man. He says: “I shot my way / to a medal and commendation (posthumous), / a credit at last to my parents, whoever they were, / and the first hero produced by the State Pen” (Ormsby 12). A traumatized, emotionally neglected boy grows up to be a disturbed and angry man, who for once had a chance to show his bravery. He truly becomes a hero, posthumously receiving credit for his actions, although the accolade seems to lack any meaning for him. Through the title Ormsby shows that the soldier is only mentioning his act of courage for the sake of it, not attaching a lot of emotional value to it, just to be clear that he has done that. It is the rebellious incidents, which constitute two thirds of the poem, and not the heroic operations, that make the speaker proud. These actions seemingly have no meaning for him, either personally or in relation to the whole idea of the war.

Throughout the volume Ormsby shows senseless mortality, which is emphasized by the suggestions of the meaninglessness of the war and sudden deaths of young soldiers who were yet to experience and discover the meaning of life. The poet infuses the soldiers with a natural and understandable need to be remembered. “The Clearing” describes the life of the unit which has just arrived in Ireland and is waiting for their time in battle to come. Although the standard, yet non-violent, glimpses of army life are invoked, Ormsby focuses on one man, who is uncertain of his future. “Here is a place I will miss with a sweet pain, / as I miss you always, perhaps because I was spared / the colourless drag of its winter” (Ormsby 4) remarks the soldier who is enjoying the surrounding country and landscapes. Nevertheless, he continues: “This is the hour / to dream again the hotel room where we changed / from the once-worn, uncreased garments, / assured and beside ourselves and lonely-strange” (Ormsby 4). The “once-worn, uncreased garments” are the wedding clothes the couple wore during a ceremony, perhaps a hastily organized event before the man’s departure. The poet presents the anxiety of the man and his wife, who share some last days before the war. Although the soldier is speaking of him, remembering the place he is stationed and the love of his wife, the quickly organized marriage indicates that his need to be remembered by a person who loves him and wishes him well is dominant.

This need is also discernible in the poem “Cleo, Oklahoma,” where a young man realizes his life might be shown only through the very last pictures he took at home, moments before departing for the front.

Nevertheless, "The War Photographers" again shares a glimpse of the other side of the problem, or the other side of a camera to be more precise. Ormsby admits that the poem "draws images from specific Crimean War and American Civil War photographs" (J. Brown 138), adding that "photographers are working in positive, enhancing ways within their limitations" (J. Brown 135). Photographs cannot show the whole terror of war, the smells, the constant fear and atrocity, and the limitations may be beneficial for the viewers. As the poem opens: "Working with one eye closed or heads buried / under their drapes, they focus to preserve / the drowned shell-hole, the salient's rubble of dead, / the bleached bones of sepoy's torn from the earth" (Ormsby 47). Even if the photographers do not share the soldiers' need to be remembered, they immortalize the images and people. They take pictures, for example, of "a barren wood / that in one hour's carnage lost its name / to history and the world's memory of death" (Ormsby 47) so that they can still share what has remained or to testify, to "confirm the worst" (Ormsby 47). Ormsby concedes that his own sense of this poem is "warily optimistic," that for him "[m]aybe the very writing of poetry is warily optimistic, to a greater or lesser degree" (J. Brown 135). "Postscripts," the poem which closes the "Northern Spring" sequence, in its last stanza posits the photographs as the means by which the soldiers can be remembered:

These are my last pictures: in a trench  
 with Chuck and Harvey, by the pheasant-pen  
 behind the gate-lodge. The dark one with the gun  
 is Dan McConnell. Keep them. When I return  
 they'll fill an album. We could call it *Spring*,  
 or *Spring in Ireland, 1944, My Northern Spring*. (Ormsby 39)

These short sentences, concise as a postscript should be, do not reveal whether the soldier was able to come home alive. Still, they summon the hope and optimism about which Ormsby spoke in the interview. Despite the atrocities of the war, the soldier wishes the photographs to commemorate his time spent at the front. He wants the recipient of the letter to keep them for him, as he intends to create an album, a memento—either for him or for the people who might mourn him.

The photographs, which appear in many of these poems, serve as a convenient way of bringing back the memories, as well as commemorating the soldiers themselves. However, Ormsby passes from sinister concepts to more optimistic ones. In *A Northern Spring* the poet speaks of the things that survived the war. Poems such as "Cleo, Oklahoma," "The War Photographers," "Postscripts" and "Among the Dead" speak of

photographs and monuments as the only memorabilia marking the lives and deaths of the soldiers. In “For the Record” there is a medal that testifies to the bravery of the fallen man. In “From the German” there is a book commemorating the deceased German fighters. Poems such as “I Died in a Country Lane” and “I Stepped on a Small Landmine” share the gruesome images of corpses being discarded on fields and random roads, where few of the victims’ remains were to return home. Similarly, in the poem “Some of Us Stayed Forever” there is a tragic plane accident, where the remains of the plane, “[o]ur painted stork, nosing among the reeds / with a bomb in its beak, will startle you for a day” (Ormsby 38). As the title suggests, the dying soldiers were never to return home and the remaining wreckage is to haunt the ones who find it as they promise to rise and “foul your nets with crushed fuselage” (Ormsby 38). The poem briefly sketches the situation: “Some of us stayed forever, under the lough / in the guts of a Flying Fortress, / sealed in the buckled capsule” (Ormsby 38). The relics of the Boeing B-17 with the dead bodies inside it are what remains remote and invisible, yet hauntingly and eerily present. Ormsby talks about traumas which either cling to their victims forever or emerge on the surface of their consciousness in an unexpected way. In “Grenade-Fishing in the Orne,” for example, one reads:

They flew me back to Utah with shock in my eyes,  
 that rimmed and frozen look the marines call  
 the two-thousand-yard-stare.  
 The bridges are all targets now, the pools  
 belch like a hot springs and dead faces  
 balloon on the surface.  
 The dark flies glisten, the faces bloom in the sun. (Ormsby 20)

The trauma emerges in the soldier’s mind immediately and does not enable the man to cope with reality. In “Home and Away” the memories haunt back the veteran as he is taking pleasure in his summer holidays. The idyllic description of a resort and people enjoying themselves, which brings to mind a travel-agent’s brochure, is rapidly put aside and the flashbacks stalk and strike the oblivious man: “And suddenly, home and away, I am ghosting through towns / of the Teutoburg Forest” (Ormsby 40). In “After the Depression” Ormsby shows the actions that the civilians undertook during war, like preparing clothes and packages of supplies for the men fighting in Europe. While the soldier was “[f]rost-bitten in Bastogne . . . blessed the hands / that sew [his] blankets” (Ormsby 32), he is not able to cope with the image of the same people who earned substantial amounts of money by doing precisely what he appreciated on the front. “The war made people

rich in Ford County, / getters and spenders. I think I'll never warm / to the  
brash place they've built there" (Ormsby 32). The poem is not only about  
the ironically and surprisingly positive side-effects of the armed conflict,  
but also about the inability of the veteran to cope with a luxurious and  
comfortable life, which is so different from the hardships he experienced.  
Another bittersweet reflection about what remains after the war is presented  
in "They Buried Me in an Orchard." Ormsby creates a vision where a man is  
buried on a farm and stays there for a whole year: "I lay / under leaves and ripe  
windfalls, the thin roots / pressing me, fingering me, till I let them through"  
(Ormsby 17). The land is claiming the body of the soldier as its own, gently  
embracing it with plants and oblivion, until one day the man is dug up and  
buried again "to a roll of drums / in a plain box on the ninety-seventh row /  
of an immaculate war cemetery" (Ormsby 17). The unassuming, probably  
hasty yet more meaningful burial contrasts with the staged ceremony, which  
seems artificial and impersonal. The poet presents the contrast in a few lines;  
however, the poem has more to offer. The deceased fighter shares a more  
striking revelation, when he says:

If anything is left of me, it lives  
in Ruth, Nevada, where my people farm  
in spite of dust and drought, in spite of my death,  
or a small town in Ireland where a child  
carries my name, though he may never know  
that I was his father. (Ormsby 17)

This bittersweet information about the soldier's child, who will never  
again or never at all see his father, is striking, as the poet delivers it with  
calmness and helplessness.

In yet another ruse, Ormsby presents images of people and incidents,  
in which life goes on despite the soldiers' private tragedies. Throughout  
*A Northern Spring* one reads about the constant struggle in poems like  
"Cleo, Oklahoma," where the town mayor already plans his own statue;  
in "I Died in a Country Lane," where a family goes back to their farm;  
in "I Stepped on a Small Landmine," where the sisters of the deceased  
man ship his body to Georgia to be posthumously honoured; or in "They  
Buried Me in an Orchard," in which the child of the soldier grows up to  
never hear from his father again. In "After the Depression" and "The War  
Photographers" people do their jobs, serving the army and history away  
from the gunshots and danger. Ormsby includes the best representation  
of the ignorance and oblivion in relation to the presence of the army in  
"The Convoy," in which almost all the lines describe a woman coming  
back from shopping. Exhausted, barely catching her breath while cycling,

she is so preoccupied with her fatigue and weariness that she is almost certain to miss the soldiers moving forward. The reader is sure to miss it as well, focusing instead on the woman's asthma remedy. Were it not for the last line: "The convoy passes" (Ormsby 27), one would certainly still be captivated by her struggle. The humour of the scene is what makes the hard-to-miss event look like a petty incident, trivial for a bystander. The inevitable continuity of life is also demonstrated in "Soldier Bathing," in which a man is dreaming of a beautiful and peaceful world:

I dry on the shore and imagine the world renewed  
cleanly between two islands I cannot name:  
as a rounded stone, say, that the ebb left bare,  
or light on water the morning after a war. (Ormsby 33)

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The soldier believes there is going to be beauty and purity in the world, even if he does not survive the war. Ormsby expresses an uplifting certainty that every war has to stop eventually so that everyone can move on.

From the brutality of the war, through the soldiers' struggles, to, finally, the reflections about what endures despite so many losses, Ormsby's poems are laced with contemplation, irony, and most importantly, optimism. The mixture of emotions and images is astonishing, as "[c]ompassion and humour suffuse the sequence" (Longley 12). Throughout the volume the soldiers are stripped of their pride, plunged into horror and uncertainty, but, crucially, with their mistakes, anxieties and loves, they remain human.

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