

## Screen Writing the Border: Eugene McCabe, RTÉ, and the *Victims* Trilogy

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### ABSTRACT

This essay explores the images and settings of the border narratives in Eugene McCabe's television screenplays for his *Victims* trilogy, a three-part series broadcast by RTÉ in 1976. The series was based on McCabe's own short stories, "Cancer," "Heritage," and "Victims"—which became known as the "Fermanagh trilogy"—written separately in the 1970s but published collectively as *Christ in the Fields* (1993). The essay argues that living on and writing out of his borderlands farm, near Clones, Co. Monaghan, McCabe experienced a condition that I term "borderliness," which is structured into his writing about this area and the region more widely. I identify this condition by the presence of four thematic tropes that echo and interlace with each other across his screenplays. Making use of archival research in RTÉ, the essay analyzes draft script and screen realization, and supporting production material, focusing on the central, pivotal episode, *Heritage*, before it reaches its conclusion by drawing on adaptation theory and the conceit of the palimpsest to compare the screenplay and prose fiction versions. (LP)

**KEYWORDS:** Irish Border, TV films, borderliness, screenwriting, Troubles

"A writer should write; when he is not writing, he should do some other work: travel, talk with people (about anything else but writing), dig a garden, plough a field, plant a tree; make love or war or pottery."

McCabe, *A Playwright's Notebook*

This essay explores the images and settings of the border narratives in Eugene McCabe's three television screenplays for *Cancer*, *Heritage*, and *Siege*, known as the *Victims* trilogy (RTÉ, 1976). It addresses the scripts in relation to the final broadcast versions of the films and McCabe's "Fermanagh trilogy" of short stories titled "Cancer," "Heritage," and "Victims" (1973, 1976, 1978), which the author himself adapted to the screen.<sup>1</sup> *Victims* was shot on 16mm film, directed by Deirdre Friel and shown on RTÉ Television—the national broadcaster in the Republic of Ireland—as a three-part series over successive weeks in October 1976. *Cancer* had previously been made by RTÉ and screened on its own in 1973. Different individual and institutional evaluations of *Victims* down the generations have concurred on the significance of the broadcast, from RTÉ's own governing body memoranda (RTÉ Authority n.p.), to television critics (Walsh, "Review" 7) and historians of RTÉ's drama output like Helena Sheehan. In *Irish Television Drama* (1986), she wrote: "The most distinguished achievement of RTÉ in this area was its award-winning production of McCabe's 'Victims' trilogy of the mid-1970s" (188). More recent critical obituary evaluations of McCabe's life (Doyle and Leavy 2020) and literary writing (Ó Ciardha 2006; Patterson 2011; Flannery 2013) all make due reference to this particular trilogy of stories and mention their TV versions, stressing the importance of the Border location. However, none of them looks at the TV contexts for the films, appreciates the screen writing, or acknowledges Friel's direction in making use of the Border location.

The aim of this paper is threefold: it offers an analysis of the screenplays on which the TV films are based to provide a better understanding of the contexts of production; it reconsiders the stories in their short prose fiction forms; and finally, it looks at these Border films from the perspective of the centenary of "the Partition" of Ireland. Reflecting on the creation of a national "boundary" line and the establishment of a "frontier" in the 1920–25 period (Townsend 212–35) helps to throw light on the way that RTÉ and the Republic of Ireland

viewed the nature of the Border in the mid-1970s. In short, McCabe's narratives offer a discomfiting expression of a lived borderlands culture that was largely ignored, dismissed, or disavowed by mainstream broadcasting in the 1970s in the Republic and Britain, albeit for different reasons. Although all three screenplays will be discussed, I will focus on the middle film, *Heritage*, as an exemplar text of the trilogy and because, in dramatizing the Border Protestant experience, it addressed the most pressing absence in mainstream understanding of political violence in Ireland at the time. I contend that McCabe's screenplays feature four tropes of "borderliness": first, "badlands," the historic and territorial borderlands that pre-date the 1920s; second, the "bucolic border" of tourism and landed leisure, holiday and hunting, temporary and attenuated, exclusionary and often seen from an outsider perspective; third, "border as barrier," representing national/state attempts to seal the Border as a secure, prophylactic boundary, militarized, patrolled and under surveillance, to stop movement and incursion (Nail 1–17). Finally, the Border is imagined not as a physical place but rather the psychic zone of a "bad dream," a space of trauma and perverse sexuality. These four tropes link and echo each other, combining to form a vision that is "bleak and nightmarish" (Henry Patterson 166), but which might be seen to express the realities of life along the Border in the 1970s.

In terms of method, the examination of screenplay versions is to draw on contemporary theories of screenwriting that acknowledge the "intermediate" nature of the screenplay and its "indeterminate" textual form (Maras 6). Although I engage in a re-reading of the stories, I do not assume that in screen adaptation the prose fiction should be privileged as an originary text in the screenwriting process (Hutcheon 6–7), and I draw on notions of the screenplay as a textual palimpsest (Hutcheon 21–22; Geraghty 11). What the essay aims to achieve is an outline of the key features of McCabe's screen technique, along with a consideration of Friel's role in realizing the material for the screen rather than stage or page. Most notably, the production was

filmed in Enniskerry and Clones, locations along the Border that form the rural settings for all three stories. At the time of their transmission, viewers in the Republic and Northern Ireland watching RTÉ, UTV, or BBCNI programming were familiar with a routinized schedule of news and current affairs coverage of political violence focused on the cities of Belfast and Derry, with periodic reference to the area of south Armagh. Typically, McCabe's work has been seen to explore the sectarianism of co-religious communities of rural Ulster, critics using the lens of "border violence" (Henry Patterson) or "border Gothic" (Ó Ciardha, Flannery) to evaluate his stories and novels. The "Fermanagh trilogy" is read here as an instance of the 1970s cultural production from what James Conor Patterson terms the "new frontier" in Ireland, setting that phrase in a post-2016 context.

### **McCabe (1930–2020): "A farmer who writes and a writer who farms"**

McCabe's biography reveals his deep connection with the borderlands that he farmed and wrote from for fifty years. Born in 1930 in Glasgow to Irish parents, McCabe understood the sectarian geography of that city in the interwar era, even if he came from a comparatively well-off business-owning Catholic family who returned to Ireland as WWII loomed in 1939. He completed his secondary schooling at Castleknock School, Co. Dublin, and took a degree in English and History from University College, Cork, after which he did some school teaching. His first published work took the form of short stories that appeared in the literary journal *Irish Writing* (McCabe 1953, 1954). In 1955, he took over the running of a farm property purchased by the family at Drumard, near Clones on the Monaghan-Fermanagh border, and with his wife raised a family. It was only a decade later that his career took a decisive turn, although he had written some fiction, and he had also been crafting plays. In 1964, his play *King of the Castle* created a storm at the Dublin Arts Festival for its portrayal of male impotence, violence, and sexuality in an Irish townland, and won an "Irish Life" writing award. His second play, based

on the life of Jonathan Swift, was staged in 1969 at the Abbey Theatre and was not successful. It is less well known or discussed that McCabe had also been writing drama for television following RTÉ's inauguration in 1962. He had been part of the writing team on the station's long-running rural soap opera, *The Riordans* (1965–79), adapted his story "Cancer" for RTÉ in 1973, and adapted his own plays and stories and others' work in the mid-1960s. He went on to contribute to biopics and historical dramas such as *Sean* (1980)—on Seán O'Casey—and *The Year of the French* (1981)—about the Irish-French Rising of 1798, based on Thomas Flanagan's sprawling novel of the same name (1979). When *Cancer* was first broadcast (1973), it was favorably reviewed and won a Jacob's TV award, gaining recognition in Europe where it was shown in Prague. When it was re-broadcast with *Heritage* and *Siege* (1976), forming the *Victims* trilogy, McCabe regained the impact that he had had on stage with *King of the Castle*, a play that he adapted for television in 1977. He published the fiction collection *Heritage and Other Stories* (1978) with the London-publisher Victor Gollancz, but withdrew from writing about the contemporary present of the Border in the 1980s, following a local killing that came close to the narrative of "Heritage."

Over this extended period, McCabe remained—in his own words—a "farmer who writes and a writer who farms" (Welch 326), but from the 1980s his fiction output was less frequent, including a children's story *Cyril* (1986) and a dark, historical novel, *Death and Nightingales* (1992) set at the end of the nineteenth century. His later novels included *Tales from the Poorhouse* (1999) and *The Love of Sisters* (2009), the former, set at the time of the Irish Famine, appeared a year after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This internationally recognized document signaled a major reduction in the political violence in Northern Ireland and set out new structures within the statelet of Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and London, and most importantly, between Northern Ireland and the Republic, marking greater cross-border collaboration (Daly 1–5). McCabe's non-fiction essay

“Borderlands” (1999) musing on the Border’s status had been published first in *The Irish Times* and then reprinted in *The Irish Border* (Anderson and Bort 1999). This volume as a whole reviewed the status of the Border in public, political, and cultural discourse, and signaled the possibility of change, appearing as it did, post-Good Friday. From McCabe’s essay we might conclude a qualified optimism on his part for the future of Northern Ireland and indeed this was the signature tone of the collection. This was a far cry from a generation earlier in the early 1970s, when McCabe had written the story “Cancer,” published first in *The Dublin Magazine* (1973) at the height of paramilitary violence and British counterterrorism within Northern Ireland. This story and its companions, “Heritage” and “Victims,” were set in the rural borderlands that McCabe knew so well and which were brought to screen for RTÉ. It is in this context, as works for television, that we need to now consider the *Victims* trilogy.

### **Television, the Troubles, and drama on RTÉ in the 1960s–70s**

In *A Loss of Innocence* Robert Savage cogently outlined how the difficulties for broadcasters at RTÉ crystallized into a crisis in the early 1970s (318–82). The institutional and political contexts in which McCabe wrote his *Victims* trilogy for the screen are important to understand so as to fully appreciate their significance as TV plays. As a public service broadcaster RTÉ was in shock and disarray leading up to the production and broadcast of the first play in 1973. Its entire governing body, the RTÉ Authority, had been dismissed for failing to collectively comply with government orders to implement measures to restrict broadcasting coverage of Irish paramilitaries (Savage 369–71). Faced with the upsurge in public disorder, rioting, and armed guerrilla warfare since the late 1960s, journalists and editors at RTÉ—in common with the BBC and UTV in Northern Ireland—were confronted by a dilemma. Investigating, interviewing, and giving screen time to individuals who were from Republican groups like the Irish Republican Army (IRA), or Loyalist paramilitary groups like the Ulster

Volunteer Force (UVF) or the newly formed Ulster Defence Association (UDA), were seen in some quarters as giving them and their ideas credence. Measures known as “Reference Upwards” adopted by British authorities on broadcast news outlets instituted professional procedures that curtailed and limited reporting on paramilitary violence. These measures routinely framed the British status quo as acceptable and unquestionable, and encroached into non-news programming, including drama. This amounted to a (self-)censorship of a pernicious kind, only resisted by the most trenchant journalists and editors. In the Republic of Ireland the censorship exerted on RTÉ was even more direct and draconian (Curtis 190–92). From 1971 until 1994, under powers directed by the government at the RTÉ management known as “Section 31” (from the 1960 Broadcasting Authority Act), news journalists, program makers and editors working for RTÉ were restricted from interviewing and presenting any paramilitary spokespersons or elected politicians, such as Sinn Féin councilors who supported them.<sup>2</sup>

More television drama about Northern Ireland was made by British production companies than by RTÉ in the period from 1960 to the time of the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 (Pettitt, “A Box of Troubles”), but almost invariably these fictional representations followed the contours of an Anglo-British viewpoint and worked through a limited range of narratives becoming the Troubles play on screen (McLoone). Though several Irish-based writers such as Ron Hutchinson, Graham Reid, and Gary Mitchell had their work produced for British screens in prestigious one-off play slots and, as critics like John Hill have shown, the Troubles play was formally often not very innovative, radical ways of handling the medium could be as confusing as politically challenging ideas (65–81). RTÉ’s own output of drama directly addressing the political violence of Northern Ireland, in historical or contemporary periods, was negligible. This was due to a combination of factors: financial, political, and cultural. RTÉ was established as the national TV broadcaster in 1962 after a period of economic problems in the 1940s and 50s and a major ideological shift in Ireland’s political outlook to

modernize, be more open to international investment, and to take on new ideas.

For the first decade of its existence, RTÉ had very limited finances, which restricted program budgets; its talented program makers and editors were inexperienced in television production and its management; politically, the country was going through a period of transition: “television changed the political culture of the country becoming a popular and tenacious critic of the status quo” (Savage 84). The station found itself as a resolving lens of cultural self-examination. RTÉ produced a series of programs in 1966 that attempted to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, the foundation event of the Republic, and reflect the public’s sentiments about the origins of the State, including an ambitious, innovative, and memorable 8-episode docu-dramatization of the Rising, *Insurrection* (RTÉ 1966). Across its programming, the traditional nostrums of Irish nationalism, the Catholic Church and issues of the state, including the continued presence of the Border (dividing the “national” territory, which remained in the Constitution post-1949 until 1998), were being questioned by revisionist thinking in some quarters and re-asserted by others in a decade of transformative tensions. Between 1957–62, in a campaign known as “Operation Harvest,” the IRA, based mainly in the Republic, bombed strategic targets along the Border in an attempt to destabilize government and re-unify Ireland. The Irish State’s military-legal response and that of the British security forces in Northern Ireland combined to suppress the IRA and the campaign gained little public support on either side of the Border. RTÉ archives from the 1960s concerning the Border show how its coverage oscillated between questioning the longevity of its existence in, for example “How Long Will the Border Last?” (1962), to more whimsical takes on local vigilante action against Border pig smuggling (1969).<sup>3</sup> The upsurge in political violence across Northern Ireland from August 1969 became a dominating focus in the following decades, in which its existence as a state was questioned by the IRA/Sinn Féin, and the compromised border limits of the Republic of Ireland were rigorously defended by the Irish Army and the Gardaí, supporting the



British security forces. As Diarmuid Ferriter, examining the contours of nationalism in what he termed an “ambiguous Republic” in the 1970s, has noted, “[t]he potential for the Troubles to spill over the border remained an anxious preoccupation throughout the decade” (197).

### **McCabe, the *Victims* screenplays and their TV production**

It is in this context that McCabe and Deirdre Friel developed their creative skills and served their television apprenticeship at RTÉ. McCabe in fact worked with RTÉ’s trio of hugely talented female directors from this period, writing three single plays between 1962–64 with Sheelah Richards and Chloe Gibson, and then as a team-writer on RTÉ’s flagship rural serial drama *The Riordans* (1965–1979), scripting episodes to tight deadlines, working with directors including Louis Lentin, Brian MacLochlainn, and Deirdre Friel, and writers such as Wesley Burrowes, David Hanly, and Carolyn Swift. In attitudes quite prevalent at the time, McCabe may have felt television work to be “hack writing” compared to the prestige of theater work or of prose fiction, but the pragmatics of deriving writing fees to supplement the income from his farm in Fermanagh held sway and he would earn £1,500 per script for the *Victims* trilogy (RTÉ 1975). Soon after the publication of “Cancer” in *The Dublin Magazine* (1973) and before the story received the “Writer’s Award: Prague International” in 1974, Wesley Burrowes had recommended the story to Donall Farmer, a drama producer at RTÉ, who approached McCabe and suggested he might adapt it for the screen. RTÉ commissioned it for production with Deirdre Friel, a great admirer of his work, as director (Garvey 1974). The finished film was broadcast in October 1973 in one of the worst periods of political violence that caused a meltdown in the government of Northern Ireland (Westminster imposed Direct Rule from London in 1972), when the British army, the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary), the UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment, a part-time regiment of the British Army recruited from largely local Protestants) and the UDA (Ulster Defence Association, a citizens’ defense organization that

formalized itself in 1972 and increasingly took on a paramilitary character) were at war with the resurgent Provisional IRA.

The provenance of the screenplays that became the three films broadcast as *Victims* in sequence in October 1976 needs to be considered alongside the corresponding short story versions in order to explore the development of McCabe's writing craft. The "Author's Note" in the fly-leaf of *Christ in the Fields*, which indicates that "these three tales (published separately) were conceived as one," might be taken at face value, but materials in the RTÉ archives show that McCabe was busy in late-1974 already working on the screenplay for *Siege* (the third part, which corresponds to the novella "Victims") under pressure of TV production deadlines, complaining that "the issues here are too serious to rush" (35). However, "Victims" as a novella was not published until 1976 (by Victor Gollancz) and the story "Heritage" (the second part of the trilogy) appeared in print for the first time in 1978, two years *after* the film versions were broadcast. So "Victims" and "Heritage" as short stories may have been written if not published in 1974–76, but it is also possible that McCabe had written the screen versions before the prose. Indeed, as a perceptive reviewer of McCabe's 1978 collection commented, "McCabe has learned much from television: the necessity for accurate and crucial dialogue, the need for speed and precision" (Sweetman 140). I will explore what McCabe has learned from television by looking at each of the three scripts as objects of TV writing, starting by briefly sketching out the story outlines of each screenplay and show how they interconnect.

All three stories are set in contemporary period in and around the Border area of Fermanagh and Monaghan, so McCabe "literally lives in the hinterland of his imagination" (McGurk n.p.). "Cancer" tells the story of two aging, Catholic and bachelor brothers, Joady and Dinny McMahan, who live together in a small, dilapidated cottage. As retired small-holder farmers they now scrape by on state benefits and Joady is dying of an inoperable cancer. They live isolated lives, visited and helped by Boyle, a local, moderately-minded, middle-class

teacher, a fellow Catholic who gives Dinny a lift into the local hospital to visit his brother. The cottage is intrusively monitored by a British military helicopter, seeking to stop IRA incursions across the Border. On the car journey to the hospital, we hear the radio news of an IRA bombing in Trillick, Boyle and Dinny are subjected to a stop-and-search by the Army, and they pass a church whose graveyard prompts Dinny to recount the McMahon history of family nobility (“Kings of Monaghan”) before the Ulster Plantation. Dinny and Boyle stop at a pub for a drink but as Catholics they realize immediately it is a Protestant pub, a “wrong shop.” The low-level discrimination—sectarian graffiti and comments made by a bigoted Orangeman (who we will see fleshed out as George the blacksmith in “Heritage”)—force them to leave. Whilst there is some dark humor at the hospital, the story concludes grimly back at the cottage: Joady in his last days and the brooding resentment of the brothers hanging over the end.

In “Heritage,” Eric O’Neill (Gordon Thompson in the screenplay) is the farming son of Robert Willie and Sarah O’Neill. Gordon has recently joined the UDR—largely under pressure from his uncle George (the bigot in the pub from “Cancer”). George is Sarah’s firebrand brother, an Orangeman and as fervent a Presbyterian as is his sister. Gordon has a local girlfriend, Rachel, but their love is marred by lack of physical intimacy. His parents also have a difficult, fractious marriage and their other son, Sam, has to be ostracized by Sarah because he married a Catholic girl and started a family. Sarah is further piqued by the fact that their house help, char woman, Maggie Reilly, is a Catholic and still in their employment. Her cognitively challenged son, Willie, also helps Gordon and Robert about the farm. Soon after the story’s opening, Gordon receives a death threat from the local IRA unit. His family, neighbors, and larger Protestant community feel under constant threat. After a family argument, Gordon accompanies his mother to their church for the service, given by the Reverend Plumb. George and Rachel’s family, including her brother, Joe, are there, too. There is talk about killing Catholics after the service. Rachel and Gordon are in love but Rachel, a local nurse, also

confesses she has bad thoughts about Catholics. They discuss leaving Northern Ireland but Gordon rejects this. They look forward to going to Iver House for an otter hunt later that day as guests of Colonel Armstrong, a member of the landed, Anglo-Irish gentry, who traditionally invites the locals to take part. Before the hunt, George takes aside Gordon at his house to instill in him the importance of being in the UDR and being vigilant. Gordon feels uneasy still. George also tells his nephew the news that Willie Reilly is in fact his half-brother, begot from an affair between Robert Willie and Maggie Reilly. The action moves to the hunt which is interrupted abruptly by Dinny McMahon who—at shotgun point—halts proceedings, asserts his land rights against the Colonel, and the hunt is called off. Later, arriving back in the village, Gordon and George have to go on UDR patrol duty. News comes that there has been a bomb in Lisnaskea with fatalities. We learn that Rachel's brother Joe and her father have been shot. George drives with Gordon to the scene of the murder, but then goes off, and brutally kills two Catholics, Willie Cassidy and his son, in sectarian reprisal. Gordon walks in on the carnage and escorts George back to his house. George is drunk and raves at Gordon. Then Gordon returns home, sees his father at bedtime, but says nothing about what George has done. He has a nightmare and wakes the following morning. He leaves early in the van but as he drives along, he comes towards a British Army check-point close to the border. Instead of slowing down, he deliberately accelerates and is fired upon by the soldiers, the van crashes and he dies in an act of willful suicide.

For the final part of the trilogy, in both the novella "Victims" and the screenplay *Siege*, McCabe shifts the action to the house at Inver featured partly in "Heritage," and focuses on the rather tawdry domestic Anglo-Irish Armstrong family and their sundry houseguests attending a party during "Inver Show" weekend. The narrative in both story and screenplay begins and is framed by the point of view of an IRA active unit from Monaghan who put the Big House under siege after the show. They hold hostage the Colonel's family (his alcoholic wife and daughter,

Harriet) and guests who include the Reverend Plumb, a visiting US academic, Caldwell (both from “Heritage”), and Alex Boyd-Crawford, attempting to negotiate the release of IRA prisoners in exchange. Whilst much of the story deals in the claustrophobia of the siege itself, in the exchanges between the IRA unit members with their captives, we are also shown the fractious interactions within the IRA unit itself. It is composed of its calculating leader Leonard Burke, the female political idealist, Trinity graduate Isobel Lynam, the psychopath gunman Jack Gallagher, identical McAleer twins, Pacelli and Pascal, and their bed-ridden Mother running the “safe house” base. The story takes all the characters through a dark night of soul-searching, political debate, seething sexuality and drunkenness, and killing. It ends with Harriet breaking down after the ordeal as she is interviewed by the preying camera crew: “Her face fell apart as she said: ‘The world is still beautiful.’” She nodded trying to smile and said again: “Beautiful” (McCabe 1979, 128). The somber end to the story provided a third desolate ending to a trilogy that offered no solutions for readers.

#### **“Telly play”: the screenplays as artifacts**

In the ensuing analysis of the screenplays as artifacts, *Heritage* is given the most attention since it seems to betray its indeterminate textual status more clearly than *Cancer* or *Siege*. Additionally, the action of *Cancer* and *Heritage* required more exterior filming (compared to the interior hostage setting of *Siege*), thus offering more scope for the visualization of the border environment and for a critical “reading” of the short stories. On the face of it, the forty-four-page-long typescript, “*Cancer: TV Script*”—noted as “Final Script”—is a fairly clean text with few handwritten additions or notes. The page listing “characters” also has two short, typed paragraphs of “Opening Suggestions” that are germane to the way the Border location of the story on screen is introduced. One paragraph suggests featuring Dinny McMahon in the interior of the kitchen in his “Fermanagh cottage” that he shares with Joady,

both “in their sixties.” The second suggests an opening shot that was adopted for the final screen version:

Aerial shot of Fermanagh small farm community (Wicklow?) Lakes, rivers, bog-land.  
Come down to opening scene. Two women with bicycles near the McMahon cottage.  
(McCabe, *Cancer* n.p.)

This version references details from the short story version, but the screenplay description for the “OPENING” clearly indicates McCabe’s sense of vision and audio for the screen:

Crows, racous [*sic*] in high trees. Panorama of Fermanagh small farm community, lakes, rivers, bogland. A helicopter is sighted in the distance, coming closer. It comes into foreground, appears to sit on the top of the trees with the crows. The crows scatter. Pull back to include Dinny, coming out of his cottage and squinting up. (1)

This is evidently the work of a writer comfortable and capable of imagining work on the screen and the distinctive border topography is succinctly envisioned. At this point in pre-production, however, he thought that Wicklow might stand in. It was Friel and Garvey at RTÉ who had pressed for the film to be shot on location in Enniskerry and Clones, Co. Monaghan close by the Border, which racked up the budget, as a helicopter cost £2,800 and “tank, army jeep and ambulance and RUC squad car” totaled £350 (RTÉ 1975b). Although figures for *Cancer* are not on file, *Heritage*’s budget was £22,500 and *Siege*’s was £32,500. The location shooting decision also increased the need for planning and security clearances with the Gardaí, the RUC, and gaining the co-operation of the Irish Army (RTÉ 1975c) given the heightened sensitivities about actual shootings in the period of proposed filming. This is a significant commitment of

resources at a time when the majority of RTÉ drama was shot more cheaply in studio and recorded to video tape which was often recorded over after broadcast to save money. RTÉ transmission had only recently become colorized, so to shoot on 16mm Eastman color demonstrated a prestige to McCabe and Friel's production. Filming on location underpinned the vital connection between the Border itself, the place, and its histories and stories, as Simeon D noted in an interview with the author/screenwriter: "McCabe's fictional space cannot be separated from the real geographic locations: Ulster, Fermanagh, Monaghan" (McCabe 1994, 28).

In the broadcast version, this opening aerial sequence is apparently transformed by the overlaying of a music track and the editing into a sumptuous, inviting travelogue view of the countryside from the point of view inside the helicopter, which shifts to a point of view on the land that becomes Dinny's. However, Friel's direction evokes the trope of the "bucolic border" only to break its benign tourist view by putting the viewer in a helicopter with its surveillance perspective of the Army pilot. From this point of view, Dinny emerges as a member of the Catholic "suspect community" living on a land that is inherently dangerous. This opening also establishes the divided nature of Northern Irish society, the metaphorical "cancer" that underpins the lives of the townlands depicted and instanced on a daily basis throughout the film. At a later point, the screenplay makes use of a graveyard mentioned in the story by writing in an extra scene that sees Boyle and Dinny stop and walk into the Churchyard and reflect on the history of Plantation conflict (McCabe, "Final Script" 4–5). The legacy of this history is conveyed in several other ways in the screenplay and broadcast version of the film.

As a televisual artifact *Heritage* is more problematic than *Cancer*. The seventy-page-long typescript is subtitled "A screenplay" but is divided into Acts I–IV like a theatre-script and then sub-divided into unnumbered scenes. Indeed, the title page features "Characters in *the play*" (emphasis added), and references to "Lights fade fast" suggest it began possibly as a stage

play idea. Even the formatting of the text on the page varies from a single to a double-column layout—suggesting its intermediate stage and TV script forms, exemplified in Act II, Scene 1 “Interior Church.” In the filmed version, the Reverend Plumb is giving a sermon whilst George and Gordon are having a quiet conversation. The layout of the screenplay may suggest the cutting back and forth of the camera angles that occurs during this scene. As a finished film, on screen *Heritage* works most effectively to make full use of the Border location as a focal point for Ulster Protestants’ fears for their “heritage”—the telling title of the film—and it shows how Deirdre Friel responded to McCabe’s screenplay in the process of shooting it.

### “These blind bitter hills”: *Heritage*

*Heritage* also condenses and combines all four border tropes identified in McCabe’s work. The Border is figured first as “badlands,” as historic and territorial borderlands that pre-date the 1920s, in an early scene in the film (11–14), in which Gordon and his mother Sarah are in conversation about the consequences of his being in the UDR and about how difficult it is to escape from the landscape. In the short story this scene takes place indoors, but in the screenplay, McCabe indicates clearly “EXTERIOR THOMPSON’S HOUSE” Gordon joins his mother outside. She is crying” (12). Moving the scene outside intensifies the dramatic effect of the mother’s dilemma. Friel’s long tracking shot of Sarah’s speech includes a line (taken directly from dialogue in the story (McCabe 1993, 33): “I’ll not stay and hear a son of mine called ‘coward.’ God, how I hate this house, these blind bitter fields” (14). Her speech is powerfully delivered as she walks towards the camera looking out to the left of the frame, with the low hills of the border landscape in the background of the shot, which thus become part of the action. Her attitude is summed up by Rob Willie, her husband, who comments to his son: “you know her, living here a mile from the border and hasn’t crossed it in fifty years, and won’t” (*Heritage* 7:14 mins). Tellingly perhaps, this line from the film does not appear in either the story or



McCabe's script, suggesting an undocumented script addition or an improvised line approved by Deirdre Friel.

In contrast to this early scene between Gordon and his mother, the romantic scene between Gordon and his girlfriend, Rachel, after the church service evokes the trope of the “bucolic border,” the Border as a space of tourism and landed leisure, of holiday and hunting, and escape. As we have seen, this trope is deceptively evoked in the “aerial travelogue” opening *Cancer*. It also appears in the opening Horse Show scenes at Inver Hall in *Siege*, where its exclusionary, privileged view of the landscape is re-framed from a critical—in this case, Provisional IRA—point of view, as Leonard and Isobel survey the show and locate their hostage target (*Victims* 1–2). In *Heritage*, the moment when Dinny abruptly halts the otter hunt also plays with this trope, but it is in the romantic interlude between Gordon and Rachel that this trope becomes most pronounced, suggesting temporary escape: “ACT III SCENE IV. Field/Spring-well. THEY CLIMB A GATE AND WALK ACROSS A LOW-LYING RIVER FIELD. IF AT ALL POSSIBLE A SHOT HERE OF SWANS FLYING DOWN RIVER. THEY LOOK AS THROUGH [*sic*] THEY HAD NEVER SEEN SWANS FLY BEFORE” (44). In the finished film version this is quite a long sequence of trees, a woodland waterfall, lush greens and summer light, the visual track overlaid with stringed “romantic” music. However, their conversation is awkward: picking up on the visual image of swans in flight, Rachel is suggesting they leave Northern Ireland together:

GORDON. We can't run out, we're farmers. I love these fields.

RACHEL. More than me?

GORDON. We MADE this country. They ARE this country and they know it. They won't rest until they bury us or make us part of themselves. (45)

Both express their fears of being overrun by Catholics and Rachel confesses that she has had awful fantasies of setting fire to the newborn Catholic babies when she was on night duty at the hospital where she works. It is also clear from this scene that the Presbyterian teaching has led them to be highly repressed sexually. In short, the “bucolic border” space is highly problematic in *Heritage* as well, the appearance of harmony and romantic love belie deep-seated social and sexual undercurrents of anxiety. As Helena Sheehan has noted, McCabe’s film implies that “sectarian tensions were connected to stunted personal development in general and sexual paralysis in particular” (191). This recurs in Gordon’s bizarre nightmare sequence near the end of the film, drawn directly from the story, which exemplifies what Graham Dawson identified as particular to Protestant anxieties in border areas that lead to psychic trauma and splitting (229–31).

In a scenario where Gordon and George are both serving soldiers in the UDR, and RUC and British Army armored vehicles, helicopters, and check points regularly feature in the narrative, the Border is also inescapably figured in *Heritage* in jural or military terms as a “barrier,” militarized, patrolled, and under surveillance, existing to stop movement and incursion. This trope, however, becomes particularly foregrounded in the final scene with Gordon’s death at a check point near the Border, which underlines the fated, preyed upon nature of the protagonist.

Finally, the Border is imagined in *Heritage* not only as a physical place but also as the psychic zone of a “bad dream,” a space of trauma and perverse sexuality, counterpointing the trope of the “bucolic” border. The highly graphic horror of Gordon’s fevered “Nightmare Sequence. Intercut with Gordon’s bedroom” is captured in the screenplay (Act V Scene 2, 69) in a long, detailed description of perversity, religion, and sex, depicting murder, mutilation, and harrowing scenes:

Naked at the stone cross Canon John Plumm [*sic*] with one hand on his genitals and the other on the Bible is mouthing. Below him Maggie Reilly sow-like confesses to the anus of the curate listening to her leering between his legs. His [Gordon's] father behind Maggie on all fours about to mount. The helicopter ascends slowly, the beam of the search light widening. Cassidy comes into the clearing with a Civil Rights banner carrying a statue of Christ with a bleeding heart .... Sarah's face is white with hatred. She rips open Maisie's stomach with a bread knife, pulls out a bloody child and smashes its head against the lectern. (69)<sup>4</sup>

Here McCabe's screen vision diverts from a largely social realist mode to a modernist, theatricalized form of "epic" TV drama representation (Hill 65–81). The modernist effect was also heightened in the process of production by that the scene was filmed in a black box studio, with props and was dramatically lit, choreographed, and edited to maximize viewer shock value including distorted sound. According to TV critic Ken Gray, however, "the nightmare sequence though technically brilliant, was superfluous nor did the play need to underline the atmosphere of despair with a melodramatic suicide" (8).

Overall, the "bleak and nightmarish quality to the stories" (Henry Patterson 166) is crystallized in the conclusion of *Heritage* with the death of Gordon under what the military reports might term "friendly fire," shot by his "own side." In the short story version, the English squaddie's last line, "Christ knows, he's Irish mate; they're all fucking mad over here; shoot first, ask after" (91), suggests the persistence of a particularly ignorant English view of violence in Ireland. But tellingly, this line is dropped from the screenplay, and it is the description of the dawn, the shooting, and the crash itself that are left in the viewer's mind as the screen fades to black.

### **Adaptation as palimpsest: from film, to story, to tale**

McCabe's *Victims* trilogy can be viewed and interpreted as "a kind of extended palimpsest" of texts (Hutcheon 33): written, visual, and oral. In broad terms, McCabe's adaptations stay perhaps unsurprisingly close to his own prose narratives, but the origins of "Heritage" are in a story McCabe heard from a woman who helped clean at his farm, but also worked across the border for the Johnstons, whose eldest son had joined the UDR, and was shot by republicans as a reprisal. As writer Colm Tóibín observed, the key elements of the oral narrative at the heart of the trilogy's central story "stayed in Eugene's mind: the house, the cleaning woman, the family and the son in the UDR, the landscape" (110). Henry Patterson in his article on McCabe's *Victims* trilogy also interweaves his analyses with details of actual killings and their reportage in the press and news media, and he claims that the female student-Republican in the IRA cell portrayed in *Siege* was inspired by Maria McGuire (158), whose own account in *To Take Arms: A Year in the Provisional IRA* (1973) filters into the characterization of Lynam. The end of "Victims"/*Siege* in turn, features a film crew creating a story from the siege event. As noted before, in the filming process lines and scenes were added, layered onto earlier versions of the scripted text of *Heritage*. The intermediate provenance of the screenplay, however, can also send us back to the short story versions to consider anew their structure and imagery.

The structural unfolding of the short story elements in "Cancer"—beginning and ending at the "iron roofed cottage" of the McMahan brothers, the dying Jodi and the truculent Dinny—corresponds most closely of the three to its screen version. "Victims," a novella with five unnumbered chapters, focuses on the confines of an IRA hostage scenario, and is perhaps the least satisfactory of the three stories in that it is peopled by a circus gallery of clichéd figures drawing on the Troubles fiction genre—aging nationalist mother, Mrs McAleer; her identical twin red-headed brothers, Pascal and Pacelli; Gallagher, a psychotic fanatic gunman; idealist

Trinity college female Isobel Lynam, and cool IRA veteran, Leonard Burke; US anthropologist; bigoted Anglican, proud, if dysfunctional Anglo-Irish big house family; and additional figures of a macabre/bizarre “Negro” and a “tinker woman.” It feels as if McCabe in completing the third story, if not balancing up, was attempting to offer a third axis by which to view the border area and its political history. Given its hostage scenario in the stately home of Inver House, the Border itself features only by reference in the early chapters detailing the IRA preparations. Leonard and Isobel “drove south towards the border” to their safe house, a cottage near a “river in Co. Monaghan” (103). To avoid detection by the security forces, they later approach their target by using an “Unapproved Road” (129). Like in the earlier stories, the depiction of the border landscape involves a recurrent use of pathetic fallacy. In the opening of the story, as the sense of place is established, the horsey Inver showground—“jodhpurs, tweed and blatant voice”—is set against a sinister, foreboding background: “the sloping meadows of after-grass gave way to the grey-brown brooding of Fermanagh uplands” (96).

In “Heritage” key passages from the beginning of the story which feature Eric’s interior thoughts about the land on the Border where he lives, its history and the political conflict of the present, are not visualized in the *Heritage* screenplay. In the short story a four-paragraph section provides a vivid description of this border topography with concrete references, for instance, to Carn Rock and Lough Erne (22–23). The real power of this section, however, lies in the characterful personality of the landscape:

A dim, hidden country, crooked scrub ditches of whin and thorns stunted in sour putty land; bare, spade-ribbed fields, rusted tin roofed cabins, housing a stony faced people living from rangy cattle and Welfare handouts. (22)

It is also of course about the inhabitants of this disputed territory whose prejudices, fears, and

violence McCabe indicates. The landscape here is read through the layers of vegetation; primitive, built habitation; livestock; and the people barely subsisting. The sense of mutual hostilities affects the concept of history to such an extent that “100 years was yesterday, 200 the day before” (22), layers of temporality become compressed. As ever with McCabe, what appears to be a natural landscape is cultivated with sectarian purpose. In this case, Eric’s grandfather deliberately planted an orchard in 1921 to “block off the view of the Fenian south” (23). In an extended metaphor of predation, hunting, and death, this passage also features a hawk “[p]erched in rigid silence” (22) in the orchard, waiting for its prey. By analogy, paramilitaries stalk each other across the fearful border communities. The story “Heritage” begins with the startling image of a pigeon killing itself by flying through a window as it is chased by a hawk. In the screenplay, this image is exchanged for a rather labored pre-titles exposition and hook sequence where Gordon discovers a booby-trapped milk churn. McCabe’s relish of the imagery of nature is carried over to Rob Willie’s mongrel dog Blister, echoing the theme of fated mixed marriage, illicit affairs, and miscegeny that leads to deformity in the figure of Willy. The illegitimate son of Rob Willie and Maggie becomes the living embodiment of a Protestant communal “heritage” abused.

The expectation or in some cases premonition of death, violent or otherwise, features in all three films and is the basis for an extended range of imagery in the source stories, from hematoma through hunt to hostage situation. The impact of “Victims”/*Siege* in part arises from the layers of meaning built up in the first two stories/films, as the third part overwrites the earlier ones. The subplot of “Heritage” is the fox hunt, that brings together local people and the big house party, who are then confronted by Dinny McMahon on a matter of territory. Imbued with a historical sense of property, the hunt is of course also problematically inflected with power and class difference. The hunting of “vermin,” in this case the fox, links back thematically to the sign in the Protestant pub in “Cancer,” which listed the price paid for different types of

vermin by Lisnaskea local District Association. The natural “pests,” which destroy valuable crops or kill livestock, “magpies, grey squirrels and foxes” are supplemented by the sectarian graffiti: “for every Fenian fucker one old penny.” This palimpsestic overwriting of observed detail had been itself noted down by McCabe in his exercise book where he drafted the first version of the story (McCabe, NLI papers 1974). Deirdre Friel’s eye for detail shows in the screen version of *Heritage*, where Gordon’s anxious paranoia makes him feel like a hunted animal. This is suggested visually in a shot from the film, not indicated in the screenplay, that shows him sitting alongside a stuffed fox-head displayed at the Colonel’s in Inver Hall. In “Cancer,” the British Army helicopter traverses the Border, “[c]lapping its way towards Armagh across the sour divide of fields and crooked ditches” (5), trying to decipher the landscape below, reading down through its surface, stalking its suspect communities like “a giant insect with revolving swords” (5), trying to discern IRA incursions from “across this border bridge.” These selected examples from both the story and film versions of McCabe’s work show the adaptive, layered richness of imagery, the recurrent incidence of the Border in its four tropes, and the additional visual touches offered by Friel’s direction on location.

## **Conclusion**

Since his death in 2020, McCabe’s reputation as an Irish writer with an acuity of vision and literary craft has come sharply into focus. Unsurprisingly, his significance is rapidly being re-evaluated particularly because much of his work is rooted in and about the extended borderlands region that—since 2016—has become so pertinent to political and diplomatic discourse about Ireland’s—and by implication the UK’s—future. This is evidenced, for example, in his work’s inclusion in the National Library of Ireland’s recent *Border Literatures* online reading and discussion (September 2021–March 2022). This essay has argued that his screen writing is just as important for consideration as his prose fiction or stage drama. The

screenplay texts of intermediate status were read “vertically”—drawing on Christine Geraghty’s notion of “layering and transparencies” (11)—with their final, realized screen versions and the textual forms of the corresponding short story versions and their oral antecedents to consider them as adaptations. *Victims*, its production, its tripartite structure and focus on Border Protestant perspectives, and the timing of its broadcast in 1976, offered a way for RTÉ to circumvent the strict censorship restrictions in operation in Irish broadcasting at the time. In its own way, McCabe’s trilogy delineated the “little histories of the Irish border” (Leary 207), staging a dynamic interaction between four discursive border tropes (badlands, bucolic, barrier, and bad dream), which together express the experience of Irish “borderliness” in the 1970s. It is not a comforting vision but historically it is part of the lineage of Irish border studies which may be edging beyond an optimistic “border crossing” phase (1999–2016) captured by Nash and Reid (2011) to a future without the Border at all.

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### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Section 31 of the Act requires RTÉ “[t]o refrain from broadcasting any matter that could be calculated to promote the aims and objectives of any organisation which engages in, promotes, encourages or advocates the attaining of any particular objective by violent means.”

<sup>3</sup> See BBCNI online “Rewind” programme (2019) for its repurposed use of black and white “Ulster Alert” newsreel <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-northern-ireland-47283726> to explain the Border campaign with added screen titles and music. RTÉ Archives also provide insights into the ways TV through its current affairs programming of 1962 discussed the issue of the Border. Shot on location, the to-camera report showed John O’Donoghue posing the question to viewers: “How long will the Border last?” (*World This Week*, 1 Apr 1962). Against the backdrop of a new Northern Irish customs post under construction, he went on to suggest the Border was likely to remain unless attitudes changed. But his report also talked of the need for economic cooperation between North and South, and mention is made of the effect of closer ties with Europe, speculating that “it [the Border] might just go in a [European] Common Market.” <https://www.RTE.ie/archives/2017/0330/863796-europe-and-the-future-of-the-border/> For footage of this 1969 *Seven Days* report see: “Vigilantes take on Pig Smugglers” (1969). <https://www.RTE.ie/archives/2019/0926/1078334-cross-border-pig-smuggling/> RTÉ, *Seven Days* report, 28 Oct 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon’s father had had an affair with Maggie. Maisie is Gordon’s sister-in-law who, because she is Catholic, caused Sarah to ostracise her eldest son when he got married.

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