

## The Town I Loved So Well

World events this spring just past demonstrate we humans still have a long way to go before we achieve a global state of affairs we may dare call civilized. Most of us thought the practice now euphemistically termed “ethnic cleansing” had disappeared from the face of Europe with the death of the Third Reich. The turmoil following the breakup of the former “greater Yugoslavia” showed that ancient historical hatreds, the result of subliminal cultural prejudice and ignorance, still survived in the Balkans, and who knows, perhaps in other parts of Europe as well. Not that we Americans have not had our own past and present difficulties in these matters, but I believe most of us today take our diversity both for granted and with pride, and so find it difficult to fathom that other societies more homogenous than ours cannot manage living together peacefully. I was fortunate to have traveled extensively in the old united Yugoslavia during the time of Tito. To me all Yugoslavs looked alike and spoke various derivatives of a common language. Yet, I was appalled to hear in social conversation, among highly educated people, the undercurrent of bitterness separating Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrans, Serbs, Bosnians, Macedonians and Albanians – distinctions which had little meaning at the time to anyone outside the Balkans -- and to be told clashes between all were inevitable. Is there any hope for these people and those in other parts of the world similarly afflicted? Perhaps one small ray.

Ireland and Kosovo – what possible lessons could the former have for the latter? Well, maybe, just maybe, Ireland is finally realizing the end of a civil war that began centuries ago in the reign of Elizabeth I, and whose inhabitants underwent their own balkanization and “ethnic cleansing” on as grand and terrible scale that a people could have undergone, one which brought my own forebears to this land.. What Ireland may have now learned is most exquisitely and eloquently summed up in the lyrics of “The Town I Loved So Well,” whose verses reveal the tribulations of the northern city of Londonderry throughout its past and recent “time of troubles.” You might have heard, as did I, the heart-wrenching rendition sung by the Irish tenor Ronan Tynan on a KQED special aired in our own 1999 “spring of troubles.” This Phil Coulter ballad, now practically the unofficial national anthem of Ireland, recounts a boy’s growth to manhood in his home of “burning pride” that he must eventually leave to make his way in the world...and his dark despair on return to find foreign occupation and desolation. “*My God, what have they done, with their tanks and their guns, to the town I loved so well.*” Should the hatred then continue? No, for the deepest wisdom of the Irish experience that should be passed on to the Kosovars, and for victims of oppression and dislocation everywhere, is best expressed by Coulter’s closing wish:

*They will not forget, but their hearts are set  
On tomorrow and peace once again.  
For what’s done is done, and what’s won is won,  
And what’s lost is lost and gone forever.  
I can only pray for a bright new day  
In the Town I loved So Well.*

May the people of Pristina, and from all the other towns and villages of Kosovo, come to share this Derry prayer as they return to their destroyed homeland and begin rebuilding their lives and country.