

Document de travail pré-publication

Digging the borderland in Brian McGilloway's *The Nameless Dead* (2012)

Marie MIANOWSKI
Université Grenoble Alpes
UFR Langues Etrangères
Bureau C314
1180 rue des Résidences
38400 Saint Martin d'Hères

Résumé

Dans tous les romans de Brian McGilloway dont Devlin est le héros, la frontière est un élément central de l'intrigue. Mais dans The Nameless Dead, écrit en 2012, la frontière est non seulement un élément essentiel de l'intrigue et du récit, mais la terre elle-même qui constitue le sol de la frontière devient tout autant essentielle. L'attention du lecteur se déplace de la frontière et des conséquences de l'Accord de Paix de 1998 et de la fin du Tigre Celtique - conséquences sociales, politiques ou économiques – vers le sol et la terre qui le constitue. En tant qu'élément matériel, la terre ouvre la possibilité d'un renouveau. Mais surtout, le déplacement du regard qui s'opère de la frontière à la terre, de la ligne qui divise à la matière qui la constitue, pose la question de la responsabilité dans la construction de l'avenir. Car contrairement à la terre "land", la terre "soil" apparaît a-politique. Mais elle a néanmoins le pouvoir de poser des questions qui vont au-delà des arrangements politiques de part et d'autre de la frontière. La frontière est représentée comme immuable, symbole d'une logique de crimes sans fin. Mais au-delà des séances de fouille et de ratissage, la terre 'soil' est tout le contraire de l'immuable. Au-delà des métaphores, considérer la terre dans toute sa matérialité consiste à poser la question non pas seulement du passé et du présent mais aussi de la à construire le futur.

Mots-clés : frontière, Irlande du Nord, paysage, terre, thriller

Abstract

*In the entire Inspector Devlin series, the borderland is central to the plot of Brian McGilloway's novels, but in *The Nameless Dead*, written in 2012, not only is the borderland a dividing line, a defining element in the plot and in the narrative, but the actual soil of the borderland is equally fundamental to the meaning of the novel. The attention of the reader is brought from the borderland and its post-1998 Agreement and post-Celtic Tiger crash issues, whether social, political or economic, to the soil that makes up the ground. As a material element the fulfils the role of a potentiality that disturbs what appears as a hopelessly already written future, and points towards the possibility of renewal. But above all, the shift of focus from the land to the soil also questions the notions of authority and responsibility in building that future. Because, as opposed to the land, the soil appears a-political, its power it to address issues that go beyond everyday politics on either part of the border and reach out to what actually be done to build a better future. The land and the borderland are represented as stasis and part of a long never-ending chain of crimes, but it is also interesting to examine how beyond the scraping and digging, the soil appears to have a life of its own, in turmoil. Finally, I will argue that beyond metaphors, the materiality of the soil is a means to question the idea of authority and responsibility in building the future.*

Keywords: borderland, landscape, thriller, Northern Ireland, soil

In the entire Inspector Devlin series the borderland is central to the plot of Brian McGilloway's novels, but in *The Nameless Dead*, written in 2012, not only is the borderland a dividing line, a defining element in the plot and in the narrative, but the actual soil of the borderland is equally fundamental to the meaning of the novel. The plot shifts the focus from the land to the soil itself. The attention of the reader is brought from the borderland and its post-1998 Agreement and post-Celtic Tiger crash issues, whether social, political or economic, to the soil that makes up the ground. In *The Nameless Dead*, a lot of digging is described, and mounds of soil transform the landscape as policemen search for the skeleton of a young man who disappeared in the 1970s and stumble upon the tiny skeletons from an old cillin. In the end, as expected, the mystery at the heart of the plot is solved. And yet, the reader experiences no real sense of closure. In *The Nameless Dead*, not only does the soil conceal and reveal, but it also corrupts and recycles. Just as wounds take time to heal, the soil cannot be merely compacted back into place after a digging. McGilloway's novel does not represent the soil only as a metaphor for hidden secrets of the past that would have been transformed and brought to the surface; nor as a material element to be simply dug up in order to find skeletons and settle scores of the past. More crucially, as a material element, the soil questions the notion of responsibility in building the future. In his newly published book *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969 : Utterly Resigned Terror*¹, Aaron Kelly wishes to redeem not only the thriller as a form of fiction, but also the historical dynamics present in Northern Ireland, to affirm 'a potentiality that disrupts' what in many of these books appears most fated, contemptuously dismissed, 'statically stereotyped and without hope'²:

¹ Kelly, Aaron, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969 : Utterly Resigned Terror*, London, Routledge, 2017.

² Kelly, Aaron, op.cit., p.1.

I want to suggest later that there is also a utopian formal politics to conspiracy in the thriller form, which actually proffers a speculative grasp of the social totality but which is conventionally masked by this traumatic paradigm³.

My contention is to show that in *The Nameless Dead* the soil as a material element fulfils the role of a potentiality that disturbs what appears as a hopelessly already written future, and points towards the possibility of renewal. But above all, the shift of focus from the land to the soil also questions the notions of authority and responsibility in building that future. The land and the borderland are represented as stasis and part of a long never-ending chain of crimes, but it is also interesting to examine how beyond the scraping and digging, the soil appears to have a life of its own, in turmoil. Finally, I will argue that beyond metaphors, the materiality of the soil is a means to question the idea of authority and responsibility in building the future.

1. Digging in limbo: the land and the borderland as stasis and continuity

Brian McGilloway's novel *Borderlands* published in 2007 set the opening scene in December 2002 with the discovery of the body of a dead girl straddling the border:

Presumably, neither those who dumped her corpse, nor, indeed, those who had created the border between the North and South of Ireland in 1920, could understand the vagaries that meant that her body lay half in one country and half in another, in an area known as the borderlands⁴.

³ Ibid., p.1.

⁴ McGilloway, Brian, *Borderlands*, London, Pan Macmillan, 2007, p.3.

While *Borderlands* displayed the complex cooperation between the Irish Republic's Garda and the Police Service of Northern Ireland over Christmas 2002, *The Nameless Dead* encompasses the Halloween period of, presumably the years 2010 or 2011, and displays how Inspector Devlin questions the limits to further investigation imposed to him. He wants to investigate in the deaths of newborn children that he thinks were murders, but because the remains were found during a dig for the Disappeared, he is not allowed to lead any investigation. The period of the year coincides with All Souls Day and the return of the dead, which befits the specific space on which the plot focuses, described as a 'geographical limbo'⁵. Also, as Devlin eventually finds out, the names of the murdered babies were later secretly given to adopted babies and therefore the identities of the dead newborns are forever haunting the world of the living. The space where the remains were found is an island. In fact, it corresponds to an existing island situated on the river Foyle between Lifford and Strabane:

Running for about two and a half miles, but less than a mile wide, the island sits in the middle of the river Foyle, its two lateral shores no more than 200 yards from either Northern Ireland or the Republic. But the island belongs to both and neither; the Irish border, which runs along the riverbed from Derry to Strabane, dissects the island down the middle⁶.

Because of its geographical situation, the island, Islandmore or Isle of Bones, has a long history of smuggling. The bridges connecting it to the North side and to the South side both fell into disrepair in the 1960s, so that the island 'became separated from both sides and grew wild'⁷. Its limbo nature, in between two spaces, neither North nor South, is accentuated thanks to another meaning of the word limbo, the island having been known as early as the

⁵ McGilloway, Brian, *The Nameless Dead*, London, Pan Macmillan, 2012, p.5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷ *The Nameless Dead*, p.6.

18th century as an unofficial burial site for babies known as ‘limbo babies’ or unbaptized babies.

As the novel opens, a team of diggers who is part of the commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains, is trying to locate the remains of a young man, Declan Cleary, ‘Disappeared’ in the 1970s. For all its invented and fictitious events and descriptions, the plot of the novel revolves around historical facts and real-life scandals, linking the 18th century, the period of the Troubles and present-day Ireland in a seemingly uninterrupted line of crime, secret and violence. *The Nameless Dead* is more particularly based on the work of the commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains, which as McGilloway mentions in an Author’s Note at the end of the novel, had recovered only nine of the sixteen ‘Disappeared’ when the novel was published in 2012. But it is also based on the work of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse in State Institutions in relation with 211 girls having been used in Mother and Baby Homes⁸, without parental consent, to test trial vaccines in the sixties and seventies. McGilloway reminds his readers of the double injustice done to those girls because ‘in 2003, following court action from doctors involved in the trials, the Commission’s investigation in this regard ended⁹’. The novel is also based on yet another scandal which took place in the United States, where, to treat their acne during pregnancy, two thousand women were given a drug called Isotretinoin, leading to miscarriages. Yet, a-hundred-and-sixty babies survived, but with severe facial disfigurement, due to an induced syndrome called Goldenhare syndrome.

The novel therefore opens with the discovery by the digging team working on Islandmore in search of the remains of Declan Cleary, of dozens of tiny skeletons wrapped in white sheets, evidently part of a cillin, but also of other tiny skeletons whose skulls are severely disfigured, belonging to babies who had suffered from Goldenhare Syndrome and, as

⁸ Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation, <http://www.mbhcoi.ie/MBH.nsf/page/index-en> (last consulted September 20, 2018)

⁹ *The Nameless Dead*, p.380.

we learn in the course of the narrative, either died spontaneously at birth, or were murdered to cover up the scandal. The discovery of those two separate sites of baby skeletons prompts Inspector Devlin to lead a separate and secret inquiry into those deaths, although technically he is not allowed to, as they were found in relation to a dig for the Disappeared. One of the key rules in relation with the work of the commission for the Location of Victims' Remains is that the discovery of the remains of a 'Disappeared' cannot lead to any investigation. As one of his superiors reminds him for the second time: 'the legislation is very clear "any evidence obtained, directly or indirectly, shall not be admissible in any criminal proceedings"¹⁰'. This fact is repeated at regular intervals in the novel, and yet Inspector Devlin investigates the mystery of the deformed baby skulls and eventually manages to unveil a huge corruption network linking an Isotretinoin-type scandal dating back to the 1960s and 70s, and a modern-day corruption deal around social benefits and illegal adoptions in a ghost estate called Islandview, built right across Islandmore.

The border is hence presented as a place of on-going smuggling, cyclical corruption, violence and revenge in the traditional vein of Northern-Irish thriller writing, where ritualized anniversaries materialize on the present day border. The memory of violent past events is celebrated, which were themselves the trigger of a cycle of violence and revenge. This aspect of the narrative gives credit to what Aaron Kelly describes, quoting Joerp Leerssen, as the 'traumatic paradigm¹¹' in which 'a nightmarish model refuses dialectical transformation and reverberates ceaselessly in irresolvable crisis' and where the thriller vainly reproduces the 'cyclical iteration of two tribalized, allochronic monoliths¹².'

In this general context, the borderland is represented as a highly politically and socially contested space, still deeply ensconced in corruption and revenge, as if things were never going to change and thriller literature was bound to go on describing this state of things.

¹⁰ *The Nameless Dead*, p.42.

¹¹ Kelly, Aaron, op.cit., p.1.

¹² Kelly, Aaron, op.cit., p.1.

And yet, the soil – whether earth, clay, land-fill, slime or sewage - appears as a fundamental agent in McGilloway’ novel, in the sense that Karen Barad gives to the word ‘agent’ in her work on the entanglements of meaning and matter. Agential realism is an ongoing process of material causes and consequences:

Agential realism does not start with a set of given or fixed differences, but rather makes inquiries into how differences are made and remade, stabilized and destabilized, as well as their materializing effects and constitutive exclusions.¹³

The soil brings this sort of dynamics to the overall terrifying stasis and reveals how elements and events intra-act, thus creating the possibility of on-going change.

2. Digging, scraping, sifting, oozing: the soil in turmoil

The novel opens on a scene of digging, scraping and sifting as the police team search for Declan Cleary and stumble across an ancient cillin:

The cadaver dog, a small black spaniel, was moving across the field towards the island’s edge, its snout pressed close to the ground, its body twisting and flexible as it turned this way and that, following whatever scent it had picked up. It snuffled into the surface vegetation [...]¹⁴.

The first word of the novel, ‘cadaver dog’, sets the tone. But the first paragraph also already points towards the soil, below the surface vegetation. In fact, the materiality of the soil is the main object of focus throughout the novel. The soil needs to be dug up, sifted through, so that it might reveal secrets of the past and resolve problems in the present. The word ‘soil’ is used

¹³ Barad, Karen, ‘Intra-actions : an Interview with Karen Barad by Adam Kleinman’, *Mousse #34*, p.77.

¹⁴ *The Nameless Dead*, p.3.

as early as the second page of the novel, to describe the first of the ‘mounds of soil’ through which the ‘forensic archeologist¹⁵’ sifts after the mechanical digger has completed its digging job. The digging and sifting of the soil are clearly linked to the understanding of past history. The digging is actually the material heaving to the surface of elements concealed in the dark, compacted soil of Islandmore, the limbo island. The scene when Declan Cleary’s skeleton is found, one-third into the novel, is described with a clear focus on the way the soil is treated:

The progress was slow and methodical. The digger operator scraped across the surface of the site where they were digging, lifting soil to a depth of four inches or so at a time. This soil was then deposited to his right-hand side, clear of the flagged spot the dog handler had marked two days previous. Jonas then sifted through the clay, looking for bone fragments, or anything which might indicate the presence of a corpse¹⁶.

The earth around Declan Cleary’s ‘raggedly-clothed skeleton¹⁷’ is described as having compacted around the legs and the right arm, requiring extra care from the diggers as they dig and lift it. In several occasions, the text also insists on the necessity to re-fill the holes with the previously dug up soil, closing a cycle, resuming another, with no hint at the possibility of any regeneration process, only patching up what had been dug up, linking past events to the present, in a desolate continuing chain of crime and sorrow.

And yet, although it is described as compact, being lifted into mounds, the soil, not only on Islandmore, but in the rest of the novel as well, displays a form of spontaneity, as if it were alive, as opposed to the ‘rubberized tarmac¹⁸’ of the playground where the body of Declan Cleary’s son, Sean Cleary, is found, two days after the dig for his father’s remains has

¹⁵ *The Nameless Dead*, p.4.

¹⁶ *The Nameless Dead*, p.101.

¹⁷ *The Nameless Dead*, p.105.

¹⁸ *The Nameless Dead*, p.52.

begun. As a grave, the soil absorbs life and kills. But in McGilloways's novel the soil escapes the stasis of representation to which the land and the borderland in particular are submitted. The soil cannot be actually dug up, sifted through and compacted back exactly into place as if the ground were an envelope to be simply sealed back over stories that can be dug out but not investigated. At the end of the novel, Martin, the main culprit at the root of the network of scandals over four decades, is hunted down on Islandmore where the slime almost swallows him up. It is low-tide and the soil of the island is described as 'waterlogged earth'¹⁹, ever more 'soggier'. The verbs 'oozed' and 'sucked' are repeated several times as everything that falls into the slime is being 'sucked beneath the surface'²⁰. The rescuing of Martin requires several people as the soil threatens to swallow both Martin and Inspector Devlin into its black and slimy entrails:

The sucking of the wet mud marked my progress, slow as it was, as I freed myself from the slime and allowed Dunne to pull me, with Martin in tow, onto the rocks of the shoreline²¹.

In the end Martin is almost buried alive on the island and the description of his second rescue highlights once more the characteristics of the soil as being alive. As Martin is being buried alive in Declan Cleary's former hole, Inspector Devlin arrives and the earth is described as 'still raw'²²:

¹⁹ *The Nameless Dead*, p.333.

²⁰ *The Nameless Dead*, p.334.

²¹ *The Nameless Dead*, p.337.

²² *The Nameless Dead*, p.367.

Callan had not compacted the soil and my hand sunk down into the loamy earth, cold and damp between my fingers [...] my hand connected with cloth and flesh in the ground [...] wriggling suddenly where Martin lay beneath the soil²³.

In this novel Inspector Devlin overtly fights the ban on investigating the deformed skeletons found during the dig for Cleary's remains. But he also seems keenly aware of the nature of the soil beneath his feet and especially of its power to swallow not only the past, but also the present. Another key culprit, Sheila Clark, disappears towards the end of the novel, without being caught, and Devlin's guess is that she has been mysteriously and secretly been buried on Islandmore:

Ironically, the dig for the Disappeared had created perfect conditions for the disposal of further bodies, for the recent disruption of the earth would make geophysical tests unreliable.

The island was quiet now, those nameless dead that still rested there seemingly content that one more had joined them in their eternal sleep, taking her rightful place on the Isle of Bones²⁴.

Those are the last words of the novel which therefore ends with no real sense of closure, since nothing proves that Sheila Clark, who was instrumental in the crimes Devlin denounces, is indeed buried on Islandmore or still on the run. And yet the tone of this last paragraph ironically implies that a sense of closure is indeed being acknowledged, as if the fact that more dead bodies had filled the recently dug out holes were the only thing likely to bring peace and quiet to the area.

²³ *The Nameless Dead*, p.368.

²⁴ *The Nameless Dead*, p.379.

But if McGilloway ends his novel on this paradox, he also explicitly describes it as a paradox ('ironically'²⁵), hence implicitly denouncing the form of solace and satisfaction that such cycles bring. In McGilloway's novel the soil goes beyond metaphors of tomb, womb and recycling. The limbo island and the soil as in-between place and surface are used by McGilloway to question notions such as 'causality, agency, space, time, matter, meaning, knowing, being, responsibility, accountability, and justice'²⁶. The crimes that Devlin denounces are of course crucial as part of the plot of a crime novel, but the fact he denounces them despite the ban on investigating those crimes is paramount. The use by McGilloway of the soil, not as a metaphor, but as a material agent, highlights the fundamental notions of responsibility and authority in building a fairer future.

3. Beyond metaphors: the soil as a pretext to question authority and responsibility

Whereas questions related to the land are political, all the more so if the borderland is the actual subject of the narrative, in placing the soil as agent at the centre of his plot, McGilloway disrupts the usual cycles and the usual way of representing crimes on the border. In doing so, he raises the questions of authority and responsibility as a means to take another stance on the ways to envision the future.

The subplot of *The Nameless Dead*, as in all the Inspector Devlin novels, is Devlin's family life and his role as a husband and father. In *The Nameless Dead* his children have grown up, they have become teenagers, and the question of authority and responsibility runs

²⁵ *The Nameless Dead*, pp.378-79.

²⁶ Barad, Karen, op.cit., 'The notion of intra-action marks an important shift in many foundational philosophical notions such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, meaning, knowing, being, responsibility, accountability, and justice', p.77.

as an obvious leitmotiv in Devlin's relationship with his daughter²⁷. The glimmer of hope which Aaron Kelly mentions in his introduction as a new strand in Northern Irish fiction lies in *The Nameless Dead*, not so much in any interpretation of the soil as a metaphor of a state of in-betweenness, that would illustrate yet again the limbo motif. The soil is indeed mostly hidden, beneath the visible and palpable surface. But it is also partially visible: it can be touched, stepped upon and smelt. It is in-between life and death. But in *The Nameless Dead* the soil reveals elements of the past which Inspector Devlin decides to investigate despite the official order to inaction and silence and very much like his teenage daughter, he decides to shun the authorities and take his own responsibility to denounce scandals of the present day, which have their roots in crimes of the past, as if to state that the future of the children being born today also depends on the ways in which justice is done to the children born in ages gone.

Throughout the novel, Islandmore is viewed from many geographical and historical viewpoints. Let us take a few steps away from Islandmore or the Isle of Bones for a moment, and stand in the ghost estate called Islandview, from which Islandmore can be viewed. Islandview itself is an island of sort, a ghost estate with its sophisticated show house and its deserted houses squatted by drug dealers. The explicit mirror construction of Islandmore/Islandview, the limbo island and the ghost estate Islandview, raises the implicit question of the ways in which crimes and scandals of the past are treated in contrast with those of the present. The soil of the ghost estate appears sterile and has not even been seeded. The words used to describe the ghost estate Islandview point at a neglected and sterile site with no gardens, where the outlines of the houses are portrayed as 'skeletal', 'the pavements loosely comprising hard-fill but no tarmac' and where the pot-holed roads are 'weedy²⁸'. The garden of the showhouse is compared to 'a pot of clay which the builder had not even

²⁷ *The Nameless Dead*, p.112.

²⁸ *The Nameless Dead*, p.87.

prepared for seeding²⁹. And yet, despite this, ‘a few hardier tufts of grass and weeds had struggled through the lumps of hard-fill littering the ground³⁰’. The key-words to describe the soil in the ghost estate are ‘clay’, ‘hard-fill’, ‘litter’, ‘weed’, as if through the hard surface of clay loosely disposed as ‘hard-fill’ - the word itself materially opposed to the soil of the island that can be compacted - weeds and grass managed to sprout through. In the same vein, one page later Devlin is portrayed ‘picking his way through’ the ‘piles of clay³¹’ littering the ghost estate. The soil of the ghost estate actually resurges ‘as the sewage system dysfunctions and the effluent of the households are pumped out of a pipe to the rear of the estate into a mound in the corner of a field³².’

In Islandview, the soil resurges into a mound, but a mound of sewage. The description of the mound of sewage is done by several characters and in the narrative it precedes immediately the careful and respectful discovery of Declan Cleary’s remains on Islandmore, creating a sharp contrast. Devlin explains to his colleagues the situation of the sewage system below the ghost estate:

the pumping station here is broken, everything that goes down the toilets around here gets flushed out into a mound in the field running along the back of the next street across³³.

The word ‘mound’ is repeated several times in association with the image of affluent and sewage, and immediately juxtaposed with the scene of Declan Cleary’s neat dug up as if to stress the jarring contrast between an almost religious scene around Cleary’s skeleton being scrupulously lifted to the surface forty years after his death, and the present day insalubrious

²⁹ *The Nameless Dead*, p.138.

³⁰ *The Nameless Dead*, p.138.

³¹ *The Nameless Dead*, p.139.

³² *The Nameless Dead*, p.87.

³³ *The Nameless Dead*, p.95.

living conditions in the ghost estate. The description seems to highlight the contrast between the scent followed by the cadaver dog on Islandmore and the inescapable stench pervading the air in Islandview.

The situation in the ghost estate also echoes Mike McCormack's novel *Solar Bones*³⁴ based on a real contagious virus called 'cryptosporidiosis' which contaminated the network of drinkable water in the Galway area in 2007, when thousands of people were taken ill with intense vomiting and diarrhea, their own digestive system in intra-action with the region's water network, itself connected and related to the political decisions made at local and regional levels. And yet, in *The Nameless Dead* the future of the ghost estate Islandview is not explicitly raised, as opposed to that of Islandmore:

What would happen afterwards was not so clear, whether the island would become isolated once more or, having been received into the community's collective conscience, remain connected again to the mainland, no longer in limbo³⁵.

The real issue of the novel seems indeed to be how to bring to the surface and clearly acknowledge what was previously in limbo, neither here nor there, and question what will happen in the future if lands hitherto unconnected eventually connect.

In fact, the actual issue brought to the fore by McGilloway's novel is that of the future, not so much of Islandmore, but that of today's children. In recent Irish fiction, such as *Solar Bones* by Mike McCormack, *City of Bohane*³⁶ by Kevin Barry, *The Forgotten Waltz*³⁷ by Anne Enright and other novels or short stories, children are often ill, handicapped, on the

³⁴ McCormack, Mike, *Solar Bones*, Dublin, Tramp Press, 2016.

³⁵ *The Nameless Dead*, p.252.

³⁶ Barry, Kevin, *City of Bohane*, London, Vintage, 2012.

³⁷ Enright, Anne, *The Forgotten Waltz*, London, Norton, 2011.

edge between real and virtual realms, or utterly absent. The title of the novel *The Nameless Dead* points at two types of lost identities: mysterious and anonymous deaths during the Troubles – names that have been lost and concealed; and mysterious burials of babies who had never been named. At the heart of the scandal of the buried children with Goldenhare syndrome which Devlin investigates there is also the recycling of their names re-attributed to adopted children, as if they were given a second chance in the recycling of their identities being transferred to the adopted babies. McGilloway subtly links all the scandals unveiled through Devlin's investigation to the future of children: the lines of the plot concerning the cillin babies and the Goldenhare babies found in the soil of Islandmore all have ramifications with the ongoing adoption scandal of which the ghost estate Islandview is a strategic base. Even Declan Cleary and his son Sean are both found dead in positions described as foetal positions, as if all those deaths from the past, either political, religious, or the consequence of greed and corruption, all led to one question: that of the future of the children of Ireland.

Conclusion

Such are the dynamics of the soil in McGilloway's novel: a reading of the land of the border neither abstract nor imprisoned in unstoppable cycles, but focused on the materiality of the soil, an apparently neutral matter, but by nature changeable. At once invisible and visible, compacted and sifted, it is a place for graves but also a place for germination. The soil in McGilloway's novel goes beyond symbolic or metaphorical interpretations of renewal. It is a way to inscribe in the representation of the borderland, not only logics of silence, compensation or even reconciliation, but the dynamics of change and responsibility for the future of younger generations. In putting the soil at the forefront, scattering the landscape

with mounds of soil, this novel calls upon the responsibility of present day citizens, diggers, mourners, designers, politicians, to make that land a better place to live.