Chapter Four

Volunteers

In this chapter I will trace the concern about history and culture and language discussed in *Translations* and *The Communication Cord* back to a play composed earlier than these two. Prior to these two plays, in the 70's, Friel produced plays that predicted his shift of attention in the plays written in the 80's. Among them, *The Mundy Scheme*, *The Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers* show the political and cultural concern that is more deeply explored in his later Field Day plays, such as *Translations*, *The Communication Cord*, and *Making History*. *Volunteers* is composed in 1975, after *The Mundy Scheme* and *The Freedom of the City*, about a group of IRA prisoners in Northern Ireland who have volunteered to help with an archeological site, an act that is taken as betrayal by their fellow prisoners, while the archeology task is done for the country to build a hotel on the site and display the excavated historical objects for promoting tourism. The volunteers have no support from either their fellow prisoners, or from their supervisors working for the government. In his observation, George O'Brien believes the play deserves more attention and praise than it actually does, since "It is sharper in its satire than *The Mundy Scheme*, and more explicit in its representation of national issues. And it is more economical in its indictment of officialdom than *The Freedom of the City*, while making more dramatically articulate that play's sense of transgressive vitality, and the parlous but necessary freedom which it denotes. Like these two predecessors, *Volunteers* also concentrates on questions of trust, responsibility and integrity in the public domain. And, not only does it dramatize these questions in terms of the possession and preservation of the country's national heritage, like *The Freedom of the City* it draws on contemporary events for its dramatic context" (Kerwin 176).

In this chapter I will examine *Volunteers* to see how Friel makes *Volunteers* a better play than its two predecessors, as O'Brien says, and also how it influences the previous two

plays I have discussed. Its representation of Irishness is obviously from a more political point of view, since the major represented images in the play are archeology, business, tourism, republicanism, and history, which includes both that of the past and present of Ireland and also of times of Viking occupation. From the outset, we see the power relation of the social class, and the power of the state to violate the moral and physical integrity of the individual. In Elmer Andrews's words, "The internees are separated from the rest of society; the diggers are ostracized by their comrades back in prison and divided amongst themselves. The dominant order is no monolithic unity either, but riven by class divisions" (Andrews 147). In this way, the class divisions and the oppression of the powerful to the powerless confine the diggers, who have completely no way out of their doomed fate: they are jailed for crimes uncertain, and they are neglected by the society; this causes their frustration and anger, which lead them to rebel against the society, and the rebel, in turn, brings them severe punishment and more pain. Even though Kathleen Ferris is aware of the fact that "Friel carefully avoids endorsing the violence of extremists, and he makes the men victims not of the state, but of their own group," she still points out that "[Friel] indicts those who constitute the establishment—the Georges, the Mr. Wilsons and the Desmonds, and other respectable citizens of the world—who would willingly allow these men to be murdered because they believe political prisoners to be only 'riff-raff,' 'only a parcel of shite' of which they are happy to be rid. In unmasking the private hatred and prejudice that lurk beneath civilized behavior, Friel is excavating the undersite of political violence" (Kerwin 125-6).

But here we must note that Friel does not write this play to condemn Northern Ireland, or the Viking, or the British, for the political status quo, but to raise questions and evoke thoughts on the problems that have existed within the Irish society and the Irish psyche. Even though the play is clearly conscious of the present social and political environment in Ireland, it does not wish to represent the violence of politics in a straightforward way. Friel puts the

issue of national heritage within the context of the present political environment, more with the hope that this can provoke the intellectual in Ireland to reexamine Irish culture identity. Seamus Heaney comments that the play "is not a quarrel with others but a vehicle for Friel's quarrel with himself…it is more about values and attitudes within the Irish psyche than it is about the rights and wrongs of the political situation, and represents a furthur digging of the site cleared in his *Freedom of the City*" (qtd. in McGrath 125). Echoing Heaney, Ulf Dantanus also believes that the play "attempts to disentangle the complex web of loyalties that determines the political complications in the North" (Dantanus 154). The political complications are more explicitly a result of the division of Republicans and Unionists in Northern Ireland, which implicitly causes different points of views about cultural heritage, and the relationship between heritage and property and between past and present. In the play, it is clear that people in the Northern Ireland community have very different views about the archeological task. The volunteers question who has authority over the jug, the skeleton Leif, the archeological task, and the writing of history, while for the supervisors of them the jug is to be reassembled and commercialized and they can publish their books on archeology. For the government, the task is for the construction of a hotel, which helps promotes tourism and attracts international attention. O'Brien observes that the play is about "the difficulties in arriving at a consensus about the relevance and accessibility of a common cultural heritage, in agreeing on mutual interests within a shared inheritance, in establishing a reliable account of cultural tradition so that public discussion regarding it might be in a common language, and in characterizing the nature of the common ground a society requires as a basis for its cultural identity" (Kerwin 177).

Because of such difficulties, Friel manages to represent the present political situation in Ireland in the uncertain context, where there is no consensus, and where simple answers and definitions are challenged. For example, the skeleton Leif and the jug evoke various kinds of

interpretations and imaginations, which push the Irish people to redefine and reexamine their cultural heritage. Also, Friel presents different elements in conflict, which generates new meaning, new potential, and new possibilities. O'Brien says "While it may be argued that, ultimately, it is the very richness of the play's thematic resonances which vitiates its dramatic impact, its enactment of the conflicts between the voluntary and the mercenary, the spirit and the letter, potential and repression—conflicts which may be broadly identified by the names culture and politics—make this a central work in the Friel canon" (Kerwin 187). More specifically, the play finds its meaning in the conflicts between the diggers and the supervisors, Leif and the jug, the interests of the government and the diggers, the cultural heritage and the tourism business. This may be exactly what Elmer Andrews observes to be Friel's main interest: "the way meanings maintain themselves or are fought for in a world bereft of consensus" (Andrews 147). It is notable, once again, that while Friel questions these political and cultural situations, he does not want to blame the problems on the colonial power or the Viking occupation. What he hopes is that the Irish people look within themselves to examine their cultural heritage and create new possibilities. Like McGrath says, "Friel does not represent the Viking settlers of Dublin in the traditional manner as raiders and plunderers but as victims, particularly victims of their own culture. In *Volunteers* insensitivity to one's own people and one's own history is the villain and not some outside invader, such as the Vikings, the English, or American economic power" (McGrath 131).

From the brief discussion above, we see Friel's representations of the Irish political situations in the present: there are the social class divisions that enable oppression and injustice and individual afflictions; there is the lack of consensus on the relationship between the cultural heritage and the national identity, which is waiting to be reexamined; there are inner problems, such as "insensitivity to one's own people and one's own history," that cause more pain to the Irish people than do the colonial powers. Friel, however, still maintains

some hope despite the problematic political and social environment. In *Volunteers* he manages to present the human ability to fight and exist in the face of difficulties and inequalities, mostly with creativity and the power of language. The best exemplifier is of course the diggers, or the volunteers. "Volunteer," as the title of the play, strongly suggests the military riots in Irish history. It has been connected with resistance since the conflicts between the Unionists and the Nationalists started in the 18th century. In his study, O'Brien lists the use of the term in history: "The Unionists who opposed Home Rule in 1912 called themselves volunteers, as did the nationalists who responded to them. The insurgents of the Easter Rising of 1916 called themselves volunteers. Members of the IRA who fought in the Anglo-Irish war of 1919-1921 are remembered by the same term. The designation is currently used by armed militants on both sides of the sectarian divide in Northern Ireland" (Kerwin 178). With the symbols it carries, the term is used by Friel to problematize and subvert it. In *Volunteers*, the volunteers are far from militant rebels; they are much more unpredictable with their languages and thinking and creativity. This is obvious from the endless limericks and songs by Keeney and Pyne, and also from the relatively more obedient Knox and Butt, who later in the play also show their way of counteracting George's will and expressing their consciousness. Therefore, while we cannot define the volunteers with old definitions, the volunteers exhibit the ability and vitality to struggle against their fate—though not readily successful at the end. For O'Brien, Friel's use of the term not only "destabilizes the term's familiar connotations (in the case of 'volunteers' those deriving from a rigid view of a complicated historical nexus)," it also "declines to substitute the putative reassurance of an alternative code for the one being undermined" (Kerwin 178). The volunteers in the play are thus unpredictable, untraditional, and they deny easy identification.

In his introduction to *Selected Plays: Brian Friel*, Seamus Deane talks about the victims in Friel's plays written in the 1970s:

> All of these plays have in common an interest in the disintegration of traditional authority and in the exposure of the violence upon which it had rested. Despite the bleakness of the general situation, Friel manages to make his central victims appealing even in their futility and in their frequent bouts of self-pity. He still adheres to his fascination with human capacity for producing consoling fictions to make life more tolerable. Although he destroys these fictions he does not, with that, destroy the motives that produced them —motives which are rooted in the human being's wish for dignity as well as in his tendency to avoid reality. (*SP* 17-18)

This is perhaps the best description of Friel's diggers in *Volunteers*. Therefore, in the play the supervisors reveal their stupid pride and limited view when they talk about the diggers:

> Wilson: Bloody trash. (George laughs) Amn't I right? How would you describe them?
>
> George: I wouldn't quarrel with that.
>
> Wilson: 'Political prisoners'—huh! In my book they're all bloody criminals. And now when this job's over, that's what they'll miss most—you know—the chance to talk….
>
> …
>
> George: All the same they performed a public service—not that they'll see it that way.
>
> Wilson: Damn right, they won't.
>
> George: And maybe we expanded their horizons just a little, too.
>
> Wilson: Huh! (*Vo* 14-15)

In comparison, therefore, the diggers exhibit more creativity and imagination about their job at the excavation than their supervisors. This fact is easily seen when Keeney introduces the

site while he is acting as an archeology teacher addressing his students:

> Keeney: Your teacher tells me that none of you has ever seen an excavation before and you could well be excused for thinking that it does look more like a bomb-crater—or maybe a huge womb—or, as one of these men has suggested, like a prison yard with the high walls and the watch-tower up there and the naughty prisoners trying to tunnel their way out to freedom ha-ha-ha. (*Vo* 35)

The diggers' creativity is thus what Seamus Deane calls the "human capacity for producing consoling fictions to make life more tolerable." And the most creative one of the diggers is of course Keeney. Friel's stage note about Keeney is itself telling: "Keeney is in his forties. Quick-witted, quick-tongued, and never for a second unaware. Years of practice have made the public mask of the joker almost perfect" (*Vo* 17). Beside him, Pyne almost serves the same function as a joker, but "unlike Keeney his public mask slips in times of crisis. He is the uncertain breeziness of a sailor. They move about the stage, waving, smiling, pouring out their double-act patter at great speed" (*Vo* 17). Their "patter," however, is not only for fun. It evokes many issues regarding Irish history and culture and language. Also, their patter shows their fate and sorrow, as McGrath notes, "Keeney provides a surface veneer of humorous and ironic commentary that tugs emotionally against the pall of death that hangs over them all. Keeney's stories and banter also serve the dramatic function of revealing things about himself and his fellow volunteers and of linking their fates (and the fate of the Irish in general) to the victimization of Leif" (McGrath 124). For Dantanus, Keeney's patter also reveals the crisis of communication, since he presents Hamlet and Leif as casualties of language, and he also claims that everyone is the casualty of language. Dantanus says, "Friel may intend no more than an allusion to the hazards of communication" (Dantanus 154). Here we can see Keeney, as Friel's victim to show the human capacity to exist in a problematic environment, uses his

patter and banters and limericks not only to make fun, but also to show the diggers' vitality and spirit, to evoke thinking on history, culture, and language, and to make the banters serve as a temporary escape from his awareness of his fate. In the discussion to follow, I will examine how Keeney makes his patter speak for him and for the diggers.

For Keeney, the excavation connects the fate of the skeleton Leif in the Viking times and that of the diggers in the present Ireland, since they are digging the Irish history and exploring "the story of Irish men":

> Keeney: And our excavation here extend from early Viking right down to the late Georgian—in other words over a period of approximately a thousand years. So that what you have around you is encapsulated history, a tangible précis of the story of Irish man. (*Vo* 36)

And Keeney believes that by digging their past, they also know more about themselves:

> Keeney: …the more we learn about our ancestors, children, the more we discover about ourselves—isn't that so? So that what we are all engaged in here in really a thrilling voyage in *self*-discovery. (*Vo* 37)

But here what is more important about this voyage of self-discovery is Keeney's question: "But the big question is: How many of us want to make *that* journey?" (*Vo* 37). From this line we see the diggers' unwillingness to take the job, take the fate, and be confined here at the site without any way out. They know very well that they are working for a nation that does not care about their fate, and back in the prison their fellow prisoners are also going to give them execution. And this fate connects them to the excavated Viking skeleton Leif, which makes them more aware of the fact that they will be sacrificed and martyred no matter how hard they work at the excavation. Elmer Andrews observes that "One way of viewing the volunteers' plight and, beyond that, the whole violent history of modern Ireland (to which the action is related by the term 'volunteers,' with its connotations of both Republican and

Loyalist paramilitarism), is to see them as part of a timeless continuum of sacrifice and martyrdom rather than the product of a specific network of social relations" (Andrews 144).

The connection of the past sacrifice to the present fate finds another example in Keeney's banter:

> Keeney: There once was a bird called O'Shea
>
> Who was known as a fabulous lay.
>
> Then along came Parnell
>
> Who screwed her to hell
>
> And we feel the results to this day. (*Vo* 18)

In this banter the story of Parnell, the leader of the Irish nationalist movement, and Captain O'Shea, is remembered to reflect the fate the diggers are undergoing now. Parnell became the accepted leader of the Irish nationalist movement during the years 1880-1882. He was referred to as the "Uncrowned King of Ireland." He brought Home Rule from being a faint hope to the forefront of national politics. Both the English political parties and successive governments had to recognize the importance of the Irish question and declare their standpoint on it. And yet such a successful political leader had to retire from his career because of his involvement in the divorce of Captain O'Shea and his wife, Katherine O'Shea. The scandal caused part of his own party to react against him, and caused his party to lose elections in the parliament. And he died at the age of forty-five.[1] With the story, Keeney connects his fate to that of Parnell in that while they faithfully serve the republican movement, they have to be persecuted by their own people not because they betray their movement but because they violate a code of behavior. Keeney knows he will be executed after he goes back to prison, because he is thought to cooperate with the state at the excavation job, but as Keeney says to George, the diggers are here at the job because they "offended against the

[1] For more information about Parnell's affair, visit the website http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/people/parnell.htm.

state":

> Keeney: …we deliberately 'offended against the state', or to be strictly accurate, George, they interned us because of 'attitudes that might be inimical to public security.' (*Vo* 55)

Keeney sees Parnell's fate, and his own fate, and also the diggers', as the sure evidence of history repeating itself. Therefore, in McGrath's words, "…the limericks, songs, verbal banter, and narratives in *Volunteers* create, like the excavations themselves, an encapsulated version of Irish history that establishes the discourses, sets the horizons, and limits the possibilities within which the prisoners/diggers must work out their destiny" (McGrath 127). It is therefore that the theme of the play under question is not so much the injustice of internment of the state, as the indifference of the Irish people to each other. Here we see Friel is not suggesting a solution to the political divisions in Northern Ireland, but some humanity and care for the whole Irish people and culture to be placed above personal interests.

There are many other examples of such limericks of Keeney's and Pyne's. For example, in their banter about the skeleton Leif, they reveal its fate in the war between different races:

> Keeney: There once was a Norseman called Leif.
>
> Pyne: Got it. There once was a Norseman called Leif
>
> Whose visit to Ireland was brief
>
> He was caught in a war
>
> Between Jesus and Thor
>
> And came to a permanent grief. (*Vo* 18)

Here we see the Vikings are not represented as the invaders, but as victims of their own culture. Likewise, the fate the diggers are undergoing is not a result of any colonial force in politics or culture or economy, but a result of the coldness of the Irish people with which they treat one another. One other limerick more vividly expresses the diggers' pain, as they are

well aware of the fact that a sort of kangaroo court is being held to decide their fate after they go back in prison:

Keeney: On an archeological site
Five diggers examined their plight
But a kangaroo court
Gave the final report— (*Vo* 88)

The final report is written by George and Dr. Wilson, the supervisors of the site and the diggers. And the diggers very clearly know there will not be any good words, and their hard work at the site will only bring them more suffering. One other limerick, or more accurately a song named "The Bonny Labouring Boy", sung by Pyne and Keeney, shows the very low position the diggers are in, and the fact that they are denied every chance by the society:

Pyne: As I went out one morning fair
All in the bloomin' spring
I overheard a damsel fair
Most grievously did sing:
'Cruel were my parents,
They did me sore annoy,
They would not let me tarry with
My bonny labouring boy'.
…
Said the mother to the daughter fair,
'Why did you stoop so low
To marry a poor labouring boy
around the world to go?
Some noble lord might fancy you,

great riches to enjoy…'

Keeney: (*Joining in*) 'So why do you throw yourself away on a poor labouring boy?' (*Now in office*) Powerful aul' song that, too, isn't it, George? (*Vo* 34, 54)

From Keeney's comment of the song as "powerful," we see the song is drawing connection between the "poor laboring boy," who is rejected by the girl's family, and the poor diggers, who are rejected by the society, which cares more about the construction of the new hotel than about the history and heritage dug out. From Keeney's other banters we know that even the archeologists/supervisors themselves are more concerned about publishing their books on archeology, establishing their reputation, and reassembling the jug so that it can be displayed. As for the skeleton Leif, and the history that connects all Irish people and all human beings, they are completely neglected. It is because of this that when Keeney sees the jug reassembled by George, what he sees is a symbol of "Smiler's pieces all put together and making a handsome jug." He says to George: "But it's more than an aesthetic delight, this, George. This is an omen. What I am talking about—it's much more than an omen—it's a symbol, George. This is Smiler, George; Smiler restored; Smiler full, free and integrated" (*Vo* 55). Smiler, one of the diggers, who helps collecting the fragments of the jug, was sent into jail and beaten out of his senses and sanity because of his leading a demonstration to protest the internment of his fellowmen. Keeney uses the symbol of Smiler to ridicule George's obsession with the artifact and his ignorance about the plight the diggers have suffered. And when early in Act Two the diggers are tossing the jug around, and when George orders them to put it back, Butt asks Keeney to "leave it up where it belongs," and Keeney replies:

Keeney: Now that's a curious phrase—'where it belongs'. Where does it belong? Is it Smiler's—finders keepers? Or is it the Professors? Or does it belong to the nation? Or does it belong to—Brother Leif. Damnit, that's a thought! And if it's Leif's, isn't it about time he got it back?

(*Vo* 60)

With his questions, Keeney questions who has the authority over the jug, over the digging itself, and over history after all. While Friel does not provide any answer, he at the same time makes Keeney speak for his purpose. He hopes that, by pushing his people to think about questions like these, the Irish people can reexamine their cultural heritage, and the national identity built on that, and redefine the meaning of archeology of the Irish history.

The jug is later broken by Butt. This is a conscious act, but it is surprising that it is done by the more cooperative Butt, not by the more subversive Keeney and Pyne. This act of Butt's shows his development of consciousness of George's hostility towards the diggers, and also of the ill fate of them revealed in Keeney's banters and limericks. Before Butt smashes the jug, George is talking to him about the report of the diggers he is going to hand in:

> George: …you did the job to the best of your ability, and I'll say that, and it'll be taken into consideration. But Keeney—a danger-man, Butt, a real danger-man. No loyalty to anyone or anything—that's his trouble. No loyalty to the job. I doubt very much if he's even loyal to what the rest of you stand for. But I'm telling you nothing new, Butt. You know. He's heading for disaster. Keep away from him. All right? (*Vo* 78)

From these words, Butt understands that George is not caring about the interests of the diggers, and he values the jug much more than he values the human being. He also understands that even George promises to write good words about him in the report, he is not going to change his fate, since his fate—together with that of his fellow diggers—has already been decided. Not only the prisoners are going to execute them after they are sent back, but all the evidence, and all Keeney's banters, show that he is not going to break out of the fate which links him to Leif and Parnell and other victims in history. Elmer Andrews sees Butt's act as his way of resistance to fixed definitions: "Butt drops the jug and smashes it rather than

let George and Professor King become the custodians and designators of its meaning. The anarchic refusal of any meaning (symbolized by the breaking of the jug) is preferable to what Butt regards as the false image of perfection represented by George's well-wrought urn. Butt's action signifies his new-found resistance to fixed, transcendent meanings; it is the only action left him when he sees that the interpretive process is being foreclosed" (Andrews 148). For Andrews, Butt knows the whole national and archeological and history writing system is beyond his ability to overthrow, so he can only smash the jug to show his resistance. With the act, George's pride and arrogance are also smashed, which shows the fragility of his shallow values revealed especially in his comment about excavation job the minute before Butt smashes the jug: "I was just saying to Dr. King last night: if we'd got nothing else here, the dig would have been worth it for that alone. Exquisite, isn't it?" (*Vo* 79).

For Butt, smashing the jug is the only way of resistance. For Smiler, however, there is no better resistance than escape. At the end of Act One, everybody finds that Smiler is gone out of sight, and just when George wants to phone the authorities about the escape, Keeney asks for two minutes to speak to the diggers. Keeney tells them all about the kangaroo court, which rules that their volunteering for the job is regarded as treason, and the punishment will be capital. And then Keeney wants everyone to give Smiler a chance to escape, since they have no chance:

> Butt: What chance has he out there?
>
> Keeney: Very little, agreed, but still a chance. So the choice we have is to let him have that chance, however slender, or have him brought back to a certain accident. It's up to you, gentlemen; because if you all disagree with me, who am I to oppose the process of democracy? (*Vo* 53)

While the diggers choose to let Smiler escape, Smiler, though, does not make it. After he returns to the site, the diggers welcome his coming back, all except Keeney. While everyone

is handing Smiler wine and cigarette and towel, Keeney is lashing out at all of them:

> Keeney: He's an imbecile! He's a stupid, pig-headed imbecile! He was an imbecile the moment he walked out of his quarry! And that's why he came back here—because he's an imbecile like the rest of us! Go ahead—flutter about him—fatten him up—imbecile acolytes fluttering about a pig-headed imbecile victim. For Christ's sake is there no end to it? (*Vo* 75)

Keeney's rage is very natural since he sees their fate more clearly than any other digger. He knows that Smiler can have become the only one of them to escape the fate of becoming another Leif, and the power of the whole institution. Elmer Andrews observes that Keeney's rage comes mostly from the diggers' blind respect for Smiler: "The real object of Keeney's disgust is the incorrigible Irish respect for sacrificial immolation, the notorious martyr complex which inhibits realistic, forward-looking action" (Andrews 147). McGrath, on the other hand, points out that the question— "Is there no end to it?"—is also what Friel himself wants to ask in *Volunteers* regarding all the problematic discourses of history and culture and politics.

Since Smiler blows his chance, once again the diggers have to accept the fact that they cannot escape Leif's fate as victims. At this point, the skeleton Leif itself becomes the site where Keeney and his fellow diggers establish myths and discourses, which help preserve the fate in the old times, and thus act as a temporary shelter where they can hide from the pain of consciousness. Therefore, there are as many as four biographies told about Leif, all well dating back in ancient times. The first story is told by Pyne, in which Leif and Ulf are cousins from Norway. When they are little boys, their families emigrate to Ireland and settle down. At the age of sixteen the two boys start out at sea to travel around the world, until one day Ulf becomes homesick, and the two of them head for their home in Ireland. On their way, Ulf is

killed by the winter gales, and only Leif and his Indian girl make it to Ireland. But people in Ireland cannot accept marriage with a "pagan," and they believe it is the woman that kills Ulf. So the villagers simply execute both the woman and Leif. In the story we once again see one's victimization within one's own culture, a fate that readily links Leif and the diggers and Parnell. What is notable is that while Pyne is telling the story, Keeney reminds us and Pyne of the need to preserve the tale in ancient times:

> Pyne: Once upon a time…
>
> Keeney: 'Once upon a time'—ah sure thanks be to God, lads, it's only an aul' yarn.
>
> …
>
> Keeney: 'Once upon a time'—keep the protection of the myth. (*Vo* 62)

Keeney is well aware that only by limiting the time to the ancient past can they stay safe and free in the present—even though he knows well too that he is only finding a temporary spiritual escape. While regarding Keeney and his friends as "casualties of their own competing, conflicting, and contradictory discourses," McGrath also sees the function of these discourses: "Yet a full recognition of their fate is also distanced by the language, stories, and discourses. What reveals also conceals" (McGrath 133).

In the second story, Leif is the "only child of a merchant prince and …tutors from all over Europe came to his house to educate his precious son" (*Vo* 70). But after Leif's father dies, his empire collapses, and he has to make a living by playing music in taverns and streets. In the end, he finds himself working for subversive organizations, which pay him money and food and companionship. And Leif comes to discover that this is much more important than his rhetoric and music. This story is told by Keeney to make fun of Knox, who used to learn to play the cello from an Italian instructor when he was a child, and who is now "a snuffling, shuffling, grubby man of about sixty-five but looks older…Not far removed from the kind of

man one sees at night wrapped in newspapers and sleeping in the doorways of banks and cinemas" (*Vo* 15). Here we see that Keeney is also emphasizing the discovery of the ironic fact that what they get from the subversive organizations is actually more important than the wealth represented by European empires.

In the third story, Keeney tells the Butt version, in which Leif takes many different roles. He is a poor Viking slave who rows the ship for his masters until one day he is too exhausted to work any more and disposed of by his masters. He is also a blacksmith who shoes other men's horses, until one day he wonders why he cannot have a hors of his own. He is also a carpenter "who had built a whole Viking village and then asked to be allowed to keep one house for himself" (*Vo* 72). He is also a crofter, who is married and has a big family to support, and who makes a living on a farm until a new landlord takes over the valley and kicks him out. All of these roles represent the servant hoping to rise to the position of his master, so as to avoid the fate of being abandoned when he cannot work anymore. This Butt version of Leif's story reminds us of the scene where George is saying good words about Butt for his cooperation at the excavation job, and saying bad words about Keeney for his lack of loyalties. Immediately after George says these words, Butt smashes the jug. Butt does not want to be a loyal servant to George anymore, because he knows no matter what good words about him appear on the report, he cannot escape the ill fate of the diggers.

Immediately following Keeney's Knox version and Butt version of Leif stories, Butt tells the Keeney version. In this version Leif "was a bank-clerk who has courage and who had brains and who was one of the best men in the movement" (*Vo* 72). Even though Keeney asks for the protection of the myth, Butt goes on and puts Leif almost in the present time when Keeney is almost Leif and Leif is almost Keeney:

> Keeney: Once upon a time.
>
> Butt: Yes, Keeney. And you're sure of it in your guts, too.

Keeney: I'm sure of nothing now.

Butt: You were once. You shouted yes louder than any of us.

Keeney: Did I?

Butt: Five—six months ago. Before you volunteered for this job. You knew where you stood then. Are you going soft, Keeney? (*Vo* 72)

Therefore in this story Keeney is represented as someone who fails to sustain his passion and faith. Keeney might be sure of what he was doing before he came to the dig, but now he sees the plight of the diggers and the all-encompassing fate that connects the past to the present. He is not even sure if he made the right decision to volunteer for the job. In a monologue comparing Butt and himself, Keeney points out the difference between them in their passions, and also the same fate they ironically share:

Keeney: Of course there is a reason—my overriding limitation—the inability to sustain a passion, even a frivolous passion. Unlike you, Butt. But then your passions are pure—no, not necessarily pure—consistent—the admirable virtue, consistency—a consistent passion fuelled by a confident intellect. Whereas my paltry flirtations are just…fireworks, fireworks that are sparked occasionally by an antic imagination. And yet here we are, spancelled goats complementing each other, suffering the same consequences. Is it ironic? Is it even amusing? (*Vo* 71)

While recognizing his inconsistent and frivolous passion, Keeney also reveals the fact that he has no other way out—even if he works as hard as Butt and accepts things as they are, he cannot possibly change his fate and get himself out of "the same consequences."

From the four stories of Leif told by the diggers, we see that the stories are told for multi-purposes. For one thing, they want to reassemble Leif with these stories, so that Leif can be restored to life to generate new meaning, just as the restored jug. In the eyes of the

supervisors, the jug may be the only useful thing produced by the excavation, since it is the jug rather than the skeleton that can be commercialized, while for the diggers, Leif is much more valuable with its representation of the human being, the victim of its own culture, and the fate that they share. For another, while these stories are told with the protection of the myth, they at the same time keep up the myth of survival and of redemption. With these stories that took place "once upon a time," the diggers find it easier to pretend that the ill fate goes back in time and cannot touch them. Therefore they do not have to accept the fact that they are going to become Leif in the modern time. Also, this provides them space for imagination, with which survival and redemption may be possible and life is still full of hope. But then again, they are still fully aware of the fact that no matter how many stories they tell about themselves and about Leif, they cannot change the looks of Leif: "A leather rope hangs loosely around the neck. There is a small round hole in the skull" (*Vo* 27). This, though, does not keep the stories from serving its most important function: to provoke Irish people to question, reexamine and redefine their culture, and to open new possibilities. Elmer Andrews observes, "Through Keeney, Friel draws attention to the masks of illusion and questions the idols of false consciousness. Keeney stops short of initiating any progressive movement towards the emergence of new meaning, but his *skepsis* may be the prerequisite to the opening onto other possible worlds which transcend the narrow limits of the play's fictional world" (Andrews 147, emphasis original). George O'Brien also expresses the same concern. He believes the jug and Leif to be uncertain signifiers and evocative touchstones, which, while defined by discourses of social status and values, generate discourses of "outsiders and insiders, jailers and prisoners, conformists and non-conformists." He says, "Leif and the jug are offered as cultural artifacts whose presence resembles that of Hamlet for Keeney. They exist as icons of community, touchstones of a common humanity, amulets of belonging, images with which to be entrusted, condensed and inaccessible narratives of time and chance

in which we all uncomprehendingly participate. Leif and the jug are a means of mediating the possibilities of the volunteers' spirit and energy, and as such are a means of circumventing, however temporarily and inconclusively, society's overdetermining structural authorities" (Kerwin 187).

From O'Brien's comment, we see the "touchstones" that exist in *Volunteers* are more than just Leif and the jug. In the play another important image Friel uses to ask questions and evoke thinking is Hamlet. Hamlet gets his significance in the play because of Keeney's repeated question: "Was Hamlet really mad?" The superficial connection of Hamlet to the play is very clear, since while Hamlet digs Ophelia's grave in *Hamlet*, the diggers are also like digging their own grave at the excavation site in *Volunteers*. Besides, Keeney's madness and "antic imagination" also make him appear like a Hamlet character. So when Keeney asks, "Was Hamlet really mad?" he is actually telling his people that he is not mad at all, and that his banters are for the purpose of "just trying to keep sane" (*Vo* 31). At the same time, not only Keeney but also all the diggers may have the appearance of madness but, "as the Swan of Avon says, they are not what they seem" (*Vo* 36). All these very obviously establish the parallel between Hamlet and Keeney and his fellow diggers.

On a deeper level, however, Hamlet must be seen in the context of politics and history and language. In the play, Keeney says, "Maybe [Leif] was a casualty of language. Damnit, George, which of us here isn't? But we're still left with problem: Was Hamlet really mad?" George O'Brien points out that Hamlet serves the same function in *Volunteers* like Leif and the jug, since it provides Keeney with the temporary shelter from the cruelties of reality: "Keeney's allusions to Hamlet also provides a fleeting intimation of his concern, expressed in the context of Smiler's disappearance, to find an appropriate course of action to offset the implications of Smiler's beating, the handling of the site, and the volunteers' fate at the hands of their fellow-prisoners" (Kerwin 183). Another function of Hamlet in the play is to prove

the fact that history is preserved not in historical facts but in language and fiction. In the play Butt finds out that the dating of a twelfth century Viking ship may be problematic, since they find a bone carving on the ship that can be dated back to the tenth century. Butt questions this, but never gets active response from the supervisors. This again raises the issue of who has the authority over history—who has the power to write it down and pass it down. In this way, Leif can never be restored to the original Leif in his own times. He can only exist in the narratives the archeologists write about him, or in the limericks and stories invented by the diggers about him. Also Leif is defined in different discourses of social class and values, which easily make him a Viking invader, and also a victim of his own culture. This explains why Keeney comments "Leif was a casualty of language" (*Vo* 28). Just as the history of Leif could be arbitrarily invented and distorted by archeologists and the diggers, legendary figures can also be created simply out of language, given life by those who narrate historical tales and pass them down. In this way, while we cannot tell for sure if Hamlet really exists, we can be sure that he exists at least in language, and is consequently subject to the power of language. For McGrath, this also makes Hamlet a "casualty of language": "This 'historical' Hamlet, in other words, exists, as far as we know, only in these narratives and others like them that constitute a history to which Shakespeare's version contributes. Hamlet, then, exists primarily as an effect of language and so can be said to be quite literally 'a casualty of language'" (McGrath 127). From this point of view, we can also see while the diggers are regarded as betrayers and political prisoners by the society and their fellow prisoners and the kangaroo court, only their narratives and limericks and banters can put them in another discourse, where their plight and suffering are known to the world. While they are also casualties of language, they can only manage to define themselves in their language.

In his study, O'Brien explains Keeney's theory of casualty of language as Friel's concern about the ethics of naming: "All such casualties are a consequence of the manner in

which any social system encodes, and attempts to stabilize, its integrity…In *Volunteers*, encoding focuses on public activity, with the acts of individual characters implicitly and explicitly discriminating between center and margin, victim and perpetrator, building and burying…The limitations of individual perspectives may be revealed by the duplicities of language…The repression of these duplicities, however, is what equips language with its institutional power, the application of which results in casualties…it clearly speaks of that preoccupation with the ethics of naming which has distinguished Friel's most important work" (Kerwin 179).

This ethics of naming is what defines the volunteers. Their position in the encoding process is never certain: they are "cornered" by both forces from the state and from their fellow prisoners back in jail, but they also have their way of expressing their resistance, which is mostly the result of their creativity and vitality, and it is this combination of plight and vitality that define their voluntarism. Dantanus says, "The social and political structure leaves the diggers at the bottom, isolated, misunderstood, confused and divided among themselves" (Dantanus 160). Despite the base position in social class, the diggers develop solidarity and brotherhood that is never seen on the supervisors. Even though there are as many differences among them as there are similarities, and there are always times when they cannot agree, their solidarity finds its proof in the examples of Butt smashing George's jug, and also of their decision to let Smiler escape. At the same time, their spirit and creativity put on them the mask of madness, which serves as a way to make them unpredictable to the supervisors and those above them in social class. This becomes their way of resisting class divisions and the power relation of the whole institutional system. O'Brien sees this as Friel's intention to subvert the border and the fixed definition, and to rewrite the traditional connotations of volunteers. He says,

> The unprogrammatic and ostensibly motiveless nature of voluntarism

> implements its revisionist function by introducing a different, open-ended type of speculation. The 'masque of anarchy' which the free play of voluntarism creates is at least a temporary rebuttal of the ethos of closure and enclosure connoted by the play's hints of the interlinkage between society's various institutional powers. By disrupting borders erected by institutionalized discourses between the moral and the political, Friel…revises the traditional, reflexive associations of 'volunteers.' (Kerwin 182)

And during the process of subverting, new identity and new definitions are established. But they are established on the basis of uncertainty and difference, where we must never rest on a fixed definition but always reexamine the identity-imposing powers and "recognize the reality of the indeterminate" (Kerwin 188). Without such a consciousness, the social problems that exist within can never be solved, and the conflicts of different sets of values will cause more cultural archeological jobs to fail and the sacrifice of more volunteers.

Despite the cruel fact that no matter how hard they try and what way they use, the volunteers cannot change anything, we must note with their questions and songs, they can evoke resonance and stimulate potentials, and make a better Ireland possible in the future. This is also Friel's favorite strategy: raise the question without giving the answer, since there is no direct answer, and the answer lies in the critical mind to see the problems, the warm heart to love one's people and country, and the flexibility to examine and internalize new meanings and definitions. In *Volunteers*, the new definition of voluntarism provides repetition and difference, with which the Irish people can redefine volunteers, not as victims of the colonizer but as victims of their own culture. However, this rewriting of victim mentality is, for McGrath, not successful enough: "In a sense, Friel again is exploring a postcolonial psyche that has replicated and perpetuated many of the structures of the colonial situation so that the Irish, in the stories and narratives they tell about themselves, continue to perpetuate

the victim mentality of colonial times. Unlike Synge's playboy, they have not rewritten their history sufficiently to transform their character and fate. Thus Smiler does not escape, but returns to submit to the fate imposed on him by his country and his colleagues" (McGrath 134). And this is perhaps what leads Friel to write more plays in the political and linguistic realm after *Volunteers*, such as *Translations* and *The Communication Cord*, and also what makes him stand beside Yeats and Joyce as one of the most important writers in Ireland.

Once again, successful or not, Friel's rewriting of the victim mentality, and also of the definition of voluntarism, of Leif and Hamlet, and of the volunteers as a whole, opens new meaning and new possibilities to the Irish people. While Friel wants his people to look within their society for problems, he is also asking his people to cross borders, redefine values and beliefs, have more love for their fellow countrymen, and make Ireland a better place to live. This concern also echoes the previously discussed plays—only Friel expresses his concern from different points of view. While *Translations* and *The Communication Cord* more directly present the hybridized state between modern Ireland and the past one, and between Ireland and England, *Volunteers* helps us see more clearly the problems lying deep in the social and political configuration of Ireland, and the need to reexamine old beliefs and values to enable a mentally and physically stronger nation. Put together, the three plays give us a more complete idea of Friel's notion of Irishness and what message he wants to convey to his people through his representation of it.