

<p><b>Brian Friel</b> (1929 – 2015)</p> <p>Dramatist and Short Story Writer</p> <p><b><i>Making History</i> (1989)</b></p>	<p>1929 –Born in Omagh, Co. Tyrone  1950-1960—Teacher in Derry  1980—Co-founder of Field Day Theatre Co.  1980--<i>Translations</i>  1988—<i>Making History</i>  1990—<i>Dancing at Lughnasa</i>  2015—Death  [For a complete biography and list of published works, check online resources.]</p>
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●Discussion Date: September 30, 2017●

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**“To trace the history of Friel’s body of dramatic work is to trace some of the most significant moments in Ireland’s theatre history. It also gives us a glance into Friel’s decades-long conversation with Ireland’s history, politics, morals, and myths. . . .” –Mary Trotter, “Brian Friel, An Appreciation,” *Irish Literary Supplement* (Spring 2016), p.23.**

Our overarching theme, “History through Literature,” challenges us (1) to think about the aims and strategies of each of these disciplines, (2) to ask how history uses narrative, and (3) to observe how historical events are woven into a literary work. We propose to accept this challenge while analyzing particular works from the north of Ireland (Ulster), beginning with about historical figures.

- The title of the play, *Making History*, suggests that a major theme is history itself, the motives for writing history, and the effect of history on subsequent events. How does Friel carry out this theme?
- After you have read the play, select one of the roles “to play” (to represent in the discussion). How would you describe the character’s appearance, temperament, and function in the play? What conflicts does your character face?
- Think about Brian Friel, the playwright. What did you like about his dramatic choices (scenes / conflicts)? His characters? Does he use humor in the play? If so, where and why? If you have read or seen other plays by Friel, you may want to share your experiences with the group.
- Comparison/contrast is an important device used to establish the sides of the conflict(s). How does Friel use characters and language (including imagery) to develop the contrast between the English and the Irish?
- To stimulate our thinking about history, we are offering comments from two historians and a novelist:

Margaret MacMillan, *Dangerous Games: The Use and Abuses of History* (2008), provides interesting observations, one general and one specific to our interests:

▶ “Stories of past glories or of past wrongs are useful tools in the present, but they, too, often come at the cost of abusing history. History is also abused when people try to ignore or even suppress evidence that might challenge their preferred view of the past” (p. 69).

▶ “History that challenges comfortable assumptions about a group is painful, but it is . . . a mark of maturity. In recent years, Ireland has witnessed a major revision of its history in part because it is prosperous, successful, and self-confident and the old stories of victimhood no longer have the resonance they once did. As a result, the old, simple picture of Irish Catholic nationalists versus the Ulster Protestants and the English supporters and the two separate histories that each had is now being amended to show a more complex history, and some cherished myths are being destroyed” (pp. 71-72).

Novelist Bernard MacLaverty, *The Anatomy School* (2001) offers a way of thinking about history: “We are all like a man rowing a boat. We have our backs to the way we’re going. We can’t look ahead, can’t see the future. All we can see is the past behind us” (p. 134). [MacLaverty was born in Belfast.]

In *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (2002), John Lewis Gaddis suggests

- ▶ that “science, history, and art have something in common: they all depend on metaphor, on the recognition of patterns, on the realization that something is ‘like’ something else” (p. 2).
- ▶ A bit later, in a discussion of science fiction and time travel, Gaddis says that “the direct experience of events isn’t necessarily the best path toward understanding them, because your field of vision extends no further than your own immediate senses” (p. 4).
- ▶ Finally, in concluding his introductory segment, Gaddis thinks of nature and art: “For if you think of the past as a landscape, then history is the way we represent it, and it’s that act of representation that lifts us above the familiar to let us experience vicariously what we can’t directly experience : a wider view” (p. 5).
- ▶ And, for fun, here is Gaddis on one of our great Irish novelists: “To try to capture everything that happened to an ordinary person on an ordinary day in an ordinary place took James Joyce over seven hundred pages in *Ulysses*. So imagine turning Joyce loose on an account, say, of Napoleon at Waterloo” (p. 27).