The attitude expressed by twentieth-century Irish writers towards their cities seems to be predominantly a mixture of love and hatred; phrases like James Joyce’s “dear dirty Dublin” or James Plunkett’s “strumpet city” give expression to an ironizing attitude also found in Frank McCourt’s recent, best-selling *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) – acclaimed for doing for Limerick what Joyce did for Dublin – when the narrator is repeatedly aware of the clearly ironical notion that “everyone knows Limerick is the holiest city in Ireland”. More than anything else, the Irish city appears to feature as a myth, the myth of what Frank O’Connor has called the “submerged population group”, whose less submerged heroes of the past are now petrified in the names of the streets and squares they pass daily – Wolfe Tone Street, O’Connell Street, Parnell Square, Pearse Street – stony as Cuchulain in the Dublin Central Post Office.

Indeed, the streets and squares, statues and public buildings in a city are a constant reminder of the past, to those that have to live in the present, and to survive into the future. In some cities, however, this is obviously more self-evident than in others. Even in a time of tenuous peace, Belfast can never, since the division of Ireland, have been an easy place to live in – for thousands of people it has been only too easy a place in which to die, or get maimed for life. In this essay, I will discuss two recent novels by Northern Irish writers, in which the city of Belfast plays a major role: Mary Beckett’s *Give Them Stones* (1988) and Robert McLiam Wilson’s *Eureka Street* (1996). Written respectively by a Belfast-born woman and man who belong to different generations, these novels are also complementary in structure, style, and tone. Mary Beckett’s first person narrator, Roman Catholic Martha Murtagh, born like her author in 1926,
Wim Tigges presents a restrained but incisive chronological account of her life on the outskirts of Belfast, that includes the vicissitudes of four generations of her relatives against the background of the often violent history of her city. In this largely monotopic but diachronic novel, domestic “troubles” are weighed against public Troubles. During the process, Martha learns to “face the truth” (152) about herself, her family, her status (or rather lack of one) as a woman (daughter, wife and mother), a Catholic, a representative of the working class, and an inhabitant of that city that is her only familiar home.

Wilson’s *Eureka Street*, on the other hand, is polytopic (although firmly anchored in Belfast) and synchronic, covering only some six months just before and after the August 1994 ceasefire. Eight of its nineteen chapters are narrated by seedy man-about-town Jake Jackson, Catholic, born, like his author, in 1964. The other chapters are a third-person narration, most of them centring around Jake’s Protestant chum, fat and fame-seeking Charles (“Chuckie”) Lurgan, who lives with his mother Peggy in a flat in Eureka Street. In contrast to the resigned and dignified realistic style of *Give Them Stones*, the style of *Eureka Street* is mainly demotic, and the novel breathes a postmodern flair and occasionally super-realistic atmosphere.

It is hard to believe that the writing of these novels is only eight years apart. But from both novels, albeit in very different ways, it becomes clear that the beauty of Belfast is in the eye of the beholder, and also that there are two basically simple solutions to its brutality (in terms of learning to live with): love and labour. An illustrative reading of both books may serve to demonstrate in particular how an imaginative sense of the city’s identity can enable its inhabitants to face its truths, and to survive its traumas.

It is the knee-capping of a boy by two Provisional IRA-men, soon after the Long Kesh hunger strikes, that triggers Martha Murtagh’s account of her life in Belfast, starting off with her childhood in her grandmother’s house on the city’s north-western boundaries. “At home”, she begins the second chapter, “we were reared very gently. I had heard children talking about being beaten. I had seen women pulling at their children and slapping bare legs with their hands. It never happened to us.” Violence seems remote, in both space and time. Her grandfather had left for America “in 1921 when the Protestants chased all the Catholics out of the Island” (11) and has not been heard from since, and her grandmother and mother have to work in the nearby linen mill. Significantly, Martha will never learn to do needlework, although she has to work in the same mill and in a textile factory during her teens and early twenties.

At primary school, where she witnesses the unjust violent punishment of a schoolmate by a hysterical head teacher (a memory which flashes into her mind like an epiphany when she lies sleepless in bed after the knee-capping event), she becomes shamefully aware of her Belfast accent, thinking she can get rid of it (14). She observes political squabbles going on between her maternal uncles. Uncle Joe, a socialist, who dates her birth to the General Strike of January 1926,