Sinn Féin in direct talks at Downing Street with the British Prime Minister? Impossible? It actually happened 70 years ago... Tonight's drama brings the people and issues of that turbulent time to life.

(TV Times preview caption for The Treaty, 1992)¹

LLOYD GEORGE: You know, you sound like you almost admire the man [Collins].
FIELD MARSHAL WILSON: Admire him? I detest the very thought of him!
(The Treaty)²

If the implication [...] is that we should sit down and talk with Mr Adams and the Provisional IRA, I can only say that that would turn my stomach and that of most honourable members. We will not do it.
(John Major, House of Commons, 1 November 1993)³

INTRODUCTION

Historical anniversaries can present difficult moments for public service broadcasters to negotiate. When television institutions like RTÉ and ITV endorse programmes that mark significant events in national history they are duty-bound to be accurate and impartial. The RTÉ/Thames co-production of The Treaty was made specifically to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the signing of the Anglo-Irish ‘Treaty’ in 1921 which signalled the end of the war between the IRA and the British Crown forces in

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Ireland. The scheduling of twin broadcasts in December 1991 on RTÉ and January 1992 on ITV, and *The Treaty*’s impetus to ‘reconstruct what had actually happened’⁴ in the past, succeeded in generating some awkward questions about the politics of the present. Although it was based scrupulously on the historical ‘facts’, *The Treaty* nevertheless demonstrated the power of imagining the unimaginable, of foreseeing the future. Since its broadcast we have learned that while publicly refusing to ‘talk with terrorists’, the British government was secretly faxing with Sinn Féin.⁵ *The Treaty* was one in a line of productions in the early 1990s that showed how drama-documentary can make a critical intervention by reminding us of the past and so challenge the contemporary consensus in Anglo-Irish relations.⁶

Essentially, in the figure of Michael Collins, the nature of the challenge was progressive and oppositional but, I will argue, not radically questioning. In the film Collins clearly retains his active association with and belief in the tactical use of violence, but also sees the need for a political resolution. These ‘contradictions’ are dramatized with a degree of sympathy and depth unusual for media representations of Irish republicans. Dramatically, Collins presents an attractive, charismatic, tragi-heroic figure in twentieth-century Irish history, particularly as he died at the age of 32. There has been a resurgence of both academic and popular interest in the Collins myth⁷ during a period of secret, indirect and official negotiations between Anglo-Irish governments and republicans in what has come to be known as the ‘peace process’. It is inevitable that historical parallels between 1921 and the particular conjuncture of 1991 would present themselves on the anniversary although several differences were evident too.

Nevertheless, *The Treaty* highlighted how a deeply-embedded, repulsion/fascination complex about Sinn Féin republicanism (shared in different ways by British and Irish governments) continues to exist at the expense of a convincing exploration of the logic and politics of Ulster Loyalism. If *The Treaty* is dramatically more effective for the marginalized presence of William Craig, the Ulster Unionist leader – who acted, according to Roger Bolton, ‘as unseen threat’⁸ in the film – there is a real political danger in contemporary peace negotiations of Loyalist feeling remaining absent. The prophetic significance of *The Treaty* can be more fully assessed if we explore the mechanics of authenticity, those complex interrelations between the film’s textual matter and the