

*"For the third time, the British Council has brought together a superb collection of stories from the 'entwined lives' of people with a foot on both our islands. Whether it is Richard English's wise historical insights, Susan McKay's raw and courageous journalism, Olivia O'Leary's finely balanced verities or young Naoise Nunn's madcap family saga, this is a series that should be read by anyone interested in understanding how conflict between nations can be brought to an end. It is more than that: it is itself a small but valuable contribution towards ending that conflict between the Irish and British nations through surfacing the fears, myths and misunderstandings that have underpinned it."*

**Andy Pollak, Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and former Education and Religious Affairs correspondent with *The Irish Times***

*"This collection of personal insights and experiences continues the noble work of the destruction of stereotypes which is the beginning of understanding. Behind the big story (which is all too often the big lie) there are thousands of small stories which have the ring of truth. These stories, intimate, personal, at times deeply felt, bring us nearer to understanding a complex cultural, historic and geographical relationship which is constantly in flux."*

**Maurice Hayes, Chairman of the National Forum on Europe, Member of the 21st & 22nd Seanad Éireann and former Ombudsman Northern Ireland**

*"Over the years, the Lives Entwined series has attracted contributions from many of Ireland and Northern Ireland's most committed politicians, pundits and peacemakers. This third book is no exception – but it focuses very deliberately on the future of the Irish-British relationship, and younger voices are consequently included. But, since all of our tomorrows derive from all of our yesterdays, it is entirely right that the book should open with an essay by Nobel Peace Prize winner John Hume, my cherished friend for thirty years and a man without whom the possibility of peaceful normality would surely still be an unfulfilled dream."*

**Neil Kinnock, Chair of the British Council**

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Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined III A new dawn?

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## A new dawn?



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# Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined III

A new dawn?

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## **Preface**

Neil Kinnock

Chair of the British Council

The relationship between Ireland and Britain is deeply complex, moulded by geographical proximity and, for many hundreds of years, by language, literature and values as well as poverty and strife. Historically, the mingling of people from both countries was driven mainly by the economics of exploitation in one direction, need in the other. From the retired soldiers of Cromwell's New Model Army, who were granted confiscated Irish land to the countless thousands of people who travelled east across the Irish Sea to find work, migrants on both sides have found themselves simultaneously at home and strangers in a hostile land.

Britain and Ireland's modern relationship has also been globally public as both European countries struggled to untangle the knots of history to achieve joint victory over the lethal residues of sectarian hatred. Just ten years ago, the whole world felt the surge of hope as the signing of the Good Friday Agreement finally offered a durable democratic route away from the waste and pain of violent division in Northern Ireland. A decade on, the years of negotiation are at last starting to bear fruit as bi-partisan governance of Northern Ireland gives encouragement, and not a little delight, to all whose hopes of peace and stability seemed, for decades, to be more resolute than realistic.

For the British Council, the United Kingdom's leading international cultural relations organisation, the opportunity to illuminate the ways in which the lives of Irish and British people are shaped by their association with one another is rich, rewarding – and most of all, relevant. One of the most important purposes of our work everywhere is to enable people from all backgrounds to discuss, celebrate and respect their differences, whether cultural, or ideological, or products of inheritance and experience. Such exchanges make it possible for participants and their audience to see and comprehend another point of view. At its most potent, the dialogues can act as catalysts for significant change.

That knowledge makes me certain that this third and final volume in the *Lives Entwined* series will, like those before them, make stimulating contributions to generating a deeper and wider sense of understanding between the people of Ireland and Britain. Moreover, from David McWilliams' portrait of the HiBrit, to Naoise Nunn's and Richard English's reflections on their mixed British and Irish heritage, many of them emphasise the closeness as well as the contrasts of the two islands.

Over the years, the *Lives Entwined* series has attracted contributions from many of Ireland and Northern Ireland's most committed politicians, pundits and peacemakers. This third book is no exception – but it focuses very deliberately on the future of the Irish–British relationship, and younger voices are consequently included. But, since all of our tomorrows derive from all of our yesterdays, it is entirely right that the book should open with an essay by Nobel Peace Prize winner John Hume, my cherished friend for 30 years and a man without whom the possibility of peaceful normality would surely still be an unfulfilled dream.



**Neil Kinnock**

**Chair of the British Council**

## Tony Reilly

Director, British Council Ireland

*Tony Reilly is currently Director of the British Council Ireland. He took up this post in July 2002 after previous postings with the British Council in South Africa, Turkey, Kuwait and Oman. He commissioned Through Irish Eyes in 2003—a piece of extensive quantitative and qualitative research carried out by Behaviour & Attitudes to investigate changing Irish attitudes towards the UK among the Irish successor generation. He also commissioned the first two volumes of Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined in 2005 and 2006, a series of essays reflecting on the intricate web of relations between the two countries. With an Irish father, English mother, Irish wife and three children born respectively in Greece, Oman and Turkey, the issues of hybridity and national identity are never far from home. He has a first degree in Sociology and English, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from Goldsmith's College London and an RSA Diploma in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.*

## Introduction

Tony Reilly

### A new dawn?

Writing from Rome, where he is currently serving as Ireland's Ambassador, Seán Ó hUiginn, whose distinguished career includes a long engagement with Anglo-Irish relations, told me he thought the *Lives Entwined* series had struck a rich and, he suspected, inexhaustible vein. It was in this spirit that he urged the British Council not to stop at two volumes, both packed with a powerful and eclectic mix of personal narratives. So here is a third.

In the first *Lives Entwined* volume, Piaras MacÉinrí, himself a former Irish diplomat, framed the endeavour in his eponymous essay on the knotty and nuanced complexities of British and Irish identities. In the same collection, Maurice Hayes chose a rhyming couplet from the Ulster poet John Hewitt, and located a valuable metaphor to encapsulate the tightly interwoven relations within and between these islands:

'Kelt, Briton, Saxon, Norman, Dane and Scot  
Time and this island ties a crazy knot'  
(From 'Ulsterman', appendix, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Ormsby, Belfast: Blackstaff, 1991)

Edna Longley, drawing on her literary background, ventured further still into allegory to warn us that Northern Ireland might yet spoil the new, and perhaps rather cosy, romance between the Old Lion and the Young Celtic Tiger. For Edna, Piaras's adjective 'entwined' was too benign – risking sweeping history under the carpet. Taking his hint, nonetheless, every one of the reflective and often self-confessional essays in the first volume opened up a space to explore and dissect the proposition that there may be 'more than a little British in the Irish and something of the Irish in the British as well.'

So, Eoghan Harris came tearing out of the closet, robustly declaring his hand as a life-long anglophile, while Mary Hickman (in an essay that provokes

interesting comparisons with David McWilliams' portrait of the HiBrit in this volume) explored the unsatisfactory no-man's-land of the second-generation Irish in Britain. Meanwhile, Patricia Palmer focused on the Irish language, unwinding the ways in which language, culture and identity have, over time, become entrapped in the interconnectedness of these islands.

In a very personal piece, Trevor Ringland shared his own ultimately optimistic personal journey and relationship with his father, together with the conviction that sport can transcend and help us embrace our differences. And Garret FitzGerald, with his characteristic precision and lucidity, analysed how the normalisation of economic relations between Britain and Ireland helped usher in a new era of mutual respect and psychological equivalence between our two countries and peoples.

It has become a distinguishing feature of the *Lives Entwined* volumes that many contributors, with a little gentle encouragement, have been extraordinarily willing to open themselves up to our readers. For some, this opportunity has been self-confessional, for others autobiographical – but all have used personal narrative to shed light on one of the most complex relationships between any two countries in the world. 'Autobiography,' wrote Edna Longley, 'is a place where lives entwine,' as authors try to explain 'where they are coming from.' I believe it is this willingness to speak personally that has given the series a rare quality, inviting readers to link events to people, and personal backgrounds to wider perspectives.

Former Taoiseach John Bruton set the tone for our second book, arguing that it was necessary for people in the Republic of Ireland to overcome their 'own fears' and work towards a stronger empathy with unionism. Liz O'Donnell's essay reflected on her own involvement in the pressure-cooker negotiations of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, not simply as a representative of her government, but also as one of the individuals at the table. More domestically, John A. Murphy traced his bicultural and bilingual family upbringing in 'inland' west Cork, to contrast the contradictory forces of intensely nationalist formative years with a growing recognition and comfortable acceptance of the multitude of links with Britain and many things British. 'Loving one's country does not mean hating another,' he concluded, a sentiment also taken

up in Mary Fitzgerald's essay in this volume, as her Jordanian friends quiz her on her inexplicable lack of hatred for the former oppressor.

But in the second volume, as in the first, not all contributors were totally at ease with this fraught and tangled web. In one of the most powerful, graphic and deeply personal essays in the whole series, Bernadette McAliskey made very short shrift of the romantic cliché she detected in the *Lives Entwined* formula. The sordid truth about this messy human conflict, in fact all human conflicts, she might argue, leaves us more accurately with 'lives entangled'. In all three books, some writers have used their personal journeys to remind readers of the harsh realities of conflict, while others have focused on the underlying dynamics. Complex notions of hybridism and plural identities surfaced again in volume two, in the finely spun historical perspective of Belfast-born and Liverpool University-based academic Marianne Elliot, and the more personal viewpoint of Ivana Bacik, child of Czech-born parents who immigrated to Ireland after the Second World War. But, not satisfied with a two-dimensional prism through which to explore notions of Britishness and Irishness, we added an additional layer, teasing out the American dimension to Anglo-Irish relations. Kevin Cullen and Ray O'Hanlon examined key facets of the American connection for us – using once again a mix of vivid and occasionally hilarious personal anecdotes to explain how (and, arguably of even more importance, *why*) the USA 'helped pull Dublin and London closer together'.

Our first two volumes have produced many strikingly different ways to excavate the deceptively concise dash in the phrase 'British-Irish relations'. So, what new facets have we introduced into *Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined III*? First, we have consciously included a healthy mix of younger voices among the more established names. Second, and not unconnectedly, we have invited this cross-generational group of commentators to consider whether or not British-Irish relations have finally entered a new era, a new dawn. After all, how does age shape one's understanding of the past, present and future of relations within and between these islands? I don't intend to prejudge how generational differences have influenced the views expressed in this volume – that is for you to decide after reading the ten essays we have collected for you.



But beside these novelties, the stories shared by our latest group of writers echo many of the observations and complex themes explored in earlier volumes. When Davy Adams, drawing on his formative years in the predominantly loyalist working-class housing estate of Long Kesh, complains that ‘too often, self-serving mythologies are allowed to pass for historical fact in Ireland’, I am reminded of Eoghan Harris complaining about those who peddle the malign myths of ‘Irish exceptionalism’. In David McWilliams’ elegant and witty account of the hybrid influence of ‘that hugely influential tribe’, the Hiberno-British, we revisit Ivana Bacik’s references to the ‘hybrid generation’ in volume two, and wince again at Mary Hickman’s observations on the annoying British tendency to congratulate Sir Bob Geldof, U2, or Seamus Heaney on their ‘Britishness’...

Meanwhile, when Olivia O’Leary explores what it means to be ‘separate but equal’ in this latest volume, it is to reprise, in another tone, John A. Murphy’s exploration of ‘colonial chains, domestic links’. And Susan McKay’s deeply personal journeys of discovery and journalistic reflection from L’Derry to Dublin to Belfast resonate, at times, with Bernadette McAliskey’s uniquely emotional contribution to the second volume.

Two of our youngest contributors to this latest book – Mary Fitzgerald and Naoise Nunn – recount experiences of their journeys North to study at Queen’s University, where Naoise soon discovered that ‘some of the Northern nationalists [he] met were more tainted with Britishness than any of the much maligned West Brits [he] knew down south.’ Meanwhile, Mary felt more ‘at sea’ in Belfast than she did on regular visits across the Irish Sea to Britain. Their sense of confused identity and disconnect with Northern Ireland is brilliantly anticipated by Edna Longley, when she declares: ‘Living in Belfast, that pandemonium of ethnic assertion, I sometimes feel Irish in Britain, sometimes British in Ireland, usually neither.’ She goes on to rejoice in the emergence of ‘overlapping identities’ claiming to enjoy ‘the fact that Belfast, up to a point, lets you live in three places at once: Northern Ireland, Britain, the Republic.’ Richard English, who was born and now lives in Belfast, but grew up and was educated in England, reflects on a curious lack of tension between a harmonious personal background as the son of a Methodist minister and a mother who taught religious education at Methodist College Belfast, and the

study of the stark British–Irish political conflicts which have formed the basis of his professional life and writings. Another voice from Belfast, Fionola Meredith, looks beyond ‘our historic role as the noisy, violent and demanding problem youngster of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, kept under close scrutiny by the paternal eye of the United States’ to discover what happens next in the everyday lives of our children. Katy Radford, meanwhile, ponders the future with one eye on the past – asking in an essay lyrically reminiscent of Patricia Palmer’s ‘Cross-talk and mermaid-speak’ in the first book, whether the voices of the victim–survivors of the Troubles are being listened to in this new dawn.

On this the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, what better way to celebrate what Eoghan Harris referred to as the Agreement’s ‘amazing grace’ than to hear younger voices from the island of Ireland sharing their fears and aspirations for the future. Eoghan wrapped up his thoughts with this message of hope for the younger generation:

‘This generation should give thanks. Hatred has lost its hold. God and geography made England and Ireland neighbours. God and good history can help make us friends. Forever.’

It is also a huge honour to open this third volume in the *Lives Entwined* series with a contribution from a Nobel Peace Prize winner, whose far-sightedness and visionary thinking were light years ahead of his time. John Hume’s pragmatic philosophy of non-violent direct action takes its rightful place alongside Ghandi and another of John’s spiritual mentors, Martin Luther King, sharing with them the ability to look for the light in the darkest of times. His unique perspective and intuitive recognition of the need to include a plurality of voices and opinions from both islands was borne out of his own upbringing and deep sense of community nurtured from within the walled City of Derry.

John’s thinking and inspiration has been an ever-present force behind many of the essays in this series. His vision for Europe as a model for conflict resolution in Ireland, his early references to borders in the mind and emphasis on the need to unite people, not territory, together with his pioneering recognition and nurturing of the ‘hugely significant’ American dimension, are mentioned

time and again by contributors to *Lives Entwined*. Perhaps it has taken us 30 years to catch up with John's original vision for an inclusive expression of the full spectrum of identities in and between Britain and Ireland. I look forward to launching the book in his own Derry backyard as a tribute to his enduring contribution to a place that is arguably more at peace with itself now than ever before.

Intercultural dialogue lies at the heart of the British Council's work and mission across the world. I hope this series has opened up a safe space for dialogue, and that the woof and warp of these 30 narratives can lead us to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the uniquely complex set of relations served up by history and geography on these islands. Grappling with complexity and diversity should be meat and drink for a cultural relations organisation committed to advancing understanding and building trust. However, the challenges and risks posed by the tangled web of Britishness and Irishness can be daunting. Go there at your peril. Despite this, *Britain & Ireland: Lives Entwined* set out to play its own part in the process – simultaneously modest and immensely ambitious – that Richard English encapsulates in these pages when he says:

'I do, however, hope that, through the reading and discussion and writing in which they engage... some students from one political background might find that the views of those of others, with whom they still disagree, are at least more explicable and sane than initially they seemed to them to be.'

Richard is writing about the teaching of history, but he might as well have been describing this series. I hope we, too, have gone some way towards contributing to this noble objective.

## John Hume

*John Hume was born in 1937, he is married to Pat and they have three daughters and two sons. He established a record of community leadership through his help in founding Derry Credit Union and Derry Housing Association, and in 1968 as a civil rights leader. He was elected an Independent to the Stormont Parliament in February 1969 for the Foyle Constituency. His manifesto committed him to forming a political party on the European social democratic model. He did this with five other Stormont MPs and one Senator in 1970. He was Deputy Leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) from its formation until 1979, and was Leader from 1979 to 2001. A key advocate of partnership, he played a major role in negotiating the Sunningdale Agreement of 1974 and was Minister for Commerce in the resulting power-sharing Executive. John Hume began talks with Gerry Adams with the stated objective of bringing an end to violence, followed by All Party Talks, the aim of which was an agreement that had to have the allegiance of both traditions. The Talks led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the same year in which John Hume received the Nobel Peace Prize, with David Trimble, for his contribution to the peace process.*

## Transforming the Union: an evolving dynamic

John Hume

### Derry Oak

On 9 December 1968, Terence O'Neill, the then Prime Minister, warned that 'Ulster stands at the crossroads'. It was a metaphor that expressed a fear that Northern Ireland would be regarded by the rest of Britain as a political outcast if the unionist Government did not implement a reform programme. But it was also a limited metaphor, because it did not take account of a changing polycentric world.

From the start of my political career I have been guided by the notion of community, of self-help and of looking outwards.

It should not be too surprising that someone born and reared in Derry should look outwards. The River Foyle and the port had a huge impact on all of our lives. It was from Derry that many of our ancestors sailed into exile, whether it was to the nearer island, Britain, or west to the United States – we referred to Boston as 'the next parish'. When our first emigrants left these shores, there was what we called 'an American wake'. In a sense, the person was as good as dead to the family, because they knew they would never see him or her again, the distance being so great. We didn't know then that this cumulative experience would quietly take shape to form the huge diaspora that was to play such a vital and positive role in our peace process. At the time, their enforced departure only let us know how vulnerable we were, and how economically dependent on one another.

When I was growing up in Derry, the river and the city were significant for another reason, too. During the Second World War, Northern Ireland was considered the most important geopolitical bulwark on Britain's western flank, and Derry had evolved as the most important escort base in the United Kingdom. We had many thousands of American sailors based in Derry – a link that is maintained to this day. In 1948, a working group of officials recognised its strategic importance and recommended 'retaining unrestricted access to

Londonderry in peace and war'. This official endorsement carried on into the 1950s, when the air bases, naval facilities and communication facilities played a prominent role in the Cold War. At the Derry port of Lisahally, the surrender of German U-boats is thought to have been a major factor in bringing the Second World War to its end.

The Joint Anti-Submarine War School was established in 1953, and US Naval communication facilities in the city were upgraded accordingly. Visitors from far afield were a familiar part of life, and enabled us to look outside our immediate community. The visitors were also an important source of income for a city with such a high rate of unemployment. One of my grandfathers was a docker; my own father had worked in the Derry shipyard until it closed at the end of the war. He lost his job, and remained unemployed for the rest of his life.

As we grew up, we were aware of discrimination and of the need to look out for one another. While our unionist neighbours saw Londonderry as a British city, we were very aware of our Irish identity. After all, Derry had its origins in the fifth-century monastic settlement of St Columba, and the addition of London to its name with the plantations of the early seventeenth century only increased the sense of grievance of its native people. For us it was a quintessentially Irish town, situated on the border with the Irish Republic – in effect, we believed, the capital of North West Ireland. But we were also aware that it was a symbol of dual and conflicting identities, a British city and an Irish city. Partition had cut off its natural hinterland of Donegal. The necessity to secure it in unionist hands had led to discrimination and gerrymandering. When the Cameron Commission reported in 1969, it recorded that in 'the evidence presented to us from many responsible individuals and bodies, predominantly Protestant and non-nationalist in purpose or outlook, there was a frank recognition that this widespread sense of grievance among Catholic people in Northern Ireland was justified in fact and called urgently for remedy.' This was undoubtedly the case in Derry.

Unemployment, created by the loss of work in industries associated with wartime activities, led to massive movement of people: in the decade after 1951, the official estimate was that 12.6 per cent of the population of the city

had emigrated. One commentator estimated that unemployment figures in Derry in the post-war period averaged 20 per cent. So it was that in my maiden speech to the House of Commons, in June 1983, I had to say that I represented an area that had the unenviable distinction of having the highest unemployment rate of any constituency in the United Kingdom. Further, I pointed out, a generation of young people '[had] grown up in a society in which they have always seen security forces and violence on the street, in which they have been continually searched simply because they are young people, and in which, when they reach the age of 18, they have no hope of any employment because they happen to have come of age during the deepest economic crisis for a long time.'

The housing situation in the period was so bad that many of Derry's homeless squatted in abandoned temporary wartime structures. The problem was compounded by demographics. With its high rate of population growth, the city more closely resembled cities in the South than those in the more affluent North.

Our growing sense of isolation was enhanced by the closure of our rail links to Donegal in 1953 and to Dublin in 1965, and the subsequent downgrading of the link to Belfast. When Prime Minister O'Neill embarked on a modernisation campaign in 1963, he focused on the area to the east of the River Bann, overlooking Derry and its environs. The final straw was the recommendation, in 1965, that a new university be constructed in the small neighbouring town of Coleraine, rather than in the city of Derry, which already had the historic buildings of Magee College, the obvious site for a new seat of learning. All of these grievances produced an inevitable momentum, which led to the dynamic and widely supported civil rights campaign. And all of it is encapsulated in Seamus Deane's poem 'Derry':

'The unemployment in our bones  
Erupting in our hands like stones;  
The thought of violence a relief  
The act of violence a grief;  
Our bitterness and love  
Hand in glove...'

## Monologue and dialogue

These were the conditions that led me into public life. I had been one of the lucky ones: I was the first of my generation to take advantage of the 1947 Education Act and get myself to university. My education allowed me to put something back into my community. I became involved in housing and poverty and self-help organisations. Along with others, I helped establish the Derry Credit Union movement – the first in Northern Ireland – in 1960, and the Derry Housing Association in 1965. That was followed by the development of a small smoked salmon enterprise, housed near the city centre and acquiring the salmon, naturally, from the Foyle, one of the biggest salmon fisheries in Europe. The smoking process used Derry oak. (The name Derry is from the Irish word *doire*, meaning ‘oak grove’, and the oak tree is of great symbolic local significance.)

I became chairman of the University for Derry campaign when both traditions in the city united in protest against the decision to site the new university in Coleraine. It was a battle we’d lost before we began, but it was still significant, showing us the potential for moving forward through non-violent direct action. In later years, the futility of establishing the university on a greenfield site was exposed. And I am proud to say that today the Magee campus of the University of Ulster is flourishing in Derry, and I hold the Tip O’Neill Chair in Peace Studies there. This has allowed me to bring international figures to the city to discuss many key aspects of conflict transformation – among them Bill and Hillary Clinton, Kofi Annan, Michel Rocard, Romano Prodi, Kadar Asmal, Bertie Ahern, Garret FitzGerald and Maurice Hayes.

This campaign was my personal introduction to the potency of non-violent direct action. We had watched and applauded the principled tactics of Martin Luther King in the southern states of America, and he has remained a hero for me. One of my proudest moments, many years later, was to form a lasting friendship with his widow and family when I was awarded the Martin Luther King Prize. The American civil rights movement in the 1960s gave birth to our own. Their successes were, for us, a cause of hope. The songs of their movement were also ours. It was Martin Luther King’s wise counsel that violence is both impractical and immoral as a means of achieving justice that rang in our ears. As he put it:

‘It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.’

I have never baulked from following the path of peace, and when I entered into dialogue with Gerry Adams in the late 1980s, I challenged the hypocrisy of those politicians who refused to talk to the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) because I had taken this step. In my speech to our party conference in 1993, I stated that: ‘I have never, and never has the SDLP and never will we, sit round the table with anyone to plan the use of violence together to achieve common political objectives. Our objective in such dialogue as has been clearly stated is a total cessation of all violence, an objective which is the responsibility of both Governments and all parties to do everything in their power to achieve.’ I believe absolutely that, on so many levels, the act of violence is indeed, as Seamus Deane described it, ‘a grief’. It was a march in Derry on 5 October 1968 that properly launched our mass campaign for social, civil and political rights. That day we endured police violence. With tempers rising in the city, it was essential to marshal the voices of moderation. On the following Wednesday, we convened a meeting that led to the formation of the 16-strong Derry Citizens’ Action Committee. I was elected vice-chairman. The committee was truly inclusive, and what we devised over the next six weeks was no less than a plan of action to educate people in the difficult discipline of non-violence.

It was our aim to exert an irresistible moral pressure on the authorities. We knew that it was risky bringing thousands onto the streets, so we gave the highest priority to the organisation of a system of stewarding – a system that worked like clockwork when 20,000 people walked through Derry on 16 November.

Violence, however, was rarely far beneath the surface in Northern Ireland. Things came to a head when, at the beginning of 1969, a radical student

movement, People's Democracy, undertook a four-day march from Belfast to Derry (based on Martin Luther King's famous march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965). Anticipating sectarian violence, I tried to persuade People's Democracy not to proceed, but I failed. In hindsight, it might be said that one of the outcomes of that march was that it changed the political dynamic. The politics of innocence had come to an end.

Terence O'Neill was being assailed by both left and right, and his days as Prime Minister were numbered. He was forced to call a general election in February, and I stood as an independent on a civil rights platform. My success, and that of two other campaigners, Ivan Cooper and Paddy O'Hanlon, provided an alternative to the popular Nationalist Party, launching a new type of opposition at Stormont. Our victory was generational, and an acknowledgement that new ways of thinking were urgently needed. All 13 opposition members cooperated as much as possible, but I was convinced that only a new party could shape the debate in the direction of justice and parity.

### **Respect for difference**

We launched the SDLP in August 1970. There were several features that suggested we were entering a new politics. One was that the SDLP, unlike most parties in Ireland, came from a tradition that has never been associated with the gun. A second was that we believed politics was to be our full-time profession. From the outset, we built up a strong organisational base. Third, we insisted on the doctrine of consent. Among the objectives of the party in our Constitution, we set out to 'promote the cause of Irish unity freely negotiated and agreed to by the people of the North and the people of the South'. That has remained a consistent principle to this day.

Finally, we formed ourselves in the European social democratic mould. This was inherent in the title of the party; in our desire to cooperate with other left-leaning parties through the Party of European Socialists and the Socialist International; and in our commitment to 'promote unity and harmony among the peoples of Europe ... and to promote a new international order of peace and justice throughout the world'.

That European dimension has always held its place at the heart of my philosophy. The success of the European Union (EU) has been a source of inspiration to us, and has contributed practically in direct and indirect ways to our peace process. The EU commits all its members to an 'ever closer union' among the peoples of Europe. That includes an ever closer union between the people of Ireland, North and South, and between Ireland and Britain – in other words, the three strands that are built into the 1998 Agreement.

In an address to Seanad Éireann in March 2004, I made it clear that the principles behind the EU are the principles behind the Good Friday Agreement:

'First respect for difference ... Differences are the essence of humanity. Therefore the answer to difference is to respect it and not fight about it. That is the first principle of the European Union. Accepting that there are going to be differences is the basis for the second principle – the need for institutions that respect those differences ... The EU is an extremely complex set of institutions designed to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and where everyone's fundamental interests are protected and advanced. Third, and most important, is the purpose of the institutions. They are not just there for their own sake, but to obtain specific objectives. The Treaty identifies the promotion of "economic and social progress for their peoples" ... This is the most important principle behind the creation of a lasting peace in Europe.'

I was delighted to be elected to the European Parliament in 1979, and held my seat until I retired in 2004. Although there were yawning ideological gaps between the three Northern Ireland MEPs, I am pleased to report that we cooperated on many practical issues that benefited Northern Ireland. It pleased me, too, that the EU was itself inspired by some of the most important founding principles of the United States of America. In an address I gave to the Fordham School of Law in New York, in November 1998, I stated that we 'owe a great deal to the vision of George Marshall and his work for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. Jean Monnet, the principal thinker behind the creation of the European Union, spent crucial parts of his career working in Washington.'

The same philosophy that crafted the United States – *e pluribus unum* (out of many, we are one) – accepted that respect for diversity is at the heart of unity. And as I looked forward to the new millennium, I looked forward to ‘our island being the bridge between the United States of America and the United States of Europe’.

But before we could indulge the luxury of dreaming, we needed to be practical, and to engage in an analysis of our problem. From the outset, I maintained that the two competing mindsets in the north of Ireland had to confront their own shortcomings. I have described the nationalist mindset as essentially territorial, summed up in the statement: ‘Ireland is our land and it must be united even though a minority don’t want to unite’.

This ignores the fact that it is the people of Ireland who are divided, not the territory. The real border in Ireland is not a line on the map. The line on the map is only a symptom of a much deeper border, which is in the minds and hearts of people. You do not cure that by one side taking over the other. Hence our conflict could be resolved only by agreement. That posed a real challenge for us, one that is only now being met through the implementation of the 1998 Agreement.

By contrast, I have described the unionist mindset as a siege mentality. Some have compared it with the ‘Afrikaaner mindset’, linked to attitudes that prevailed in the old South Africa. Knowing that they are a minority in Ireland as a whole, unionists have believed that the only way to protect themselves has been to take and hold all power. But they could not guarantee their own security through suppression, nor secure their own rights through injustice.

We had no quarrel with their honourable objective of protecting and preserving their identity. It was the methods they used to do so that we found distasteful. So the challenge to Unionism has been to find a way of protecting its own identity, while respecting that of others. We recognised, given the geography, history and size of the Unionist tradition, that the problem could not be solved without them, nor would it be solved against them.

I am convinced that only a healing process, given time, can end division in Ireland. But it is important to work to realistic timescales. I believe the first necessary step in the healing process is total equality for all the citizens of Northern Ireland, from basic civil rights to full expression of their identity. This spectrum was addressed in the Good Friday Agreement. On the basis of that equality comes the process of reconciliation, the second step in my party’s long-term programme, the breaking down of barriers between the different sections of our people. I had also addressed this issue in my maiden speech to the House of Commons:

‘The extent of the problem in Northern Ireland today can be summed up by the desperate indictment of a brick wall that has been built between two sections of the community in Belfast to keep them apart and to protect them from each other ... That wall is an indictment ... of the unionist tradition, the nationalist tradition and the British who govern from this House. It is an indictment, but it is also a challenge.’

Of course, many more so-called ‘peace walls’ have been erected since 1983. Now, at least, they are being challenged. And that will lead to the third major element in the process, to the only Irish unity that really matters – a unity that respects diversity and legitimises differences. The seeds of that particular growth can be witnessed in the remarkably warm relations shared between the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, and the First Minister Dr Ian Paisley.

#### **‘Their quarrel’**

We knew from the outset that the competing mindsets could not resolve this problem on their own. Both claimed to have their respective ‘guarantors’, and that was a major distraction. It was an issue I addressed in 1996 in my publication, *Personal Views*.<sup>1</sup> The IRA ceasefire had broken down in February, and John Major was a Prime Minister in thrall to his own right wing and to the Ulster unionists at Westminster.

I argued that, for its part, London ‘exercises a reluctant sovereignty in Northern Ireland, while Dublin maintains a somewhat reluctant claim to that sovereignty’. I challenged the perennial British view of the problem as ‘their quarrel’ and not ‘ours’. And I stated bluntly that the ‘two greatest problems in

Northern Ireland are the British guarantee, which inhibits such re-examination, and the unionist dependence on it'. In addition, I accepted that 'democrats in the south and in the SDLP had to find the humility to acknowledge that we had so far failed to define an Irish identity which adequately accommodated all the traditions of this island. Our failure – an intellectual and moral failure – had unwittingly created one of the principal inspirations of violence.'

In many respects, my political life has been dedicated to meeting those challenges. Since partition, the Irish state had engaged only intermittently with the North and, for the most part, on a strictly rhetorical basis. It was more intent in embedding its own democratic structures and seeking economic security. The Fianna Fáil Government's reaction to events in Derry and elsewhere after August 1969 demonstrated a deep fissure between moderates and 'traditional' republicans. It led to a split in the party from which it never fully recovered.

The coalition government of 1973 worked diligently to establish itself as a power-sharing government with an Irish dimension. After the tragedy of the Ulster Workers' Council strike and the collapse of the Sunningdale government, we felt to some extent that we had been abandoned by Liam Cosgrave and Fianna Fáil. Economic uncertainty, and the installation of three different governments in the period 1981–82, added further uncertainty – although it was during this period that the British–Irish process came into effect, when Margaret Thatcher and Garret FitzGerald agreed to commit to 'efforts to heal the divisions within Northern Ireland and to reconcile the two major traditions in the two parts of Ireland.'

We felt the need to re-engage with other constitutional nationalist parties on the island. In our manifesto for the Assembly elections in October 1982, we urged the creation of a Council for a New Ireland that would have a limited life, and would set itself the specific task of examining the obstacles to the creation of a New Ireland. Its task was to produce, 'for the first time on behalf of all the elected democratic parties in this country who believe in a new Ireland, an agreed blue-print so that a debate on real alternatives can begin within the Anglo–Irish framework'. The idea metamorphosed into the New Ireland Forum,

following a meeting on 21 April 1983. The first public session was held on 30 May and the final report was delivered on 2 May the following year.

The Forum was difficult because we were confronting our own mythologies as openly and honestly as possible. But its significance was noted by the distinguished historian Oliver MacDonagh, when he detected the 'beginnings of a profound change of mind and attitude on the part at least of one of the key parties to the imbroglio'. Constitutional nationalism, he believed, had thrown over received assumptions and the 'revolutionary change was the open gratuitous acknowledgement by the Forum that the Ulster Unionist identity was both fundamentally different and a permanent condition. This represents surely the first breaking of the ideological ice jam.' In my contribution to the parliamentary debate at Westminster, on 2 July 1984, I stated: 'The most important aspect of the report is not the three options, but the views of Irish Nationalists about the ways in which realities must be faced if there is to be a solution.'

This was, if you like, to become the fourth option, because Margaret Thatcher rejected the other three later that year – even though she wasn't too certain what they were! Ultimately, her reaction made little difference, because President Reagan responded through his Secretary of the Interior, William Clarke, when he commended 'the Irish statesmen for their courageous and forthright efforts recently embodied in the report of the New Ireland Forum'. The significant and positive international attention that the report received broke the log jam. This moral pressure point could be read as a precursor to the Anglo–Irish Agreement of November 1985.

### **Eyes on the horizon**

I had long argued that the British guarantee was a tragic mistake that undermined any hope of political negotiation between the two sides in Northern Ireland. During the uncertain days of the collapse of the IRA ceasefire in 1996, I wrote:

'The basis of British policy is concealed under layers of good intentions, ingenious initiatives, commissions of enquiry, attempted



reforms, financial aid and a good deal of genial bewilderment. I do not use the word “concealed” maliciously. Many sincere and concerned British politicians and observers have the impression that they have tried everything possible to get the Irish to agree: that is a measure of the extent to which the basic assumption of their policy has become imperceptible to the British themselves.’

It is good to report in 2008 that this basic assumption is no more. I have gone on record to praise the moral courage of Ted Heath in 1973 (and indeed that of Brian Faulkner at the same time). I have been excoriating about the pusillanimity of Labour administrations throughout the 1970s (although I admired the way that individual MPs such as Kevin McNamara stood by us through thick and thin). And I was often exasperated by the sheer arrogance of Margaret Thatcher.

In short, I recognised that British politicians had withdrawn psychologically from the problem. But I never lost faith that we would find the structures for a solution. In particular, I drew great sustenance from a statement by one of our wisest secretaries of state, Peter Brooke, when he asserted that Britain had no selfish strategic or economic interests for remaining in Ireland. That one statement destroyed the *raison d’être* of the IRA, and suggested that if the British were not quite ready to be persuaders, they could at least become encouragers.

A large part of that faith rested in the vast stores of international goodwill we had gathered in. The American dimension has been hugely significant since the early 1970s (I first met Senator Edward Kennedy in Bonn, in November 1972). The roles played by the so-called ‘Four Horsemen’ in the 1970s and 1980s ensured that the Irish question was always at, or near, the top of the US agenda. A statement released by President Jimmy Carter on 30 August 1977 promised US investment in Northern Ireland if violence ceased. It was written in the language of human rights, and was the first positive statement from a US President that probed the nature of the Anglo–American relationship. While it appeared to vanish without trace at the time, much of its thinking reappeared in the Anglo–Irish Agreement of 1985. I am proud to say that I had a large input into that statement.

During the Reagan presidency, Speaker Tip O’Neill ensured that the President was kept up to speed on the Irish question. I am not at all certain that the Agreement would have been signed in November 1985 had not President Reagan taken such a keen interest, and persuaded Margaret Thatcher of the efficacy of signing. Tip’s parting gift as Speaker was to deliver the International Fund for Ireland, which has played such a positive role in economic development in Northern Ireland and the border counties. In line with EU assistance, our economy has arrived at the point of self-sustained development.

The role played by the Clinton Presidency is well documented. His granting of a 48-hour visa to Gerry Adams in 1994 was visionary and politically courageous. Ever since my contact with Gerry Adams began, through a letter I sent to him on St Patrick’s Day 1988, I had found him to be straightforward in dialogue. A personal trust built up between us. It was my conviction that it was foolish to dismiss the Provisional IRA as mindless criminals and gangsters.

I believe that they followed, and were immersed in, a particular ideology. I have always countered their ideology with Martin Luther King’s wise words on the painful delusions, the narrowness and the irreversible consequences of violence. It would not, however, have been possible for my party, or for me, to bring the republican movement to the position it adopts now. That needed the input of prestigious third parties, for which we are eternally grateful. The breakthrough came in 1998 when three strong leaders – Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern – were in a position to deliver.

The principles that I have adhered to throughout my political career are to be found at the heart of the Agreement. Principle number one, the respect for difference, is the basis of the Agreement. No-one has had to renounce his or her identity or aspirations. Everyone has agreed to pursue their goals by exclusively peaceful and political means. It is a victory for us all. Principle number two, the need for institutions that respect difference, lies at the heart of the Agreement, in the composition and modalities of the Assembly and the Executive. Principle number three is that the institutions of the Agreement should work in the common interests of all the people. That has been implemented more slowly than those preceding it, but now we are beginning to see the fruits of the outworkings of the various committees.

It has been a remarkable journey. When I delivered my Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech in Oslo on 10 November 1998, I said that I thought David Trimble would agree with me that the award of the prize 'is in the deepest sense a powerful recognition from the wider world of the tremendous qualities of compassion and humanity of all the people we represent between us'. I recognised the enormous hurt we had suffered, and I commented on the state of British-Irish relations:

'I have seen the friendship of Irish and British people transcend, even in times of misunderstanding and tensions, all narrower political differences. We are two neighbouring islands whose destiny is to live in friendship and amity with each other. We are friends and the achievement of peace will further strengthen that friendship and, together, allow us to build on the countless ties that unite us in so many ways.'

This has to be one of the ways in which we move forward. Another must be that the time has come to draw a line under the past, and to let history judge it. Our eyes must be on the horizon. I think that among the most important lessons we have learned is the realisation that we are richest when we embrace all our diversity. We have learned that violence can never resolve conflict, but serves only to distort and deepen division. The future brings an ever-increasing human diversity to our shores. We must learn to embrace and welcome this human richness as we continue to strive for a community based on true respect for difference.

So onwards and outwards and upwards. Self-help, self-reliance and self-confidence can now be at the heart of all that we do.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> J. Hume, *Personal Views, Politics, Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland*. Dublin: Town House, 1996.

## Mary Fitzgerald

*Mary Fitzgerald is The Irish Times' foreign affairs correspondent. She began her career reporting on Northern Ireland for The Belfast Telegraph and international media. The only Irish journalist to be awarded the Lawrence Stern Fellowship at The Washington Post, she covered the 2004 US presidential election for that paper before moving to Jordan. She has since worked across the Middle East, Africa and south Asia, reporting from countries including Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, Chad, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2006, Mary reported on the Islamic world for The Irish Times after she was awarded the inaugural Douglas Gageby Fellowship. She has also worked on a number of award-winning documentaries for the BBC, and is a frequent contributor to the Irish broadcast media.*

## Drawing on a larger canvas

Mary Fitzgerald

I

The remark was as unexpected as it was blunt. I was sitting with some Jordanian friends in the cosy living room of their apartment in Irbid, a town near the border with Syria. I was living in Amman at the time, and often spent weekends at their home, waking before dawn to the sound of the call to prayer as it drifted in from the nearby mosque. It was past midnight, and the children had long been tucked up in bed. There were five of us – two young married Jordanian couples and myself. We had been chatting for hours, pausing only to take sips of mint tea so sweet it made my teeth ache. We were talking history – of their country and mine.

They had read about the Irish famine and watched Liam Neeson fill the local cinema screen as Michael Collins; they had heard Gerry Adams' Belfast burr on countless TV news bulletins, and were aware that peace now prevailed where once there had been Troubles. Suddenly one friend interrupted: 'What I find so surprising,' she said, turning to me, 'is that after all that, you don't seem to hate the British'.

Taken aback, I mumbled something about time passing and letting bygones be bygones, and the conversation took another course. But my friend's remark stayed with me. There was no doubt it came from a place rooted in her own experience of growing up in a country Winston Churchill had bragged of creating with 'the stroke of a pen on a Sunday afternoon in Cairo', a country where every schoolchild can tell you about Sykes–Picot and Balfour and all the conniving in between. A country, like many others in that region, where people continue to suffer the consequences of colonial map-drawing almost a century on.

But the assumption that an Irish person would automatically bear animosity towards the British took me by surprise, so at odds was it with my own experience as part of a generation that came of age in an Ireland framed

by Celtic Tiger prosperity and the peace process. It is an Ireland in which most of the old quarrels simply no longer seem relevant, an Ireland that appears to have finally awoken from what Joyce's Stephen Daedalus called 'the nightmare of history'. It is not that my generation chooses to ignore the darker chapters of Ireland's historical relationship with Britain. Instead, we are less willing to allow that past to define our present.

Nevertheless, the conversation that night in a small town in northern Jordan was a reminder of how, in many other parts of the world, the story of Ireland remains inextricably linked with Britain and the colonial experience. Not only that: it was a reminder that, much as we in Ireland parade our new confidence in ourselves and our place in the world, there still exists an image of a country forever seething at its much larger neighbour across the Irish Sea.

Every Irish person has encountered it at some stage or other. The jaded quips, delivered with a nudge and a wink, about hating the Brits. It is a casual assumption that can sometimes backfire. A British man who has lived for so long in Ireland that his accent is shot through with Irish inflections once told me about the time someone sidled up to him in the USA and said 'You must really hate the British', before crumpling with embarrassment when crisply informed of his mistake.

In Asia, Africa, Latin America and, most frequently, the Middle East, I have come to expect the knowing comments, barbed jokes, and often muddled history lectures about Ireland's 'old enemy' that follow when I tell people my nationality.

'You are Irish?' said Mahdi Akef, leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, when I corrected his impression that I was from Denmark. 'Ah, that means we are relatives,' he exclaimed, before comparing Egypt's experience of British rule with that of Ireland.

Then there was the interview with a self-proclaimed jihadist who, when I asked why he decided to fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, turned to me and said, as if by way of explanation: 'Remember, your people fought the occupiers too'. Not to mention the Palestinian who told me matter-of-factly that his people

were just like the Irish because 'we hate the British as much as you do'. How to explain that things have moved on quite a bit since then?

Should we start with a snapshot of contemporary Ireland, a country grown fat on more than a decade of economic boom, a nation newly rich, ethnically diverse, and brash in its confidence? A society evolving and changing at such dizzying speeds that it demands new ways of defining itself on an almost daily basis?

Should we let them know that, in this Brave New Ireland, we encounter so much that is British in our daily lives that it barely registers with us any more? We shop in Boots, and Marks and Spencer, and all the other British high street stalwarts that have been part of our urban landscape for more than a decade now. We watch *Big Brother* and follow British soaps, cheer Premier League clubs, read British newspapers, and hardly notice when yet another shrieking hen party from Newcastle lurches past us on a Friday night in Dublin.

Should we point them towards the writer in *The Daily Telegraph* (of all places) who, in a column headlined 'Irish women vomit like good English girls', bemoans an Ireland 'now free, rich, drunk and Anglicised', where 'Irish football fans shout in mockney accents picked up from English TV... English celebrity culture is everywhere; British tabloids have taken over; English football is the new religion; and Tesco has "pacified" the country way beyond Gladstone's wildest dreams.' Would they be surprised or puzzled to hear that the same columnist goes on to describe himself as both 'Irish and English'?

Should we mention the most recent census, which found that 112,548 UK citizens now live in the Republic, significantly outnumbering the Polish, Latvian and Lithuanian migrants to make up our largest group of foreign national residents?

Should we tell them how much we congratulated ourselves when, in February 2007, we passed what many had billed the ultimate test – watching the Irish rugby team take on England – and win – at Croke Park, spiritual home of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), a place haunted by the ghosts of 14 innocent people killed there by British forces in 1920? Hearing the strains of *God Save*

*the Queen* drift over fans sitting on the Hogan stand, named after the young Tipperary footballer shot dead that November day almost nine decades ago? Or those cheering the Irish team from Hill 16, a stand that takes its name from the fact it was built with the rubble of buildings destroyed by British shelling during the 1916 rising? Not only did we hail it as another sign of how much Ireland had changed for the better, we even dared to joke about it. Some wisecracked about the English not having the advantage of rifles and armoured cars this time round. Others quipped that the most appropriate Irish margin of victory would be 19–16. And everybody tittered at the photograph of one protester, oblivious to irony, who held a placard that read ‘No to foreign games’, while wearing a Glasgow Celtic football jersey.

Or perhaps we should recall another milestone three months later, when Bertie Ahern became the first Taoiseach to address a joint sitting of the British Houses of Parliament. In a speech entitled ‘Ireland and Britain: a shared history – a new partnership’, he acknowledged the past in order to emphasise a present in which we are ‘conscious of our history but not captured by it.’ A present in which Ireland and its nearest neighbour together forge a ‘new and lasting partnership of common interest that fully respects identity and sovereignty.’

## II

Ireland has changed, and its relationship with Britain, bound by history, geography, language, popular culture and the blood links created by generations of Irish emigrants, has changed. Yet there remain traces of residual ambivalence in the way we perceive and relate to our nearest neighbour.

Although it is four years old now, *Through Irish Eyes*, a report published by the British Council in Ireland, based on research into attitudes towards Britain among the ‘successor generation’ of Irish people under 40, remains instructive. While it found there was a strong sense among the Irish that relations had improved – with over 80 per cent characterising them as good, and 77 per cent expressing the view that relations had improved noticeably in recent years – the study also uncovered some of the complex and sometimes contradictory feelings that people of my generation are still teasing out when it comes to Britain.

You can see it in the way the relationship with Britain remains a staple in the routine of many young Irish comedians. They play with it, deconstruct it, turn it upside down and inside out, unafraid of skewering a few sacred cows – both British and Irish – in the process. Take Dara O’Briain, the thirty-something comic from Wicklow who now lives in London, where he hosts BBC2’s *Mock the Week*. He has built a whole routine around what he refers to as ‘the awkwardness’. This, he tells British audiences, is ‘predominantly your fault’. O’Briain is equally merciless with home audiences, telling an interviewer in *The Daily Telegraph* last year that he plays with the tension in Ireland of ‘not being knee-jerk’ anti-English. ‘One of my favourite routines over there’ he explained, ‘is to describe my imaginary English child and how he won’t have an asterisk above his head, as in “I love you, but – check asterisk, go to bottom of the page – you shouldn’t have invaded Ireland for 800 years”.’

After hearing that the comedian’s father was an Irish language activist and his grandmother a teenage member of the IRA, the interviewer had earlier wondered if there had been a ‘high level of anti-English sentiment’ in the O’Briain family home when he was growing up.

‘It didn’t trickle down as much as you might think,’ O’Briain replied. ‘I probably had the “background radiation” level of enmity to the English which all Irish have; where we cheer for your opponents in football tournaments and have a distrust of the West Midlands serious crime squad. When I started to live here, that jokey attitude began to get tiresome.’

Perhaps the relationship now between Ireland and Britain could be compared with that of a grown-up child and parent in the aftermath of a particularly strained upbringing. After centuries of depending on a parent country that could be both heartless and domineering at times, benevolent at others, we look at Britain now through the eyes of an adult nation, with something of a tempered affection and the odd twitch of resentment, to measure how far we have come. We take in our similarities and differences, note the ways in which Britain shaped us, and was in turn influenced by us. The dense entanglement of resentment and dependency, together with an inferiority complex that manifested itself in the need to distinguish ourselves from the British as much as ape them, has receded, and Britain somehow seems smaller and less

important to us now, its shadow not so forbiddingly long, as we concentrate on taking our place in a world where globalisation and migration have loosened the ties between state and identity.

### III

Born in the late 1970s, I am one of those just old enough to remember the last gasps of pre-boom Ireland. We were children as the Celtic Tiger was being coaxed into life and many of the old shibboleths began to crumble.

As a child growing up in rural Cork, Britain occupied a special place in my imagination due to the stories my parents liked to tell of the years they spent there. Like so many others of their generation, my father and mother took the boat to England in the 1960s. For my mother, having just left convent boarding school to study in Manchester, it was a brave new world of Beatles concerts and football matches at Old Trafford, at a time when many of her female peers back home balked at entering a pub without a male companion.

For my father, living in London represented freedom, opportunity, and a chance to see the Rolling Stones play Hyde Park – all far removed from the view of perfidious Albion passed down to him from his own father, a dour man with framed portraits of Liam Lynch and Padraig Pearse on the wall and an annual subscription to *An Phoblacht*.

Both parents retained a deep affection for Britain and the friends they had made there. As a result, I grew up on stories that cast Britain in vivid technicolor, a sharp contrast to the distinctly monochrome tones of life in late-1980s Ireland.

Yet there were other chapters in my childhood that hinted at an altogether more ambiguous relationship with Britain. I attended the local primary school – three rooms, one prefab, and a headmaster determined to make good little republicans of us all. The 1916 proclamation hung on the wall, the library seemed to consist only of books related to the Rising, and we learned by heart the lyrics to maudlin songs about 1798 and Kevin Barry. So much of what we were taught fed into the notion that to be Irish was to be ‘not British’. Yet the

same headmaster would take his own children to see the Tower of London and Buckingham Palace during the school holidays.

I was 11 when my mother first told me the story of her uncle, Jeremiah Lyons, who had left university to join an IRA flying column during the War of Independence. He was killed along with three friends in an ambush by the Black and Tans in Co. Kerry in 1921, an incident later immortalised in a well known ballad by the writer Bryan McMahon. She was always careful to add that, while it was important for us children to know about our grand-uncle’s place in the footnotes of an often bitter history, we should not forget the good Britain had done for Ireland.

My mother would say the same when the Guildford four were released in 1989 and the Birmingham six walked free in 1991. But the story of how ten innocent people became victims of the most notorious miscarriages of justice in British history would leave a deep impression on myself and my peers at school, reinforcing handed-down prejudices for some, and challenging fondly held images of Britain for others, including myself.

Mine was not a GAA family, but the area I grew up in had a strong hurling tradition. In 1990, when Ireland discovered the joy of soccer as the national team made it to the World Cup quarter-finals, there was talk in the schoolyard of children whose parents had forbidden them to watch the matches that had gripped the rest of the country on TV. Soccer was a ‘foreign’ (that’s to say, British) game and therefore *verboten*. On 24 February 2007, I thought of the adults those children would now have become, and wondered how they felt about another ‘foreign game’ being played on the hallowed turf of Croke Park. I would like to think that they watched the match with barely a second thought, cheering when the Irish rugby team gave England a drubbing.

### IV

And then, of course, there was ‘the North’. One of the most interesting findings in the *Through Irish Eyes* survey is the extent to which antipathy towards Britain has lessened when it comes to the issue of Northern Ireland. For those of us born after the civil rights marches and internment; those too

young to remember Bloody Sunday, the hunger strikes or allegations of shoot-to-kill; those whose strongest memories are to do with post-ceasefire, peace process Northern Ireland, perhaps this is not very surprising.

For the most part, the conflict in Northern Ireland was little more than a background hum during my childhood. But some things reached beyond the blur of incomprehensible news bulletins and headlines to lodge themselves in my memory – the tremble in Gordon Wilson’s voice as he recalled his last conversation with his daughter Marie as they lay buried in the rubble of the Enniskillen bombing; the grainy figure of Michael Stone running across Milltown cemetery, throwing grenades and firing shots as he went; the photograph of Father Alec Reid kneeling beside the bloodied, half-naked body of one of two British corporals killed by the IRA, after they drove into a republican funeral in 1988. To a child in Cork, these were remote and puzzling events, happening ‘up there’ in a place that seemed very far away. The only time it came close enough to touch our lives was one day in 1987, when our car was stopped by gardai who had set up a checkpoint on the main Cork–Dublin road. They were looking for Dessie O’Hare – the ‘border fox’ – my father told us children, sitting wide-eyed in the back seat, as the garda waved our car on. Every schoolchild knew about Dessie O’Hare and the grisly tale of how he chopped off the fingertips of John O’Grady, the Dublin dentist he had kidnapped some weeks earlier. That year Dessie O’Hare was one of the bogeymen that haunted our dreams and brought what was happening in Northern Ireland closer than it had ever felt before.

Years later, I would move to Northern Ireland to study at Queen’s University in Belfast. Friends and family wondered why I had chosen to spend my undergraduate days in a place the mention of which made many of them shudder. It was a ‘war zone’, the father of one close friend declared, despite the fact that this was the late 1990s – the height of the peace process. Many were wary of visiting, despite my protestations that no, their southern accents and number plates would not automatically render them a target on the streets of Belfast.

Even today, I know many of my contemporaries in the south of Ireland who have travelled and worked all over the world, but have yet to set foot

anywhere north of the border. They feel comfortable hanging out in London, Manchester or Edinburgh for the weekend, but Belfast, despite all the glossy advertising campaigns depicting the city as a whirl of hip bars, clubs and boutique hotels, is a very different proposition. Perhaps it is because for many, Northern Ireland appears not quite Irish, not quite British, but a place apart from the two – and in that sense, often just as bewildering to those from England, Scotland and Wales as it is to people from the Republic.

I remember exploring Northern Ireland with my English boyfriend, who had moved there from Manchester around the same time that I started university. We would spend St Patrick’s Day on the Falls Road, and four months later watch the Irish tri-colour disappear in flames on top of a Sandy Row bonfire on the eve of the Twelfth. We both experienced Northern Ireland as a foreign country. There was always a sense of being on the outside, looking in. The fluttering Union Jacks and pavestones painted red, white and blue were as remote to him as the version of Irishness I encountered in west Belfast seemed to me.

To us – a woman from the Republic and an English man – there was Britain, a place we visited regularly to go clubbing in London and Manchester, or walking in the Lake District, or to hang out at music festivals like Glastonbury, and then there was Northern Ireland, a place that made us both feel all at sea.

It was a feeling that would persist throughout my time living in Northern Ireland, first as a student and later as a reporter with *The Belfast Telegraph*. As a ‘southerner’ working for a newspaper with a long unionist tradition, I became accustomed to confounding people in republican and loyalist areas alike, the moment they heard my accent. Once, while manning the news desk the day after a gay man from Kildare had won Channel Four’s *Big Brother*, I took a call from an angry reader. The caller, a woman from Belfast, was apoplectic that an Irish man was even allowed to take part in a British reality TV show, let alone have the cheek to win. ‘It’s not right,’ she kept repeating before noticing my accent and asking me where I was from. When I told her, she hung up. I remember swapping this story, and many others, with a Jewish American journalist friend who had covered the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for several years. We had both experienced what it is to report in an environment

where, no matter how much you protest your neutral outsider status, you are automatically marked as friend or enemy simply because of your name, your religion, your nationality or your accent.

## V

In my early twenties, I spent some time working in London. While I was there, my father suggested I get in touch one of his distant cousins, a woman he had hardly seen since she moved to England more than two decades previously. Her London could not have been more different from mine. She inhabited a Little Ireland in the heart of Wood Green, a place where she, her husband and their friends pulled the Irish community tight around them, socialising together, marrying and raising families together. The pubs they frequented were places where the air was thick with Irish accents, scarcely changed after years of living in England, the walls were hung with posters advertising trad sessions, and the television was always tuned to a GAA match from back home. Such enclaves remain in several British cities, a legacy in part of the dark decades of the Troubles, when anti-Irish sentiment and suspicion caused by the IRA's bombing campaign resulted in many Irish communities drawing in on themselves.

Spending time with my cousin and her circle made me realise the generational shift in terms of how we related to and engaged with Britain. My London was about working in media companies in Charlotte Street and the City; flat-sharing with Italian, Japanese, Spanish and British twenty-somethings; and spending weekends browsing the stalls at Portobello market or the latest exhibition at the Tate Modern.

My London was one dateline out of several in a life lived, like many of my contemporaries, as one of the new Wandering Irish. Whether it is Irish bankers in Frankfurt or New York; Irish software engineers in Silicon Valley; Irish nurses in Australia; Irish teachers in Buenos Aires; Irish aid workers in Zambia, or Irish backpackers on the *Lonely Planet* trail, we leave Ireland because we want to, not because it's either that or the dole queue, as was the case for generations before us. Emigration has largely become a lifestyle choice, and if we eventually return to Ireland, it is with an infinitely richer and more complex idea of who we are and where we fit in the world, a sense of self developed

through contact with other cultures and perspectives. As part of a generation born after Ireland joined the European Union, our outlook has been shaped by Europe, globalisation, migration and the communications revolution, all of which challenge old ideas of nation, community and tradition. For us, the world is flat, as Thomas Friedman would put it, and our concept of identity is more fluid and mobile than it has been for any previous generation.

## VI

When I lived in the Middle East, one of the books that would often crop up in conversations was a slim volume entitled *On Identity*.<sup>1</sup> In it, the author, Amin Maalouf, an Arabic- and French-speaking Lebanese Christian, who now lives in France and writes in French, considers how we define ourselves and how identity is constructed and understood in an increasingly interconnected world. In a region where ideas of identity and belonging (whether based on often-flimsy colonial-era notions of nationality or on deeper tribal and religious allegiances) are fraught with particular difficulty, Maalouf's attempts to give shape to his own multi-layered sense of self struck a chord with many young Arab friends of mine, who were tentatively finding their own path between tradition and the choices afforded by globalisation.

Maalouf professes a hybrid identity, the fruit of all his experience in life, and approvingly quotes the historian Marc Bloch's maxim that 'Men are more the sons of their time than of their fathers.' This, Maalouf believes, has never rung truer than it does today as we grapple with multiplicities of identity brought on by the unprecedented movement of ideas, people, capital and culture that globalisation entails.

There are few better examples of these forces converging so much, and in such a short period of time, than what has happened in Ireland over the past decade. Three years ago, in *The New York Times*, Thomas Friedman lauded Ireland as a poster child for the benefits globalisation can bring. And Ireland's rapid transformation from a largely monocultural and mono-ethnic nation to one in which migrants drawn from some 100 countries make up more than 10 per cent of the population will keep sociologists busy for decades to come.



As one friend put it recently, living in Ireland right now feels like living in the middle of one big experiment.

The most recent census allowed us to get a fuller picture of this new Ireland. It found the number of non-Irish nationals living here had almost doubled to 420,000 in the past four years. The majority came from the European Union (275,776), followed by Asia (46,952), Africa (25,326), the rest of Europe (24,425) and North and South America (21,124). The census also reported that Islam is now Ireland's third biggest religion, with the number of Muslims here increasing by 70 per cent since 2002. The incorporation of these newcomers, with their different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds, amounts to a redefinition of Irish society, and calls for a reimagining of what it means to be Irish. The days when Irishness was defined in largely non-British, Catholic and Gaelic terms seem very far away now.

## VII

How do our new arrivals fit into Ireland's relationship with Britain? They do not share the folk memories that link the two countries, and their feeling of history lies elsewhere. They see Britain through a different lens, free of the historical baggage that has always coloured the relationship, and their presence challenges our old frames of reference. But many are also aware of the history that brought us to where we are today. A Nigerian man, who has lived in Ireland since the mid-1990s, told me how his view of Britain was influenced by Irish missionaries who taught him about Ireland's colonial experience when he was at school in Lagos. Those from former Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe often talk about the example Ireland sets in showing that it is possible to step out from the shadow of a larger and more powerful neighbour.

It is interesting, too, to note how often Muslims in Ireland refer to our colonial past as something they identify with, even helping them to feel more at home here. In an opinion piece published in *The Irish Times* last year, Ali Selim, an Egyptian-born theologian based at Ireland's biggest mosque, wrote: 'The Muslim existence here is facilitated by the fact that Muslim immigrants and the native Irish have so much in common, historically and traditionally. Most of the

immigrants in Ireland come from countries which, just like Ireland, suffered long decades of occupation.'

Britain is also going through a process of reimagining itself, as it examines what it means to be British in the twenty-first century. Issues ranging from devolution to the perceived failure of Britain's experiment in multiculturalism have prompted much soul-searching about identity and national cohesion. In this debate, few subjects stir public and government anxieties more strongly than that of Muslim integration, particularly in the wake of the 7 July bombings. Worries about radicalisation frame increasingly shrill arguments on issues such as the place of the veil or Sharia law in Britain.

Muslim leaders in Ireland prefer to distance themselves from what is happening in Britain, and when asked why Irish Muslims have proved less susceptible to radicalisation, they point out significant differences between the two communities. They highlight the relative youth of Ireland's Muslim community, its smaller size, greater ethnic diversity and educational and socio-economic profile – a large percentage are professionals who moved here to work or study. A poll carried out in 2006 found that 73 per cent of Muslims living in Ireland believe they are fully integrated into Irish society, with 77 per cent saying they feel accepted here. A British-born Muslim, who works as a youth coordinator at one of Dublin's mosques, told me that he believes one of the biggest differences between the two communities is that Muslims in Ireland do not feel alienated by government decisions, especially in the area of foreign policy. 'You don't see the anger here that you see among British Muslims, particularly the younger ones,' he said. 'Muslims in Ireland feel their country is not against them but part of them.'

Last year, I observed a revealing encounter between a female Muslim student born in Ireland to Iraqi parents and some jeering British acolytes of Omar Bakri, the radical cleric now exiled to Lebanon after living in London for more than two decades. Articulate, confident and wearing a headscarf, the young woman calmly told the British visitors that their brand of hate-mongering, reactionary ideology had no place in Ireland. In a sense, this was the British-Irish relationship being played out on a whole new stage with a whole new cast of characters.

## VIII

For a long time, Irish identity centred on what it was not – and that, for the most part, meant ‘not British’. Hence Samuel Beckett’s famous riposte to a French journalist who innocently inquired whether he was English – ‘*Au contraire*’. In today’s Ireland, a country changed utterly, Beckett’s spare commentary on relations between the two isles no longer seems relevant.

We play with new, more inclusive ways of defining ourselves now, and our identity draws from a much larger canvas. That is something from which the ever-evolving relationship between Ireland and Britain can only stand to benefit.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Amin Maalouf, *On Identity (Les Identités meurtrières, 1998)*, translated by Barbara Bray. Harvill P. (2000).

## David Adams

*David Adams is a former senior member of the UDA-linked Ulster Democratic Party (UDP). He helped broker the loyalist ceasefire of 1994, and was a representative at the political negotiations that led to the Belfast Agreement of 1998. He has since severed all links with loyalism, and is no longer involved in party politics. He now works as a freelance journalist, commenting on politics and current affairs in print, on radio and on television. David is a columnist with The Irish Times, and has a weekly slot on BBC Radio Ulster's Talk Back programme.*

## A long way back to the beginning

David Adams

### Part 1: Blaris and me

Born in 1952, I grew up as one of 10 children (eight boys and two girls) on a tiny rural housing estate called Long Kesh, which sat just off the main road between Lisburn, Co. Antrim and Hillsborough, Co. Down, in the townland<sup>1</sup> of Blaris. At the outset of the Troubles, after Long Kesh internment camp was opened about a mile away at the Maze, our little clump of 38 three-bedroom houses was quickly renamed to avoid any confusion between the two locations. Although predominantly Protestant, it was and – somewhat miraculously, I suppose, has remained – a mixed-religion estate.

That we were the only Protestant family in our row of houses was of no consequence in our daily lives. Making ends meet was what preoccupied everyone who lived at Long Kesh. There was neither time nor energy to waste on petty incidentals like the religious affiliation of your neighbours. Who cared? Who could afford to care? My late father, a driver-cum-labourer with the Electricity Board of Northern Ireland, spent his time earning enough money to keep his family. My mother spent hers washing, cooking, cleaning, and trying to stretch every penny to its limit.

I should say something about the hidden history of the townland where I grew up. My childhood friends and I knew from an early age that King William and his army had camped on the flat fields of Blaris as they made their way to the Boyne. In fact, while his troops had camped there, the man himself had stayed a couple of miles up the road in the relative comfort of Hillsborough Castle. And it was from Hillsborough – after Sunday worship and a presentation to the local vicar of a few mementoes of his visit, which survive to this day – that King Billy marched off southwards.

We also all knew that during the Second World War, Allied aircrews had set out from Blaris to do battle in the skies over Europe in defence of freedom and democracy, and that some of them hadn't made it back alive. A row of

grey headstones standing solemnly to attention in the little graveyard at Eglantine, my own Church of Ireland parish church, told us that. Those memorials spoke of barely imaginable distant places like South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada and, to our young minds, of the middle-aged men in their late teens and early twenties who lay beneath them.

What we didn't know, however, was that Blaris had even more history about it than we could ever have imagined. For four young men had been executed there in 1797. It seems that from at least the early 1700s, the area had been home to Blaris Camp, a military base. Stationed at the camp in 1797<sup>2</sup>, along with other regiments, was a detachment of the Monaghan Militia. Early that year, a senior officer, Colonel Charles Leslie, was disturbed to learn that Presbyterian radicals from Belfast had persuaded a number of his soldiers to swear allegiance to the United Irishmen. He assembled his men and promised to seek pardon from the Lord Lieutenant for all those who admitted their involvement in the conspiracy. More than 70 soldiers confessed to having taken the United Irishmen oath and, after a time, were duly pardoned. However, the four young men who had sworn the others in were not so lucky. Peter Carron, Daniel Gillan and brothers William and Owen McKenna were taken to Belfast, tried by court martial, and found guilty of '... exciting, causing, and joining in, a Mutiny and Sedition in the said regiment ... the Monaghan Militia'. They were all sentenced to be shot at Blaris Camp.

On 17 May 1797, the Monaghan Militia and various other units slow-marched the 10 miles from Belfast to Blaris, escorting two carts carrying the prisoners, their clergy and their coffins. At precisely 1 pm, the four young men were put to death by firing squad as they knelt on their coffins in front of the assembled troops. After the execution, the 200 or so attendant soldiers were marched slowly past the four bodies as they lay on the ground, a grim reminder of the penalty for rebellion.

The McKenna brothers' elderly father had travelled from his home at Moy Bridge in Truagh to be with his sons at the time of their execution. His feelings on witnessing the deaths of his two children can hardly be imagined. He was either unable, or not permitted, to take the bodies home for interment. All four were buried in an unmarked grave just inside the entrance gate at Blaris old graveyard.

It was only in recent years that I heard this story of the young men who were put to death on the fields where I played as a child. I couldn't help but feel a deep sympathy for them. Four young lads, many miles from home, had been executed in the townland of my birth, and we grew up completely oblivious to it. My wife and I spent a couple of hot and sweaty summer afternoons searching for any sign of the grave. We found nothing. They might just as well have never existed.

There are countless other historical snapshots of the 1798 Rebellion scattered about the unionist heartland of Northern Ireland, particularly in Counties Down and Antrim, sources of most Presbyterian support for the United Irishmen. Ironically, the list of places that rose in revolt at that time reads today like a visitors' guide to the most fiercely unionist and loyalist parts of Northern Ireland: Ballymena, Ballymoney, Ahoghill, Islandmagee, Antrim town, Carrickfergus, Ballynahinch, Randalstown, Ballyclare, Saintfield, Comber, Killinchey, Broughshane, and so on.

But just as at Blaris, the local history of the United Irishmen is largely ignored or forgotten in these and other loyalist areas. That is a great pity. The human tendency to select and elevate segments of the past to suit contemporary loyalties, while ignoring the awkward bits that don't fit, has ensured that the role played by their ancestors in the 1798 Rebellion has been almost entirely wiped from the memories of northern Protestants. In the same way, Catholic Ireland found it difficult until recently to acknowledge the scale of the sacrifices made by its many thousands of sons and daughters who fought in British uniform during two world wars.

As people who are famed for, and take great pride in, having an intimate knowledge of our history, we in Northern Ireland have a strong tendency to skip over the bits that don't suit our purposes. We contort and tailor history until it sits comfortably with our own particular worldview. Too often, self-serving mythologies are allowed to pass for historical fact in Ireland, both north and south. This is dangerous and destructive: it perpetuates the stereotypical notions we hold of ourselves, and each other. These, in turn, feed into a cycle of prejudice and sectarianism that periodically manifests in violence. The men and women of 1798, and the fallen of two world wars,

belong to none of us, and yet, as part of our collective history, they belong to us all. History should not be denied, twisted or picked over like an à la carte menu.

It is my firm view that, in the end, selective amnesia is the enemy of everyone, except for a tiny minority on either side who stand to profit from it.

Like many women in those days, my mother was in charge of our domestic finances. How she managed at all, never mind so well, is a minor miracle. She had a simple set of rules that she followed faithfully. Vital expenses like rent, food, coal and electricity came top of her list of priorities and had to be paid before anything else was considered. She saved any money left over for clothes, shoes and so on. Although we didn't realise it at the time, the fact that she was such a good manager, not frivolous with money, and that my father could be relied on not to drink or gamble his wages away, was all that stood between us and disaster. The slightest tilt in either of those directions would undoubtedly have sunk the good ship Adams.

My mother consumed books – she still does – at a phenomenal rate. From as early as I can remember, a vital part of any shopping trip to Lisburn was a visit to the library to pick up a few books. Nor, by any stretch of the imagination, could her choice of reading be described as 'light'. As one who shared her passion, she introduced me from quite an early age to Orwell, Lawrence, Zola, Dickens, Stephenson and a host of other wonderful writers. She delighted in teaching us to read and introducing us to her own childhood favourites.

I had no time, however, for my mother's other abiding interest, the church, which she attended at least once a week. We children, not having any choice in the matter until we were about 16, had to troop the mile or so to Eglantine Parish Church to worship with her every week. Between the boredom of the service and Sunday school in the afternoon, I used to dread Sundays. I envied my father, who was exempt. Except for weddings and funerals, he never set foot inside a church if he could possibly avoid it. However, this didn't stop him taking a certain pride in the fact that his was a churchgoing family. My two sisters were the oldest and first to marry and leave home, abandoning my

mother to the exclusive company of nine males. I suppose it's no wonder the poor woman sought solace in religion.

Nowadays, it is easy to forget how much of a struggle it was for parents raising a large family in the 1950s and 1960s. Money was forever in short supply, and there was no such thing as a fridge, washing machine, dishwasher, or any of the other labour-saving household devices that we now take for granted. It wasn't always a lot of fun growing up in those circumstances.

No doubt there are those who would claim that having to share everything, from beds to bargains, is in some way character-forming. I can only conclude that – like those who manage to find something romantic about back-breaking, mind-numbing physical labour – they must never have tried it. A cold winter's morning, with oilcloth underfoot, ice as thick on the inside of the windows as out, and so many bodies in front of the fire that you could hardly see it, never mind feel any heat, is an awful lot more pleasant in the recollection than it ever was in reality. It certainly didn't feel very character-forming at the time.

Having said that, I wasn't in the least bit self-conscious about being poor and from a large family. Where I lived, it was nothing out of the ordinary. It was only after being accepted into a grammar school that this was to change.

Like most of my brothers and sisters, I attended Blaris Primary School, a quarter of a mile or so from our home. A two-roomed, two-teacher, turn-of-the-last-century building, the school had lain empty for decades but was reopened in the early 1950s to cater for the new estate at Long Kesh. Throughout my time there, the place was infested with rats, their numbers fluctuating depending on whether or not the 'rat man' had paid a recent visit. It was quite common for one or two rats to make an unscripted appearance in the middle of lessons and provide some welcome distraction from schoolwork.

During my first few years, there was no playground, so we played on an area at the front of the school where cinders from two large, coke-burning, pot-bellied stoves were routinely scattered. If we fell, we were ripped to pieces, and it took weeks to remove all the grit from our elbows and knees. When I was about

eight, much to our excitement and relief, the 'tar men' arrived one day and laid a lovely new tarmac playground. Progress indeed.

Yet, for all its obvious shortcomings, I loved my life at Blaris primary. Even in its heyday, the school never had to cope with more than 30 pupils at any one time. My Primary 7 class consisted only of myself and one other pupil, prompting my mother to joke that I was receiving the next best thing to a private education. As if to prove her point, my classmate and I duly sailed through the Qualifying Exam (later renamed the 11+), and went off to further our education at Wallace High School in Lisburn.

I will never forget my first day at Wallace. Adjusting to a large urban grammar school after Blaris primary would have been hard enough, but for me it was made doubly so. A maths teacher, Mr Martin, decided to go round his new class asking each of the pupils to introduce themselves, and tell everyone how many brothers and sisters they had and what their father did for a living. After having listened for a while to the sons and daughters of doctors, dentists, teachers and the like, telling us about their one or two siblings, I began dreading my turn. I don't think I've ever felt so out of place in my life.

'Maybe I should lie and tell them my father is a lawyer, and that I have only one brother and a sister', I thought. 'No, there's no way I could keep that pretence going for years.' Refusing to answer also crossed my mind, but that was hardly a realistic option. I was growing redder by the minute. Eventually, inevitably, it came to my turn. As red as a beetroot, I got slowly to my feet:

'David Adams, Sir. My father is a driver with the electricity board and I have six brothers and two sisters.' (My youngest brother had yet to be born.)

And with that I sat down, relieved it was over.

'Very good, Adams,' said Mr Martin.

He paused for a split second, before adding, 'For a minute there I thought you were talking about all of the children in your street.'

My new classmates laughed while I, the butt of the joke, was mortified as only an 11-year-old can be. I looked at Mr Martin, smiled grimly, and thought, 'You rotten bastard'.

I almost hoped that he could read my mind. In fairness, he turned out to be one of the better teachers and a decent enough man. But, for the first time in my life, I had become self-conscious about my background.

## Part 2: The world encroaches

My parents were solidly unionist and never missed casting their votes at election time. I just sort of accepted as a fact of life that our Catholic neighbours didn't vote. I suppose today I could pretend the most likely reason was that they never had anyone to vote for. No nationalist, as far as I'm aware, ever stood in our constituency. In such a unionist-dominated area, there was little point.

However, if I am honest, I think that if a nationalist had put himself forward for election (the politicians were always men), our neighbours would still not have gone out to vote. In all likelihood, they would have been afraid of people assuming that they had voted in direct opposition to those who, literally, provided the roof over their head – the local, exclusively unionist, council. They were only too aware that the council could just as easily remove that roof if it took a notion to do so. In those days, before the advent of anything even approaching a civil or human rights culture, housing allocation and the power to evict virtually on a whim lay entirely in the hands of district councils throughout the British Isles.

The precarious position of all working class families was brought home to me (again literally) when I was about nine. One of my older brothers and some of his friends had spent a winter evening amusing themselves by knocking on various neighbours' doors and running away. A local busybody, who happened to be both a council employee – appropriately enough, he worked at the sewerage works – and a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, arrived at our door demanding to speak to my father. He threatened to report us to the

council and insist that we be moved from the estate if any of us annoyed him or his family again.

I can still remember my father's face when he came back into the house. How shaken he was by the threat. Having never knowingly done anyone a bad turn in his life, he had had to stand mute and listen to a stream of bile from this bully. We learned later that this man was in the habit of issuing similar threats to anyone who crossed him and, in all likelihood, his complaints were ignored by the council. But my father couldn't afford to take that chance. Had the local council taken it into their heads that Long Kesh would be better off without the Adams family, they could, on the slightest pretext, simply evict us or insist on our moving to another estate. With, at that time, six sons of various ages galloping about a small estate and getting into all sorts of mischief, even we Unionists were in a vulnerable position.

With hindsight, if my family, presumably known to the council as Protestant and Unionist, were nervous about falling foul of some little jumped-up local dictator, then our Catholic neighbours must have felt they needed to be doubly careful. No wonder they steered well clear of the voting booth. It now seems certain to me that Catholics not voting in predominantly Unionist areas was mostly to do with people keeping their heads down and not drawing undue attention to themselves or their families.

Shortly after the civil rights campaign took off, I was working at some menial job, having squandered my educational opportunities, when another older brother happened to read in a local newspaper that Ian Paisley would be holding a parade and rally in Lisburn on the following Saturday. My mother was quick to say 'I hope none of you will be going anywhere near that.' My father's comment, the first political advice I can remember him ever giving us, was more direct: 'Stay away from that one, for he's a badun.' My father had little in the way of a formal education, but he always prided himself on being a shrewd judge of character. I must admit, I can't remember him ever being proved wrong on that score.

It is fair to say that, as a family, we weren't terribly sympathetic to the Civil Rights Association. It was hard for us, and many thousands of other unionists

like us, to have much sympathy with a campaign that seemed to be claiming that Protestants had everything. If having oilcloth under your feet and fighting a constant battle against poverty was 'everything', then perhaps we did have it. The absence of a 'one-man, one-vote' system at council elections affected working-class Protestant families as much as it did Catholics. Only the householder, in our case my father, had a vote, while business owners of either religion were entitled to multiple votes.

So we avoided concentrating too much on the instances of undeniable discrimination that were being exposed, like unfair housing allocation by some Unionist-controlled councils and its attendant electoral gerrymandering. But with evidence mounting, we had to accept that it was happening.

Of course, colouring our attitude, and underlying everything, was a deep fear and suspicion, well stoked by Unionist politicians, that the Civil Rights Association was merely a front for those who wanted to destroy Northern Ireland and take us all into a united Ireland. No need here to trawl back through the civil rights protests and how the whole thing was eventually hijacked by militant republicanism – the history of that period has been visited often enough – except to say that political Unionism reacted to the demands for civil rights and an end to discrimination in the worst possible way.

Instead of acknowledging that the game was up, and moving swiftly to introduce as many reforms as were needed, the Stormont administration initially tried to face down the protesters. How they could ever have imagined that beating men, women and children off the streets would do anything other than make a bad situation ten times worse is beyond me. The civil rights campaign certainly hadn't started out as an attempt to force Unionists against their will into a united Ireland, but that was how the situation was soon to develop.

At that time, the relationship between working class Protestants and their Unionist representatives was one based almost solely on ideas of mutual benefit: the Unionist electorate gave the politicians position and power in exchange for religious freedom and constitutional security, if very little else. This was long before the novel idea had taken hold of politicians actually

working on ‘bread-and-butter’ constituency issues such as employment and housing. It didn’t necessarily follow that people like my parents had any great love or respect for their elected representatives as individuals. Often, quite the reverse.

My father’s oldest brother, for example, despised the Ulster Unionist Party (and even more so, Ian Paisley’s fundamentalist offshoot when it came along). He was socialist through and through, and probably voted Northern Ireland Labour before that organisation fell apart. Every year, he attended the British Labour Party’s annual conference and railed against its refusal to organise in Northern Ireland. Yet he still considered himself to be solidly Unionist. The Unionist people were simply voting *against* any alternative to the union, regardless of who the pro-union candidate was. The potential implications of them doing anything else were too horrible to contemplate. With a lot of justification at the time, they saw the Republic as fundamentally anti-Protestant.

So, in order to protect Northern Ireland and themselves from being subsumed by that state, working-class Protestants believed that it was essential they always vote Unionist. In short, it could be said that for one section of the Northern Ireland community, religious discrimination was a living reality. For the other, it was a constant dread.

Yet there was, and is, much more to it than just the fear of ending up a minority group in a Catholic theocracy. Unionist people did, and still do, consider themselves to be British first and foremost. So strongly, and with such passion, is this sense of Britishness held that it is immune to rational argument and debate. I grew up in the certain knowledge that I was both British and Irish. Being British wasn’t something that I chose: it was simply what I was. Instinctively, I felt the young airmen lying in the graveyard at our church to be my own people, regardless of the fact that they came from virtually every corner of the Commonwealth.

Questioning whether a Unionist’s sense of oneness with Britain is shared by the British Government and the rest of the people of the UK, never mind properly acknowledged or reciprocated, is pointless. As is drawing attention to anomalies around whether loyalty ultimately lies with the Crown or with

Parliament. Similarly, making economic and demographic arguments in favour of Irish unity, or talking about how changed the Republic is now and how Unionists would have more influence in a united Ireland than in the UK, has no impact on the Unionist/Protestant psyche.

This isn’t, and never has been, about rational argument and debate. The attachment is essentially an emotional one. It goes back to the earliest days of the plantation, and has held together through, or more likely been strengthened by, countless sectarian and ethnic wars, battles and skirmishes in Ireland. Not to mention two world wars and various other conflicts around the globe where the Irish Unionist has donned the British uniform and fought for King/Queen and country.

The uncle I mentioned earlier complained endlessly about the Ulster Unionist Party, the British Labour Party and, not surprisingly, the Conservative Party, and moaned about every British government of the day – in the same way as ordinary people in Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow did. Any suggestion that he was less than British would have horrified him, as would the notion that he would be better off in a united Ireland. To ask a Unionist to explain in rational terms his or her attachment to Britain is like asking someone to explain why they love their parents.

As a youngster, I never discussed this attachment with my Catholic friends. This wasn’t through any sense of awkwardness, it simply wasn’t relevant at the time. I now assume that, to some degree at least, many Catholics had a similar non-rational attitude to living in Northern Ireland – most markedly during the early years of the Free State. The fact that the Free State was poverty-stricken and Northern Ireland was streets ahead in terms of jobs, prosperity, healthcare, roads, infrastructure and a host of other criteria, probably mattered not one jot. Many Catholics would still have preferred to live in a united Ireland, even one where the economic future was so uncertain. Quality-of-life issues didn’t enter into the equation because emotional ties rendered them redundant.

I suspect that most people in the Northern Ireland of my childhood shared my own feeling of being both British and Irish (although not necessarily in that



order). As we later discovered, each person, if pushed, would lean towards one nationality or the other.

As the Troubles progressed, and identity became more and more of an issue, people found themselves choosing, or feeling that they had to make a choice, between Britishness and Irishness. It was no longer feasible to be both – you simply could not be on two sides of an argument at the same time. Naturally enough, all but a few plumped for what they regarded as their ethnic, religious and political parent state, and distanced themselves almost totally from the other. National identity and sense of belonging became narrow and exclusive as the population split neatly along political and religious lines into two distinct tribes.

One of the many benefits of the Belfast Agreement is that it addresses the issue of identity head-on. Not only does it endorse and legally protect the right of people in Northern Ireland to choose either Irish or British nationality, but it also guarantees their right to pick and mix at will between the two. Thanks to the Agreement, we can now enjoy the best of both worlds.

When the civil rights campaign took off, the Unionist fear of being coerced into a Catholic church-dominated united Ireland, regardless of whether it was justified, was real and widely held. But at Long Kesh, this did not influence our feelings towards, or our everyday relationships with, our Catholic neighbours. Our hostility was directed towards an abstraction, towards a foreign state and the church that dominated it (and, of course, to those who were ‘trying to force us into it’). Relationships with our Catholic friends, who were decent people and good neighbours with whom we interacted on a daily basis, were the exact opposite of that: they were solid, practical, and built on affection born of everyday intimacy.

It’s worth saying that, in later years, I came to realise that separating the particular from the general, and the individual from the group, can sometimes be dangerously deceptive, and is far from proof of non-bias. The misogynist who happens to be friendly with a couple of girls at work, but still hates women in general, is no less a misogynist. Nor is the racist any less of a bigot because he has a couple of black workmates with whom he manages to pass the time

of day. The same applies to the homophobe who might still nod to an old (now openly gay) school friend, and to the xenophobe who thinks that his English neighbour is okay, but still hates all the English people he has never met. None of these people is any less bigoted because they are able, in certain circumstances, to look favourably on an individual representative of a group they generally despise.

An all-too-commonly-heard remark in Northern Ireland encapsulates this perfectly: ‘Such and such is a Protestant/Catholic, but they’re okay.’ This manages to combine a favourable comment about a person with a strong negative inference about the community the person belongs to. It makes crystal clear that, although the individual in question may be considered ‘okay’, they are an exceptional member of a community that is anything but.

I know that being raised in a religiously mixed community has made me strongly averse to broad generalisations and the negative stereotyping of whole groups of people. You simply cannot spend your formative years in such close – and, in our case, often mutually supportive – proximity to people of another religion without realising that, essentially, they are no different from you. Nor can you easily give credence to the negative stereotyping and demonising tactics of others.

Have I never had sectarian thoughts? Of course I have. I would be a liar or, worse still, seriously self-deluded if I claimed otherwise. We all have a tendency to identify or invent difference and then scapegoat and/or attack it, particularly as a defence mechanism against facing up to our own shortcomings. The trick is to recognise it, be constantly vigilant against it, and be prepared to eradicate it quickly if it does breach our defences. We need, within ourselves, to be fighting a constant battle against irrational prejudice and all the dangerous phobias and -isms that we are naturally drawn towards. There is no better defence, in my view, than continual warts-and-all self-appraisal.

From the start of the civil rights campaign, and throughout the entire Troubles, there was an unspoken understanding between the Catholic and Protestant residents of Long Kesh. They very seldom talked to one another about what

was going on, except when it would be embarrassingly obvious not to make some comment, such as after a particularly brutal atrocity. Even then, it would be no more than, 'That was terrible, what happened yesterday', with a stock reply along the lines of, 'Aye, them poor people, it's terrible altogether.' Formalities over, there would be a quick retreat to the safer and more comfortable terrain of everyday neighbourly small talk. Most of the time, it was as if the Troubles were happening on another planet. No doubt it helped Long Kesh survive as a mixed-religion community, despite the murder, mayhem and upheaval. I just can't help feeling that there had to be a better way of dealing with it than that.

### Part 3: For my part

Identity and ethnicity, to some extent, remain a tribal battleground in Northern Ireland. An added problem is that many people confuse the two, often deliberately. What a divisive, artificial nonsense the whole thing is. Thankfully, these are not issues that I have ever felt inclined to overburden myself with. Like most other people in Ireland and Britain, I am an ethnic mongrel (of mixed Irish, Scottish and English stock, at least), and delighted to be so. As for identity, I was born and raised in Ireland, therefore I am Irish. My nationality is British, so I consider myself to be both British and Irish.

Where I lived, there were no sectarian interfaces, no bombs going off, and no-one being shot or attacked. Aside from the close proximity of the Maze Prison (formerly HMP Long Kesh), the Troubles very rarely impinged directly on our lives. Having said that, Lisburn was only three miles distant and suffered more than its fair share of IRA atrocities during the conflict, so we weren't completely divorced from what was going on.

How, then, given my stable family background and the fact that I was raised and lived happily in a mixed community, did I ever become a member of the Ulster Defence Association, or any paramilitary group, for that matter? You might well ask. But I'm afraid I have no pat answer to give. If I were to revert temporarily to my former political persona, no doubt I could come up with any amount of plausible-sounding excuses. But that's all they would be – excuses and attempts at retrospective justification.

The nearest I can come to a straight answer, I suppose, is that old macho thing of saying I 'wanted to do something for my country/community'. Not much of a reason at the best of times, I know. And it becomes even less plausible when one considers just what 'doing something for your country' in a paramilitary sense usually entails, and how little paramilitaries of any stripe have actually contributed to the collective welfare of 'their' communities.

I could argue that during a conflict situation, and particularly one that showed no sign of ever ending, societal reference points on issues of morality shift and become distorted. The wholly abnormal gradually becomes accepted as the norm, and people do things and take up attitudes and positions that they wouldn't normally entertain. Yet that doesn't go any way towards explaining why many thousands of other young people – the overwhelming majority, in fact – across the political and religious divide chose not to become involved in paramilitarism. After all, they lived with exactly the same societal shifts as me, and in most cases in far worse circumstances than I ever experienced.

When I listen to former combatants talk of the terrible things they 'had to do' during the Troubles, I am reminded of observations made by Hannah Arendt<sup>3</sup> in her stunningly prescient and deeply disturbing work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. She had this to say on the subject of how German SS members were primed to cope with the weight of atrocities they carried out or witnessed:

'Hence the problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of human suffering. The trick used by Himmler – who apparently was rather strongly afflicted by these instinctive reactions himself – was very simple and probably very effective; it consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!'

I was raised to know the difference between right and wrong, so no such excuses from me. Suffice it to state baldly – become involved in paramilitarism

I did. Thankfully, it was mainly on the political side of things. Again, though, whether it is through acts of commission, omission, encouragement or support, no-one leaves a paramilitary group with clean hands. My last word on the subject is this: in a functioning liberal democracy, any paramilitary organisation that uses extralegal methods cannot remotely be described as being, or consider itself as being, 'pro-state'. This is simply a contradiction in terms. By the very act of deliberately going against the most fundamental laws of a state, you put yourself in direct opposition to it. That was where I put myself for a while.

I wound up as part of the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) negotiating team at the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement. A Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) wag is supposed to have remarked that the initials UDP were the result of a typographical error. Very funny!

Like Seamus Mallon's now famous 'Sunningdale for slow learners' comment<sup>4</sup>, I wish I'd thought of it myself. Mallon was right, of course. Anybody with an ounce of wit knew exactly where an agreement lay, even before they had set foot in the negotiations. The trick was to get everyone moved to the right place, preferably at the same time and, critically, with their various constituencies in tow. With the DUP now fully signed up and sharing power with Sinn Féin, this has eventually been achieved.

I believe that the credit for peace and stability in Northern Ireland is due to Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, above everyone else. Without their tenacity, patience, powers of persuasion and willingness to take risks, we would still be stuck somewhere between open conflict and a functioning political settlement – with it being only a matter of time before we inexorably slid back to the former. Without taking anything for granted, things are now looking good for Northern Ireland. We are gradually returning to a monotonous level of normality that is in keeping with our proper status as a regional backwater. And thank goodness for it – we have had more 'excitement' and elevation than we ever deserved.

And what about the future? Last year, a senior Sinn Féin member asked me if I would accept a united Ireland if a majority of the people in Northern Ireland were ever to vote for one. I said, yes, of course I would. I was actually a bit

miffed that he felt he had to ask (although this did take place while he and I were getting rather heated over an unrelated matter). After all, allowance for a democratically mandated unitary Irish state is a fundamental part of the agreement made between unionism and nationalism, and guaranteed by the two governments. It is an agreement that I helped to negotiate. Did he think that I had changed my mind since then? Everyone now agrees that a united Ireland can be triggered by popular mandate – but only in that way.

If he had asked me whether I thought it likely to happen, my reply would have been far less certain. In an increasingly settled and properly functioning Northern Ireland, more and more people might well decide they would rather stick with the 'best of both worlds' option than plump entirely for one side or the other. Alternatively, relations between the two governments will continue to improve, and friendly interaction between the Irish government and Unionists will be maintained. So it is perfectly conceivable that a sufficient number of Unionists to tip the scale might well decide, at some time, to vote in favour of Irish unity. Although my personal preference is on the side of the former, I have no fears of the latter. If there is to be a united Ireland in my lifetime, so be it. I will comply with whatever the Northern Ireland electorate decides. There is a world of difference between dogged resistance to a violent and sustained attempt to force you into accepting something against your will, and compliance with the democratically expressed wishes of a majority of the electorate.

I do have concerns about how, in the event, Irish unity would be managed – more precisely, about whether those in favour have actually considered all the implications. Managing the political, social and economic consequences of a sudden expansion of the Irish state by approximately 1.75 million extra citizens would be taxing enough on its own. That around one million of the new citizens would be pro-British would complicate the process immeasurably. No one can seriously believe that former Unionists, a substantial minority in any new dispensation, would overnight become enthusiastically pro-Irish. A profound change in attitude would need to take place in Ireland for there to be any chance of a process of unification being peaceful, never mind economically successful. The casual, grudge-bearing, victimhood-indulgent anti-Britishness

(usually, more accurately, anti-Englishness) that is too often on display would have to disappear.

In recent times, the Republic has enjoyed undreamed-of economic success, and national self-confidence has grown accordingly. One might have expected, as a consequence, that overt anti-Britishness would have all but evaporated of its own accord – but not so to date. If Unionists are ever to be successfully integrated into a united Ireland, major efforts will have to be made to accommodate them. Britishness will need to be embraced, and even celebrated, as opposed to being merely tolerated. That, of course, is all part of a future that may not happen. But the fact that it is possible is reason enough for the Irish Government, in particular, to make preparations.

Every so often, it is worthwhile looking back on where you came from and considering the people and the circumstances that helped to shape you. It's a chance to reflect on the changes that have taken place both within and all around you, and to try to accept the absolute certainty that change will continue to happen.

Although life is undoubtedly about change, not all of it is lasting. Sometimes the journey can appear as circular as it is linear. My own life is once again heavily sprinkled with close friends who were raised as Catholic, this time from both North and South. I have no idea what, if any, religious or even political views many of them hold now. Nor could I care less. And thanks to recommendations from some of them, I find myself contributing in a small way to what I have always considered two of the greatest media institutions in the world, the BBC and *The Irish Times*, to my great delight and occasional disbelief. Moreover, among my most trusted friends, whose politics I am well aware of, are a few non-party-aligned IRA ex-prisoners. Our constitutional preferences are really the only point on which we disagree, and that is no big deal. We decided a long time ago that they weren't even worth us falling out over, never mind killing one another. Life's like that – it can sometimes take a long time to learn what you already knew in the first place.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The English term townland is derived from the Old English word *tun*, in turn originating from the Old Norse word *tún*, which describes a homestead, or settlement. The official term for townland in Irish is *bailte fearainn* (plural *bailte fearainn*). Source: Wikipedia.
- <sup>2</sup> Stewart, A.T.Q. (1996) *The Summer Soldiers*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Arendt, H. (1963) *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. London: Penguin.
- <sup>4</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the then Deputy Leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, Seamus Mallon, publicly described the new initiative as 'Sunningdale for slow learners'. The original comment is sometimes attributed to Mark Durkan.

## Olivia O’Leary

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## Separate but Equal

Olivia O’Leary

### An organ and a piano

My family has had a long and troubled relationship with the British National Anthem. It started during the 1903 Royal visit to Dublin by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. My grandfather and his friend, medical students at the then Catholic University Medical School in Cecilia Street, lay on top of the organ during the King’s visit to Trinity College in order to stop the playing of *God Save the King*. For this impertinence, they were arrested.

This is all according to my mother, but it made a big impression on me, and I had my own run-in with the anthem when I was nine. It happened at Titania’s Palace. My mother had taken us to see the massive doll’s house, since bought for Legoland in Denmark, but then on almost permanent display at Ballinastragh, outside Gorey in County Wexford. It had been built in the early twentieth century by Sir Neville Rodwell Wilkinson, Principal Officer of Arms in Ireland, and it was so big it seemed to suck in all the space in the room that housed it.

Our English guide told us proudly that many Royal visitors had been to see the doll’s house when it was in London, and that the Queen herself had inspected it in December 1922. Then he wound up a gramophone in the corner and put on a scratchy record of *God Save the Queen*. My mother, ever polite, stayed standing. I promptly threw myself into one of the chairs around the wall. ‘It’s not my national anthem,’ I announced to the disapproving guide. ‘No,’ said my mother with a smile that would freeze mercury, ‘but it is grown-up to show respect for other people’s traditions.’

The perfect put-down. It ticked me off for being rude, but was also a sharp reminder to our English guide that this was Ireland, and the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was ‘other people’.

She steered a balanced course, my mother, much more balanced than I ever met with at primary school, where anti-Britishness was part of the curriculum.

We were told constantly how the British had suppressed our economy and our language – and how they had failed to suppress our religion, so they’d punished us for it instead. It wasn’t wrong, but it trapped us into martyrdom. Almost every day, we sang *Faith of our Fathers*, the militant Irish Catholic hymn, sung until recent years in the Gaelic Athletic Association’s national stadium at Croke Park. It swore allegiance to Catholicism, and vowed that we would be ‘true to thee till death’. We learned it before we even knew what the words meant, which is probably why my cousin Mary called it ‘the trutledeetledeet song’.

This was the diet fed to us at school. When I’d arrive home, my mother would once again calm things down: ‘We are separate from the British now,’ she would say. ‘We are separate, and we are equal. You don’t have to resent people when you are equal to them.’

Our house, of course, was somewhat frowned on at school. At home, we *Listened with Mother*. The BBC Home Service was on regularly because it was simply, my mother said, the best radio in the world. My parents’ conversation was laced with quips from the great wartime radio show *ITMA*<sup>1</sup>. Christopher Robin and the Famous Five sat on the bookshelves beside Standish O’Grady’s *Cúchulainn and the Red Branch Knights*. It was a house where we played golf and tennis, rather than Gaelic games.

But nobody dared point an accusing finger, because this was also a house that, 35 years earlier, had been raided constantly by the Black and Tans and the British Auxiliaries. One of my mother’s earliest memories was of standing beside her cot while British soldiers ran bayonets through her mattress. They were looking for guns. They looked in the wrong place. The guns were under the floorboards in the linen press, where we found a few of them 40 years later.

Her father was O/C of the Fourth Brigade of the County Carlow IRA during the War of Independence between 1916 and 1921. As the local doctor, he had a petrol ration during the First World War, and so was useful in running guns. He crossed to Scotland through Larne to bring back weapons and dynamite. He supplied the guns for the Carlow Kilkenny area during the Easter Rising of 1916. The dynamite that he acquired from a colliery in Scotland was used

to make grenades and bombs deployed in the General Post Office during the week of the Easter Rising.

Knowing he would be arrested after the Rising, he went to the girl he’d been walking out with in our village of Borris and asked her to marry him. She had been partly educated in England. She had major reservations about his involvement in violence, but she married him anyway. It was a hurried afternoon ceremony in the empty village church. The ring was borrowed from her housekeeper, who acted as witness. They walked to a remote train station where he wouldn’t be recognised, and they set out on their honeymoon to Kerry. Very quickly, he was arrested and spent the rest of the year in prison in Dublin, and then in Knutsford and Reading.

It wasn’t easy. He was regarded as a ringleader and was regularly held in solitary confinement. In his jail diary, written on scraps of paper, he describes a Sunday in Knutsford in June 1916. ‘Sang Hail Glorious Saint Patrick after Mass. The officer in charge, when he heard *Erin’s Green Valleys* (the chorus) got a terrible fright as he thought ‘twas a Sinn Fein song as a prelude to a burst for freedom by us. They are awfully frightened of us, even as prisoners.’

In Reading, he was visited by his older brother, my grand-uncle John, who was a doctor attached to the medical corps of the British Army, and who arrived in his officer’s uniform. Warders were bewildered as to why ‘this officer and gentleman’ wanted to see ‘this Shinner.’ The two brothers belonged to two armies ostensibly at war with one another. But they saw no barricades. They remained close all their lives.

In all his time in prison, my grandfather desperately missed his new wife. So many diary entries begin: ‘She didn’t come today ...’ He talked about her incessantly – how beautiful she was, what a wonderful pianist she was – so much so that his cell companion, Denis McCullough from the well known Irish music and instruments firm McCullough Pigott, decided to shut him up by suggesting he order her a new piano. A German Schiedmayer was ordered from prison and arrived, via Genoa, once the war was over.

And every time I play it (because it's mine now), I'm reminded of the irony of the situation: my jailbird grandfather in Reading ordering a piano for his new wife, whose musical and social skills had been polished in a convent in Ascot only 20 miles down the road. That contradiction would remain in their relationship. She was a gentle woman who took no part in his revolutionary activities. She hated his constant absence on the run or in jail, and the regular searching of her home by strangers. Visiting him in prison, talking to him through the wire around the Curragh Camp or at Richmond Barracks, she tried to persuade him to go to America with her and start again, to leave it all behind. He told her it was unfair to put such pressure on him; that he couldn't desert his companions. She died young. I often wonder whether it had anything to do with the tension of those years.

### **Inherited tensions**

In a way, I inherited those tensions from my grandparents. I'm proud of my Irishness and my separateness, and of my grandfather's part in bringing that about. I know, however, that the War of Independence was used by the modern-day IRA as a historical precedent for Republican violence in Northern Ireland and the UK. We, the Irish, have to reflect on that. The British have to reflect on the brutal repression that brings people to use such violence in the first place.

I've described what my family did during the First World War, but there was another war, with other tensions. I was reminded of those late one night while walking home along the river bank from St Mullins to Gaignamanagh. Suddenly the moon came out, lighting up the river like a highway. I shivered, because I knew I'd seen this scene before – in my mind's eye. My mother told me that on moonlit nights in 1940 and 1941, German bombers used the Barrow/Grand Canal waterway to guide them towards Dublin, from where they'd turn right for Liverpool. When she and her family heard the planes, they would get out of bed and say the Rosary for people who would be bombed in England that night. As a child, I used to have nightmares about this, about the drone of the planes, about the people in Liverpool asleep in their beds, about the notion that our river, where we spent hours swimming and picnicking, could be used as a pathway to death.

Once, as a cheeky teenager, I told my mother that a few anti-aircraft guns based along the Barrow would have been more useful to the people in Liverpool than prayers. No, she said. Joining the Allies would have meant that the terrible Civil War of the 1920s would have broken out again. To survive as a separate state, we had to remain neutral. We desperately wanted people to understand this. We knew it was almost impossible that the British ever would.

They saw it as an act of betrayal, because they still thought of us – to use Louis MacNeice's phrase from his great poem *Neutrality* – as 'kin'. We didn't see it as betrayal because we were neighbours, not kin. It didn't mean we didn't care. The general thrust of our neutrality policy was pro-Allies. By the end of the war, an estimated 150,000 Irish citizens had volunteered for the British armed services.

My mother's cousin, Jim Murphy, was an air-raid warden killed during the Blitz in London. My two O'Leary aunts, Peggy and Kitty, who qualified as nurses at the Mater Misericordia Hospital in Dublin, served with the British army nursing service. Kitty went to India, and was torpedoed twice on the way. Peggy was with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service Reserve, and served in Normandy, setting up field hospitals after the D-Day landings in 1944.

But both aunts were cut off from us by that experience. They married in England and lived there for most of their lives. A chippy relationship grew up, particularly when religious difference was seen as part and parcel of what made us British or Irish. Take my Auntie Kitty. During her wartime nursing service, she met a lovely British doctor called Owen Clarke, an Anglican, married him and settled down in Canterbury. She had escaped from Catholic Ireland with all its taboos, and she revelled in her freedom. She sent one very musical son to the Canterbury Cathedral Choir School. The other went on to Sandhurst. Her husband was a sidesman at the Cathedral, and at Christmas, instead of the nativity scenes or holy pictures that everyone else sent us, Kitty took a wicked delight in sending us all a card with a photograph of Canterbury Cathedral. It used to drop through our postbox onto the tiled hall floor like a gauntlet. It drove her orthodox Irish Catholic brothers and sisters wild. My father, who was a kind man, would just sigh and say, 'Well, that's Kitty for you.'

When, years later, I met her in London, she would feign utter ignorance of Irish affairs. Sweeping me off to lunch in a terrifying embrace of perfume and chunky jewellery, she'd ask: 'And how is Mr Cosgrove running things, darling? And how is *Cumann na nGaedhail*?' I'd sigh, 'It's Mr *Cosgrave*, Auntie Kitty. And his party is now called Fine Gael.'

Years later, when attitudes in Ireland had become more ecumenical, we were watching the Papal visit to Britain on TV, and the cameras panned across the front of Canterbury Cathedral, where the Pope was awaited. Suddenly a bustling little figure, an official usher in a black velvet suit, hurried latecomers inside the door. It was Kitty O'Leary from Graignamanagh, playing her part in the historic first Papal visit to Great Britain. 'Good girl, Kitty,' said the sisters and brothers.

Kitty remained a Docent, an official usher and guide, at the Cathedral until she died in 2000. She was buried beside her husband in the Friends' Garden (the war memorial garden at the Cathedral), a mark of special respect. The Irish cousins attended en masse, and in Kitty's house that night provided a sort of musical farewell, with flutes, tin whistles and harmonicas. As her coffin was carried out of the crypt, the chief boy soprano from the choir sang *She Moves Through the Fair*. 'We had to have a bit of Ireland in there,' said her sons John and Oz.

John was in the Coldstream Guards, and because of his Irish connections, was given the option of not doing a tour of duty in Northern Ireland. But he thought being Irish would actually help him understand the place better, so he went to Derry. He was based on the Strand Road, opposite the Bank of Ireland, where our Uncle Ned was manager. It was difficult because in his uniform, even popping into the bank to see his uncle, John would always be a target. My uncle Ned, conscious of the danger to his nephew, and trying to keep his staff and his bank from being bombed, had to be careful about meeting John in public. They met quietly, and in mufti.

## Rome

It was my cousin Oz Clarke who welcomed me to swinging London when I was posted there for the Irish state broadcasting service, RTE, in the early 1970s.

He wasn't yet known as a television wine expert, but he would haul me off to wine tastings at Sotheby's and Christies, steer me firmly away from the champagne, and bury me in the buttery tastes of St Estephe and Pauillac. By the time I was posted to Northern Ireland, two years later, I had the most expensive palate in Belfast. One day, in a bomb clearance sale at the Wellington Hotel, I discovered two venerable bottles of Margaux, Chateau Rauzan-Segla. 'Och, they're all dusty,' said the nice girl at the check-out apologetically. 'You can have 'em for a pound each.' Thank you, Oz.

Working in London for RTE in the 1970s and for the BBC in the 1980s, I picked up more than expensive drinking habits. I learned how to plan. The Irish are optimists – we hope it'll be all right on the night. The British are pessimists because they can afford to be. Not only do they have plan A: they adopt a belt-and-braces approach with plans B, C and D.

On *Newsnight*, I was warned constantly that if it could go wrong, it would. Programmes were planned and mapped out like a military campaign. Marching into the studio with that massive *Newsnight* script, I knew that for every item that fell down, there would be a back-up. Ancient Rome, I thought, must have been like this: organised, hierarchical, ambitious.

That didn't mean they couldn't handle a breaking story. One day, *Newsnight's* foreign desk noticed agency reports of unusually high levels of radioactivity in Scandinavia, and immediately guessed that there had been a nuclear explosion in the Soviet Union. The evening news bulletins tentatively ran the Chernobyl story, but we already had all the background done; Peter Snow and his experts were ready in the studio. Five minutes after we went on air, we got the first pictures of the burning reactor. 'Just describe what you see on the monitor,' they told me in my earpiece. 'We'll get you information as it comes in.' And they did. I still remember talking over those flaming scenes as, all around me, below camera level, *Newsnight* producers crawled like crocodiles across the studio floor to put pieces of paper on my lap. At one stage I counted seven crawlers, the cream of Oxbridge, many of whom went on to hold the BBC's most senior jobs. It was a triumph of grit and organisation – the BBC at its British best.



There were times when I wasn't so comfortable. I was more than happy to cede defence stories, for instance, to the wonderful Peter Snow, whose eyes would light up at the prospect. 'Ooh, let's get in some brass hats, we've got to have some brass hats,' he'd chant. Naturally, Britain's position in NATO and on the UN Security Council gives defence a bigger place in British national debate than is the case in a neutral country like Ireland. Still, the generals and admirals, and the acres of British media coverage given to defence issues, are all to me an uncomfortable reminder of empire, and of Ireland's unhappy place in it.

It seems to me that Britain's defence forces are central to the British sense of identity, in much the same way as the Roman Catholic Church was once central to our sense of being Irish. The British show a degree of reverence to 'brass hats' that we once bestowed on bishops. As a journalist, I noticed that censorship in Britain usually had to do with security and defence issues. When censorship or self-censorship arose in Ireland, it was often about not upsetting the Catholic Church. In both cases, I suppose, we're talking about once-great international empires. The British had theirs. We had ours: the Roman Empire, controlled by priests and nuns. Each society paid due deference to its own imperial troops.

### **The Royals and the BBC**

As escapees from the British Empire, we Irish are acutely aware of all its trappings. I remember the effect of my first sight of the British Museum. Faced with those formidable pillars flanking those great entrance steps, I faltered. These were truly the gates of empire, guarding all the loot from other people's countries, including the Elgin marbles. I couldn't walk up those steps. Eventually, I found it possible to go in through the modest back entrance and see the magnificent Reading Room, and enjoy one of the greatest exhibitions in the world.

With Empire, of course, came the Royal Family; as an Irish broadcaster working in Britain, I also had to come to terms with that. Irish people have always shown great interest in the Royals, particularly the horsy ones. Even among republicans, there was genuine affection for the Queen Mother, who went to

the races and enjoyed a stiff drink. The Queen is seen as a good egg. Princess Anne is seen as a very good egg.

For the British, of course, it's much more than a matter of grading eggs. Royalty represents their state. Still, I found it bizarre, on the only occasion when I went to interview a member of the Royal family, that all of the very superior reception staff at Lime Grove were so excited, they actually came outside to wave me off. For a meeting with Princess Michael of Kent!

We were going to interview her about Laura Ashley, who had died that day. The Princess was her friend, and also a trustee of the Victoria and Albert's costume museum. We set up our cameras in her sitting room in Kensington Palace, and I sat there waiting for her, wondering what Royalty was like. When she came in, tastefully dressed in navy and white, she took one look at me and threw up her hands in horror. 'No!' she cried, turning to the producer and crew. 'No! You can't possibly.' Was it because I was Irish? I bridled, ready to defend my nation, like my grandfather before me. But no. My offence was that my fuschia pink John Rocha suit clashed with her apricot velvet armchair. We swapped chairs and she gave us a grand interview. But I did come away wondering if anybody'd ever put a pea under her mattress.

The correct address for the Princess was 'Your Royal Highness'. I said it as little as possible because it sounded so silly. When you've grown up in a Republic, I suppose, all these titles sound hilarious, like something out of a pantomime. In deference to my British audience, I did always try to get these things right; but every so often I'd slip up. Once on *Newsnight*, I had to refer to a nobleman ranking somewhere between a duke and a count, a marquis – except that I pronounced it the French way. We had a voluminous post. 'Get it right,' said one angry letter. 'He's an aristocrat, for God's sake, not a tent!'

It's different now, but in the mid-1980s there weren't many Irish accents on the airwaves in Britain, apart from those of Terry Wogan and John Cole. Received English pronunciation was still the norm, and I remember clinging on for dear life to my Irish 'r', resisting any temptation to slide into saying 'Aythuh Scahgill'. The odd time, we'd get complaints – particularly if I was co-presenting with one

of *Newsnight*'s finest presenters ever and a Scot, Donald McCormick. One bloody Celt was bad enough, they'd grumble, but two!

Ten years later, however, I was asked by an English colleague, an award-winning journalist, if I would do the voice-over on her film. I said she should do it herself, that she had a lovely voice. 'No,' she said in her cut-glass home counties tones. 'They don't want accents like mine any more.' That's when it struck me how much the relationship between Britain and Ireland had changed. In a politically correct age, my accent, Irish and therefore regarded as classless, is more acceptable than that of a well bred Englishwoman.

Some day, someone will write the story of the BBC's role in British-Irish relations. If anything created a bridge between the two states, even at the worst of times, it was the constant, reassuring presence of the BBC. Of course, it was an arm of Empire: during the Second World War it used Ireland's best known comic, Jimmy O'Dea, in a programme aimed at nudging neutral Ireland towards a sense of common cause with beleaguered Britain. But programmes like *ITMA* did that anyway, simply because they were so good. *ITMA*, *The Goons*, *Just a Minute*: generations of Irish people depended on them for a laugh. As for television, the soaps on the two main British terrestrial channels now dictate mealtimes in Irish houses, and TV coverage of British soccer dominates the pubs.

We get all of this without paying a licence fee, and we're utterly unrepentant about that – a small down-payment on the debts of Empire. There was a time when official Ireland worried about that shared, intimate world of the airwaves – that it was a form of cultural imperialism that would erode our sense of identity. Those concerns are a bit pointless in the era of the internet and global communication. But the BBC has tried hard. It has developed an Irish language service in Northern Ireland, and gives serious coverage to Gaelic games. That sort of cultural recognition can cause years of pent-up resentment to melt away. Official Britain has recognised this for some time. The proliferation of schools of Irish studies in British universities over the past two or three decades is surely no coincidence. Among other things, they have given a voice to the vast Irish community in Britain, and some of the most interesting recent examples of Irish cultural and social history have emerged from them.

## Easier neighbours

For the British Irish community, and indeed for the rest of us, the improved relationship between the two islands has been a boon. There are three reasons for this. First and foremost is the ending of the republican campaign of violence. Then there are the years of work by political leaders, from Jack Lynch to Bertie Ahern, from Ted Heath to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – not forgetting Liam Cosgrave's work on Sunningdale, and Garret FitzGerald's work on the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, ensuring that British and Irish government would work in tandem and would never again be hijacked by their own extremists.

Equally important, however, has been Ireland's move from being a rural to a suburban or urban society. In prosperous, modern Ireland, the lives of ordinary Irish people are much more like those of ordinary British people. And shared experience allows people to relate to one another more effectively.

British romantics are appalled by our materialist new Ireland, with its SUV-clogged roads and its pushy developers buying up the *Savoy*. They preferred us when we were dreamy and simple and poor, but they also looked down on us because we couldn't support our own people. Now we can. That self-sufficiency gives us pride and confidence. It makes us easier neighbours – to use my mother's words, separate but equal.

There will always be things we don't understand about one another. For example, it's almost impossible to explain to most English people (although the Scots and Welsh understand) why the survival of the Irish language matters, when so few of us speak it as a first language. I can still remember sitting in the make-up room at Yorkshire Television, putting the case for Irish to the woman doing my face. 'It's part of what we are,' I said. 'I mean, if I didn't have basic Irish, I wouldn't be able to understand what all the Irish place names around my home area mean: *Bun na hAbhann* – the end of the river; *Clais an Ghainimh* – sandy valley; *Baile na Greine* – sunny town. It would be like losing the map of my own country, where I spend all my spare time, all my holidays. I'd be a stranger wandering around in my own lovely place,' I finished with a flourish. She was a no-nonsense Yorkshirewoman, and wasn't having any

of it. 'You'd be much better off learning French, and then you could go there on your holidays,' she said. I gave up.

We've come a long way. I knew I was hearing history when *God Save the Queen* was sung last year in the hallowed home of Gaelic games, Croke Park – and listened to by a respectful Irish crowd. Inevitably, though, anthems, flags and symbols will always cause some problems. I had a difficult moment one November on *Newsnight*, when I was handed a poppy to wear on air. When I demurred, the deputy editor, Tim Orchard, a decent man, said: 'Olivia, it's my duty to give you the poppy. Whether you wear it or not is up to you.'

I took the poppy off to my presenter's room and contemplated it. I don't like wearing emblems anyway, but this one represented two world wars during which my family history diverged sharply from that of the British. I have a cutting from the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* in May/June 1916 with the headline: 'Our Heroic North Sea Dead'. Beside that story is a picture of a dozen Sinn Féin prisoners arrested after the Rising, and staring out from the middle of the photo is my 33-year-old grandfather, Edward Dundon. He was fighting for Irish independence when Britain was fighting what many Irish people see as an imperialist war. It was in order to maintain that independence that Ireland stayed neutral in the Second World War, when Britain was fighting against fascism. We are all of us uncomfortable with parts of our history, but we live with it.

So I didn't wear the poppy because it doesn't represent me. This is not in any way to disrespect those who died in the wars. But we will respect them in our different ways. Some will remember them at the going down of the Sun and in the morning. I must remember them when the moon rises over the Barrow.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *It's That Man Again*. The name of the radio programme derived from a topical catchphrase: whenever Hitler made some new territorial claim, the newspaper headlines would proclaim 'It's That Man Again'.

## Richard English

*Richard English was born in 1963 in Belfast, where he is Professor of Politics at Queen's University. His books include Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA (which won the 2003 UK Political Studies Association Politics Book of the Year Award) and Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland (which won the 2007 Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize and the 2007 Political Studies Association of Ireland Book Prize). He is a frequent media commentator on Irish politics and history, and has written on Ireland for The Irish Times, The Times Literary Supplement, the Financial Times, Newsweek and Times Higher Education.*

## 'Force will get us nowhere?'

Richard English

My earliest recollection of the Northern Ireland Troubles is a conversation I had with my Dad when I was seven years old. We were on our annual family holiday on Ireland's north coast, and I must have noticed British soldiers on the beach. Magilligan Camp was not far from where we were staying, and this would have been the summer of 1971, when internment had just been introduced in the North. At that age, I used to play a lot with toy soldiers, but the real thing must have seemed more menacing. 'How long,' I asked, 'will the soldiers be here?' I recall my Dad's reply, something along the lines that, while he himself didn't expect to see an end to all this, I might do so in my own lifetime.

As it turned out, my father died in August 1998, the month in which the Omagh bomb so brutally demonstrated that there was still some murderous energy left in the Troubles. My Belfast-born mother had died the previous year, a few days after the Provisional IRA's second and more decisive ceasefire. And so there were key signs towards the end of my parents' lives that epochal change was indeed happening in British-Irish relations, and more especially in the politics of Ulster.

It's an unreliable business – childhood recollection. But my strong memory of our Irish holidays when I was a child was overwhelmingly one of benign interaction. I have to say that this has also been a lasting feature of my own ongoing experience – in spite of a professional career studying political violence in Irish-British relations. As young children on holiday, my brother and I used to have Mark Twain-like escapades in the freedom of the dunes and beaches of the beautiful north coast. Our mother's Irish (mostly Northern) family were effusively kind and loving when we visited them each year, and it all seemed straightforward enough: we had a Belfast-born mother and an English father; I myself had been born in Belfast but lived in England; we had relatives in both places. Nothing seemed more natural to a child.

Irish visits (South as well as North) were irregular but frequent during the rest of my childhood. As a politically intrigued teenager, however, I came more and

more to notice the sharper and more conflict-laden aspects of a setting that had seemed so idyllic to me as a small child. On holiday in England, in the summer of 1979, I remember hearing on the radio – on my brother’s birthday, 27 August – of the IRA killings in Sligo and Warrenpoint, which claimed 22 lives in that one day. Then, while I was a sixth-former at school in Bristol, news from Ireland frequently featured the grisly and courageous republican hunger strike of 1981, as well as the brutal violence of the strikers’ comrades beyond the H-blocks, and also that of their counterparts in rival armed groups.

When I became a history student at Oxford in the 1980s, I was politically very left-wing. (This seems strange now: virtually none of the undergraduates whom I lecture at Queen’s University in Belfast are old enough even to remember the existence of Communism as a world force. But it was not particularly rare in the mid-1980s for a student to be of the left, and I was following the well trodden pattern of Methodist parents producing Marxist children... I should, however, point out that it was the Methodism that turned out to be the far more lasting and valuable legacy in terms of understanding history and politics.) Anyway, as a young Marxist I was fascinated by the problem that nationalism posed for the left; as a history student I wanted to explore this through one detailed example; and as the Belfast-born son of a Belfast mother, I chose Ireland as my case study.

So I spent much of my time at university reading about Irish history, and after Oxford I studied for a PhD – focusing on the 1920s and 1930s left wing of the IRA – and then came to work at Queen’s University in 1989. For someone fascinated by Irish history and politics, those last years of the twentieth century were extraordinary ones to witness in Belfast. World-historical change was happening on the doorstep, and the intimate politics of Northern Ireland – tension, violence, political initiatives, peace process developments – meant that the local news was also internationally significant. (Thankfully, it is far less so now, and the events of Belfast today only occasionally attract the interest of *The New York Times* or CNN.)

Inextricably, all of this late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century politics was both Irish and British, and this was so in both communities. It was true that Ulster Protestants had, during the Troubles, tended to eschew an openly Irish

identity (one of the many ironic legacies of republican violence). In 1968, 20 per cent of Northern Irish Protestants described themselves as Irish; by 1986 the figure had dropped to three per cent, where it languished to the end of the century. But it was equally clear that such people’s Britishness was heavily defined by their Irish setting, in such a manner as to make them seemingly unintelligible in political terms to most people in Britain. (As in Ali G’s great interchange with an Ulster unionist: ‘Is you Irish?’ ‘No, I’m British!’ ‘Is you here on holiday then?’)

Similarly, the powerful Irish nationalism so long evident in the North was one that drew, historically, on influences with very British roots. This was true of the powerful constitutional nationalist tradition of O’Connell, Parnell and Redmond – a tradition that, by the late twentieth century, was being pithily carried on by SDLP politicians such as John Hume. But it was there also in the rich heritage of militant Irish republicans, with an Irish Republican Army (IRA) hero such as Ernie O’Malley spending his prison days reading Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

How could it be otherwise, with such proximity between the islands? The influence, of course, went both ways. At school, studying ‘English’ literature for A-level in Bristol, I read, among others, Sheridan, Yeats, Heaney, Joyce and Beckett. And the English football team I supported had been heavily enriched by having players including Liam Brady, Pat Rice, Pat Jennings, Frank Stapleton, and Sammy Nelson in its ranks (Brady being the import of greatest genius). Now, none of this necessarily undermines the significance of political tension between Ireland and Britain, or the argument of those who espouse a committed Irish separatism. Indeed, as I was later to argue in my book about Ernie O’Malley,<sup>1</sup> it could on occasion be precisely the cultural ambiguities of people’s background influences that drove them to opt for a starkly clear-cut political identity in attempted resolution.

A similar pattern is sometimes evident now in the careers of British jihadists, which brings us to an important point. The lessons available through an understanding of the ambiguous relation between Irishness and Britishness are of value not only in Britain and Ireland. Viewed from Belfast, the post-9/11 international crisis has been all too recognisable and explicable, as what we

have seen in its broad pattern has been very familiar to us: terrorist violence emerging out of long-rooted grievances over contested legitimacy; religiously inflected political ideology; anger at foreign military and other occupation of precious territory. Amid all this, the state under attack is taken by surprise and lacks the intelligence (in more than one sense of the word) to respond with sufficient guile to the new crisis. Understandably, there is a sense that the state must 'do something' – as true in Ulster during 1968–72 as it is in post-9/11 Washington – and it duly responds with an overly military response (in 1970s Northern Ireland, the Parachute Regiment; in the early twenty-first century, the invasion of Iraq), and with often counterproductive legal and incarcerative measures. Was anyone who was familiar with the effects of internment in the North during the 1970s surprised at the developments at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib?

In my work as a professional historian, I have always had the opportunity to see Ireland as a fascinating case study in wider, world-historical themes. This is how I initially began to study Irish history seriously. And the themes involved in, say, the history of the IRA are also those that have shaped modern world politics: the intersection of nationalism with political violence; the tension between nation and state; the overlap between religious and other kinds of group identity; the waxing and waning of socialist idealism; and so on. For this reason, it's all the more lamentable that we seem so often to face contemporary international political crises in a spirit of historical amnesia, in the manner we have just witnessed during the early years of the 'War on Terror'.

One of the lessons we frequently forget at the outset of new conflicts is the dual likelihood involved in violent acts: first, that they will bloodily polarise, making subsequent compromise far more difficult, which is a problem in cases where outright and decisive military victory is implausible; and second, that violent acts will indeed change the world, but rarely quite as their practitioners anticipated. The Provisional IRA, the Ulster Defence Association and the British Army's Parachute Regiment all played a decisive role in altering the history of Northern Ireland in 1972, but none of them was in time to achieve anything like the outcome they and their leaders had anticipated in that bloodiest of years in the North. The study of political history should teach us all multiple

lessons in humility, and should serve as a counterweight to hubristic confidence in our own ability to change the world through force.

Another skill that sensitive readings of history, at their best, can inculcate is how to explain something with which you have no sympathy. As the great practitioner Eric Hobsbawm once wrote, the major task of the historian is 'to understand even what we can least comprehend'.<sup>2</sup> In part, this is why I have so long researched and written on Irish republicanism and nationalism. It is an attempt to explain – not to sympathise with or to endorse, but to *explain* – ideological traditions and organisations with which I myself do not agree.<sup>3</sup> For all of the flaws in these attempts on my part, I'm glad to have made some scholarly effort in that direction. In my life as a university teacher, I have never seen it as my role to change students' political views – even on the odd occasion when it might have seemed that I was in there with a chance. I do, however, hope that, through the reading and discussion and writing in which they engage at university, some students from one political background might find that the views of those of others, with whom they still disagree, are at least more explicable and sane than they initially seemed to them.

Despite my accent (and even my surname), I've found Belfast to be an extraordinarily rewarding place in which to research, write and teach. As someone whose childhood was peripatetic (Belfast, Nigeria, north-east England, Manchester, Bristol), I've found myself feeling at least as much at home in Ireland – South as well as North – as I do when I'm in Britain. And my political interviewees, from the Reverend Ian Paisley to many who were his committed and violent enemies in the IRA, have been courteous, thoughtful, helpful, sane and, in very many cases, likeable, in spite of the sharp differences of political view that might divide us.

Behind this phenomenon lies, I think, another important conclusion to draw from reflections on the interweaving of Ireland and Britain: the essential normality and rationality of those who practise initially unfathomable politics and violence. It's a comforting cliché among outside observers that Ulster's unionists – certainly in their powerful Paisleyite version – are incomprehensible in their politics. Similarly, it's a somewhat comforting myth to assume that monstrous things are done by unusually monstrous people, and that IRA

violence must therefore have arisen from atypical psychopaths. However, in neither case does such a stance seem to me even close to the truth. And it surely makes our explanation of political conflict and violence far more important, paradoxical and ultimately hopeful, if we can acknowledge that those practising what seems to be the politics of incomprehensible extremism are in fact acting with the same mixture of the rational and the visceral as characterises most people's actions, most of the time. (Again, the implications for our reading of contemporary popular-Islamist aggression – however appalling its outworkings – are clear enough.)

Not that any of this diminishes the awfulness of the violence practised in Irish–British political conflict over the years. I've long thought that the idea of presenting IRA violence as criminal in order to demonstrate its illegitimacy was a strangely self-defeating and unnecessary approach for the British Government to adopt. (That great Irishman triumphant in England, Oscar Wilde, had one of his characters once observe that 'It is extraordinary what astounding mistakes clever women make' – a line I often found myself applying to the UK's first female Prime Minister.) For you don't need to show that something is 'non-political' in order to argue persuasively that it is illegitimate, mistakenly blood-stained, or futile. The Provisional IRA's nationalist rivals, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), clearly recognised the political roots of Northern violence: however appalling and misjudged, paramilitary actions had their origins in serious political problems.

'Violence has erupted periodically in Northern Ireland since the foundation of the state,' the SDLP's Executive Committee observed in 1978, 'because of injustices in the political, social and economic systems. All attempts to remedy those injustices were met with repression by the Stormont government through the Special Powers Act. Since the abolition of the Stormont government there has been change. A start has been made on some of the social and economic problems of our society... ' 'However,' they continued, 'stable political institutions have not been established, and currently the government is doing nothing to create them. Violence continues, therefore, because of the unsatisfactory political situation.'

And yet the same SDLP was unambiguously hostile to IRA violence, holding it to be a wholly illegitimate way of pursuing nationalist goals, whatever the political situation. In his successful campaign to hold on to his West Belfast Westminster seat in 1974, then SDLP leader Gerry Fitt accordingly stressed the fact that a vote for him would be seen as favouring 'the ballot box instead of the bomb and the bullet', and 'partnership instead of conflict'. In the same year, the SDLP had proclaimed that 'The Provisional IRA can achieve nothing by carrying on their campaign of violence but they can achieve almost anything they desire by knocking it off.' (How hauntingly prescient this was of the Provisional movement's own eventual calculations, years later, in embarking so successfully on a ceasefire and peace process strategy.)

Throughout the conflict, the constitutional nationalists of the SDLP repeatedly condemned the horrific violence of the IRA. After the 27 August 1979 Provo operations referred to above, which were to claim 22 lives – including those of Lord Mountbatten in County Sligo, and 18 paratroops in County Down, Northern Ireland, whose deaths were welcomed with 'euphoria' and 'elation' by IRA prisoners – the SDLP was impressively lucid in its own stance: 'We wish to reiterate again our utter revulsion at the acts of murder and carnage carried out by the Provisional IRA. We are confident that our sense of revulsion, outrage and shame is shared by the mass of the Irish people. Who would want to live in an Ireland created by people who are capable of such acts?'<sup>4</sup>

Several key points emerge when one reflects closely on the rivalry between these different wings of nationalism in the North of Ireland during the past 40 years. As I have noted, the Provisionals' campaign made so much sense to so many ordinary people because of a series of political developments for which many actors – the British and Irish states, mainstream unionist politicians, loyalists, civil rights agitators, British soldiers, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, external gun-runners – must all share some measure of responsibility. The Provos' acts were monstrous and (in my view) entirely unjustified; yet they were not carried out by monsters, but by normal people who came to view violence as necessary and just. And yet within the nationalist community in the North, it was only once the IRA had effectively ended its campaign, its 'armed struggle', that its party – Sinn Féin – came to dominate Northern nationalism. Observers often read Northern Irish politics as

demonstrating the victory of the extremes. In fact, for the bulk of the Troubles, it was the moderate political parties that clearly, emphatically and repeatedly gained the support of the majority of people in both communities.

This factor owes its existence in part to a dynamic that is central to the Northern Ireland Troubles, but is easily overlooked: that the most intense and decisive conflicts frequently took place within, rather than between, the rival nationalist and unionist communities. What form of struggle was appropriate in the pursuit of your nationalist/republican or unionist/loyalist cause? What did the means of struggle that you adopted actually say about the nature and quality of your tradition, and what kind of Ireland (or Ulster) would emerge as a result? For the two states involved (the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland), what kind of state did you want to produce: one that celebrated majority tradition at the expense of minority identity and rights and protections? Or one with the confidence to refashion itself accommodatingly around flexible structures and identities?

These questions had variously taxed people in Irish and British politics for many years. Rival interpretations over how best to achieve political reform can already be detected in the contrasting 1790s perspectives on Ireland offered respectively by Theobald Wolfe Tone and Edmund Burke. Contrasting answers to the question of how to pursue nationalist struggle had already been offered up by Robert Emmet as opposed to Daniel O'Connell, by Patrick Pearse as opposed to John Redmond. The legacies here are rich and complex. Nor will there emerge any uniformly accepted twenty-first-century view of whether force was indeed necessary to produce desirable political change in an Irish context (and we must remember that force has been used not only by non-state republicans and loyalists, but also by both formal states themselves). This argument will be one to engage future historians of Northern Ireland's Troubles for many years to come: there are no easy answers available. IRA violence certainly prevented the imposition of a solution from which they were excluded. It also gave republicans greater leverage in the negotiation of the final deal that was arrived at in April 1998 – one that included the prospect of republicans in government, prisoner releases, significant reform to the state, and the hope of its ultimate dissolution.

Certainly, the IRA itself held firmly to the view that its violence was historically inevitable, unavoidable, and necessary. Yet it is also worth listening to alternative views. Even in the early 1970s, it was noted by many observers that the violent coercion of Ulster's unionists into a united Ireland might be less possible – or even desirable – than the Provisionals themselves supposed, and that a more consensual approach would be better for Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Such views were quite frequently articulated by Irish nationalists, and archives show them to have been in existence before the Troubles erupted. In November 1968, over a year before the foundation of the Provisionals, one of Taoiseach Jack Lynch's ablest advisers, T.K. Whitaker, penned a prescient *Note on North–South Policy*, which deserves to be widely acknowledged.<sup>6</sup>

Whitaker, who had earlier been instrumental in leading the Republic of Ireland away from its Sinn Féinish economic protectionism, here challenged other features of traditional republican thinking. The Republic of Ireland had rightly abandoned force, he observed, as a way of undoing partition 'because (1) the use of force to overcome northern unionists would accentuate rather than remove basic differences and (2) it would not be militarily possible in any event.' The only option was 'a policy of seeking unity in Ireland by agreement in Ireland between Irishmen. By its nature this is a long-term policy, requiring patience, understanding and forbearance and resolute resistance to emotionalism and opportunism. It is none the less patriotic for that.' Whitaker based his own patriotic view on a cold reading of the complex realities of partition: 'The British are not blameless, as far as the origins of partition are concerned, but neither are they wholly to blame. Nobody can read the history of the past century in these islands without some understanding of the deep, complex and powerful forces which went into the making of partition. It is much too naïve to believe that Britain simply imposed it on Ireland.'

Crucial here was an acknowledgement of the problem that Ulster unionists represented for Irish irredentists; in particular, their economic concerns were thought to merit attention. Unionists were conscious of the economic advantages of being in the UK; indeed, Whitaker argued that any shift towards Irish unity would be disastrous unless Britain continued for some time to provide a subvention to the north:



‘All we can expect from the British is a benevolent neutrality – that no British interest will be interposed to prevent the reunification of Ireland when Irishmen, north and south, have reached agreement. This, of itself, will be cold comfort if we cannot, in addition, achieve a good “marriage settlement”, in the form of a tapering-off over a long period of present British subsidisation of Northern Ireland. Otherwise, we in the south will be imposing on ourselves a formidable burden which many of our own citizens, however strong their desire for Irish unity, may find intolerable. We cannot lay certain social ills in the north at the door of partition without acknowledging (at least in private) that conditions for the Catholics in Northern Ireland would be far worse if partition were abolished overnight.’

Whitaker was clear about what he saw as the counterproductive nature of political violence in pursuit of Irish unity: ‘The most forceful argument in favour of the patient good-neighbour policy aimed at ultimate “agreement in Ireland between Irishmen” is that no other policy has any prospect of success. Force will get us nowhere; it will only strengthen the fears, antagonisms and divisions that keep north and south apart.’

In the eventual deal, which seems to have settled down in Northern Ireland a decade after the 1998 Belfast Agreement, communal division and antagonism clearly remain. As my friend and colleague Paul Bew has recently pointed out,<sup>7</sup> ‘The key theme of British and Irish government policy since the early 1990s was the inclusion of the so-called “extremes”. This marked a shift from the policy of the Anglo–Irish Agreement of 1985, which was aimed, above all, at boosting constitutional nationalism.’ Northern Irish politics is now dominated by two parties – the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin – who draw their support from entirely different and separate political constituencies. The politics of the middle ground has effectively been uprooted.

Nevertheless, it is also true that, in key ways, these two parties are not now as extreme as their rhetoric and history might suggest. New Sinn Féin has given up the armed struggle, it has effectively accepted the principle of majority consent in Northern Ireland, it has jettisoned its more sharp-edged leftist ambition, and has entered into power-sharing government at Stormont

(of all places); for its part, the DUP has shifted almost unrecognisably too, with the result that its leader came to share power with one of the most famous of former IRA men. And at the heart of this is a reassuring lesson. For the Northern Ireland peace process was founded on the recognition – on all sides – that violence was bringing not victory, but merely a futile and blood-stained stalemate. If force would not bring victory, then compromise might be the most effective option. On this logic was the conflict – eventually – brought to an end. ‘Sooner or later in political life one has to compromise,’ observed another of Oscar Wilde’s characters: ‘Every one does’. Doing so might yet involve more division and antagonism. But, as in Britain and Ireland’s new deal in relation to Northern Ireland, such tension is at least based less on force than on more productive engagement and respect. This, surely, is the key lesson that we should broadcast to the world when we reflect on the changing nature of the complex Irish–British relationship today.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> R. English, *Ernie O'Malley: IRA Intellectual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*. London: Michael Joseph, 1994, p. 5.
- <sup>3</sup> R. English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2003; R. English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> For the source of all quotations see R. English, *Irish Freedom, ibid.*, pp. 388, 396–7.
- <sup>5</sup> G. FitzGerald, *Towards a New Ireland*. Dublin: Torc, 1973; 1st edn 1972; C. C. O'Brien, *States of Ireland*. St Albans: Panther, 1974; 1st edn 1972.
- <sup>6</sup> T. K. Whitaker, *A Note on North–South Policy*, 11 November 1968, Lynch Papers, National Archives, Dublin 2001/8/1.
- <sup>7</sup> P. Bew, *The Making and Remaking of the Good Friday Agreement*. Dublin: Liffey Press, 2007, p. 1.

## Susan McKay

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## Soldiers

Susan McKay

### A botched curtsey

At Drumahoe Primary School in the North of Ireland in the 1960s, big groups of us would link arms and stomp round the yard, chanting 'We won the war!'. We had no idea which war, but we were jubilant anyway.

I grew up to the sound of marching boots on tarmac, and my father's voice barking out staccato orders. 'To the left, quick march! Parade: Halt! Eyes right!'. My sisters and I would sometimes peek out of our bedroom window, over the tops of the leylandia trees and into the tennis courts, where Major McKay would be out, exercising his Territorial Army (TA) cadets.

He'd get us to polish his boots, and he'd stand to attention with his chest puffed out and salute, a grey feather cockade in his cap. Andy Stewart's *The Scottish Soldier* was often on the record player, lamenting that these green hills were not the hills of home. We had short hair and kilts, and looked like boys.

My mother would pack us into the car, and we'd drop him off at a firing range in the sandhills at Magilligan before we headed for the beach. Once, I was at Girl Guide camp outside Edinburgh, near the place where the TA was camping that year. My father came to visit, swinging out of a Land Rover in full army uniform. I was embarrassed.

He was Headmaster of the Protestant secondary school to which the tennis courts belonged, and the cadets were his pupils. We didn't go to that school, although many of the boys we'd been at primary school with did, and many of them joined the TA. They were mostly country boys, or boys from the local estates. Drumahoe is a suburb of Derry now, but at that time was rural, and the school still closed for a fortnight every year for the potato picking.

We, on the other hand, did the 11-plus and got the Ulsterbus every morning to the High School – also Protestant – a few miles away in Derry. Not half a mile

from the Catholic Bogside, the school was in a big, Victorian house, set in its own leafy grounds. The sign at the gate still read 'Londonderry High School for Young Ladies', although no one called it that any more.

Minor efforts had been made to help me fit into the unionist world. As a small girl, I had been taught how to curtsy. I was to present a bouquet to Lady somebody-or-other when she opened the annual flower show in Derry's Guildhall. Lift your skirt slightly with both hands, bow your head, lean forward, bending both knees outwards, ankles close, one foot slightly behind the other. She was a vision in a hat. Red faced, eyes down, I unsmilingly shoved the large bunch of chrysanthemums into her gloved hands, and hurtled off the stage. No curtsy.

Going to the High School for me coincided with the start of the Troubles. The town was full of soldiers. Thousands of them. Soldiers on foot patrols striding along, swerving and turning, guns at the ready. Marching ranks of them on the Strand Road. The old factory down the road from our house was turned into an army camp. We'd sometimes see girls from the estate next door, kissing soldiers through the tall fence.

My friends and I would camp in our back garden, and we'd hear gun battles in the distance while we told each other ghost stories. Boys who we knew headed up the road past our house with nail-studded clubs to join the B Specials at Burntollet, where they attacked the student march.

The developing crisis preoccupied the adults around us. Tiny, neat Miss Mathena Patterson, who taught five-year-olds, said fiercely to my mild mother, 'The post office is rotten with them.' Meaning Catholics.

There was an army hut made of sandbags at the side of the Guildhall, that you had to pass through when you walked through the city centre. It had a wooden counter, where you placed your bag to be searched, and the soldiers would snigger at us and make sexual remarks as they went through our schoolbags. There was a fad for fake fur pencil cases at the time. One day, a soldier took mine out and started stroking it and asking about my pussy. Another soldier asked my sister for her address and sent her an amorous letter.

I was useless at hockey, but liked to be made left back because it gave me a good view of the army lorries zooming down Duncreggan Road, filled with soldiers waving and grinning at us. An army helicopter landed on the lawn one day during maths. All eyes turned eagerly towards the fit young men leaping out onto the grass. Tall, stern Miss Armstrong closed the curtains and continued her lesson.

I played trombone, and soldiers from one of the regimental bands used to come and play along with us in the school orchestra. We played hymns and Beatles songs, and *When the Saints Go Marching In*. I developed a crush on a big, stout sergeant who also played trombone. He had terrible acne, and no interest in me, but I still decided to leave school and join the Women's Royal Army Corps. My parents exchanged worried looks when I got the brochures in the post. Maybe I should finish school first, they suggested.

### **Greyhounds**

The Northern Ireland news was a grim nightly experience. It was how we heard about Bloody Sunday in 1972. My father was in the Northern Ireland Labour Party, cautiously supported civil rights, and deplored Ian Paisley, whose ranting voice sometimes wafted into our house from a gospel hall down the road. We knew, watching the television, that the paratroopers were to blame.

However, when my parents kept us home from school the next day, the note they sent to excuse us just said it was in case there was trouble in town. There was no mention of Bloody Sunday at school assembly either. A girl was crying in the cloakroom, and it was rumoured she had been going out with one of the teenage boys who'd been shot dead.

There was an intense, shocked silence in Derry.

A while later, in English class, we were reading a play by Lady Gregory, which has lines about soldiers opening fire on a crowd. Our teacher, a distinguished and sensitive man called Denzil Stewart, tried to get us to talk about it in the context of Derry, but some of the girls made violent remarks about how there'd been no trouble in Londonderry until the Catholics started

it, and it was their own fault if they got shot. Eventually, he despaired and swept out of the classroom, white with anger in his black gown.

Catholic Derry hated us, it seemed. Our school's equivalent of the stiff upper lip was our grey beret, which had to be worn on all occasions. Walking through town, we'd hear sneering shouts of, 'Oh look, the greyhounds are out exercising,' and our berets would be snatched from our heads. The city swimming pool was on the edge of the Bogside, and our buses were stoned, until one day, without a word to us, the school stopped sending us to swimming classes altogether.

We saw all the outward manifestations of trouble, but we had no insight into its causes. I met Catholics on family holidays in Donegal, but I didn't know any Derry ones. Saturday riots on Waterloo Place were scary if you had a part-time job in Littlewoods, and we carried hankies to hold to our faces against the lingering CS gas fired by the army. There were bombs and bomb scares, and traffic jams and army checkpoints, and the city was full of burnt-out ruins. But we were detached from it. It was as if it were happening elsewhere.

The soldiers had lost their novelty value. They didn't bother us, and we had ceased to notice them. We never really had noticed their guns.

When we were 16 or so, my friend and I took to wearing tricolour pins and shamrocks inside the lapels of our coats. We had discovered Catholic boys. It started with drama collaborations, early cross-community experiments that we embraced eagerly. An anxious priest watched Ladies Macbeth and Macduff strop into St Columbs College with pleated skirts rolled up at the waist and lashings of mascara.

After getting our parents to drop us off at some innocuous church youth club, we'd hitch across the border to discos in Donegal, or else head for the pubs of Waterloo Street on the edge of the Bogside. We sat in the back room of the *Gweedore* with our new friends, drinking pints and singing, all of us together. We sang Leonard Cohen: 'So long, Marianne, it's time that we began, to laugh and cry and cry and laugh about about it all again.' We sang *Only Our Rivers Run Free* and didn't blink at lines like 'I drink to the death of our manhood,

those men who would rather have died, than to live in the cold chains of bondage...'

### Pauline

I got a scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin, drank a lot, became increasingly troubled about the situation at home in the North, and returned in 1981. I needed to find my place. It was towards the end of the IRA hunger strike. Black flags getting tattered and a sense of bitter exhaustion in the air.

By this point, more than 2000 people had been killed as a result of the Troubles. The British army was now part of the street furniture, big ugly watchtowers incongruously draped with camouflage, like ivy, against Belfast's red bricks; a vast army installation perched on top of the Black Mountain, like a spaceship.

It would have been impossible for me to live in that harsh, violent city and not get involved, and I was soon embroiled in militant feminism, setting up a centre for women who had been raped. I began to know republicans, or rather, I began to know that I knew republicans, because I now realised that some of those singing in the *Gweedore* bar had felt a lot more strongly about the cold chains of bondage than I had.

Some of the Protestant boys from my primary school class in Derry had done time in jail for taking part in loyalist paramilitary violence. One of them had lost a hand when a bomb he was planting had exploded prematurely. Others from the same school had joined the British army.

I'd taken to fighting with my father about politics. He'd trained the loyalist paramilitaries, I accused. He conceded that some 'bad apples' had probably misused their TA weapons training, but he retained his strong belief in the benefits of military discipline.

A decade into the Troubles, hatreds had been established, in which I was well out of my depth. One day I went upstairs on a bus and saw, scrawled across the back of the seat in front of me, 'Thirteen dead but not forgotten – we got

18 and Mountbatten.' It was a reference to the Bloody Sunday murders by the British army in Derry. The other 'score' referred to the murder of Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten on the sea at Mullaghmore in County Sligo, and the massacre later the same day in 1979 of 18 British soldiers, in two carefully coordinated bomb blasts near Warrenpoint in County Down. The second bomb caught those who were trying to rescue survivors of the first.

I lived in a flat in the university area, and one night we were all woken by an explosion and a man's voice screaming out in agony: 'Pauline!' It was an Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) soldier who had been visiting his girlfriend. The IRA had put a bomb under his car.

The morning it was on the news that the Irish National Liberation Army had bombed the disco at the *Droppin Well*, near Derry, killing 17 people, I cried briefly because I knew the place, which wasn't far from Drumahoe. Eleven of them were soldiers. The young women who died were considered fair game because they were fraternising with the enemy.

By contrast, when I heard on the news about the IRA's bombings of London's Hyde Park and Regent's Park, and that some of the 11 soldiers who died had been playing in an army band when they were blown up, it didn't enter my head to wonder if they might include musicians I'd sat beside during the 1970s.

I moved to work in Enniskillen in County Fermanagh in 1988, soon after the IRA had bombed the Remembrance Day ceremony at the Cenotaph there, killing 11 Protestants whose relatives had fought in the First and Second World Wars as British soldiers. I lived in the gatelodge at Castlecoole, which was owned by the National Trust, but had a resident Lord.

I got to know a major in the Ulster Defence Regiment. We'd stand chatting at the gates of the big house. The major told me the political situation had got out of hand because the army wasn't allowed to do its job. He had been a member of the B specials and, like many in that notorious force, when it was disbanded went straight into the UDR. 'This could have been nipped in the bud a long time ago,' the major told me. 'They should have let us shoot a lot of those so-called civil rights people. That would have put a stop to it.'

A community worker I knew told me the IRA had killed a UDR man and had then put up black flags at the bottom of lanes that led to the homes of other UDR men along his road, to show them they were next.

There were a lot of UDR checkpoints. Sometimes, when I was stopped and asked by the soldiers where I was going, I'd say, 'Derry'. The soldier would bristle. 'You mean Londonderry,' he'd say. 'No. Derry,' I'd say. 'Right madam, if you'd just open your boot,' he'd say, and a lengthy search would begin. Mary McConnell, whose son Micky wrote *Only Our Rivers Run Free*, had advice for me when I told her about these encounters: 'Never show your teeth if you can't bite,' she said.

### A no-go area

It was many years before I began to understand the silence in Derry the day after Bloody Sunday, and the ocean depth of the anger that swelled beneath it. In the 1990s, as a journalist, I was able to cross boundaries and ask questions. British soldiers had killed a lot of Catholic civilians, including women and children. Patricia Thompson told me about her mother, Kathleen.

'On the night of the 6th of November 1971, I went to bed a perfectly happy child in a family,' she said. 'I woke up to the world turned upside down. Daddy was sitting on the stairs with his head in his hands, sobbing. Mummy was dead. She had been shot by a British soldier.'

Kathleen Thompson went on all the civil rights marches, and she raised money to give to the families of men from Derry who'd been interned. When British soldiers were spotted entering the Creggan estate, where she lived with her husband and six children, she would be one of the women who'd go out and bang her bin lid on the ground to warn people.

'She was wild about music,' Patricia said. 'I remember her buying *Spanish Eyes*, and she'd be singing round the house and laughing. She was the one got us up for school and made our breakfast. When you came home you dropped your schoolbag and ran to see Mammy. She took us to dance classes, knitted clothes for us, polished our shoes and left them out for us. Daddy's dinner was

on the table when he got home from work. We had a good life – every summer we took a wee house in Donegal for six weeks.’

It was a normal Friday night. Kathleen’s husband, Patsy, had been out at his union meeting, and she’d brought the children to her sister’s house. Later on, after Kathleen had gone to bed, Patricia’s 12-year-old sister heard a noise on the street, looked out, and reported to her family that ‘they’ were raiding a neighbour’s house. Her father said she’d better wake up her mother.

Another of the children went to Kathleen and said, ‘Did you rattle the bin lid?’ She got up and went out the back door. Soon after that, the army fired CS gas. The family assumed that Kathleen had gone into a neighbour’s house, but when it got really late they checked. She hadn’t been there. Patsy went out and found her body lying in the back garden.

‘Thousands came to her funeral,’ Patricia said to me. ‘We were just told she’d died and gone to heaven. But we heard whispers. I never played in the back garden again; it was a no-go area, a dead zone, full of fear. As a child, you are afraid of the dead. You’d think about ghosties. There was a bullet hole in the wall, too. You’d be afraid you’d be shot.’

Kathleen’s mother had been living with the family. Profoundly shocked by her daughter’s death, she suffered a massive stroke a few weeks later. ‘She didn’t know any of us. She was like a baby. She had to be taken away to a home,’ Patricia said. ‘We sort of lost three people, because my Daddy was never the same again either. His hair went white, and he never really laughed again, not in the same way as before.’

At the inquest into Kathleen’s death, a soldier identified only as Soldier C said he’d seen a man and a woman in the Thompsons’ back garden that night, and that the man raised a rifle to shoot. He said another soldier, Soldier D, then fired two shots and the gunman fell. Soldier D said he’d heard a shot before he fired. Under the terms of a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the soldiers had been interviewed by military police, a practice that rarely led to any further investigation.

Neither Patsy Thompson nor his neighbours were asked to make statements. However, witnesses later told a local community inquiry that there had been no shooting at the army, no injured or dead gunman, and that the soldier who shot Kathleen Thompson was close enough to have seen her, and to have heard her calling to one of her older children to come home.

Patricia said the army harassed her family persistently after that. ‘They did that to a lot of families, but you’d have thought that after they killed our mother they might have gone a bit easy on us. The boys were constantly arrested and held. A few weeks after Mummy died, they beat one of them up and brought him to her grave and held a gun to his head,’ she said. ‘My father was constantly on at the boys: “Don’t get involved. Don’t give them anything to say about your mother.” He must have been out of his mind with worry.’

The soldier who shot Kathleen was never put on trial. No one ever apologised to her family. ‘I don’t want anyone to go to jail. I have no desire to take some ex-soldier away from their wife or their grandchildren,’ Patricia told me. ‘I don’t want compensation. All I want is for them to acknowledge that she was an innocent person.’

It was as a reporter that I met my old classmate who’d had his hand blown off. He no longer believed in loyalist violence, he told me. He was running a cross-community horticultural project, and said he spent a lot of time talking young boys out of seeing him as a hero for what he’d done in the past.

I don’t remember hearing about Kathleen Thompson’s death at the time, although it caused controversy in Catholic Derry. And I don’t remember hearing about Henry Cunningham’s either. It happened on the road from Belfast to Derry in the summer of 1973. Henry Cunningham was 16, the same age as me, when he was shot dead. He was meant to be going on a date that night to the *Lilac Ballroom* in Carndonagh.

Derry people love to escape to Donegal’s lovely mountains and beaches, but in the early 1970s it was a tough place to live, and its young men had to travel to find work. Many emigrated – but Henry and his brothers had got work on building sites in Derry and Belfast.

Their van was ambushed by gunmen on the motorway just north of Belfast, and Henry was killed instantly. The others were lucky to escape death. I was introduced to Henry's brothers in 2006, soon after they found out that it was the loyalist UVF that murdered him. They'd thought it might have been the IRA. The Cunninghams are, as it happens, Protestants, but the killers would have assumed that a Donegal registered van was full of Catholics.

Then, following an investigation of the case by the Police Historical Enquiries Team, the family found out something else. One of the sub-machine guns used in the ambush had been stolen from a TA Volunteer Reserve Centre in Lurgan in 1972. It had been used before, and was used again after Henry's death, in yet more sectarian attacks.

Among the declassified secret documents recovered from the British military archives by human rights researchers at the Pat Finucane Centre in Derry, is one that refers to this particular robbery. Written beside it are the words: 'UVF have claimed responsibility. Collusion is strongly suspected.'

### **Driving nights**

After a long interview, in which he spoke movingly about the death of his son in an IRA bombing in Derry, one British army father I met in Liverpool a couple of years ago shocked me when he said, 'When I see the state of some of the lads that came back from Ireland, I'm glad my boy died.'

British soldiers who came to Northern Ireland at the start of the Troubles were often surprised by the friendliness of the people. Many love stories began. But the relationship with the nationalist community deteriorated fast. Republicans began to use a barbaric sort of punishment for girls who fraternised with soldiers. Their hair would be cut off, they might be stripped, tar would be poured over them and feathers thrown at them. They would be tied to railings, where their shame could be witnessed.

Bill is a former British soldier, who began his first tour of duty in Ireland in 1971, when he was just 17. He remembered finding a girl who had been punished in this way: 'This was an 18-year-old girl who had been tarred and

feathered, with her family's endorsement, for going out with a soldier. She was naked. I had a friend who married a girl from Londonderry, and they had to move to England. She was just told she could never come back. The IRA just said, "You're dead." I was engaged to a girl from Londonderry myself, but it didn't work out.'

Soldiers I've spoken to said they were left to find out for themselves what was going on in Ulster. Many were bewildered. 'I was 18. My first patrol was in the Sandy Row in Belfast,' Steve, a member of the NI Veterans Association, told me. 'It was all people coming out and giving us tea and soda bread and calling us "our boys". Then we went over to the Divis flats and there were televisions thrown at us, and blast bombs. We didn't have a clue.'

Bill said that he felt that nobody had really cared about the plight of the Catholic community, but he had no sympathy for the IRA. 'I never received any hearts-and-minds training. It was all about survival and killing the enemy, trying to second-guess the IRA. They were just criminals and terrorists. Scum. I buried three of my friends who were killed there. One of them had a premonition about it.'

Like other soldiers I spoke to, Bill said there was no counselling or specialist care for soldiers after their friends had been killed. Bill said he had mates who'd served with the army in Iraq and Afghanistan. 'At least there, you have an enemy that you can see. You can hunt him out and face him down. I never saw an IRA man with a gun. It was a terrorist war, I think, that was more stressful.'

'A lot of soldiers are very bitter. They were bitter about the prisoner releases and they are bitter about the new government. Paisley and McGuinness and their cronies are all as bad as one other – their hands are stained and their minds are the same. I came back from Ireland in a bad state. I became very insular. I was always breaking down. I had huge mood swings. I couldn't work with people – I'd get aggressive and violent. My wife eventually dragged me to Combat Stress (a voluntary support service for ex-servicemen) and that has helped a bit. I'm a long-distance lorry driver now. I drive nights.'



## On your own doorstep

Former soldier Ken Wharton has just finished writing a book called *A Long, Long War: Voices from the British Army in Northern Ireland*.<sup>1</sup> 'These are squaddies' voices and the book is unashamedly pro-squaddie,' he told me. He said the experience of serving in Northern Ireland was particularly disquieting. 'You are not talking about people being killed thousands of miles away in the desert,' he said. 'This was British soldiers being killed half an hour from Leeds Bradford Airport on EasyJet. This was fighting on your own doorstep. These guys were being shot on streets just like their own.' Many soldiers had Irish connections in their families, or in their communities.

He said that when soldiers came home, traumatised or with serious disabilities, the Ministry of Defence 'just washed its hands of them ... they used us and then they just said, "sod off". I know one lad, and he came back to England with three bullets in his body, and had to live in a damp caravan in a quarry because the MOD wouldn't sort out his money.'

Some of the squaddies were just out of school. One youngster described being sent out in 1971 to the scene on the edge of Belfast, where three young Scottish squaddies had been shot in the back by IRA people with whom they had unwittingly been out socialising.

It was a 'dirty little place. Not a place one would want to die in or for,' he said. Half-way down the lane where the atrocity had taken place, he saw, neatly placed, 'three pint beer glasses, partially full, or empty, I never decided which.' On the road, 'a pool of thick, congealed blood had formed and in this blood was money ... the new coins which came out in 1971.' The youngest of the dead soldiers was just 17. His older brother, aged 18, was also killed, and the third soldier, aged 23, was their cousin.

The soldier described how a television crew had shown up, and 'as I was young, a friend and I started messing around for the camera, dancing and laughing ... childish shock.'

John Lindsay had shared a flat in Liverpool with some ex-soldiers and, when he moved to Derry in the 1980s, became fascinated by the soldiers all around him. After one of them was shot, he said, he'd look at the others with pity and fear. He noted, too, his own strict observance of the Derry convention that during 'quiet' times, you pretended not to notice 'these armed men on the streets'. He wondered what they thought, and his book, *Brits Speak Out*<sup>2</sup>, is based on the interviews he held in order to find out.

One was with Martin, who left Northern Ireland trusting nobody, and full of pent-up anger. 'The problems came when these expert anti-terrorist troops were let loose on "normal" streets,' he said. He couldn't settle in a job. He served time in prison after killing a good friend. His wife divorced him, citing 'persistent mental cruelty', and he subsequently set fire to his next partner's flat, and got sent back to jail. 'Sometimes I feel the only way I will ever cure myself is to put a gun to my head and pull the trigger,' he said. To seek help would be 'betraying my regiment'. Maybe, he speculates, returning to Ireland would help 'to lay the ghosts that haunt me'.

It is clear from some of the stories in both Wharton's and Lindsay's collections that some soldiers were dangerously full of aggression in the first place. A former soldier called Jimmy wrote his own account of his war in Northern Ireland from Durham jail, where he was serving life for murders committed in England after his return.

Lindsay quotes him reliving his high-adrenaline, high-aggression adventures in Lurgan in 1972. The town looked like his own home town, but he quickly discovered that, in its Catholic areas, people would try to kill soldiers at every opportunity, while in its Protestant areas, people 'wanted to see the British army wipe the Catholics off the face of the Earth.' He and his men loved the fight. After Bloody Sunday, they cheered, and he ordered a Saracen to drive straight at a crowd who had gathered to mourn the dead.

## Where toddlers roam the streets by night

The Saville Inquiry into the deaths on Bloody Sunday had to decamp to London because the soldiers who were to be questioned claimed they would be unsafe

if they attended the hearings in Derry's Guildhall. The families of the dead went along too. They were particularly incensed by one paratrooper, who said, 'I don't know' or 'Can't remember' over 500 times in a single day's evidence.

General Sir Robert Ford had been in charge of land forces in Northern Ireland in 1972 and led the propaganda exercise against the dead after the massacre. He gave evidence. When word went around that he was very ill, one of the Derry women said she hoped he'd die of cancer, surrounded by the ghosts of the innocent people his soldiers had murdered.

General Sir Mike Jackson, now Britain's most senior soldier, was adjutant to the paratroopers on Bloody Sunday. He directed the analysis of 'Operation Banner' – the name given to military operations in Northern Ireland – which was published on the MOD's website in 2006, just before troops were withdrawn. The document was picked up by the Pat Finucane Centre and published on its website for a time. It is a most peculiar narrative, in the introduction to which Jackson writes that lessons learned 'on the streets and in the fields of Northern Ireland' had already been successfully exported to the Balkans, Sierra Leone, Kuwait, East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The document paints a grim picture of Catholic poverty in Derry and Belfast, claiming that there were families of 14 in which five-year-olds were routinely woken up and put out to roam the streets at two in the morning so that other family members could sleep in their beds. While extreme poverty and overcrowding were certainly endemic in Catholic areas, I have never heard such a tale in my life.

It admits that the army used 'deep interrogation techniques' on internees, and that internment was a 'major mistake', but not one made by the army – the blame for that was laid at the door of the Unionist Government, for which the authors have no great respect.

Astonishingly, Jackson's analysis finds 'only two examples of poor military decision making' which had serious consequences. One of them was 'the manner in which the arrest operation on Bloody Sunday was conducted using vehicles to approach the crowd', which seemed, in hindsight, 'heavy handed'.

Not the shooting dead of 14 unarmed civilians, mind. Afterwards, according to the document, there was a lot of IRA propaganda.

There is very little reference to armed loyalism in the analysis, nor to collusion between elements of the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries. By contrast, documents from the MOD archives plainly show that, for example, the government was well aware that the UDR in particular was full of loyalist paramilitaries, and that army weapons stores were, at some points, the main source of loyalist guns.

It seems that some of the 'top brass' are still in denial. The British government has shamelessly covered its tracks in relation to abuse of its authority in Ireland, and continues to do so.

There are numerous examples, but one case will suffice. Solicitor Pat Finucane was murdered in 1989 by a loyalist gang, most of whom were security force agents of one kind or another. The murder was presaged by a Tory government minister stating in the House of Commons that there were lawyers in Northern Ireland who were unduly sympathetic to the IRA.

Tony Blair agreed in 2001, as part of the Peace Process, to abide by the recommendations of Canadian Judge Peter Cory in relation to whether inquiries should be held into controversial murders that may have involved security force collusion. However, when Cory called for such an inquiry to be held in the case of Finucane, the government rushed through a new law that gave it enormous power to restrict an inquiry's independence. Cory was furious, and Lord Saville, who was in charge of the inquiry into Bloody Sunday, said that he would refuse to take part in an inquiry held under such compromised terms.

In 2007, the Public Prosecution Service announced that there would be no prosecutions arising from Sir John Stevens's finding, in 2003, that there had been collusion in the Finucane murder. The murdered man's son, Michael, wrote that it made a perverse kind of sense. 'After all, why prosecute someone for doing what you asked them to do in the first place?' He said collusion was the 'last Rubicon' that has to be crossed before there can truly be peace<sup>3</sup>.

Earlier this year, the Finucanes renewed their call for a full, independent judicial inquiry.

### **Breaking the spell**

There is no sign that the British state is ready to embark on that particular journey. However, many ordinary ex-soldiers have begun to make their own peace with Ireland. Some have done so through projects run by voluntary organisations like the Glenree Centre in Wicklow, and the Warrington Centre, set up by the parents of Tim Parry, a child killed by an IRA bomb in the Cheshire town in 1993. Others have quietly initiated contact themselves.

Steve, the man who recalled soda farls on the Sandy Row and televisions used as projectiles in Divis, said he feels the MOD has treated Northern Ireland veterans appallingly. 'But I have no bitterness. You signed up to do a job, and you went where you were sent.'

He said he and many of his colleagues were horrified by the behaviour of the paratroopers in Derry on Bloody Sunday. Months later, he was serving in Belfast on 'Bloody Friday', when more than 20 no-warning IRA bombs killed nine and horribly injured many others. 'I went to the bus station while the bombs were still going off,' he said. 'I saw what was left of a human being in the road.'

After that he served in Derry, and was shot and injured there. He recently returned to the city to visit the spot where his friend, also a soldier, was shot dead by the IRA. The person who accompanied him was an ex-IRA man.

'A few years ago, Jo Dover from the Warrington Centre initiated an old soldiers' weekend,' Steve told me. 'It was very moving. Most of us had come out of service, and talked to nobody about it. It was quite cathartic. Jo asked me if I'd be willing to meet ex-IRA people, so I stuck my neck out and went for it.'

'It was very strange and frightening to go back to Derry,' Steve said. 'I had all manner of paranoid feelings. I was afraid it was a trap. They took me to where I was shot on Bligh's Lane. They brought me up to where my mate was killed.'

Obviously, I would have liked to have left a wreath, but I knew it was too soon for that. We got on quite famously. It was as if someone had broken this spell and we saw each other as fellow human beings, all of us victims of circumstances. I love the Irish – I didn't want to stomp through their gardens and smash down their doors.'

Like several other soldiers I've talked to, Steve has been reading a lot of Irish history over the past few years, going right back to the seventeenth century. Although he recognises the unfairness of the pre-conflict unionist state, he is not convinced that the IRA campaign was justified.

His friend was called Tony Goodfellow. In the month following his murder, 15 other British soldiers were killed. 'It was at a vehicle checkpoint in the Creggan in 1973. He was killed by one shot fired through a letterbox. It was a battleground. The hatred was naked. After Tony was shot, they all came out laughing and cheering and chanting.'

Private Goodfellow had been engaged to a 16-year-old Belfast girl. She had already paid dearly for their relationship. She had been tarred and feathered, and forced to move to London. Scouts from the troop to which the soldier had belonged before he joined the army had donated a cup to be awarded annually to Scouts and Guides in Derry.

After his 2007 visit to the Creggan, Steve went to a pub with some of the people from the area: 'They asked me to join them, and we did a lot of talking. A woman asked me how I felt, kicking down doors. I said, "Not great." I said, "Ask me how I felt when my mate was shot dead." They said, "We're all here for the same reason. We all need to move on." I agree with that. I feel it's my moral duty to take part in peace-making initiatives. I've also made a lot of friends in both communities. It really has been absolutely heartwarming.'

'It was like a massive weight off my shoulders to go back to Derry. Now I can see it as a normal estate, like the one I came from. Same houses, different world.'

## Proud to be a Lundy

There is a profound nostalgia in unionism for the good old days, before the Catholics got uppity. When the old RUC is praised, it is for 'gallantry' and 'valour'. In the late 1990s, it used to be common to see, in police stations and other public buildings, a framed photograph of Queen Elizabeth. Not the cross old Queen in her sensible shoes, though. It was always the 27-year-old Princess, smiling in diamonds on her coronation day in 1953.

I'm 50 now, and my knees creaked when I tried – strictly for their amusement – to show my daughters how to curtsy. It amazes me how archaic the unionism of those days now seems. Within a few years of that flower show, the civil rights marchers were in the square outside singing *We Shall Overcome*, and the old regime was teetering towards collapse, lashing out as it did so.

In 2000, my book *Northern Protestants – An Unsettled People* was published. I described it as 'a portrait of the people I uneasily call my own'. I hoped to offer some insight into a much maligned community, which seemed to me, in many ways, to be obdurately and unnecessarily self-defeating. The book was popular with nationalists and republicans, controversial among unionists.

The late George Dawson, an evangelical Protestant and Democratic Unionist Party politician, then head of the independent Orange Order, said simply that no-one should read the book. The late David Ervine, of the Progressive Unionist Party, said that every Protestant should read it: it was 'frightening and painful and true'. Some Protestants said it showed I was 'a guilty'. One review suggested that I was full of remorse at having been born among the oppressors: that the book was my 'act of contrition'.

Up until a few months before he took office as First Minister alongside Martin McGuinness as Sinn Féin Deputy First Minister, Ian Paisley still routinely concluded his speeches with, 'No surrender!' – the cry of the Apprentice Boys who shut the gates of Derry against the Catholic forces and launched the siege of 1689.

Robert Lundy was the governor of the city who argued for compromise, and was forced to flee the city by climbing down a pear tree that grew against the walls. A Protestant who favours compromise is seen to be a traitor, and is called a Lundy. I was thrilled when it was said of me. The babies of loyalist families at Drumcree used to wear bibs emblazoned 'Proud to be a Prod'. I'm proud to be a Lundy.

Now even Paisley agrees the siege is over. The soldiers have gone from the streets of Derry and Belfast. It is time to talk about what happened to us all during those long, dark years of conflict and hatred, when we lived in the same houses, but in different worlds.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Wharton, K. (2008) *A Long, Long War. Voices from the British Army in Northern Ireland*. Solihull: Helion.
- <sup>2</sup> Lindsay, J. (1998) *Brits Speak Out, British Soldiers' Impressions of the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Creggan, Derry: Guildhall Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Finucane, M. (2007) 'My dad's murder is part of the last conflict demon,' *The Guardian*, 28 June.

## David McWilliams

*David McWilliams is Ireland's best selling non-fiction writer. His books – The Pope's Children and The Generation Game – have sold 150,000 copies in the past three years, and the ensuing documentary series were also viewed by record numbers on RTE1, The Pope's Children winning an International Academy of Film and Television award for best factual entertainment programme. He writes two weekly columns for the Irish Independent and The Sunday Business Post. A regular on Irish television and radio since his Agenda on TV3 was rated the 'best current affairs programme on Irish TV' by the Sunday Times and Irish Independent for four years in a row, he presented both the Breakfast Show on NewsTalk and The Big Bite on RTE1. He has interviewed opinion-formers from Hillary Clinton and Henry Kissinger to Mikhail Gorbachev and Rudy Giuliani.*

*Prior to his media career, he spent ten years in banking, helping draft the Irish Submission to the Maastricht Treaty while at the Central Bank and later at the investment bank UBS, where he was appointed the youngest-ever Director at the age of 27. He also held the position of Head of Emerging Market Research at Banque Nationale de Paris. He was the first economist to predict the 1990s boom in Ireland, which later became known as the 'Celtic Tiger'.*

## HiBrits – Irish blood, English heart

David McWilliams

In the mid-1990s I lived in London, and played soccer with a bunch of wide-boy foreign exchange traders from the East End. We were pretty awful, but that wasn't the point. The thing was to get out, put yourself about and have a laugh, followed by the obligatory rake of pints in an East End pub which (inexplicably for the middle of a sunny day) had some well endowed local stripper going through the motions up and down a rickety pole. This wasn't a lap-dancing club. It was a standard, 'Dog and Duck' Charrington's boozier. Strange, but there you go.

We were playing a game in Mile End and being hockeyed by an outfit from some telesales company or other. There were a few young Asian players: one, in particular, had the full bag of tricks – a sort of Indian Ronaldo with an IT qualification. Our lads couldn't get near him, and no amount of knee-strapping could conceal the fact that we were over the hill and getting a hiding.

At full time, mercifully only two down, one of my team, bedecked in full barrow-boy mufti – sovereign rings, chunky gold chains and a Torremolinos tan – proffered the following sociological observation:

*'When I was born 'ere, it was all white,' he announced in that cocky City way, ego bolstered by a few large bonuses.*

He looked out over Mile End.

*'Now it's full of Pakis!...*

*...The only whites left 'ere are fuckin' Micks'.*

*'But I'm a Mick don't forget.' I blurted.*

*'Nah David, not your type of Mick. You're alright. I mean our type of Micks.'*

'But Jimmy Regan, with a name like that, you're a Mick too.'

*'I know way back I'm a Mick, but I'm an English Mick – if you know what I mean. I'm Free Lions fru and fru. Don't get me wrong; I'll support the Paddies – after all my people are from Cork. I'm as much of a Mick as Andy Townsend and more than Tony fucking Cascarino, but I'm kissing the Lions not the Shamrock.'*

It was clear, then, according to my deracinated friend, that there are various different levels of Irishness in England. When you're real Irish born and bred, you're all right, even possibly looked up to as having something different to offer. If you're first- or second-generation London Irish, ghettoised in an area like Mile End, or Cricklewood, or Kilburn, you're a thick Mick and classed as such. And if you're fourth-generation Irish, or even more distant and living south of the river with a clipped front and back garden, a Vauxhall Vectra and decking, you're possibly not a Mick at all.

But it set me thinking. Our mutual animosity is the ethnographic pantomime of These Islands; we all ham it up when we need to. It's easier to play to the crowd than to delve more deeply into our complexities. When talking to a Frenchman, it is demanded that the true Irishman should dislike the Englishman. But it's not true. Ask any Irishman on a two-week summer holiday abroad who he'd rather go out with for a few drinks, and the Englishman wins hands down every time.

Which is not to say that we don't applaud the dexterity of continental goalkeepers at penalty shootouts. History reserves us that right. But proximity and familiarity breed not so much contempt as resignation. When we are repelled, it is by our similarities as much as our differences.

English culture has predominated to such an extent that, in everyday life, from the language we speak to the soaps we watch, the magazines we read and the football clubs we support, there is little to tell between us. The crucial difference is that we, the Irish, know everything about you, but you know very little about us. (This, to say the least, is discourteous.)

Most of the intelligentsia lament the dominance of all things English in Irish popular culture, but that's the way it is. Thousands of Irish people have freely chosen to have a view on Jade Goody, support Manchester United and buy *Heat* magazine. By contrast, English water-cooler moments do not generally involve discussions about who won the Irish *You're A Star*, nor do the English buy the *Irish Independent* or support Shamrock Rovers.

Size also matters in the nation game, and four and a half million people don't get much change out of 50 million. The obvious conclusion is that English culture, particularly popular culture, in a straight line from Victorian music hall to *Celebrity Big Brother*, has steamrolled indigenous Irish culture. The driver of this cultural wrecking ball has always been economics and demographics. Ireland, the perennial economic basket case, could never stand up to English financial and commercial prowess.

Unless you are an unreconstructed revisionist, this is more-or-less the way it happened. Your lot grabbed our land, slapped us around for a few hundred years, and we lived off scraps. During these great sweeps of history, ordinary people made the best of a bad hand, resulting in huge emigration from Ireland to England, particularly in the past century.

But what happened to the children and grandchildren of the great Hibernian Exodus, and what did they contribute to Britain? Who were these people, many of whom could not speak English when they docked in Liverpool, Holyhead or Bristol? What impact did they have, where was it felt, and what is their legacy? The Irish, Britain's largest ethnic minority, couldn't simply have disappeared without trace – could they?

The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the cultural story was by no means a one-way street. Consider, for a moment, the idea that the Irish immigrants, although beaten politically and economically, got their revenge by first infiltrating, then influencing, and ultimately hijacking English popular culture. What if their offspring came to dominate youth culture, a terrain in which Britain excels?

What better place to explore the cultural impact of this tribe – the British of Irish descent – than in that most vibrant arena of British popular culture, football? And who better epitomises today's British football culture than the Croxteth genius Wayne Rooney?

### **Rooney – portrait of a HiBrit**

The 07:55 am Ryanair FR442 – one of the hundreds of jets Mick O'Leary bought in the post-9/11 Boeing fire-sale – takes off on time, bound for Liverpool. Out past the suburbs – over the giant steel-and-chrome motorway slug of commuting morning traffic, and straight across the Irish Sea. It is only 35 minutes to John Lennon International, not enough time for even Ryanair to sell you something. (Surely neither John Lennon's granddad – the Dublin seaman Jack Lennon – nor his grandmother Mary Maguire, ever thought anything would be named after one of their own when they both, like millions of other Irish, made the same trip, never to return home.)

The Croxteth orchestra of sirens, shouting kids and screaming mothers is momentarily drowned out by the traffic on the East Lancs road. This place is home to the longest-lived continuous Catholic congregation in the north of England. The 'Blood of the Martyrs' Catholic Church (named, according to the local priest Father Inch, because Catholicism was maintained by the blood of the martyrs in this part of England) is where Wayne Rooney was baptised and confirmed a Catholic – an Irish Catholic. Father Inch is a Toffee through and through. Everton Football Club is the Irish team in Liverpool, and it's no surprise that Rooney is a Blue.

Bob Pendleton, the Evertonian who scouted Rooney, remembers seeing him for the first time when he was nine. Jeanette, his mother, would take him and his two brothers on the bus down to Fazakerley to play for Coplehouse in the Walton and Kirkdale Junior League. Wayne was in a different class from the rest. Other Scousers of Irish descent, Jamie Carragher, Danny Murphy and Steve McManaman, came from the same schoolboy league in the years before Rooney, but talented as they were, none had the scouts whispering the way young Wayne did. Bob remembers that he was so keen to play and get on with the game that when the ball was kicked over the walls into Everton Cemetery,

it was always Rooney who hurtled over among the headstones to get it back.

That cemetery itself tells the story of Liverpool's immigrants – and not just the Irish. You can see that Liverpool was multicultural way before most other English cities. There is a huge Jewish part, host to Ringo Starr's people, who arrived in the great Jewish migrations from Eastern Europe of the late nineteenth century, while today enormous Chinese mausoleums testify to the changing immigrant aristocracy. Quite apart from the other immigrant tribes, the names on the headstones are evidence for the presence and passing of the biggest minority – O'Briens, Forans, O'Haras, McCabes and Kellys.

Given the joy Wayne brought, even as a child playing here, it saddens Bob that the roof of the dressing rooms at Fazakerley was daubed for weeks on end with 'Rooney You Scab' when he signed for United.

Down the road, past East Derby, is 'The Western Approaches', the Rooney family's local. There's something about the smashed car windscreen glass, which fragments into thousands of particles, telling you that you'd better walk in here with a face that is recognised. It's early afternoon, school's just out, and skinny young lads on bikes are doing wheelies, trying to avoid the teenage mothers whose top-of-the-range strollers suggest that, despite the recent Revenue assessment, the Giro isn't the only income in the house.

There's a small lad with no neck, poured into an Everton strip, swearing at a William Hill betting slip, while a few women in pink pyjamas are hanging around Costcutter, having a smoke and a natter. No-neck steals up behind one of the grans and takes her from behind. Everyone pisses themselves, and he makes off, bright red from the laughing.

A Citroen Sax, weighed down by an enormous subwoofer, blasts rap out at the traffic lights. 'Slapper,' shouts one of the young lads, as he grabs his crotch and thrusts in the direction of the passenger seat. The girl ensconced there, pristine in white Juicy Couture, hoop earrings and full Croydon facelift, gives him the licked finger as the car pulls off. Older ladies with tartan trolleys wait patiently at the bus stop, oblivious to the pubescent girls from St Swithin's primary scratching their fellas' names on the shelter.



Bob Pendleton, who met his missus in The Western, points me up to the bar. Gerard Houllier was amazed, he said, when looking for talent, that there were no black kids in Croxteth.

This is an Irish neck of the woods. Most people here are straight from Scotland Road – the traditional home of the Liverpool Irish. In fact, Scotty Road was so Irish that, in the late nineteenth century, it returned an Irish Home Rule MP for years. The Western is simply Costigans on Scotty Road, 40 years on – same people, same names, and the same culture.

The door opens grudgingly. We are in familiar surroundings: red carpets, screwed-down barstools, flock wallpaper, posters advertising bingo, and tired-looking men and women. Skinny old men with hollow cheeks scan their betting stubs, while local brazzers reveal a bit too much up top, as they shout across the bar for their fourth Smirnoff Ice. We get stuck in, chatting with a few punters on the Irish theme.

*'Alright Bob.'*

*'Couple of lagers please.'*

*'Rooney's never,'* says a visiting Geordie, whose two loves are Newcastle and Everton.

*'He is, you know, just look at the name. No Longshanks were ever called Rooney.'*

*'Not one English ounce.'*

*'Not a drop?'*

*'He's pure Scotty Road Irish.'*

*'On both sides?'*

*'Yep, Holy Cross parish.'*

*'On the Murray side too?'*

*'Sure Jeanette's ma's name's Patricia Fitzsimons.'*

*'Good job Jack Charlton didn't see him when he was a nipper.'*

*'Too right.'*

*'How far back?'*

*'Four generations.'*

*'No fucking way.'*

*'He's hardly English at all.'*

*'Just look at him – he looks like a Mick!'*

*'Two more pints of lager please, a whiskey chaser, a pack of Lamberts and one for yourself.'*

As the racing commenced, there was a newsflash announcing that North Korea had just successfully tested a crude nuclear bomb. BBC News 24 went all serious. The weirdest state on Earth has just stuck its jaw out, bared its teeth and challenged the world to 'c'mon have a go if you think you're hard enough'.

John Reid, the Home Secretary, is put out to bat and is prattling on about Britain's international duty to react to this threat to world security. He is joined by Tony Blair at a hastily convened conference, and they are both interviewed by Martha Kearney. So here are three more British of Irish descent making and dissecting Britain's foreign policy. When you scratch the surface, this tribe is everywhere.

At a small table, close to the loo, is Patricia Fitzsimons – Rooney's nan. Even before Wayne exploded onto the scene, Patricia Fitzsimons, whose lot are from Derry, was famous locally for being born on St Patrick's Day – hence the name

Patricia. The first thing you notice is the crucifix and her clear, strong blue eyes. Straight off, she starts referring to herself as Irish and to me as ‘one of our own’. Within seconds she’s back in 1960s Liverpool, sharing memories of running away from the King Billys (as she calls them) on the 12th of July, showing just how sectarian the city was until recently.

The Western is rocking now. A few winners, a few pints, and the place is alive. It’s Monday afternoon, late October, and Patricia is talking about some German professor who claims to be Wayne’s half-brother. Billy’s still reminiscing about sectarian scraps in the 1960s. The Orangies were always causing trouble and throwing bricks at his Patricia, when she was looking beautiful in her finest Hibs Irish dancing costume at the top of the St Patrick’s Day parade.

‘*Could Wayne have played for Ireland?*’ I whispered, thinking of all those English lads with Irish grannies who’d worn the Green, from Steve Heighway to Ray Houghton, who headed England out of the 1988 Euro Championship, and Kevin Sheedy, who equalised against England in the 1990 World Cup. There was John Aldridge, Andy Townsend and John Sheridan. The list goes on and on.

And what about the lads who could have played for Ireland, but chose England – including four recent English captains: Kevin Keegan, Steve McMahon, Martin Keown and Tony Adams?

‘*Nah,*’ replied Patricia. ‘*He’s English on the outside.*’

She looked up, ‘*But, pure Irish on the inside.*’

She checked her betting slip, looked up again, ‘*He’s a half-breed.*’

### **Hibernian echoes**

Now that we are on the trail of these Irish/British half-breeds, what are the critical pointers we can use to find them? What distinguishes the British of Irish descent from the millions of other people who live on the same streets, work in the same offices, and drink in the same pubs?

When two tribes look so similar, an interesting place to start disentangling the relationship is to look at people’s names. Do you recognise the following?

*Seán Ó Leannáin agus Pól Mac Carthainn*

Yes, they do look quite foreign, very unBritish. Are they minor opera singers? The accents over the vowels are off-putting if you haven’t seen them before. But on closer inspection, the endings *ainn* and *ain* appear as if they might come from some common root. They do: this is the Irish language – the language spoken by the ancestors, possibly great-grandparents, of these two rather influential characters in British popular culture:

*John Lennon and Paul McCartney*

Both were the grandchildren of Irish immigrants to Liverpool, as was George Harrison, whose people came from Wexford. Let’s examine some of the other players. Check out this pair of similarly foreign-looking names.

*Stiofán Ó Muirgheasa agus Seán Ó Meachair*

Again, these names look indecipherable with the odd ‘gh’ spelling in the middle – until you anglicise them, and they become Stephen Morrissey and Johnny Marr, both sons of Irish immigrants to Manchester. The Smiths – the band that defined Britishness in the 1980s and created the very British Indie scene – hadn’t actually any British blood in them at all.

And what about the following pair?

*Nollaig agus Liam Ó Gallchóir*

Translate these names from the Irish original into the English, and you get Noel and Liam Gallagher – the crown princes of Britpop – a term coined by the music press in the 1990s to describe an apparently uniquely British phenomenon. Yet again, like the Smiths, the Gallaghers have no British blood in them either. They, too, are sons of Irish immigrants to Manchester.

Another one of these hybrids in the music scene is *Sean Ó Loideáin*. Translate this into English and you get Johnny Lydon, aka Johnny Rotten, another son of Irish immigrants to London. Again, the face that at the time epitomised the snarling, out-of-control side of British punk adolescence was another hybrid – genetically Irish, environmentally English.

These cultural icons, all of whom have been described as quintessentially British, were actually something else. Something quite different...

When today's pop theorists are asked what Britain excels at, many will cite music, youth rebellion and pop culture. There is little doubt that this is where Britain has been at her most creative over the past 40 years. The same theorists appear on arty late-night chat shows, invoking various pivotal names to back up their impressive-sounding arguments. In the course of this serious sociological exercise they are highly likely to trace what they might describe as one 'uninterrupted arc of rebellion' from John Lennon through Johnny Rotten to Morrissey, Liam Gallagher and Pete Doherty.

It's hard to argue against these lads being critical influences on British pop culture. But what binds them together? One link stands out more than any other. Examine all their original surnames: *Ó Leannáin*, *Ó Loideáin*, *Ó Muirgheasa*, *Ó Gallchóir* and *Ó Dochartaigh*. These path-breaking rebels all have anglicised versions of Irish, originally Gaelic, clan names. These radicals are not native British, but dissenting hybrids. They are part of a hugely influential tribe – British people of Irish descent.

John Lennon, in his 1974 album *Walls and Bridges*, included a booklet with a history of the Lennon name, taken from the rather academic-sounding *Irish Families, Their Names, Arms and Origins* by Edward MacLysaght. Lennon is the anglicised version of the Irish original, *Ó Leannáin*, which originated in Galway. Under 'Lennon', the official entry concludes that no person with the name Lennon has ever distinguished himself in the field of culture or politics, beside which Lennon wrote, in his own handwriting, '*Oh yeah? John Lennon!*'

Morrissey's 2005 single *Irish blood, English heart* speaks for itself. When introducing himself at a homecoming gig in Manchester the following year,

he described himself as 'ten parts Crumlin (the Dublin suburb his parents emigrated from), ten parts Old Trafford'. Meanwhile, Johnny Rotten's autobiography, *No Dogs, No Blacks, No Irish*, sums up his sense of being an outsider when he was growing up in Islington in the 1970s.

The Gallaghers, who won last year's 'Outstanding contribution to British music' at the Grammys, articulated their Irishness early in their careers. In 1995, on the eve of England hosting Euro '96 and at the height of the Britpop movement, Noel Gallagher was asked to pen the official England *Three Lions* football anthem, to which he responded: 'Over my dead body mate, we're Irish'.

Gallagher's attachment to Ireland is stronger than that of many people of Irish descent in England. For most, the attachment is emotionally ambiguous; they can be both British and Irish. One identity need not dominate the other. When Kevin Keegan captained England, no one thought him less English because he was eligible to play for Ireland. The relationship is fluid, open to interpretation and revision.

The issue is not that any of these musicians or sportsmen is Irish in the way Bono, Roy Keane, Des Lynam, or even Terry Wogan and Graham Norton are Irish. Nor are we talking about the likes of Elvis Costello and Shane McGowan, who wear their Irishness on their sleeves. What is fascinating about this phenomenon is that Lennon, Morrissey, Lydon, Gallagher and a whole host of others (including David Bowie, whose mother, with a name like Peggy Mary Burns, couldn't have been from anywhere else) stem from that strange hybrid – the Irish in Britain.

They are a specific tribe, rarely studied yet prominent in all walks of British life. These people are a fusion. They are the Hiberno-British. Let's call them HiBrits for short.

### **Who are the HiBrits?**

The HiBrits are Ireland's demographic echo – the direct product of Ireland's perennial economic underperformance, which seemed to be a defining

national characteristic until about 10 years ago. But our loss was Britain's gain. Britain made them, and reaped the rewards.

Unlike the Irish-Americans, the HiBrit's history is a silent one. Yet Tony Blair is actually more Irish than John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Blair's mother was born in Donegal, while Kennedy's parents were both born in the USA of Irish stock.

Although rarely classed as such explicitly, they are by far the largest ethnic minority in England. The Irish echo in Britain shows up dramatically in official figures. In the last census of 2001, there were six million HiBrits in England. Over one in 10 of the British population has either an Irish parent or grandparent. Given that there are only four and a half million Irish people in Ireland today, that's quite a statistic.

Looked at from the Irish side of the channel, these figures make sense. Close to three-quarters of the Irish who emigrated over the past 70 years now live in Britain. By 1971, over 900,000 Irish people lived over the water, while the population of Ireland itself was only just over two million. 500,000 emigrated to England in the 1950s alone, mainly settling in Manchester, the midlands and London. Their children make up the lion's share of today's HiBrit population.

There was a later, but much smaller, bulge in the 1980s, ensuring that HiBrits are continuing to be born in maternity wards all over Britain. But as Ireland is transforming itself and absorbing more immigrants per head than any other country in the world, emigration to Britain has practically dried up. Nevertheless, the existing Irish population is still significant. So while 1971 constituted the peak, 30 years later there are still over 650,000 people who were born in Ireland, living in Britain.

In recent years, those who might in the past have hidden their Irishness have rediscovered and flaunted Hibernian roots. Many HiBrits have 'outed' themselves, possibly because the sense of what it is to be Irish has cohered at the expense of the sense of what it is to be British, which has weakened. Good examples of this phenomenon are Morrissey, Rotten and Kate Bush (who recorded in Gaelic). In a sea of bland, being a HiBrit makes you distinctive.

This metamorphosis mirrors the changing image of Ireland in Britain. Where once we were seen as feckless, lazy and drunken, the same characteristics are now seen as carefree, liberated and spontaneous. This change occurred sometime in the mid-1990s, and has created a new vision of Ireland that is very attractive to the discerning HiBrit.

As a result, many young HiBrits develop a romantic notion of Ireland. They use this to suggest that, in the arts, having Irish blood automatically renders you, compared with the British, and the English in particular, more artistic, less commercial; more romantic, less pragmatic; more dreamy, less realistic – and more creative altogether. A HiBrit such as Daniel Day Lewis is the poster boy for this sub-group.

The relationship is still fluid. Irishmen like me, who arrived in the early 1990s with education and a certain amount of self-confidence, are regarded as on a par. (I say 'self-confidence' because my mother is of that generation of Irish people who think those who speak with a middle-class English accent must be classier and thus more intelligent. She, and thousands of Irish pensioners like her, defer to some of the most vacuous bores known to man, simply because they can pronounce 'th'.)

A pre-census survey (ICM Research, *Irish Survey: Fieldwork: 16-18 February 2001*. London: Lexis PR, 2001), reported that one in four English people are HiBrits, claiming to have some Irish background. If true, that is some 14 million people. It means that today, there are close to three times as many HiBrits as real Irish. This affinity with Irish roots is particularly marked among younger people, 42 per cent of whom claim to be part Irish. Young Londoners, never slow to spot a trend, are particularly committed.

I blame this on über-HiBrit Dermot O'Leary! This metamorphosis is bizarre and uncomfortable for many of us Paddies. We had got used to the caricature. We're not used to being thought of as cool. We are the ones who panic at the sight of a red velvet rope outside a nightclub.

## The impact of the HiBrit hybrid

What drove this tribe? Many suggest that the creative spurt can be attributed to the fact that the HiBrits were outsiders – as much outsiders, according to Dermot O’Leary, as second-generation Asians. While they knew they were different, the rest of society saw people of the same colour, speaking the same language and supporting the same football clubs. More than other outsiders, HiBrits were the silent ethnics. They minded their own business and tried to get on.

Their parents met in newly established Hibernian clubs, and the children were sent home to Granny in Ireland for the summer. It was this very mongrel clan with the silent parents that found its voice in English popular culture, in a variety of ways. The psychology of being in the place, but not quite being of it, had a huge creative impact. The HiBrit knew the true Brit, but also knew that he (or she) was not from the same tribe, causing him to look at his neighbour slightly differently, and *vice versa*. This is evident in every area where the British (rightly) pride themselves as having an edge.

Such distance or detachment is invaluable to comedians. Could anyone except Steve Coogan (both of whose parents are Irish) have had the perspicacity to create the horribly, toe-curlingly and monstrously middle-English Alan Partridge? Partridge’s antics when dealing with Irish people – for example, patronising the Irish writers of *Father Ted* – are so accurate (for those of us who have experienced the gaucheness of middle England) that it must come from somewhere deep inside. The influence on comedy of other HiBrits, such as Peter Kay, Dave Allen, Spike Milligan, Catherine Tate, Jimmy Carr, Paul Merton, Neil Morrissey, Caroline Aherne and, of course, Billy Connolly, is again notable.

It’s hardly surprising that the Irish make good showmen. After all, most British people, when asked, will describe the Irish as good storytellers, good partygoers, who tend to be better chatterers and more sociable than the average punter. Like the Hollywood Jews, they are instinctively well suited to the stage and the limelight. HiBrit fingerprints are not confined to edgy comedy or rebels with guitars. Smack in the centre of mainstream

broadcasting we have Judy Finnigan, Ant and Dec, Anne Robinson, Sharon Osbourne, Dermot O’Leary, Dermot Murnaghan and Martha Kearney.

The HiBrits are now part of the furniture. Many argue that they are now as British as the British themselves. But there is a difference. The HiBrits knew ‘otherness’ as kids, when they closed their front doors and entered a very Irish world of sacred hearts, domestic service, labourers, nurses, spinster Auntie Mary and hairy bacon. Today, given Britain’s multicultural complexion, it is hard to imagine a time, not that long ago, when the Irish were the only large foreign population in the country, living huddled together in Irish areas, which they rarely left. Today these ghettos are almost gone from urban Britain. But if you want to get a sense of what it might have been like a few decades ago – how it felt to be white outsiders in white Britain – take a stroll down to one of the Irish pubs on the Harrow Road in London or the Stockport Road in Manchester. (Hurry up, before the blight of the ‘gastropub’ engulfs them too.)

There’ll you’ll find the twilight world of the Irish in Britain. Think of what it must have been like 50 or 60 years ago, when the old men at the bar first arrived. Consider how this 1950s influx of off-the-boat Paddies affected the gentrified Irish, who had come over a generation before and were already moving out to the suburbs. Contrary to popular belief, immigrants of different generations did not always stick together. Plenty of their more settled, more anglicised compatriots were hardly pleased about being reminded publicly where they had come from, or what they looked like before they acquired the habits of their hosts. Those who arrived a generation ago, or two or even three, who stuck together in Irish ghettos, whether Scotland Road in Liverpool, Levinshulme in Manchester or Mile End or Kilburn in London – they and their offspring were looked down on, even by their own.

Yet the creative wave has come from this more raw, second-generation HiBrit. And the truth is, today’s HiBrits needed Britain as much as it needed them. It is clear to anyone brought up in the stuffy Ireland of the 1970s or 1980s, or listening to older people talking about the 1950s and 1960s, that these products of mass immigration could never have made it in Ireland. Can you imagine Boy George (George O’Dowd), Julian Clary or Paul O’Grady getting away with cross-dressing in Ireland back then? They would still have risked

being lynched in rural Ireland, where their people came from, as late as the early 1990s.

Tolerant Britain gave them the chance to breathe, the opportunity to be outsiders and, most definitely, the commercial backdrop to express themselves in a way that Ireland, until recently, could never have done. In a way, they have drawn from the well of both cultures and forged something special. They – the HiBrit pop aristocracy – have created a generational echo of millions of Irish immigrants who wanted to speak, but felt that they had to keep their heads down. Today, through their children and grandchildren, they are being heard.

### **The last of the HiBrits?**

On 8 June 1999, something momentous occurred in the relationship between Ireland and Britain. On that day, Ireland officially became richer of the two countries, and since then a yawning gap has opened up, with average Irish incomes today almost 30 per cent higher than those across the water. This has created a new type of Paddy in Britain, and has also prompted the biggest movement of people from Britain to Ireland since the Tudor plantations. The affair has come full circle.

Today, poorer British are emigrating to Ireland seeking opportunities, and the richer Irish are investing in Britain, seeking capital gain. According to the most recent Irish census, the British are the largest ethnic minority in Ireland. Not so long ago, Irishmen were blowing up London's trophy buildings; today they are buying them up. From Wentworth Golf Club to the Savoy and the 'gherkin', Irish investors are the biggest foreign players in the UK property market. The Micks have gone from put-upon tenants to absentee landlords in one generation.

So where will the next Morrisseys, Lennons, Lydons and Gallaghers come from? Will tortured second-generation British immigrants in Ireland become the font of a new type of Irish creativity?

The economic miracle in Ireland is not only of interest to British people in the narrow financial or political sense of how was it achieved, and whether they can learn anything or even copy it, as the possible next Chancellor George

Osborne was recently suggesting in *The Times*. A more interesting question is – what will happen to the relationship between the two great tribes of this part of the world?

### **London City Airport**

Beep, beep. Is there any peace? What do they think is so urgent that they are punching in their passwords before we actually land? Mobiles are on; the corporate world is ready for battle. The suits check their messages frantically while the air hostess tuts through her armour of Mac foundation. Ignoring her, the battalion of Armani horn-rimmed glasses furiously search for a local network. They've been in the air from Dublin for all of 50 minutes. Who knows what financial tsunami could have struck in the meantime? The lawyer (there's always a lawyer who thinks the deal is his, and speaks of it in proprietorial terms) is trotting behind his masters, worried sick about the terms in one of the financing tranches. Hopefully he'll be able to sort it out with his opposite number at Linklaters.

These are changed Paddies in changed times.

The deal they are closing is the largest leveraged property deal any of them have been involved in. The debt/equity split is 95 per cent, and the syndicated notes further down the food chain are practically junk. If anything goes wrong in the London commercial market, those holders are toast. But they don't care. Back in Dublin, bragging rights are afforded to those who are 'part' of these deals. Boomtime Dublin, particularly at the top table, is a nose-tapping fest. Those in the know imply that they are in on some deal from which the others are excluded. Being part of a syndicate is now the Holy Grail, and being involved in the biggest deal thus far confers balls on a person. In a town of wannabes, you are a player.

The past few years have been a roller-coaster, as the Irish have gone from being the lads who built to the lads who buy. They are now the largest foreign investors in the UK property market. Last year, 53 per cent of all deals with foreigners in the London market were with Irish investors.

The black cab moves quickly from City Airport (owned by the same Irish oligarch who owns Celtic FC). It pulls up at 100 Liverpool Street, home of UBS, one of Europe's largest banks. The 'power foyers' of these places are always full of the same types. Women race for the door, clutching their yoga mats for a lunch-time alignment of their chakras. They brush past the preening French financial analyst, dressed head-to-toe in his 'look *anglais*', reverentially brandishing his sushi. Upstairs, on the dealing floor, American gym-bunny salesmen, with their ties swept over their shoulders, tuck into alfalfa and bean sprout salad, eyes glued to screen, Bloomberging early-bird college friends in Wall Street. The cosmopolitan elite likes to stay in touch.

Back downstairs, to the faint, synchronised chimes of lifts ascending and descending, the twin-setted and pearled Sloaney fund manager, all expensive blonde highlights and pencil skirt, rabbits into her top-of-the-range Motorola camera phone, while two identically turned-out Japanese businessmen in neat-fitting navy suits and twin-like side partings have their shoes shone by the automatic 'buff-stop shoeshine'. Even the new Irish property oligarchs, on their way out this morning to buy half the West End, haven't the chutzpah to get their brogues polished in public.

The Irish oligarchs – unlike many other multimillionaires – haven't much time for the obsequiousness of investment bankers. They realise there's more to business than a signet ring on the little finger, a pink shirt and bespoke suit. They also understand that, behind all the bluster, the bankers are simply employees – well paid, well heeled – but employees nonetheless. Bankers are salaried men who believe in insurance, market signals and respectability. The oligarchs, in contrast, believe in risk and have bungee-jumped into the property market – many are pleasantly surprised that the elastic rope hasn't broken yet.

But this deal is mega. It involves a mix of residential and commercial buildings all over the West End, from Piccadilly to St James's and down to Knightsbridge. The one billion pound transaction will be financed by various different tranches of debt. The ultimate owners will be the four men around the table. However, at least 50 smaller investors will be needed to get it over the line, and they will use the smarmy Sandhurst-trained bankers to find them.

Times have changed. Ireland has been transformed, and its relationship with Britain is undergoing an enormous makeover. Britain once saved millions of Irish from destitution in their homeland. These migrants formed the Irish community, and in turn spawned the HiBrits, who have profoundly embellished the mix that makes the British who they are. Their absence over the coming generations will be missed by both tribes.

Who will lament the passing of the Morrisseys, McCartneys, Lennons, Gallaghers, Lydons, Keegans and Rooneys?

I will, for one!

## Fionola Meredith

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## Springtime in Belfast

Fionola Meredith

Standing on the austere, stately steps of Stormont on a bright winter's morning last December, I started to believe that Northern Ireland had truly changed. It wasn't a shattering epiphany, or a conviction that the change was a complete and perfect thing. Far from it. But standing there, among an extraordinarily diverse crowd of people – a great colourful jumble of republicans and loyalists, politicians from all parties, devout churchgoers and passionate atheists, arch-conservatives and dyed-in-the-wool socialists, children from Cameroon and Nigeria and Lithuania and Belfast – I knew that something unusual was happening.

We were all there to protest against the forced deportation of a Nigerian woman and her young family, who had settled in east Belfast. Some of us knew Comfort Adefowaju personally, others did not. But we had gathered there united in the same purpose: to beg the Home Secretary to have compassion on Comfort and her children, and to let her return to the place she had made her home. My eyes filled with tears as I watched the assembled children holding up huge posters emblazoned with the plea, 'Bring them home to Belfast'. This, surely, was a marker of how far we had come, that people from such radically different and opposed backgrounds could join together – out of compassion, out of principle, out of the goodness of their hearts – to intercede for a foreign woman who had lost almost everything. In that sea of faces, I caught a glimpse of a different way of life.

But first, I want to look back a few years, to a late summer night in 2005. It was one of the worst nights of violence in Belfast for a very long time. On Saturday 10 September 2005, the city was engulfed by a storm of bricks, bullets and blast bombs. Loyalist paramilitaries, incensed at the diversion of a small Orange Order parade at Whiterock in west Belfast, had unleashed a brutal outburst of violence and anarchy across the city. Rioters poured onto the streets, roads were blocked with burning barricades, and at one point a stolen bulldozer was driven at police lines.



But for many – myself and my partner included – it was just another Saturday night. We had spent the first part of the evening having cocktails in the opulent bar of Malmaison, one of the self-consciously cool hotels that had recently sprung up across the city. (Interestingly, the hotel's restaurant is decorated with a montage of the famous political murals that came to define Belfast in the global imagination – a striking example of how it's possible to transform militaristic imagery into urban art.) In those unlikely surroundings, we had a foretaste of the kind of night Belfast was in for, as a score of heavily fortified police Land Rovers mobilised in the street. Noticing the scene outside, the barman discreetly drew the window blinds, safely enclosing us in the bar's lush, black velvet-lined interior.

Later, as we walked across town to our favourite nightclub, we passed City Hall, where a live link-up to the Last Night of the Proms was in full swing. The prim, manicured lawns were full of concert-goers sitting on deckchairs, sipping Pimms from thermos flasks and enjoying the mild evening air. The stuttering whir of overhead Army helicopters was clearly audible.

As we strolled towards the Dublin Road, we wondered if the club would still be on, but it was going ahead as usual, and we danced deliriously until the early hours to – among other things – the old Derry punk band Stiff Little Fingers and their inspiringly interrogative thrash from 1978, *Alternative Ulster*:

'Is this the kind of place you wanna live? Is this where you wanna be? ...  
What we need is an Alternative Ulster, grab it, change it, it's yours.'

Outside, about 500 yards down the street, teenage rioters were setting cars on fire. Notwithstanding my whiskey-addled state, it was impossible to miss the irony. Could this place ever change?

I tell this story for several reasons. First, to reflect on how far Northern Ireland has come in the few short years since that evening; and second, to show how close we remain, both chronologically and in terms of deep-rooted sectarian tensions, to the dark times. The savage anarchy of September 2005 came hurtling out of a relatively calm political sky – this was post-ceasefire, post-

Belfast Agreement, after all – and there's no doubt that the potential remains for more of the same.

I am not talking about this out of misplaced *braggadocio*; looking back, I wonder what we were thinking of, going out into that night of flaming madness. Perhaps it shows how inured to violence and public disorder we, as a society, had become. Nor do I wish to imply that the violence on the streets added a squalid frisson to our evening, that we were somehow titillated by it – the Belfast version of people who have public sex on roundabouts. No, like the concert-goers who attended the Proms in the Park event, we simply wanted the pleasant night out that we had planned, and were disinclined to let a crowd of thugs stop us from doing that. In fact, we did have a great night, and got home safely. Others were not so fortunate – several people attending the Proms had their cars hijacked and burnt out on their way home.

I mention the events of this night to give a sense of the kind of schizoid, incongruous Belfast that I have known all my life, a city at once savage and benign, both soberly conformist and wildly bizarre. There are many other instances of the apparently casual attitude of Northerners to their own personal proximity to violence, all part of the untold minutiae of the Troubles. When Newtownards, the market town where I grew up, suffered a massive car-bomb attack on a summer night in 1993, the roads were jammed for miles around as people flocked to rubberneck at the scene – despite police warnings that there could be a hidden second device. The target of the bomb attack was Roma's Bar in the town's main street. I remember looking up at the smouldering building to see a solitary wine glass left miraculously intact on a table on the building's upper floor.

It was also common to see people getting on with their business, blithely oblivious to the sight of yellow police tape stretched across one of Belfast's many shopping streets; 'sure, it's only another bomb scare' was the laconic attitude. Yet once you had actually heard a bomb explode, with that muffled, mighty, death-dealing boom, you never forgot it. I was in a friend's house, close to the scene of the explosion, when the Newtownards car bomb went off, and we watched with horrified fascination as the glass in the Velux window of her

attic bedroom appeared to surge like water towards us, before becoming rigid once more.

The fact that so many of us went ahead and attempted our usual Saturday night out in September 2005 – in circumstances that people from outside the North might consider almost laughably reckless – illustrates the thirst for normality that has always existed among the majority of Northerners devoid of fire-in-the-blood political allegiances. You don't often hear from these people, precisely because they do not fit into Northern Ireland's harsh, inexorable binary of sectarianism – and because those excited by political and religious zealotry always shout louder. I am talking about the people who watched the wild-eyed strife – both political and, especially, physical – with as much incredulity as distaste, the visceral, blood-rousing cries of our politicians leaving them untouched and repelled. Living in a trenchantly politicised culture that was overdefined and grossly distorted by that apparently insuperable divide, many simply opted out: not bothering to vote, keeping their heads down, carving out their own private spaces in a culture both depressingly familiar – many of us have lived with it all our lives – and curiously alien.

Outsiders have little understanding of what it means to live in a place where the sectarian divide saturates almost every aspect of life. It is alive in the very bones of the language we speak. To some, my own name – Fionola – marks me out as Catholic, even though I was born a Protestant. It's a cultural disconnect that I am not unhappy about; anything that mixes up the old burdensome dichotomy is a good thing, as far as I'm concerned. I was born in 'the North', or 'Northern Ireland'; I deliberately use the two terms interchangeably, refusing the established nationalist/unionist markers. Hey, let's throw 'Ulster' into the mix too – put several centuries of history into the blender, and see what comes out. Like many people of my generation, I can't be bothered with mouthing these ridiculous political orthodoxies, reiterating the tribal litanies that continue to carve our society up. It is, and always has been, hard for me to understand the burning ideological forces, the diehard tribal allegiances that drove and sustained the conflict, and which continue to shape and define the peace. That fiery impetus has always been missing from my sense of self, and from that of many of my friends.

Fortunately, the extreme street violence of September 2005 turned out to be an aberration in the North's stumbling, imperfect path towards peace. Our desperate thirst for normality has been slaked in recent years, and a picture has gradually begun to emerge of a truly post-conflict Northern Ireland.

When I went to vote in the referendum on the Agreement in May 1998, I was 24 years old, and had my baby daughter, born less than a month before, in my arms. Passing the noisy campaigners at the gates, stridently urging me to vote 'no', I entered the voting booth, where I noticed a scrawled piece of paper. 'For your children's sake, please vote yes', it said. I could imagine the other young mother who might have left that plea. This was not a moment to cast up old hurts, terrible losses, real and imagined injustices. This was a time to grasp that fragile sliver of hope and, as they say rather bluntly in these parts, hang on to it for grim death. And besides, I needed no encouragement: I had walked in there determined to say yes to the possibility of a bright, peaceful future for my tiny daughter.

It wasn't until nine years later, with the astonishing sight of implacable enemies Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness taking their seats as First and Deputy First Ministers in the devolved administration at Stormont, that peace seemed – at last – a done deal. But it was those first pictures of firebrand fundamentalist Paisley and Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams side-by-side (although carefully positioned on either side of a corner table), confirming that power-sharing would soon begin, that really blew everyone away. Even though we knew it could well be coming, the visual hit was extraordinary, like seeing water turned to wine before your eyes: an impossibility made flesh.

So now we are all living in 'the new Northern Ireland', under the surprisingly harmonious aegis of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness – well, at least until Mr Paisley hands over the First Minister's reigns to his likely successor, his rather less jocular deputy Peter Robinson. For the first time, the peace feels like something you might just be able to rely on, acquiring a substance and solidity that was always absent in the past. This, of course, could be a comforting fiction, grounded on only a few years of shaky peace, and on only a few months of functioning devolved government. After all, the commentator Conor Cruise O'Brien once soberly predicted that Northern Ireland could never

achieve a lasting peace as long as its politics were defined by religion. He added that the North might see episodes of non-violence that coincided with the ageing of each generation of its warring leaders, an observation that fits uncomfortably well with the current rapprochement.

All the same, there's an unmistakeable energy and vigour about the North these days. Belfast has a spring in its step, a shimmer of confidence that I've never before seen in the dour old city. Gone is that lingering sense of grim, battered, stoical endurance that was its defining mark in the dark years. It's no longer self-loathing or ill at ease with itself. A sense of possibility and purpose is in the air.

Of course, Belfast always had its pockets of loveliness. Carol Rumens' poem 'Variant Readings' speaks of her surprise at discovering a different Belfast:

'I expected bleachworks and burnt-out cars, not fuchsias;  
Not cedar and sky-trickling larch, their remote massed shade,  
Not to hear my footsteps, lonely in streets of wet hedges  
That tell me: here peace, and love, and money, are made'<sup>1</sup>.

But now an extraordinary challenge lies ahead. As a society, we've spent years hunkered down low, barely functioning, our eyes and ears and minds so full of the conflict that we've had no chance to hear ourselves think. With that terrible weight removed, the North is free as never before to grow and develop from an immature, self-obsessed and dysfunctional society into one that, while damaged and fragile, is culturally rich and politically mature.

So who are we? What kind of society do we want to be, now that we've woken up, blinking incredulously, in the twenty-first century? How do we 'alter our native land', as Stiff Little Fingers had it? Most of us are happy to sign up to the big, beautiful picture, the one that Ian Paisley, in his new incarnation as peacemaker, and echoing Martin Luther King, recently referred to as

'A dream in which children can play together, in which people can work together, and in which families can live happily side by side, regardless of their community or ethnic background or their religious beliefs'<sup>2</sup>.

Who could disagree with that all-embracing vision? Yet this being Northern Ireland, the reality is darker and messier: more crazily tangled, criss-crossed with competing moral, cultural and political values...

But first, let's take a closer look at the glossy, public representation. Let's see what's being scrawled on the tabula rasa of post-Troubles Northern Ireland.

If you are to believe the marketing people, dominant voices in a determined effort to rebrand this place, Northern Ireland has undergone a radical and complete transformation in the past few years, morphing almost instantaneously from shambling, war-torn pariah to 'world-class' destination. Yes, world-class: that's the favourite buzzword these days. The phrase is bandied about everywhere. Now we're told that Northern Ireland is a 'world-class and progressive region', with 'world-class theatre and museum experiences', 'world-class colleges', 'world-class corporate services', 'world-class developments' and 'world-class infrastructure'.

The rebranders need to catch themselves on. At the risk of stating the bleeding obvious, simply asserting that something is true does not make it so. Belfast, and Northern Ireland as a whole, is undoubtedly a unique and intriguing place. But brashly insisting, without any credible foundation, that we are the cream of the global crop is an ill-advised tactic. Making such huge claims is a crude, blunderbuss approach. And, ironically, the overstatement risks making us look worse than we actually are. It's a kind of 'protesting too much' – actually making us look rather silly, immature and deluded.

It's all part of the wave of dumbed-down marketing-speak that Northern Ireland's public bodies have embraced so enthusiastically. And the pity is that it shuts down on all the colourful, contradictory things that make our country the fascinating place it is, both to live in and to visit.

I'm not saying we're rubbish – far from it. But we've become seduced by gloss and froth. If we really want to call Belfast a world-class destination, it's not enough to swathe it in shiny wrapping paper and stick a bow on top, or do awful things like calling the Lisburn Road, south Belfast's main shopping street,

'little Knightsbridge'. That's falling into the trap of thinking we're only any good as long as we resemble other, bigger, better places.

Part of the problem is that we're easily impressed by the glitz of commercialism. Retail is practically a third major religious denomination here, and this is nothing new. 'A city built on mud; / A culture built upon profit',<sup>3</sup> as Louis MacNeice put it – the virtues of trade and hard dealing having long defined the city's grabby commercial side. There's nothing Belfast's citizens love better than to cram themselves, cheek-by-jowl, into strip-lit stores and buy, buy, buy! Bargain-hunters of the world, come and join us in the one collective cultural pastime we can all agree on.

But there is more to this strange city than the spending and making of money. And there is much, much more than can be reduced to the empty chirp of marketing-speak. This superficial, relentlessly upbeat, brittle-bright language is creeping in everywhere, wiping away all the things that make Belfast dirty and complicated and interesting. Recently, a friend visiting from Dublin remarked on how natural and unpackaged Belfast is as a city, compared with the glossy branding that has overtaken Dublin. But at this rate, we won't be long in catching up.

A rather more subtle, but in my view equally insidious, aspect of the current rebranding of the North involves an attempt to forcibly sanitise the place. You can sometimes see the tactic at work if you travel on one of the many Troubles Tours that shunt tourists around the flashpoints of north and west Belfast. Passengers huddle up on open-top buses beneath Belfast's customary leaden skies, while tour guides provide a running commentary packed with joky bonhomie. Presumably intended to put nervous tourists at their ease, this bright and breezy tone can really jar. Last time I took a trip on the tour bus, as we were passing the Royal Hospital on the Falls Road, the tour guide described how – during the Troubles – doctors from all over the world came to the hospital to train in dealing with gunshot trauma. 'It's nice to be famous for something,' she laughed nervously. Later, we passed the remains of a smouldering bonfire in the middle of the road, the product of 'a wee fight' last night, we were told.

Similarly, the guides on a literary tour of Belfast were recently asked to remove certain readings from their programme – including an outstanding piece of writing by Belfast novelist Robert McLiam Wilson<sup>4</sup> – because they were considered too bleak, painting the city in a sinister, negative light. Again, this well meaning but misguided form of cultural cleansing risks stripping away the very qualities that make Belfast the exceptional city that it is.

It's not really surprising that we set such store by superficial appearance and public display, when we consider the North's old obsession with the politics of representation. There's nothing like flags and emblems to get this society revved up and ready to roar. I always think these loud, proud markers of tribal identity are appositely – if rather inelegantly – summed up by Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain's phrase 'territorial pissings'.<sup>5</sup>

Flags are far more than gaudy bits of fabric here, and you toy with them at your peril. A friend of mine, living in a loyalist area of east Belfast, was ill-advisedly attempting to sell his house at the height of the summer marching season, when streets in loyalist areas are always awash with rampant flag-flying. Unfortunately, the flag fluttering from the lamp-post outside his home was a purple Ulster Volunteer Force one, and he worried that it would harm his sale prospects. So one night he crept out with a ladder and took the flag down. Fearful of being seen putting it out with the rubbish, he now uses the paramilitary flag as a rather colourful tea towel in his new house.

In some respects, divisive sectarian grandstanding has not abated with the advent of the new accommodation at Stormont; rather it has become more entrenched than ever. In a recent case, Sinn Féin councillors in Limavady, County Derry compiled an inventory of apparently offensive council-owned items that they believe breach the 'neutral working environments' directive. Under the Good Friday Agreement, the principle of 'neutral working environments' recognises the political sensitivity around the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and was intended to ensure that such symbols are 'used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division'.<sup>6</sup>

It sounds like a perfectly simple, reasonable aspiration, but – as is so often the case in Northern Ireland – its practical application has turned into a

complicated, point-scoring and increasingly fraught process. As ever, the proportion of publicly displayed shamrocks to red hands of Ulster is fiercely contested. But is it really such a big deal if the council displays an (admittedly naff) Charles and Diana wedding mug, or a toy dragon presented by the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards? Sinn Féin say it is, arguing that in the absence of items representing the nationalist/republican tradition on council property, strict neutrality is the only option. Of course, unionists are furious, claiming that their heritage is being airbrushed out. Earlier this year, in Banbridge, County Down, Orangemen protested outside the offices of the district council after certain items – including a painting of an RAF checkpoint, as well as Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Ulster Constabulary plaques – were removed from public display. The language was emotive, almost hysterical: a letter handed in to the offices on behalf of 50 Orange lodges in the area described the move as ‘utterly devastating’, and accused the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (whose role it is to promote good relations and oversee anti-discrimination law) of engaging in ‘a long term strategy to wipe the face of Britishness from Northern Ireland’.<sup>7</sup>

To those of us unmoved by passionate tribal allegiances, the whole situation is, frankly, bonkers. It shows Northerners – on both sides – at their worst: querulous, whining, self-righteous and small-minded, wilfully refusing to see the bigger picture. Some observers fear these freakish rows over crockery and giftware could be the harbinger of worse to come. As Dr Kris Brown of Queen’s University Belfast muses, ‘I wonder if it’s all indicative of future brushfire cultural wars. People are taking to the streets over these issues: it’s a long way from chuckling towards Stormont.’<sup>8</sup>

Such incidents prove that mutual suspicion and hostility are still far from being eradicated from Northern Ireland. After all, in one often-quoted statistic, two-thirds of the North’s population live in areas that are either 90 per cent Roman Catholic or 90 per cent Protestant, each with their own separate schools, libraries, healthcare clinics, buses, and so on. And it costs a packet to maintain this dual structure: a study by Deloitte<sup>9</sup> showed that the extra expense in duplicated services came to one and a half billion pounds. What’s worse, there are no proposals in the current programme for government that attempt to tackle the massive problem of segregation.

There are other, equally established but perhaps more culturally diffuse, impediments to the growth of openness and tolerance in Northern Ireland: for instance, the steely, thin-lipped social conservatism at which Northerners traditionally excel. I think of it as a form of self-righteous parochialism, grounded in a suspicion of all that falls outside its narrow worldview. Amid all the fanfare around devolution, I see no evidence that we are any more free from the grip of this blinkered conservatism. Is Northern Ireland the kind of place where a lesbian couple could walk down the street holding hands, without inviting comment or abuse? Hardly. Is it the sort of place where a woman can breastfeed her child in public, without pinched looks? Too often, not. We can’t even bring ourselves to have a proper debate about abortion – which remains effectively banned in Northern Ireland – instead, relying on our (overwhelmingly) male, middle-aged representatives to continue to kick the issue under the carpet.

The treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people in Northern Ireland remains a matter of serious concern. Despite a gradual thawing of public hostility, for too many people, homophobia is still regarded as a ‘respectable and acceptable prejudice’. Still, the days when you could get away with publicly stating that lesbian and gay relationships are ‘immoral, offensive and obnoxious’ (as Ian Paisley Junior did in 2005, following it up in 2007 with the claim that gay people ‘repulsed’ him)<sup>10</sup> have gone the way of ‘Ulster says No’. As a chorus of indignation rightly pointed out, you can’t go around saying you’re repelled by gay people, and claiming that they harm society, when you are a minister in a department charged with protecting their rights.

Yet now, I believe, we are seeing an ostensibly different, but similarly hostile approach to homosexuality from some of our other politicians. Earlier this year, Stormont Arts and Culture Minister Edwin Poots accused Northern Ireland’s first gay-friendly rugby team, the Ulster Titans, of sporting apartheid, arguing that it is unacceptable for a team to recruit members on the basis of their sexual orientation. ‘I just cannot fathom why people see the necessity to develop an apartheid in sport’,<sup>11</sup> he said.

Somewhat disingenuously, the Democratic Unionist Party member claimed that it would be just as wrong to have an all-black rugby team or an all-Chinese

team, and that the Ulster Titans are moving against the spirit of inclusiveness that characterises ‘the new Northern Ireland’. He denied that his opposition to the team was rooted in his fundamentalist Christian views.

Actually, the team is not exclusively gay – it welcomes all players. But the disturbing issue here is Minister Poots’ use of the sunshiny discourse of equality to express his distaste for the team. It appears that, having realised that stating gay people fill them with revulsion will not be tolerated, certain politicians have hit on the cunning wheeze of getting in first with allegations of discrimination. Of course, many people find the Minister’s statement farcical, and await his views on teams made up of people with disabilities, or all-women line-ups, with amused interest. Nonetheless, it’s a worrying development. It’s clear that some of our political representatives are finding that their insular, sin-haunted worldviews are profoundly at odds with the liberal, rights-based governmental structure they have inherited from direct rule. The working out of that uncomfortable disjuncture will, no doubt, throw up many more similar situations.

Part of the problem, I believe, is Northern Ireland’s prevailing political culture of macho bluster and swaggering heterosexuality. As the historian Stephen Howe has noted, reflecting on Protestant, male, working-class disaffection, the North has long been a ‘profoundly masculinist culture, in ways that decades of violence could only reinforce’. Yet anxiety and fear may lurk behind the bravado. Howe believes that ‘both the partial ending of paramilitary violence (which threatens to deprive “hard men” of their *raison d’être* and aggressive youths of their role models) and the precipitous decline in industrial employment must intensify the crisis of masculinity that commentators identify as a more general post-industrial phenomenon.’<sup>12</sup>

Before we can truly embrace the future, it seems we must look to the past and consider how to deal with its mute, glowering presence. For many, following Maya Angelou’s wise observation that ‘history, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be un-lived, and if faced with courage, need not be lived again’,<sup>13</sup> seeking out ‘the truth’ of what happened in the conflict has become imperative – the ultimate cleansing, healing and redemptive act that will bring collective

closure to our damaged society. And yet ‘the truth’ has itself become a dangerously loaded and contested term, buckling under the weight of competing histories and contradictory cultural mythologies.

Truth is messy, and fluid, and uncontainable. It is always inflected by interpretation. It can never be captured as a whole, neatly catalogued and filed away. So the quest for absolute and guaranteed truth will always end in failure and disappointment. To paraphrase Nietzsche, truth can’t be understood as something simply there, that might be found or discovered, but as an infinite process that never reaches its final goal.

If total possession of ‘the truth’ – understood as the complete representation of an objective state of affairs – is an impossible ambition, what are we left with? Perhaps nothing more than a series of narratives, a complex web of stories that occasionally overlap each other, but more often strain apart, refusing to cohere into a single, intelligible voice.

Will these partial, imperfect, incomplete truths be enough to allow the victims of atrocities a measure of healing? Would an official attempt at national truth recovery and acknowledgement, however flawed, provide sufficient closure for those most brutally damaged by the conflict? State-sanctioned processes of remembering are built on the presupposition that ‘the truth sets us free’; that victims remain stuck in a form of post-traumatic limbo until the agonising splinter of truth is extracted, and that only then can they heal and move on.

But what if only parts of the splinter can be removed? What if some of it is embedded so deeply that it can’t be extracted? How much of the truth will be enough to ease the agony? Attempts at truth recovery, from the public inquiry to the full-blown truth-and-reconciliation process, may at best be able to locate missing pieces of the jigsaw. Making them fit together into a coherent, consensual whole will be a potentially infinite task. But perhaps a fractional, imperfect or provisional truth is better than none at all...

I think of my birthplace with a strange mixture of gritted-teeth frustration and eye-rolling affection. There is no other place like this crazy, mercurial city; no

place that can infuriate, surprise, and occasionally charm me like Belfast does. It is my home, and my children's home. And despite the flaws and imperfections, the inherent tensions and weaknesses of the new political accommodation; despite, too, the myriad seemingly intractable social and cultural problems yet to be resolved, there is real hope for the future here. It is springtime at last in Northern Ireland.

In her poem 'Prayer for Belfast', Carol Rumens urges:

Go, stories, leave the breath in her,  
The last word to be said by her,  
And leave no heart for dead in her.  
Steer this ship of dread from her.  
No husband lift a hand to her,  
No daughter shut the blind on her,  
May sails be sewn, seeds grown, for her.  
May every kiss be kind to her.<sup>14</sup>

Amen to that.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> C. Rumens, 'Variant Readings', *Thinking of Skins*. Bala, Gwynedd: Bloodaxe Books, 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> From a speech by Ian Paisley to the Northern Ireland Assembly, 4 June 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> L. MacNeice, 'Autumn Journal: XVI', *Collected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber, 1966.
- <sup>4</sup> R. McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street*. London: Minerva, 1997.
- <sup>5</sup> From the 1991 Nirvana album *Nevermind*.
- <sup>6</sup> The Belfast Agreement, April 1998.
- <sup>7</sup> Open letter from the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, 22 January 2008.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with Dr Kris Brown, 14 February 2008. Since their inception as First and Deputy First Ministers, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness have often been dubbed 'the Chuckle Brothers', a sardonic reference to their surprisingly amiable relationship.
- <sup>9</sup> Deloitte, *Research into the Financial Cost of the Northern Ireland Divide*, April 2007.
- <sup>10</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 31 January 2005; *BBC News*, 30 May 2007
- <sup>11</sup> Edwin Poots, *BBC Northern Ireland News*, 19 February 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> S. Howe, 'Mad Dogs and Ulstermen: The Crisis of Loyalism', *Open Democracy*, 27 September 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> M. Angelou, 'On the Pulse of Morning', *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. London: Random House, 1994.
- <sup>14</sup> C. Rumens, 'Prayer for Belfast', *Best China Sky*. Bala, Gwynedd: Bloodaxe Books, 1997.

## Katy Radford

*Katy Radford began work at 16, becoming a producer in the British Film Institute and a researcher in the Irish School of Ecumenics, before stints in organisations as diverse as the Playboy Club, Save the Children, the Comic Strip and the BBC. Currently working with the Belfast-based Institute for Conflict Research, she is committed to furthering good community relations through policy-related research, and has published several reports relating to social inclusion, such as Hearing the Voices: Sharing Perspectives in the Victim/Survivor Sector for the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council; 'Red white blue and orange: an exploration of historical allegiances through loyalist songs' (The World of Music 46: 71–89), and Health, Faith and Equality for the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism. Katy has a PhD in social anthropology, sits on the Executive Council of the Belfast Jewish Community, and is a regular broadcaster.*

## Forty one sounds of green – an Anglo-Irish soundscape

Katy Radford

I

Home, for my parents, is a small white stone cottage in an unpretentious and unashamedly 'ice cream, bucket and spade' resort in County Down. It's a seaside village of fewer than 2000 people, with views from the coast on a clear day and further inland across to Scotland. In the nearby sea lagoon, wintering waterfowl and waders contribute to the diversity of a habitat of salt marsh and mud flats that is rich in flora and fauna. Bird cries and calls are the principal sounds, together with the crash and swish of the waves that break and ebb across the shingle. There, where myriad intertidal communities mark the transition from fresh- to seawater, both the marine and the human stories of the area exhibit their own strange, layered narratives of absorption and survival. Persistent elemental forces pull tides and birds, as the political and economic forces push traders and barterers back and forth between Irish and British shores, weaving different interpretations of experiences shared between the two islands.

My aim here is to explore the way reciprocal cultural adaptations between the two islands have forged common as well as contested heritages. Harking to these diverse and multiple identities that have always been richly present in Britain and Ireland is, I believe, the best way to illustrate the weft and the weave of intercultural relations as they fashioned a complementary tapestry for the nations.

My parents moved to Belfast in the 1960s. Like many of the new EU accession country migrants recently motivated to leave mainland Europe to build new lives in Britain and Ireland, they were in search of a warm welcome, secure employment and a safe home in which to raise their pre-school family. My mother's journey here was a particularly circuitous one. Brought from Vienna by nuns as a seven-year-old Jewish refugee, she found her way to the Isle of Man. That she came ashore in a place equidistant between Britain and Ireland was somehow prophetic, as she spent her next 30 years in England and the following 40 in Ireland.



Despite having chosen to live the majority, and indeed the rest, of their lives in Ireland, my parents still consider themselves to be essentially foreign. Perhaps that is unsurprising in a place where outsider status has long been adroitly conferred and embedded in expressions such as: 'but where are you *really* from', unashamedly solicited from anyone – be they English, Polish, Chinese, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu – with a 'non-Irish' accent. I remember a friend of my father's, a man with supremely plummy enunciation, being asked how long he'd been in Northern Ireland. His clipped response, 'about 300 years', was met with a derisory look: he was at least 100 years too late to be considered anything other than a blow-in.

The Ireland that I knew as a child during the 1960s and early 1970s was not well epitomised by the saturated colours and subjects of postcards by the photographer John Hinde: not for me rural paddy-whackery in the guise of curly ginger-haired children, donkeys and peat baskets. Nor was the natural environment 'red in tooth and claw' as those English Victorians, Tennyson and Darwin, would have it – that bloody process of unnatural selection came later on in the 1970s. Rather, for the first part of my childhood, the landscape was tamed into a formally gardened, tree-lined, urban construct that on first impressions could just as easily have passed for middle-class Scotland, Wales or England. Religious conservatism, to be heard in dire dirges and dreary Calvinist hymns, offered some the ballast they needed to steady themselves. But for a child, religion was never more disproportionate and fundamental than when the squeak of the swings in the municipal parks were silenced and chained up, so as not to 'desecrate the Sabbath'.

The tight reins of Orangeism, unionism and an elitist form of patronage didn't otherwise directly impinge on the neighbourhood in which we lived. In the main those, like my parents, who worked as academics and university administrators, irrespective of national allegiance or religious affiliation, were already at one remove from the structural inequalities that beset others in the city. Equipped with the certainty of jobs, housing and education, many friends and neighbours appeared to have developed a political antipathy to their perpetuation of practical and theoretical colonialism. Instead, they scaled ivory towers, from which they set their academic sights on the civil rights and wrongs of black America, Vietnam and the intellectual anarchy of Paris.

Yet scratch the surface, and 'my' Belfast had a small, self-satisfied, inward-looking patriarchy at its centre. The alpha male was as evident in the university system as anywhere else, and political and gender norms went unchallenged. Perhaps they were at their most benign, but in effect most insidious, when suppressing those 'Gaelic games that were just not cricket', while encouraging women to consider themselves lucky to be on the flower-arranging rota at the wives' club.

Some time between my seventh birthday in 1968 and entering secondary school in 1972, sticky tape to limit the shattering of glass appeared on my classroom windows; regulations were issued about kicking cans in the streets; and, despite John Lennon releasing *Give Peace a Chance*, 497 deaths irrevocably altered my understanding of a complacent and self-contained world.

The city centre became a place that was out of bounds without an adult, limiting 'normal' childhood social activities like cinema-going, my preferred connection to 'the other'. At the time, I had no notion as to the reason for the Ulster 1971 exhibition in Botanic Gardens. But I do remember the excitement in those pre-Nickelodeon days, running back early morning across the wet park to the house to tell my brother there was a tent being put up where you would be able to see films and Disney cartoons projected onto a huge temporary screen. My two-dimensional world was comfortably repopulated by damsel rescuers on white horses and wicked witches in black capes. As a result, perhaps, it was only to be expected that such bipolar beliefs would characterise my political misunderstandings.

Despite the fact that from the United Irishmen to Seán MacStiofáin/John Stephenson, English-born men and women have played significant roles in Irish Republicanism; despite the fact that many Irish nationalists willingly took up arms to fight with Britain during the First and Second World Wars; despite the fact that police corruption and government chicanery and collusion are exposed in every spy movie as the underbelly of poor politics and diplomacy – I spent my early childhood oblivious to this. I expected uniformed soldiers to defend us honourably from men in balaclavas. The movies that I understood and could access taught me that goodies were goodies and baddies were never anything other than that.

But when my monochromatic certainties shifted from screen to street, they began to be challenged through music and the process of music-making. Throughout the 1970s, two nights a week and on Saturday mornings, I went to the School of Music on Donegal Pass. It remains, perhaps, the most useful cross-community initiative that the Department of Education, via the Belfast Education and Library Board, has run since the height of the conflict. At that time, it was under the leadership of a Welshman, Leonard Pugh, and situated in a densely populated loyalist working-class area. Row upon row of small 'kitchen houses' dominoed onto the main thoroughfare, the Pass, where the school was to be found. The gable wall of a nearby street sported one of the earliest Orange murals (and, as the man sat on a white horse, he was clearly to be considered a hero-goody).

The Pass seemed permanently wet and dark. Paint-chipped exteriors of bars opened onto interiors whose sole occupants were donkey-jacketed men with broad shoulders and shuffling old-timers in dunchers. Metal grilles covered shop windows in a road with intermittent street lighting, waves of litter and roaming, collarless, defecating dogs. The light from the fish-and-chip shop shone 100 new decimal metres across and down from the school: a welcome beacon after a night's playing. There, the radio station seemed to be permanently tuned in to a wavelength that picked up semi-audible police messages, so that customers could ensure their routes home were open and safe. The School remained a remarkable oasis of calm and learning during that decade and, for those fortunate to make the grade, provided a gateway to an even braver new world of fellow-travelling players in Europe, where radio airwaves crackled with half-understood languages, rather than with indecipherable security services' coded initials.

From way back before integrated schooling became an option, and even since then, the School of Music was the first opportunity many of us had to meet with children and young people from different backgrounds. Unlike many other arts associations of the time, it was no elitist academy where finance, accent or social status had the upper hand. Rather, those who benefited most from the school tended to come from homes where music-making was the norm, and playing together part of a daily or weekly rite at the core of family life. In the scruffy (but highly polished) classes, we learned repertoires and

instruments from other traditions, how to adapt and incorporate styles of playing from traditional to jazz, from symphony to *sean-nós*. And, perhaps most importantly of all, that the basic rule of music-making starts with trust-building, collaboration and passing on social messages through the art of non-verbal communication. In a pre-rights-directed society, the right to access both a shared and a contested history and culture was learnt through this opportunity to play, sing and – through our performances – to appropriate all sorts of different forms of music.

The grouping together of bands, orchestras and choirs provided a structural framework for this implicitly cross-community work. Inside the band rooms, the creation of harmonies out of nothingness and 'dis-chord' became a metaphor for youth cohesion, as the tensions and fears outside were variously ignored, suppressed, subordinated and eventually drowned out through sound. The music and poetry of the songs brought with them shape-shifting themes from the mythologised and romanticised pasts of victims and survivors, of thwarted lovers and of lost lands that defied national boundaries.

This was no place for music that glorified military martyrs or sociopolitical narratives (although that music might well be part of more eclectic repertoires to be made later in the home). Instead, in the School, the national certainties of some and the colonial convictions of others were musically challenged if not eradicated, as flautists and fiddlers shared histories discovered through gigs and reels that have been exchanged between these islands, north and south, since people first picked up instruments. We explored varieties of playing style that exemplified regional techniques thought to typify the landscape from which they derived. The same piece tutored by someone from the island's most northerly areas might be played with choppy bowing or breaths suggesting the waves of the Donegal coastal regions, whereas in the hands of a practitioner from the West, instruments could be manipulated to produce long and protracted phrasing, invoking those rolling fields.

The School was a place that equipped children to hear those differences and to recognise the juxtaposition of sounds and instruments essential to creating the musical tension that arcs through a piece, making it a whole. The English ethnomusicologist John Blacking, who first brought this academic discipline

to Ireland, did so with the suggestion that a proper understanding of music might produce a *soundly* organised society. And it was the skills in how to resolve musical conflicts and strains collectively, as learnt in the School of Music, that proved to be of use outside the band room.

As the 1970s progressed, the soundscape of Belfast was increasingly punctuated with bombs and bullets, helicopters and loudhailers. Neighbours and friends across the islands and across the water became silent and taciturn. 'Them-ness' and 'us-ness' was surfacing fast. In fear of the spiralling, increasingly violent community responses to social and political need, government reacted with a progressively more militarised response. Militarism and paramilitarism were all-pervasive, not just in the presence of scared and trigger-happy pro- and anti-state soldiers on streets and in shucks, but in the messages reinforced on murals, in songs, in the clothing and the language of locally elected politicians who, in 'Ulster' accents, designated what were and were not to be considered private spaces, corporal punishment, major stumbling blocks and the general welfare of the 'country'. Many people disengaged. Political denial and avoidance became armour and defence weaponry.

Mistakes were made on all sides at that time, including the mistake of silence. Silence, denial and avoidance certainly left their legacy of mistrust and miscommunication. But still, the sounds and laughter of children (to paraphrase Bobby Sands) both from fiercely republican and staunchly loyalist backgrounds connected through music-making – a welcome revenge for just those silences. The School was unintentionally an agent for social engineering, playing its part in laying the foundations for a future of shared working and living.

## II

Much has changed in South Belfast since those days. Thankfully, the School of Music still thrives in Donegal Pass, but the challenges and opportunities in the surrounding area are different ones. In the direct and neighbouring areas, a geographical consolidation of business interests by the Chinese community, together with increased social housing for migrant workers, principally from Eastern Europe, have ploughed new accents into the existing linguistic mulch.

Despite some racist incidents, the neighbourhood's old unionist majority and nationalists in the nearby markets and lower Ormeau have begun to respond positively to the changing demography. It was not the longevity and sheer size of the Chinese community and its vote that brought about the electoral success of Anna Manwah Lo. But as the first East Asian politician to be elected to any national parliament or assembly in Europe, the impact of her ethnicity alone is a novel contribution to political life in Northern Ireland, and illustrates future potential for new economic and cultural alliances throughout Britain, Ireland and beyond.

Much has changed throughout the island. Different versions of histories past and present still top our best-seller lists and the schedules of local media programmers, but the Celtic kitten as alchemist also has the power to unite in ways that combat the divisions inflicted by politicians and religionists, writers and broadcasters long since divided. The historical Belfast City Taxi Tours are a seemingly integral element of tourists' urban sightseeing. And the Victorian houses of Belfast's Lisburn Road and Bloomfield Avenue and their Dublin counterparts in Ranelagh and Phibsboro are no longer home to elderly ladies with linen antimacassars displayed as evidence of an agricultural and industrial inheritance. Now, as any serial cross-border shopper can attest, oppressive red brick has been minimised and replaced with glass and steel, where Gucci, Pucci, and Fiorucci fabrics are housed and purchased as a marker of global times and networks.

Lives are ever more entwined through commerce, politics, service delivery and the arts. The fusion of identities and the recognition of multiple heritages create hybrids that defy pigeon-holing, bringing neighbourhood connections to wider environments in many unexpected ways. 'Grannyng' is the tender art of drawing on extended family addresses to ensure that parish, electoral or national boundaries don't impair parental choice in the provision of health, housing and education services. It is now such a common and seemingly largely acceptable phenomenon that the system is openly practised by government ministers in both Britain and in Ireland. But grannyng, like other fraudulent practices, seeks out ways to privilege access to limited resources, and in so doing undermines the spirit of the future and the opportunity to share it. Rather than knocking down tangible and psychological peacelines

that act as barriers, grannyng is only one of many ways in which we traverse the *status quo* for the self, while guaranteeing that it remains an obstacle for the collective.

The litmus test of success since the post-peace Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (the name for which has not yet been agreed) might be located in how rigorously the desirability and sustainability of social and economic segregation is questioned and subverted. The whiff of crabs in a bucket has begun to come inland. Rather than stepping on one another's backs to escape the bucket with our separate heritages discretely intact, we ought to have been shoring one another up all the while to find a freedom through a shared humanity and compassion.

Perhaps, however, we are now legislating sufficiently to engender a process of shared living. The response to the radicalisation of young people in Bradford and Burnley, Belfast and Bellaghy has led to a raft of equal opportunity and rights-based governance initiatives aimed at revising and counteracting former disparities. But in the main, and other than as abstracts, people themselves are generally absent from the policy, protocols and strategic specifications that affect them. Personnel departments now rarely exist in the workplace: they have been morphed and absorbed into human resources, where individuals are quantifiable economic units measured alongside other material and financial assets. And, perhaps because of the dominance of the theoretical over the human, employment legislation that was brought about to protect the interests of those most vulnerable in our society now serves those at risk of marginalisation poorly.

Subscribing to a categorisation model of 'Protestant, Catholic or Other' in ethnic monitoring forms in Northern Ireland duly designates all Hindus, Jews and Muslims 'Protestant', both denying their own religious existence and skewing the figures in relation to the Christian majority. No less problematic is the Sisyphean task facing those attempting a more sophisticated breakdown of ethnicity who find that with an overarching category of 'Black African', they have united the radically different worlds and worldviews of Muslim Somalian refugees with Christian Nigerian bankers. It rests with the spin of public relations DJs to revoice the inanimate and place the personal back into the frame.

In this post-9/11 world, whether or not our own plagued British and Irish houses are sufficiently in order, it seems we are still available to sort out other people's. Opportunities are welcomed by both Britain and Ireland to ensure that the mistakes and intransigencies of the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland are not replicated elsewhere. So, under the guise of being advisors to peace-building, former pro- and anti-state combatants and politicians are auspiciously exported as another set of voices to sing from the same hymn sheet in surprising harmony, augmenting the British troops and Irish police services peacekeeping with and without the UN in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places.

Yet not all our 'players' are included in local, let alone global, reconciliation processes. The voices of those who are victims and survivors of the Conflict are most often silent, if not silenced. Is anyone asking if this is in the best interests of political expediency?

Victim-survivors are a paradoxical group representing a cross-section of British and Irish lives in Northern Ireland. Here there is no consensus as to who is a victim and who a survivor; whether the term is applicable to all who lived through the years of the Conflict, or whether a sliding scale of trauma and traumatic loss should assist self-definition; whether or not those who took up arms as perpetrators of violence for or against the state should be referred to as victims; and whether we should include in that category the victims and survivors of other conflicts, globally, who now live with us. Despite the rhetoric of a shared future and the attempts of groups to sustain intercommunity working, victim and survivor needs tend to reside in a 'separate but equal' space.

A flurry of activity in Northern Ireland is currently centred on ways to commemorate, to memorialise, to dismantle sites of significance, and to redevelop others into museums that will set in stone and legitimise the actions of, and reactions to, the Conflict. Such processes of cultural constructionism are designed to ensure that collective amnesia does not feed into the rewriting of social history. Some investigations, focused by due process of the law on forensic truths and matters of record, are being settled through historical enquiry. Some relate to counter-terrorism, or the effects of individual acts of

armed violence that resulted in death and injury, no-warning bombs and lethal force. These are then drawn on implicitly to argue for housing and education, arts and science projects that ultimately represent all of 'us' locally to all of 'them' globally.

But in this sometimes overly legislated process, the citizens who have been most affected by the legacy of the Conflict are often least able, equipped or facilitated to participate in decision-making around how the past is represented in the future, and they often do not see the reasons for their victim status as inseparable from the political process which has now brought credible enemies together into an administration with no credible opposition. As one 'victim' suggested to me in relation to his concerns about the shared workings of the current administration – 'a shared sorry wouldn't go far wrong'. Both Britain and Ireland are well able to ensure that, in any peace and reconciliation work they preside over, there is an explicit role, adequately resourced and supported, for those individuals whose experiences contributed to our shared if contested history – now referred to somewhat disempoweringly as part of 'the victim's sector'.

Years after my parents left the sounds of battling urban 1970s Belfast for the constant reverberations and resonances of the natural world in County Down, it was with some surprise that they found out their village, Millisle, was once Northern Ireland's home for Jewish refugee children. Between 1939 and 1946, long before my mother's journey was complete, a number of children who fled Europe with the help of the Kindertransport (the Refugee Children Movement) were brought to Millisle. They were educated and built friendships in the village school alongside local children. In the evenings, they returned to a cooperative farm on 70 acres of land, where they lived and worked in a kibbutz-like system. It is at best regrettable, and at worst a national shame, that the material remains of that important part of our European heritage were lost when, in 2007, the current owner pulled down the last remaining building that he had until then been using as a cattle byre. But on the other hand, the village children today are being educated to recognise a new dawn in European relations, as they pay tribute to the unspoken love in the guise of civic duty and humanitarianism that marked earlier villagers' attempts to welcome and support newcomers. To honour the past generosity of their community to

the Jewish visitors, Millisle Primary School actively remembers them in their curriculum with the help of a landscaped garden of Holocaust remembrance and through the echoes of the accordion and klezmer music of Eastern European Jewry. The Holocaust, and the community's response to it, is now drawn on as an intergenerational tool. It highlights and addresses issues of sectarianism and discrimination that relate directly to the inter- and intracommunity feuding that wreaked havoc in Northern Ireland, displacing and fragmenting families from people and places that they loved. It seems to be the case that, through a study and acknowledgment of the mistakes, silences and injustices of the past, young people are better equipped to build a more inclusive future together.

## Naoise Nunn

*Naoise Nunn was born in 1972 and grew up in south County Kilkenny. Enrolling in Queen's University, Belfast in 1990, he graduated with a BA in political science. In 1999, he became the first person in the history of the state to import the banned French spirit absinthe when he established 'Club Absinthe'. Between 2001 and 2005, he worked in the Debates Office of the Oireachtas, transcribing and editing the proceedings for the public record. In 2003 he founded the Leviathan political cabaret series of debate, comedy and satire – mainly hosted by writer and broadcaster David McWilliams – which has since featured, among others, Naomi Klein, Dara O Briain, Ronnie Drew, Pat Rabbitte, Irvine Welsh, Palestinian ambassadors and an Israeli Government spokesman. In 2006 he was appointed as the first executive director of the Libertas Institute, a new pro-European think tank. He lives in County Galway with his wife Ashley and their sons Dylan and Jude.*

## What have the Brits ever done for me?

Naoise Nunn

### Visiting Christopher

My earliest memories of Britain are of being driven by my father Clive and mother Sue in the back of a rusting Renault Four, with my sisters Alice and Hannah, onto the creaking B&I ferry in Rosslare, and across the churning Irish Sea in the company of drunken balladeers and children vomiting Tayto crisps and red lemonade. Arriving in darkness and swirling snow, my first impression of Britain, peering through the fogged-up car windows, was the apocalyptic vista of the angry gas flares from the Esso oil refinery in Milford Haven, and futuristic motorways and spaceport-like service stations. This was another world entirely.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, our final destination on these trips was Pluckley in Kent, home of Clive's parents, Christopher and Beatrice. Pluckley was, and most likely still is, almost eerie in its perfection: a picture postcard of middle England with its timber-framed cottages, manicured gardens, woodland walks, fragrant hop fields and oast houses. It is also, according to the 1998 edition of the *Guinness Book of Records*, England's most haunted village.

As Pluckley's ghosts might well attest, Clive did not share my romantic childhood view of the English idyll as it compared with dirty, disorganised, boring, litter-strewn Ireland. He had by now lived in Ireland most of his adult life, and found it uncomfortable on these visits to be immersed once again in the very middle England from which he had fled as soon as he came of age. What I could not see was what he regarded as the class-bound regimentation of English society: the hypocrisy and social control that had sustained the dark satanic mills of the industrial revolution, the building of an empire on which the Sun never set, and so many picture postcard villages. This ran counter to my father's innate sense of natural justice, and he would refuse to allow it to define or limit him. It is an aspect of British society that he abhors to this day.

I have vivid memories of my grandfather, although he died when I was just seven. To me, he seemed the very essence of the gentleman adventurer, with fascinating collections of confiscated gold weights, tribal masks, mysterious wood carvings and musty old books in every corner of the house. Geoffrey Noel Napier Nunn, known to his family and friends as Christopher, read classics at Cambridge and, having joined the Colonial Office as a district commissioner at 23, became an accomplished linguist in many West African languages. He was administrator in the office of the Governor General of Malta during the siege of 1940–42, when the island sustained some of the heaviest bombing of the Second World War from the Luftwaffe and the Italian Air Force. During the first six months of 1942, when there was just one 24-hour period in which bombs were *not* dropped, daily rations consisted of ‘three boiled sweets, half a sardine and a spoon of jam’. In 1942, Malta and its defenders were awarded the George Cross in recognition of their courage and resilience in holding the strategic island for the Allies. The human cost of this achievement, however, was catastrophic and, according to my father, took an appalling toll on my grandfather from which he, and to some extent his family, never fully recovered.

Following a brief period at head office in London, Christopher was posted to Jamaica – a soft option in comparison with Malta. Thus in 1945, with his pregnant wife and seven-year-old son Charles, he crossed the Atlantic in a heavily guarded military convoy bound for Kingston. A week’s layover in New York as a result of my uncle contracting a bout of measles came just three weeks too soon for my father to be born a US citizen. Some years later the family moved back to England, regarded by my grandparents (particularly my grandmother) as the centre of their universe and the most civilised nation on earth. With its legacy of literature, parliamentary democracy, good governance and ordered countryside, this was their other Eden.

After the war, a psychologically shell-shocked Britain contained hundreds of thousands of fractured families: fathers who had never come home; those who had, but were unable to cope with life; and mothers who had managed valiantly to cope with life during the war, but who fell apart when peace broke out. For many, children added to the complications of adapting to this new life, and for a certain class it was still natural that they should be sent away

to school. My father found himself among them, packed off to boarding school at the age of four. He hated the experience intensely, and he was never to share his parents’ view of this new place, this England.

Meanwhile, my grandfather became increasingly disillusioned and frustrated by the nature of Britain’s colonial administration. He foresaw the chickens coming home to roost, as colonised peoples – particularly in Africa, where he had spent so much of his early working life – began to seek self-determination and independent statehood. Eventually, he resigned in protest at the political cowardice that followed the spectacular failure of the Attlee Government’s well intentioned groundnut scheme in Tanganyika. After an abortive bid to be selected as a Conservative candidate in the 1950 general election, he was appointed to the Allied Military Government in Trieste, before joining the newly formed United Nations as an economic adviser. His first UN posting was to the newly created Islamic state of Pakistan, before he was transferred to South America, where he served in Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil. His final UN posting was to Libya in the early 1960s.

### **A British heritage**

Throughout much of this period, my father’s childhood home was his boarding school, interrupted occasionally by matron calling him in to be inoculated against beri beri, yellow fever or worse, before handing him his passport and a BOAC ticket to wherever his parents were posted. On this basis, Clive had been to Karachi, Bogotá and Tripoli, all before he was 16. On these visits, he would watch his father leave each morning for work in a chauffeur-driven car, dressed in an immaculate white tropical suit and trilby (the iconic solar *topi* of empire-builders having been cast aside by the new, international public servants of the UN).

My father sometimes tells a story about one of the closest moments, literally, that he ever shared with his own father. When the taxi in which they were travelling through Bogotá suddenly came under a hail of gunfire, my grandfather threw his own body across his son’s, forming a human shield. Earlier, on his way to Colombia to join his parents, Clive recalls having had to move to the front of the small, twin-prop aircraft along with seven or so other

trembling passengers to help it gain sufficient altitude to clear the Andean peaks that surround Bogotá, one of the world's highest capital cities.

All this glamour and excitement was worlds away from *Scoil Naomh Colmcille* in picture-postcard Inistioge, County Kilkenny, where I set out into the world. And yet it formed one half of my heritage. The other part, provided by my mother, was set in her native city of Cork, and came from her parents: Maeve Curtis, a journalist with the *Cork Examiner*, and Tony Curtis, clerk of the District Court; both of whom had sadly passed away a year or so before my birth. The British part of me, amplified by years of listening to BBC Radio Four every morning, together with my funny name, posh accent and downright weird school lunches (lentil sandwiches anyone?), made me a prime target for suspicion, ridicule and occasional hidings from my peers – in their eyes I was a classic West Brit.

In my favourite subject, history, in an attempt to compensate for these failings, I far outdid my classmates in hating Cromwell and the Black and Tans. I was aware of the hunger strikes in 1981, and convinced that we had to 'smash the H-blocks' in response to the urgent appeals painted on walls all over the country. Even then, though, I knew the bombs that were killing innocent people (and about which we wrote in our *Nuacht an Lae*) would not solve anything either.

At that time, we were watching a lavish and romantic TV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, which suggested that even the members of the English aristocracy that we loved to hate were human and fragile too. Politics were discussed frequently at home, with Clive shocking me by referring to the 'fucking Brits' in the context of the Falklands War, in what could only be regarded as a British accent. In spite of where he came from, my father just could not identify with his countrymen, declaring himself a 'reluctant owner of my heritage'.

Although, as blow-ins, we found it difficult to integrate into our rural community, my father had successfully achieved for us what had always been denied to him: a genuine and secure sense of home and of place. That it was Thomastown or Kilkenny or Ireland was never important; it was always a place

to call home, a place where unconditional love resided, from which one could start again if everything else went wrong. Identity, in any sense of county loyalty or nationality, is secondary to Clive, and so it was to me for many years. We were not involved in local Gaelic Athletic Association clubs like our neighbours, and we did not go to Mass like them, although when my mother started working at Radio Kilkenny in the late 1980s, the black and amber went up fairly lively, and we all became ardent but fair-weather Cats supporters.

The natural place for social interaction was the pub, particularly *The Spotted Dog* and *Ger Hayes's* in Inistioge, the former owned by a genial Donegal republican, the latter by a local lad who had emigrated to England in the 1960s to join the British Army and returned a monarchist with a Cockney accent. Inistioge was then, and is still, an unusual and beguiling village, with more than its fair share of outsiders, rogues and eccentrics. So eventually we became part of the community. Salmon poachers, retired British military officers, spinster farmers, potters, advertising men, horse breeders, alcoholic Anglo-Irish landowners, jazz musicians, judges and barristers, republicans and royalists – the very essence of Britain and Ireland entwined, but very much on Irish terms, and all generously lubricated with drink.

The Kilkenny Design Workshops, established by the state in 1965 as a national centre of excellence for industrial design and craft, drew to the area artists, artisans and designers from around Europe, and particularly from Britain. These people contributed hugely to making Kilkenny a relatively cosmopolitan place, where events such as Kilkenny Arts Week could thrive. Another distinctive feature was an ever-shrinking rump of the former Anglo-Irish ascendancy (or 'rotting Protestants', as my father affectionately calls them), which survives to this day. Because we were not brought up in any religious faith, it was sometimes assumed that I was a Protestant. At an early age, I attended a number of Church of Ireland catechism classes in school, until I realised it was all a terrible mistake and that I didn't quite belong among them either. We were often invited to drinks parties in crumbling old houses, where sherry and gin were the order of the day and, under many alcohol-reddened noses, I was able to hold my own in conversation – often cringingly precocious – because of the happy influence of the contrarian views and eloquence of my father.



When I started secondary school in 1984, my political awareness was sharpening, and I read George Orwell's novel at the same time as I followed the nightly readings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* through the earplug on my portable Bush radio. Late at night, rather than worrying about what it meant to be Irish, however, I fretted about totalitarian regimes like Oceania and Animal Farm, and about nuclear annihilation. Around 1986, my class went on a school trip to London. When we got to Britain, we were consumed by an odd combination of hilarity and anxiety, when one of the teachers – a Kerryman with a luxuriant beard – was detained at the ferry terminal in Holyhead by customs officers and police. They were grappling with the import of a diagram of an alarm clock, which they'd discovered in his briefcase. The diagram in question had been intended for use in a third-year physics test and, once he had explained this and officialdom was satisfied that he was not a security threat, he was released without charge. Nonetheless, we all felt it best to keep a low profile for the rest of the trip; the incident had underlined an uncomfortable sense of embarrassment many of us felt about being Irish.

### **Come on Ireland!**

By the mid-1980s, things were changing. Bob Geldof, an Irishman, had produced *Feed the World*, Christmas number one single in 1984, followed the next summer by Live Aid, to which Ireland responded with extraordinary generosity, proudly donating about 20 times the *per capita* figure of anywhere else on Earth. In 1986, we had Self Aid, our own Irish version of Live Aid, aimed at tackling our chronic unemployment, then running at about 17 per cent with 30,000 young people leaving the country every year. The concert, held in the grounds of the Royal Dublin Society, showcased the best and worst of Irish music. A particular highlight was Bono's performance of Bob Dylan's *Maggie's Farm*, presented as a diatribe against British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the ultimate Brit-bitch on whose farm we all worked – or would if we could get a job. I also remember being hit by the power of Paul Brady singing *The Island*, and began to feel the stirrings of a sense of national pride and identity. Being taken seriously – and treated as an equal – by English people was of particular importance to me. In Stuttgart in 1988, we went one better: Ray Houghton (ironically, a Scot) scored the winning goal against England in the European (soccer) Championships.

1990 was quite a year in the history of all things, and it was also the year I came of age, finishing school with a head full of dizzying schemes for the future. I wasn't a big one for sport, as Clive, though he had been an excellent athlete in his youth, had never much taken to it as a spectator. Having reached six foot three by the age of 14, he had swept the board as *victor ludorum* in the 1959 school games. As a family, we enjoyed the drama and occasion of big rugby and soccer internationals, and all-Ireland hurling and football finals, but until 1990 sport had not forged the traditional bond between father and son for us.

I was working for Clive that summer, when Ireland made it to the finals of the soccer World Cup with a team of British-born players with Irish grannies, knocked into shape by a brusque Englishman, Jack Charlton. My father called his style 'agricultural football' – but he and I were united in a very new desire to see Ireland succeed and England fail. The raw tribal energy that burst from my chest as David O'Leary netted the last penalty to beat Romania on 25 June will live with me until the day I die. We were through to the quarter-finals of the World Cup at the first time of asking, without winning a match in normal time. It was the luck of the Irish, and we deserved it. A few days later, the dream ended in tragic glory as we went down 1–0 to the demonic Italian genius Totò Schillaci.

A few days after this, my father the furniture designer, renowned potter Nicholas Mosse, and myself travelled by van to England on the faithful old Rosslare to Fishguard ferry. We were taking up an invitation from *Country Living Magazine* to exhibit at the Royal Agricultural Show near Coventry. Our digs were in a bed and breakfast in Leamington Spa, a town whose credentials as the epitome of Middle England were confirmed by the fact that the sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances* was filmed there. There can be no better portrayal of the Britain Clive had long despised than the hideous class snobbery of Hyacinth Bucket (pronounced Bou-quet), lampooned in that series. It is a testament to its gruesome accuracy as a social satire that I never found it remotely funny, and the one and only time I watched it with my father that week in Leamington, we both shuddered at the horror. For some reason, I remember being intrigued by the forests of 'For Sale' signs around the town as the British property crash was beginning to bite.

Setting up at the genteel *Country Living* marquee, filled with the fashionable crafts, furniture and décor of the day, I was very taken by Tamsin and Sophie from the magazine, both posh girls in Laura Ashley dresses. I employed all my Irish wit and charm, flirting with them and wilfully reinforcing their prejudices about the unpredictable Irish, shocking them with irreverent humour and bad language, but generally getting nowhere. Ireland had been knocked out of the World Cup and, by way of consolation, on 1 July England faced underdog heroes Cameroon in the quarter-finals. Leaving our digs that evening, we went for dinner in an Indian restaurant in Leamington town centre. On hearing my father's accent, the Bengali waiters took us to be English and politely wished us good luck for the match. When Clive told them in no uncertain terms that it was Cameroon we were supporting, the waiters became giddy with delight, joining us in slagging off the overconfident English and their team.

Repairing to a local pub, resplendent with fruit machines and oak panelling, we settled in for the game. Despite Cameroon's romantic heroics earlier in the tournament, England went ahead early and confidently led 1-0 at half time. But the tide turned in the second half as Cameroon were first awarded a penalty, and then scored a goal from play, putting them ahead. The crowd in the pub was at first stonily silent. Gradually a fury began to build – one I had never before witnessed – as the shock gave way to rage. England's defeat in its own game seemed to recall the final humiliation of its loss of empire. Our good-natured banter with the England fans, which had earlier drawn bemusement, now ceased as the atmosphere became poisoned with comments about Paddies and IRA scum, in which company my father was now included. Cameroon came within eight minutes of reaching the semi-finals, but two dodgy penalty calls, duly converted, put England through, to both our disappointment and relief. Two days later, England crashed out to West Germany. Three people were killed in rioting across Britain. There were hundreds of arrests; the largest number in any one town was in Leamington Spa. Newspapers also reported that 'For Sale' signs had been used as weapons.

### **Belfast revisited**

Later that summer, I finalised plans to move to Belfast. In doing so, I was following in my father's footsteps more than 20 years on. My father's stories

about Northern Ireland and my interest in politics made Belfast an unusual first choice for college as I sat my Leaving Certificate. I was going to take up a place studying politics at Queen's University.

Clive and I have always shared a fascination with British politics, fuelled by daily doses of the *Today* programme and *The World at One* on BBC Radio Four. Many of our journeys in the van that summer, and since, were undertaken without any words passing between us, but instead a shared unspoken desire for knowledge and understanding of the human condition. As Margaret Thatcher played out her last months as Prime Minister, some of our closest moments were spent listening to cassette tapes from a set entitled 'Great Parliamentary Speeches', capturing memorable moments since broadcasting was first introduced to the Houses of Parliament. It included fantastic and hilarious stories by Michael Foot about his youth in Blackpool; Gerry Fitt bringing down the Callaghan government; Gerald Kaufman quoting Voltaire on the death of Airey Neave; and, just audible in an earlier segment, the dull thud of the Irish National Liberation Army bomb that killed Neave outside the Palace of Westminster. During those years, and since, I have developed a huge respect for British parliamentary democracy, which has prevailed for centuries and has been exported around the world as mankind's least worst solution for governing ourselves.

Clive had been drawn to Belfast in the late 1960s by the Irish people he met in London in his late teens, finding solace in chaos among the charmers and chancers. Although he maintains it had more to do with an appreciation of the different and wilder elements of human nature than with nationality, he found that many of the risk-takers and rogues he admired and loved were very often Irish. As an outsider himself, he sought out others like him, and seemed naturally drawn to the young emigrés who were leading a roaring life in Britain since shrugging off the burden of conservatism at home. He mixed with a beguiling array of students, navvies, revolutionaries and barflies around Ladbrooke Grove, in bars like the *Elgin* at the Kensington Park Hotel (or 'Keep Paddy Happy'), where drinking was both a sport and a way of life. He loved the accents, the peculiar turns of phrase, and the people unbound by any sense of class consciousness. To him, the roguish, bohemian way of life of the Caribbean and Irish immigrants in the tenements of Vauxhall Square was irresistible.

In the mid-1960s, Clive went to work in Hay-on-Wye for the celebrated bookseller Richard Booth, who he describes as 'wonderful, but pathologically insane', responsible as he was, among other things, for regular late-night gun fights with antique firearms. By that time, Booth – the self-proclaimed 'King of Hay' – had already begun to build a book empire that would make the town not only the world's number one destination for second-hand books, but also the host for what is probably the world's best annual literary festival, christened 'Woodstock for the mind' by Bill Clinton. My father's mission at this time was to travel across Britain collecting curios, in order to establish an antique furniture shop to complement the Booth empire. To this end, when Boots the Chemists decided to sell their nationwide chain of lending libraries, Clive was dispatched after six army surplus trucks to collect all their surplus books. Sadly, this ambitious plan came to nought, but my father's lifelong affection for curiosities – antique and human – was well under way.

My father says he was very much aware of the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Rising in 1966: he remembers being intrigued by the powerful impact it had among the Irish people with whom he mixed in London. Drawn by this impulse, he ventured to Belfast in the autumn of 1967 to observe at close quarters the growing civil rights movement among people like Ivan Cooper, John Hume and Gerry Fitt. A couple of years later, having been battered – with so many others – off the streets of Northern Ireland by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), these men would go on to found the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Friday and Saturday nights at the Wellington Park Hotel near Queen's University were an intoxicating mix of youthful energy and dangerous politics. Academics and students; politicians and hard men; musicians and poets all mixed in the relative security of middle-class south Belfast, as fear and violence began to take hold beyond the leafy streets of the Malone Road. On occasion, my father and others would repair to the *Blue Room* – a speakeasy of sorts in a back room of the Cushendun Hotel in the Glens of Antrim – where one was quite likely to see Seamus Heaney, John Taylor and Van Morrison all on one night. At a very early stage, however, Clive learned that, regardless of the company he kept, and regardless of the fact that he was an amusing novelty, he was always a Brit. This meant that he should keep his mouth shut on the subject of politics. Even close friends doubted his capacity to understand the complex conflict in Northern Ireland. When he encountered

armchair republicans, particularly those in Dublin, he had to grind his teeth in frustration as he listened to them holding forth at length about perfidious Albion and 800 years of oppression.

Amazing though it may seem, when I arrived in Belfast with my friend from Tullamore, we too were novelties: two of only 240 students from the Irish Republic who had enrolled in Queen's, which at that time had a student population of about 13,000. We shared a room of famously ill repute in the halls of residence, and very much enjoyed the notoriety of being southerners. To our northern friends, this meant we were untouched personally by the conflict and therefore relatively free of baggage. We were also free of the civilising influences they had enjoyed, courtesy of the British state, and ignorant of some of the subtler aspects of popular culture delivered via British television, to which we had come fairly late. British high street chains, British newspapers and magazines, and British currency were all far more familiar to them than they were to us. Could it be that some of the Northern nationalists I met were more tainted with 'Britishness' than any of the much-maligned West Brits I knew down south? Certainly more than they would have liked to admit. But I had, and still have, huge admiration for northerners' ability to wring from the darkest situation an even darker humour, which must have gone some way to sustaining them throughout the conflict. Their forthright, no-bullshit approach has always appealed to me: it seems closer to a Scottish sensibility than the glad-handling, smooth-talking southern style.

By virtue of my accent, it was universally assumed that I was a Catholic nationalist, which was a novel experience for me. Certainly, my thinking at the time was that of a nationalist. I remember trying to get my head around the logic that justified some of the outrages committed in the name of Ireland by pointing to the neglect of successive British governments and their complicity in exacerbating sectarian and political divisions in the North. However, I always came back to a non-violent, diplomatic paradigm for solving the Irish question. I remembered the Voltaire quote from the tape in my father's van: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.'

In my role as a Catholic nationalist, there were times when I shamefully played to the gallery to ingratiate myself. On other occasions, it was vital for me to be able to amplify the British aspects of my heritage to avoid a hiding. Many of these occasions occurred, or began, in the legendary *Lavery's* on Bradbury Place. Nowadays it seems miles from the nerve centre of Belfast nightlife, but when the ring of steel security barriers closed off the city centre to all life back then, *Lavery's* was a neutral meeting point that drew loyalists from nearby Sandy Row, students from Derry, hippies from Northampton, acid ravers from Lisburn, and even the odd politician. In any event, I heeded my father's advice and kept my mouth shut and my ears open.

Student politics at Queen's was a bit of a disappointment to me. Having fantasised about heroic civil rights movements and violent student protest, I discovered polite white-line demonstrations about student loans, from which I was disqualified. That said, I did little to foment revolution, being more concerned with matters of a social nature. The students' union was dominated by nationalists and socialists who sat on the left and middle – and indeed most of the right – during meetings held in the Mandela Hall. Young Ulster Unionists such as Steven King and Peter Weir were a distinct and much abused minority at the time. They seemed to us like throwbacks to another era, although I admired their steadfastness against the odds. I can picture now enjoying a lazy Thursday afternoon drinking cider in the *Speakeasy*, gazing absentmindedly at the Victorian Lanyon Building across the road, when Roisin McAliskey, daughter of Bernadette, rushed in to plead with some of us to come down to a Union meeting to prevent the Unionists and Conservatives winning a vote purely on the strength of others' apathy.

### ***Crack and Leviathan***

The development of the Northern Irish peace process, which culminated in the Good Friday Agreement in 1998; net immigration; the economic renaissance and Ireland's global cultural reach in terms of literature, theatre, music and sport – these have all served to instil a resurgent confidence and self-assurance among Irish people. We're proud to be Irish because Ireland and all things Irish have become hugely fashionable internationally, and we've been buying into the brand for all we're worth.

Foremost among the attractions cited by visitors here is the notion of the 'crack' which, in commodified, packaged terms, means fun and enjoyment. On a more profound level, however, it suggests a peculiarly Irish love of irreverence, humour, risk-taking, black-guarding, insolence and general roguishness. These are all features we can never fully bring ourselves to condemn (and in fact that we secretly admire) in our political and business leaders – people, as comedian Dylan Moran insists, who look 'like they have a ham sandwich in their pocket'. It seems we Irish greatly appreciate and understand the flawed hero, whereas the British prefer steadfastness, abstemiousness and, above all, order. It is the latter that, to some extent, drove my father away from Britain. The former drew him to the Irish and to Ireland – a quality I too have sought out in the people who have become my friends over the years.

For all its confidence and self-assurance as a state and a nation, Ireland and its people are now faced with a whole new set of challenges. My father believes we're headed for trouble: he sees us beginning to adopt the very modes of thinking that drove him away from Britain 40 years ago, and to lose the qualities that drew him here. The economy – and to some extent society – rests disproportionately on a deflating property bubble. People are complaining about a new coarseness among the Irish, and moral panics abound concerning the extent of alcohol and drug use. In all this, I can't help being reminded of the people of Leamington Spa, who felt their sense of identity and worth had been stolen from them, not by negative equity, but by being shortchanged by their own hype. Our friends in the North would tell us to catch ourselves on and not be so far up ourselves. We should listen to them.

Inspired by stories about the Hay Festival, and with the encouragement of Richard Cook, founder of the Kilkenny *Cat Laughs Comedy Festival*, I came up with an idea for a political cabaret called *Leviathan*. The format combines irreverent political debate, music, comedy and satire in an informal setting, and we ran the first event in December 2003. After a year or so of these events, I was honoured to be invited by the British Council to devise an edition of *Leviathan* to complement the Council's fascinating *Through Irish Eyes* survey.

Tony Reilly and I fell upon the title *What Have the Brits Ever Done for Us?* in homage to the Romans scene from Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. Of course,

the first, self-evident, answer to the question is brilliant comedy. On the night, host David McWilliams grilled a panel featuring Eoghan Harris, Fiona O'Malley, Trevor White, Cilian Fennell and Steven King (yes, him) on questions of Irish identity and British-Irish relations. The panel may have been somewhat unbalanced, but it was a nuanced and fascinating discussion, which raised as many questions as it answered. The evil geniuses at Langerland.com cooked up a cartoon entitled *Top Ten Things the Brits Did for Us* – including the English language, the potato famine and, at number one, Cromwell. Probably the highlight of the night, however, was when the audience, which included the British Ambassador, were cajoled into singing along with spoof Irish republican balladeer Ding Dong Denny O'Reilly to *Spit at the Brits* and *Ooh, Ah, up the Ra*, a tender ballad about the misadventures of a young republican who winds up, quite literally, in the service of a New York gangsta rapper.

As I made my way to the bar to buy a round for His Excellency and his entourage, I remember thinking: 'We've come a long way'.

Standing in my customary position at the back of the room, throughout the evening I watched my father as much as I watched the stage. I wanted to see how he responded to the arguments and to guess what he was thinking. Did he still feel British, acknowledging the centuries of tradition hard-wired into him, or would he identify himself as an Irishman now? With whom did he have the greater affinity? If I could decipher that enigma, maybe it would give me a better purchase on who I was. The fact is, he didn't respond in any strong way to any of the propositions about the nature of the relationship between Britain and Ireland, or the weird and wonderful prompts on identity. He spoke to Brits and Irish as though he was neither – charming one minute, severe the next. He told me he enjoyed the experience, and that he was proud of what I'd achieved. I might glimpse Britishness, much of which he rejects or denies, alongside the many traits with which he is blessed or cursed that I regard as quintessentially Irish. Identity for him is an ephemeral thing: it is the values we hold and share that are most important.

Over the course of the evening, this important point began to sink in. Brits and Paddies roared as heartily at McWilliams's description of Englishmen called Rupert and Rufus 'who wear yellow cords and work in the City', as we did at

Eoghan Harris's evisceration of those Irish people who cast themselves as the 'Most Oppressed People Ever', or comedian Owen O'Neill's note-perfect portrayal of an uptight, angry Orangeman told by the RUC officer that he must be sick of walking down the 'Queen's Highway' after 300 years of it. In the thick of it all, I realised that my father and I had reached a similar maturity in our own relationship. We don't seek neat answers to impossible questions, but deal with the realities of the here and now, and celebrate what connects us. Had I put myself onto the panel that night and been asked, 'What Have the Brits Ever Done for You?', I might have spoken about English language and literature, parliamentary democracy, Radio Four, railways or comedy. But all of that is as nothing in comparison with what I really value – my father himself, a rich and complex heritage, everything that he could possibly give me, and then some.

