

# Britain and Ireland Lives Entwined

Shifting borders, shifting identity



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## **Front cover photograph: Torr Head**

by Donovan Wylie

Torr Head, Northern Ireland, looking towards Mull of Kintyre, Scotland. Image made during the project Lighthouse/Donovan Wylie and Chris Klatell. 2017–20. To be published by Steidl 2020.

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Shifting borders, shifting identity

Edited by Michael Arlow and Rosemary Bechler



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# Shifting borders, shifting identity

Introduction by Sir Ciarán Devane

Like many on these islands, my view of who I am and my view of who we are collectively have both changed beyond recognition. Being Dublin born but spending my adult life in England, having an Irish language campaigner and a Royal Navy admiral in the ancestry, loving the buzz of London as much as the wilds of Kerry, I understand the complexity of embracing all that is good about being simultaneously Irish and British.

My own eyes first opened to an alternative definition of Irishness when I shared an office in a chemical works with a colleague from Ballymena. He also taught me that Britishness was not the same as Englishness, something I had managed to miss in my upbringing. As a young scientist and young engineer out of our home environments, in our conversations we talked about how being different did not mean being better, how pride in a tradition did not mean being superior, and how we both saw the strengths and weaknesses of our backgrounds more clearly for being out of them. And of course, we both commented furiously on what we saw around us in the North-East England of the 1980s. For that is the joy of experiencing the different and the other. The perspective, the reflection, the widening of understanding.

Three decades later the young engineer finds himself as chief executive of the British Council, an organisation whose goal is to create a 'basis of friendly knowledge and understanding' between the people of the UK and people around the world. The belief is that when people know each other, understand each other, trust each other, then good things are more likely to happen. That philosophy, or as political scientists would say that constructivist view of the world, means that we believe that peace, prosperity and progress around the world

depend not only on strong states and strong economies, not only on multilateral institutions and organisations, but also on a shared appreciation of differing values, norms and experiences. To build a better world means to build better relationships and to engender trust.

The challenge to the status quo on the islands presented by Brexit, with all it means for everything from border communities on the island of Ireland to constitutional arrangements in Britain, makes it feel right to bring out a fifth volume of *Lives Entwined*. It is a timely reminder that we are all more complex than we think, all more interesting than we know, and that we all add to the rich tapestry which makes up the communities and societies that enliven this part of North-West Europe.

The first edition of *Britain and Ireland: Lives Entwined* was published in 2005, the title taken from an essay by academic and diplomat Piaras MacÉinrí. Since then, at moments in our story together, politicians, journalists, academics, lawyers, civil servants, novelists, poets and civil rights activists, people with diverse perspectives, have been invited to reflect on life in these islands and the relationships between the peoples who inhabit them. From the outset, *Lives Entwined* has been about dialogue and reflection on British–Irish relationships. It has never been about tying up loose ends. Political, geographical or philosophical balance have never been strenuously pursued, and of course, the views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the British Council.

*Lives Entwined V* is no exception. It explores the theme of ‘shifting borders, shifting identity’ and offers contemporary, authentic and often challenging perspectives. Poignant tales, sharp insights and fresh nuances are prised from the knotty complexity of cultural relations between Britain and Ireland, firmly set in a context of profound change and flux: striking social change on the island of Ireland; the absence of devolved government and renewed paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland; the approaching centenary of partition, a possible poll on Irish unity; fresh questions about the continued validity of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement; and, of course, the UK’s departure from the European Union. Global influences have also altered the dynamics of cultural relations – not least, political change in the US and increasing awareness of the climate emergency.

John McCallister and Ian Marshall explore the place of unionism on a changing island and call for a fresh articulation of an open and pluralist unionist vision. John shows that shifts in self-understanding are an innate characteristic of unionism and nationalism, of being British and Irish, and makes the case that what truly destabilises our relationships is the myth of pristine 'fixed' identities. He argues that two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland will better promote pluralism than one single monolithic state. Ian warns that any moves towards forced unification driven by ideology would end up as flawed as the outcome of what many regard as a forced partition.

Susan McKay interviews women who knew and who were changed by the life and death of Lyra McKee. They are strong, open, progressive and believe that they deserve better. Traditional identities are less important for them and they hunger for a better life for all, freer and less constrained by the past. But there are some in society who are, 'stuck in their ways and ... tramping on the futures of the young'. For these women, Lyra's death was a reminder of older, darker realities in the face of which, in Lyra's own words, 'peace and moving forward seem like the only options.'

Glenn Patterson introduces his friend, Donovan, a photographer who provided the images for the cover of this book. At the intersection of lives, powerfully, through stories of work and living, we witness moments where meaning is made. In Berts Bar, what may be a double gin sits comfortably alongside the observation that art might be the only way to deal with the legacy of the conflict. Whatever the future holds, life and friendship go on.

Diarmaid Ferriter lucidly demonstrates that the deep and imbalanced relationships on these islands are not just a matter of politics: they are economic, social, cultural, personal and profoundly emotional. Points of connection have been untidy and characterised by misunderstanding and mistrust. For Diarmaid, following the 'British political meltdown' after the Brexit referendum, 'we're holding our breath again'. Anglo-Irish mistrust has returned. The relationship stands in need of careful repair.

Through work in theatre, Grace Dyas questions the narrative that conflict is over. People still die and the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation remain unfulfilled. She argues that the conflict



was never about borders and identities; it was about having basic needs met, needs denied by a unionist state. Brexit feels similar, 'a fake solution to a fake problem' to distract people in Britain whose needs are denied by austerity. Instead, she imagines a world driven by compassion but feels stuck in the space between what was and what's next. It is the place where all transformations happen.

Having lived in Dublin, Malaga and Belfast, Conall McDevitt reflects on identity, which he sees as constantly changing and adapting; rich, plural, complicated, full of contradiction. It is, he suggests, more fluid and more a matter of choice than it was even 30 or 40 years ago. Young people are more globalised and less bound by narrow, local self-interest. The Brexit crisis feels to him like the end of an era, with life, economic development and political discourse paralysed. Ireland has been left out of the conversation and the border has casually returned. Now, he argues, success for any part of these islands depends on success for every part.

Shannon Sickels (Yee) describes herself as 'an immigrant, biracial, ethnic minority, queer artist-parent with a disability'. In Belfast, she and her partner became the UK's first same-sex civil partners. Later, they joined the crowds at Dublin Castle celebrating the result of the same-sex marriage referendum and 'felt braver, stronger, justified, unabashedly visible in a way we hadn't realised we weren't. I remember returning to Belfast and slumping back into invisibility out of cautious habit'. Now, she feels caught 'between stagnation and progress' but is sure that peace and reconciliation must now promote compassion and understanding in opposition to sectarian binaries. The arts, for Shannon, are a way to do just that.

Kate Ewart-Biggs gives us a deeply personal and moving insight into three generations of her family. From the death of her father, through her mother's dignified and principled response, her own international experiences and then to her daughter grappling with identity. Her experience of living in different worlds showed her that 'prejudice is always personal – as I learned as a child, it does not happen to someone else so that you can walk away from it'. We are presented with an alternative reality where prejudice and intolerance are challenged, where trust is valued, where people have the courage to step beyond themselves and to cross boundaries.

Pádraig Ó Tuama wrestles with poetic forms, the nature of time, contested histories and Brexit to create poetry that does more than tell us what we already know. Finally, he settles on a tale of two unequal and fighting pilgrims. Along the way, he notes the common ignorance and awkward historical narratives of our shared past. While the future threatens, he insists that we already know what saves lives – a ‘spirit of concord’ allowing peaceful, democratic solutions where issues are ‘debated and discussed with information, care, creativity, tension and precision’. Pádraig challenges us to consider that days happen all the time and that, at any time, we can make new days, maybe even ones that we wish to repeat.

Several of our authors have grappled with what Pádraig Ó Tuama describes as the uncertain art of saying something in uncertain times. All have succeeded. Of course, diverse perspectives are presented, but common themes have emerged. There is a shared sense that we, on these islands, have been on a journey. At times we have been in much darker places; at other times, things have seemed much better. As the UK has attempted to leave the European Union, relationships across the islands have been damaged and there is agreement that we must commit to repair them for the good of all. For some, there is a feeling of being at the end of an era or even at the end of the world. Many share a sense of paralysis, of being stuck between progress and stagnation. But whatever happens next, there is an assurance that life and living will go on. Friendships and human connections are where many of us find the meaning, the means and the will to push through to wherever we are going. On that continuing journey we are presented in this collection with challenges to discover, perhaps through the arts, ways to deal with our shared history; to stand against the tendency to define our relationships in narrow terms of toxic binaries; to step beyond ourselves and to cross boundaries.



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**Friendships and human connections are where many of us find the meaning, the means and the will to push through to wherever we are going.**



**John McCallister** lives near Rathfriland, County Down. After studying at Greenmount College he returned home to start his farming career.

After many years of involvement with Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU) serving in various roles within the organisation, he was elected YFCU president and served between 2003 and 2005.

With a passion for politics, John was then elected as a Ulster Unionist Party Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in March 2007 and re-elected in 2011 for the South Down constituency. He was the first MLA to have a private members' bill passed by the assembly, becoming the Caravans Act 2011, and the only member to pass a second private members' bill in 2016 when the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act 2016 was passed. He served on ten different assembly committees and the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly. John served as deputy leader of the UUP between 2010 and 2012. He co-founded NI21 and was deputy leader for one year.

After leaving the assembly in 2016 John now works for YFCU and Ulster Farmers' Union heading up a Land Mobility Programme and was appointed as a human rights commissioner in 2017 and to the board of the Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland in 2019.

# ‘So much more than just neighbours’: shifting borders, shifting identities and a time of uncertainty

by John McCallister

Shifting borders and shifting identities have been a consistent theme in the history of these islands and the political allegiances which have shaped our polities. The unionism of the 19th century, a definitively Irish political tradition and vision, was to transform into Ulster unionism. Republicanism was very much a minority expression within 19th century nationalism, before fundamentally reshaping the nationalist allegiance following 1916. In more recent times, unionism has journeyed from a ‘Protestant parliament for a Protestant people’ to a ‘pluralist parliament for a pluralist people’. Constitutional nationalism journeyed from a *de facto* rejection of the institutions of partition to full participation in devolved institutions. Equally significant, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) largely abandoned the exclusivist politics of fundamentalism for a more mainstream unionist outlook, while Sinn Féin moved from the politics of physical force and rejection of the legitimacy of partitionist institutions to constitutional politics within Northern Ireland structures.

Shifting identities has also been a feature of both the United Kingdom and Ireland. The United Kingdom’s transition to a post-imperial power perhaps has been the single most significant factor in a shifting British identity since 1945. Added to this, mass immigration,

secularisation, and the (re-)emergence of regional and national identities (a process intensified by Scottish devolution) have resulted in profound shifts in the self-understanding of Britons. No less dramatic, the Irish identity embodied in De Valera's 1936 Constitution has, in recent decades, undergone revolutionary change.

This history of shifting identities should inform contemporary unionist–nationalist and British–Irish relationships. Changes in communal and national self-understanding, rather than being regarded as inherently destabilising or as occasions for fear, are an innate characteristic of both unionism and nationalism, of being British and being Irish (indeed, the assumption that ‘British and Irish’ is a statement of alternative, rather than complementary identities, is itself deeply ahistorical). What is destabilising, however, is belief in mythic, pristine ‘fixed’ identities, and the associated intolerance of ambiguity, fluidity, and change.

### Dreary steeples?

This being so, the routine invocation of Churchill's words regarding ‘the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone’, and the assumption that these words embody an enduring wisdom, obscures the realities of shifting identities on this island and these islands – identities which have certainly not been untouched by ‘the deluge’ of wider patterns of political, social, and cultural change. Assuming fixed identities, fixed allegiances, and fixed accounts of communal and national interests prevents a recognition of the challenges and opportunities presented by shifting identities.

A similar history of ambiguity, fluidity, and change characterises the borders – physical and metaphorical – which have featured in unionist–nationalist and British–Irish relationships. Perhaps counter-intuitively, ambiguity has been a significant feature of the Northern Ireland–Ireland border. The rejection of the Boundary Commission report in 1925 resulted in the agreement between the prime ministers of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland, and the Free State to leave the border as it was, contrary to the intentions of the UK government, contrary to unionist commitments to Protestant communities south of the border in the historic province of Ulster, and contrary to nationalist ambitions. The existing border, therefore, was itself the result of pragmatism, a refusal to force abstract concepts of self-determination (which blighted the Versailles settlement), and a statement of shifting identities on the part of both unionism and nationalism.

The 1923 and 1952 Common Travel Area agreements demonstrated the extent to which the UK–Ireland border was fluid, qualitatively different to many other border experiences elsewhere in Europe. The constructive ambiguity of the Éire government during the Emergency – in particular, the Donegal air corridor – is another example of such fluidity, as was the Irish pound's link to sterling. The UK–Ireland border, literal and metaphorical, has not been characterised by fixed, pristine notions, but by a consistent ambiguity and fluidity which means that the post-1998 arrangements regarding the border, rather than being an innovation, reflect an enduring historical pattern in which the impact of the Troubles on the border was an aberration rather than a characteristic pattern.

### Another pattern

It has been this very pattern of shifting identities and shifting borders which has enabled British–Irish relations to absorb and manage a range of pronounced challenges over the decades. Precisely because identities have shifted, and because borders (literal and metaphorical) have been fluid, there has been a capacity built into British–Irish relations to absorb ruptures and disagreements.

To take one example that is often overlooked but which has a significance difficult to understate: the Cold War. Ireland's non-aligned status during the Cold War and the UK's NATO membership resulted in radically different commitments and understandings of national interest. This did not prevent, at a moment of intense confrontation during the Cold War, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (itself another expression of shifting identities, on the part of a strongly unionist UK prime minister, and shifting 'borders', with the Irish government committing to intensified security co-operation).

Similarly, the 1948 rejection of Dominion status and the establishment of the Republic, and the ending in 1979 of the Irish pound's link to sterling, were examples of ruptures which British–Irish relations have been able to absorb and accept precisely because this pattern of shifting identities and 'borders' had been set. These latter examples have a particular contemporary resonance in terms of demonstrating how significant constitutional and economic changes – ruptures – can be accommodated by British–Irish relations.

Indeed, patterns of change, rather than fixed ideological notions, have chiefly characterised both unionism and nationalism, and the British–Irish relationship. This reflects the wisdom of a political thinker whose personal narrative (the Irish defender of the British Constitution, a Protestant of Catholic descent) testifies to the fluidity of identities on these islands. As Edmund Burke stated, ‘A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation’. Shifting borders and shifting identities – ‘means of some change’ – have enabled unionism and nationalism, and British–Irish relations, to navigate evolving contexts and the realities of sharing these islands.

## After Brexit?

It is against this background that the prospect of impending Brexit should be considered. Rather than regarding the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union as an existential threat to British–Irish relations, and to nationalist identity and aspirations, it is, rather, another expression of shifting identities and shifting borders.

British–Irish relations have absorbed other, arguably more significant, ruptures than that represented by Brexit. The relationship has also matured alongside radically different understandings of national interest and international commitments. This being so, our shared history suggests that Brexit – irrespective of initial controversies and disputes – can be accommodated by the British–Irish relationship. Particularly in terms of the political institutions of the EU, there is little reason to regard Brexit as more significant than, for example, Ireland not being a participant in NATO’s Parliamentary Assembly or the Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly.

The fluidity of identities and borders also ensures that the identity (or identities) and aspirations of nationalists in Northern Ireland are not undermined or compromised by Brexit. With Irish citizenship rights carrying with them the rights of EU citizenship, and available to all born on the island of Ireland, the contemporary experience of shifting borders and shifting identities ensures that the rupture of Brexit can be absorbed and managed without negatively affecting nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. On this point, it is also worth noting that the (far from numerically insignificant) use of Irish passports by those in Northern Ireland of a unionist background – and the nonchalant response of political unionism to this phenomenon – is another example of a fluidity over identities and borders which promotes practical, pragmatic accommodations.



## What about the ‘backstop’?

It is an obvious rebuttal to this understanding to point to the intense debates surrounding the ‘backstop’ provision in the Withdrawal Agreement. The ‘backstop’ itself reflects the characteristics of shifting borders, shifting identities (and I think a much stronger pragmatic case should have been made on this point in a way which may have addressed some unionist concerns). Does unionist opposition to it, therefore, contradict the suggestion that fluidity has been and continues to be a defining characteristic of nationalist and unionist identities? This might be the case if unionist opposition was on the basis of securing a ‘hard border’, but this has been consistently and explicitly rejected by political unionism since the outset of this debate. Any of the proposed alternative mechanisms to the ‘backstop’ have assumed a fluidity to the border, and seek to ensure that this fluidity continues. Irrespective of whether or not such proposals have practical merit, they at least demonstrate – alongside the agreement to maintain the Common Travel Area – that there is a shared commitment to an open and a fluid border.

Having campaigned for a Remain vote in the 2016 referendum and continuing to be very sceptical about the suggested benefits of leaving the EU, I recognise that the UK government has a responsibility to implement the outcome of the referendum. I supported the Withdrawal Agreement as the best means to that end and believe that both Remain and Leave MPs who failed to support it bear a heavy responsibility for the political turmoil experienced by the UK, particularly as it is obvious that partisan calculations defeated a pragmatic negotiated settlement.

On both sides of the Irish Sea, and within Northern Ireland, the polemical tone of the debate concerning the ‘backstop’ has (somewhat ironically) reflected and echoed the Westminster debate. A contributing factor to this was the absence of functioning devolved institutions in Stormont which, potentially, could have facilitated and encouraged greater pragmatism and compromise, not least as a Stormont administration could have been a shared unionist–nationalist persuader for the economic importance of an open border. This perhaps could have resulted in a less confrontational debate on the ‘backstop’, and promoted much greater recognition of the shared commitment to an open, fluid border.

## Not helpful

The current dynamics and tensions of Westminster and Stormont politics have, then, obscured the patterns of shifting identities and shifting borders which have historically shaped British–Irish relationships and unionist and nationalist identities. This has also been the case with the Irish government’s participation in the debate, markedly lacking the pragmatism which traditionally has been a hallmark of Dublin’s approach. (It should be noted that the Dublin government’s frequently tone-deaf interventions regarding the ‘backstop’ have had a profoundly negative impact on unionist views.) This being so, responsibility lies with both Westminster and Dublin, and on unionists and nationalists, to interpret Brexit within the context of the patterns of shifting identities and shifting borders.

For both nationalists and unionists, there is a concern that, respectively, Westminster and Dublin are pursuing Brexit agendas which fail to respect the fluidity and complexity of identities in Northern Ireland, seeking monolithic outcomes, and not recognising the need for ‘shifting (i.e. fluid, permeable) borders’ (whether, from a unionist perspective, establishing an Irish Sea ‘border’ between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK or, from a nationalist perspective, undermining the open nature of the Northern Ireland–Ireland border).

From both Westminster and Dublin, and unionists and nationalists, there needs to be a shared determination to ensure that Brexit is integrated into the enduring patterns of relationships between these islands and on this island. There is no *prima facie* case why this should not be so. Brexit will be neither the utopia of ultra-Brexiteer fantasies nor the apocalyptic scenario suggested by too much nationalist polemic. A United Kingdom outside of the EU will be placed alongside an Ireland outside of NATO and the Commonwealth: another expression of shifting identities to be accepted and managed.

Westminster’s foolish neglect of the East–West relationship amidst the Brexit debate and Dublin’s response of megaphone diplomacy both need to be urgently replaced with a renewed and deepened commitment to the East–West relationship for a post-Brexit context, with a determination to demonstrate that the strong, positive bilateral relationship of recent times can be restored. The shifting borders and shifting identities of these islands call for such a relationship, a means of reflecting, respecting, and securing our interdependence – an

interdependence that can flourish even with the United Kingdom outside the European Union, precisely because it is deeply rooted in the historical experiences and contemporary realities of the islands.

### The Stormont vacuum

Devolved institutions in Northern Ireland – indeed, devolved institutions across the United Kingdom – give similar expression to the shifting borders and shifting identities of these islands. Scottish and Welsh devolution, for example, reflects both the experience and reality of these national identities within the union, and a history of open, permeable borders.

This itself highlights, in a number of ways, the weaknesses of *de facto* direct rule for Northern Ireland. The complexities and layers of identities throughout significant parts of these islands have required institutional recognition over centuries (for example, the pre-union Scottish and Irish parliaments, the provision for Scotland's legal and religious identity within the terms of the 1707 Act of Union, and the Stormont parliament). Against this background, the devolutionary settlements of the 1990s stand in continuity with these patterns and the experience of shifting borders and shifting identities. The absence of functioning devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, therefore, deprives this region of the inherited wisdom which has historically shaped the institutions of these islands and which led to the devolutionary settlements, an inherited wisdom conscious of fluid borders and identities.

From a unionist perspective, then, the absence of devolution weakens the union, setting Northern Ireland apart from the experience of Scotland and Wales, while it also obscures the complexity of identities in Northern Ireland to which nationalism is particularly (but not solely) alert. Direct rule (whether *de facto* or *de jure*) is inherently incapable of giving institutional expression to these shifting borders and shifting identities which shape Northern Ireland.

Despite this, however, there is little evidence to suggest that either unionism or nationalism since 2016 has had a political focus on the restoration of the devolved institutions, with, respectively, Westminster and Dáil agendas and activity consuming the political energy of both. This does raise the question of why institutions

historically important to both unionism (devolution) and nationalism (power-sharing) have failed, in recent years, to attract significant investments of political capital from either tradition.

The answer to this question may lead to initially uncomfortable conclusions regarding the structures of the Belfast Agreement. In his now classic study of ‘the Ulster question’ – *The Narrow Ground: Patterns of Ulster History* (1977) – historian ATQ Stewart concluded by noting that, as with any society, society in Northern Ireland ‘is, of course, changing continually, but it changes in accord with intrinsic laws, and not at the dictate of the makers of instant blueprints’. Hence part of the ‘function of wise constitutions’ is to take account of such change.

A case can be made that the 1998 architecture for the devolved institutions – when interpreted in a static, ossified manner – has not allowed for the change which is a characteristic of ‘wise constitutions’. Mechanisms and processes initially required to build confidence have, over 20 years, too easily become regarded as unchanging, permanent aspects of the architecture of devolution, rather than temporary expedients. In many cases – and this is particularly so with regards to the Petition of Concern and Designation provisions – these features have become obstacles to devolution functioning effectively and have impeded the evolution of a parliamentary culture characterised by accountability and consensus-building.

As David Trimble pointed out on a number of occasions, however, the 1998 arrangements did provide for organic change and reform through the review mechanism contained in the agreement:

*After a specified period, there will be a review of these arrangements, including the details of electoral arrangements and of the Assembly’s procedures, with a view to agreeing any adjustments necessary in the interests of efficiency and fairness.*

The failure to meaningfully implement this commitment undermined the functioning of the devolved institutions and, crucially, impeded their ability to take account of and reflect the reality of shifting identities within Northern Ireland, identities which have changed and evolved since 1998.

Above all, while the immediate post-conflict context necessitated rather fixed and monolithic institutional assumptions regarding identity, keeping the related mechanisms in place for over 20 years has obscured the realities of the fluidity of identities. With opinion polls consistently indicating an increasingly socially liberal electorate, a population with a growing proportion of ‘others’ (a majority of whom, interestingly, while rejecting the description ‘unionist’, have the union as their preferred constitutional option), and a growing section of society with no personal memory of the Troubles, mechanisms designed to address the immediate post-conflict context of 1998 cannot be assumed to retain their relevance.

Perhaps the most startling political expression of this has been the 2019 European election, with the combined ‘others’ vote (Alliance and Green) representing over one in five voters, and with Alliance winning its first European seat. This is a significant swathe of Northern Ireland political life of which the Designation provisions of the assembly are incapable of rendering meaningful recognition.

Shifting identities require the pragmatism and flexibility of parliamentary structures and representative institutions which are capable of evolving, rather than a brittle, fixed architecture established to address a particular set of circumstances which, 20 years on, can no longer be regarded as definitively reflecting social and cultural realities. Effective and fair devolved institutions – to use the phrase from the agreement’s review provision – require significant reforms to the mechanisms and processes which shape the Northern Ireland Assembly, encouraging and enabling a more robust parliamentary culture. These should reflect fluid identities and opinions rather than be constrained by the strait-jacket of Designation and Petition of Concern, thereby fulfilling the promise of a pluralist parliament for a pluralist people.

## The union and pluralism

The coincidence of the Brexit debate with the inability (and unwillingness) to restore the devolved institutions has also resulted in calls from Sinn Féin for a border poll. This, of course, is another example of shifting political identities, overturning Sinn Féin’s historic rejection of the legitimacy of border polls, embodying a recognition

of partition, and reflecting the agreement's commitment that 'the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union'.

Aside from this, however, unionists have to recognise that the conflation of the Brexit debate and the absence of devolved institutions do pose a threat to the union. What appeared to be a settled constitutional position in the decade following 1998, with the focus of (admittedly very intense) debates being internal arrangements, has given way to a context in which discussion of a border poll, rather than being merely partisan polemic from Sinn Féin, is being seriously debated.

Unionism is correct to oppose the suggestion of a border poll, not because of the unlikely outcome of support for Irish unification, but because such a referendum would be a distraction to the body politic in Northern Ireland (and beyond). From both unionist and nationalist perspectives, changing the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would not address either the need to shape the post-Brexit British–Irish relationship (debate surrounding the 'backstop' has too often overlooked the fact that this relationship is about much more than the Northern Ireland–Ireland border) or the need to secure stable institutions of regional government in this part of these islands, required irrespective of the union or Irish unity defining the constitutional status.

Mindful of how the Brexit debate – pre- and post-referendum – has voraciously consumed political focus and capital in the United Kingdom, it is very difficult indeed to believe that a similarly damaging dynamic would not be seen in Northern Ireland and Ireland in the event of a border poll.

Renewing the British–Irish relationship post-Brexit and the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, both vital expressions of the shifting identities and shifting borders on these islands, should not be sacrificed in the pursuit of a constitutional outcome which is both highly unlikely to be achieved and which, even in the highly unlikely circumstances that it was achieved, would have negative consequences for pluralism on this island and these islands.

As the taoiseach rightly emphasised in recent comments, a border poll which resulted in a narrow vote for unification – and any such result would inevitably be very narrow – would profoundly destabilise

the Republic. It is very difficult indeed to understand how nationalism would be served by threatening the settled constitutional order of the Republic with such instability. This settled constitutional order has organically evolved in the light of shifting borders (the changes to Articles 2 and 3) and shifting identities (for example, the acceptance of equal marriage), but would be incapable of absorbing the seismic shock of undoing the settlement of the 1920s.

Above all, however, unification would be an intrinsic rejection of pluralism, a pluralism embodied in the reality of two jurisdictions on this island, reflecting the challenges and opportunities of shifting borders and shifting identities. This flows from the historic unionist opposition to home rule and the conviction, in the words of the Ulster Covenant, that a home rule parliament would be 'subversive of our civil and religious freedom', unable to reflect the complexities of identities on this island. Two jurisdictions with diverse institutions are more capable of reflecting and promoting pluralism than one single monolithic constitutional outcome for the island.

For unionism to convincingly articulate and promote such a case for the union, a range of challenges need to be urgently addressed. With Westminster having legislated to extend equal marriage to Northern Ireland, unionism should recognise that its opposition to this undermined the case for the union and threatened to make unionism appear fundamentally reactionary. The union, however, is sharing in a vision of the common good and that this includes equal marriage should be positively embraced: the parliament of the United Kingdom has secured for gay and lesbian couples in Northern Ireland the same right to marry as found elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The matter of abortion raises rather different moral issues, but it is clear that some form of access to termination of pregnancy is required to secure for women in Northern Ireland the rights and choices that characterise a pluralist and compassionate society.

Likewise with unionist attitudes towards Irish identity, a more robust and convincing expression of pluralism is required. The Irish language, already deeply embedded in Northern Ireland through place names and family names, requires appropriate recognition, not as in the highly divisive, ideological proposals emanating from Sinn Féin, but in a variety of pragmatic ways. Appropriate recognition of the Irish language would be an affirmation of pluralism, a declaration that Irish identity is embraced by the union. More broadly, there is a challenge



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**The complexities of  
our identities and  
relationships within  
Northern Ireland,  
across Ireland, and  
between our islands,  
are not obstacles  
to overcome.**



for unionism to re-engage with its own history as an Irish political tradition, and with the various ecclesiastical, cultural, and sporting organisations that have had and continue to have significance for unionists in civil society and which are explicitly identified with 'Ireland' (for example, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland; the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland).

In his speech on opening the parliament of Northern Ireland in 1921, King George V stated: 'For all who love Ireland, as I do with all my heart, this is a profoundly moving occasion in Irish history'. For the king, and for the unionist-dominated senate and commons of Northern Ireland, there was no sense of contradiction in referring to the new parliament in such terms, or in the king's hope 'that the Irish people, North and South ... shall work together in common love for Ireland'. Such a vision – with deep historic roots within unionism – has a renewed contemporary significance in making the pluralist case for the union, embracing layered identities and fluid borders, ensuring that Irish identity is at home within the union, and contributing to the richness of the diversity of this island and these islands, diversity reflected in two jurisdictions in Ireland and devolution across the United Kingdom.

## The politics needed today

In her speech in Dublin Castle in 2011, Her Majesty the Queen said of these islands that we are 'so much more than just neighbours'. This captures the significance of our experiences of shifting borders and shifting identities, and our need of diverse institutions and institutional expressions to sustain the many layers of our relationships. It is because we are 'so much more than just neighbours' that there must be a renewed commitment to a deepened post-Brexit relationship, a reform and renewal of the devolved institutions, and a fresh expression of the unionist vision for the flourishing of all in Northern Ireland.

The complexities of our identities and relationships within Northern Ireland, across Ireland and between our islands are not obstacles to overcome. They may be lamented by ideologues as hindrances to monolithic aspirations, but they should be the stuff of a vibrant, positive, confident politics of pluralism and the common good, the politics needed today by those who are 'so much more than just neighbours'.



**Don't tell me  
there's no hope.**

Lyra McKee, 2017



**Susan McKay** is a writer and journalist from Derry. She is currently writing *Outside in the Navy Dark*, a book about borders, and has just been awarded one of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's Major Individual Awards to enable her to work on it. She has also received a grant from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Her recent work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, the *Guardian/Observer*, *The Irish Times* and the *London Review of Books*. Her books include *Bear in Mind These Dead* (Faber, 2007) and *Northern Protestants – An Unsettled People* (Blackstaff, 2000). Her journalism and documentaries have won several awards. She was one of the founders of the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre. Susan is currently working on a book which revisits *Northern Protestants – An Unsettled People*, 20 years after the original was published.



**Hope navigates  
a way forward.**

Rebecca Solnit,  
*The Mother of All Questions*

# Being more Lyra

by Susan McKay

'It gets better,' she'd said. 'It gets better for those of us who live long enough to see it get better.' Hope, for Lyra McKee was a passionate imperative, a political strategy. In 2017 she gave a TEDx talk in Belfast about how 'uncomfortable conversations' can change and even save lives. 'Don't tell me there is no hope,' she said. 'Because for some young LGBT people hope is all there is.' She was walking proof of the power of hope herself. As an isolated young teenage lesbian she'd contemplated suicide. She went on to find her vocation as a writer, to be popular and respected, to care for her disabled mother, and to meet the woman who would become the love of her life.

It got better, for Lyra. But tragically, not for long.

She should have been well into the writing of her book, *Lost Boys*, by now. She should have been engaged to Sara Canning, delighted that finally the law they'd campaigned for had been introduced, and they could marry in Northern Ireland. But just two years after she spoke about the power of hope, Lyra McKee is dead. She was murdered in Derry by dissident republicans on the eve of the 21st anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), for which an overwhelming majority of the people in both parts of Ireland had voted.

The New IRA, consisting mainly of a handful of disgruntled former members of the 'old' IRA, had mustered a crowd of radicalised young men to hijack and burn cars and vans and hurl petrol bombs at the police. A television crew was filming. This was a classic paramilitary show of strength. The dissidents wanted to signal that the people were ready to go to war again. Lyra was one of those observing the scene from behind police land rovers when a masked gunman stepped out from behind a wall and raised his weapon. Lyra had just tweeted a photo captioned 'Derry tonight. Absolute madness' when a bullet hit her in the head.

Lyra's killers have not been identified yet, and may never be, such is the fear of retribution that persists in a community still plagued by paramilitarism, a fear reinforced by vicious warnings that appeared on the walls and lampposts near where she was shot. These included a crude drawing of a rat caught in the cross hairs of a gun. What we know is that Saoradh, meaning, in Irish, liberation, is the political voice of the New IRA. It issued a statement regretting Lyra's death but blaming 'heavily armed crown forces of occupation', meaning the police.

Three days after Lyra's murder, a small group of women walked purposefully through the centre of Derry, to Saoradh's offices, in a terraced house on the edge of the Bogside. The gable wall is gaudily painted with murals showing masked men with starey eyes holding enormous guns, ready for action. It is absurdly phallic. The women were armed. That is to say they carried cans of red gloss paint, paint trays, and plastic gloves. The republicans were waiting, standing outside their building. The women put on their gloves, dipped their hands in the paint, and began silently to place blood-red handprints all over the macho murals. The men glared at them, muscular arms folded, grim-faced, but obviously at a loss.



(From left to right) Ellen Murray, Hamsavani Rajeswan and Caoimhe O'Connell in Belfast. All firm believers in Lyra McKee's 'It gets better kid' mantra.



## Peace and moving forward seemed like the only options.

Lyra McKee

The women told me afterwards they had no fear as they stood up to the dissident republicans that day. These were the friends of Lyra McKee. This was their show of strength.

Lyra was born in 1990 and grew up in a working-class family on a long north Belfast street known during the Troubles as 'the murder mile'. There was very little money but she was surrounded by love, including in particular the love of three women, her mother, Joan McKee, her grandmother, and her older sister Nichola. In a blog she wrote in 2014 she remembered the fear of violence that circumscribed her world as a child, the streets she was warned not to walk down, the individuals she was told to avoid. 'Northern Ireland has come so far ...' she wrote. She believed, however, that the obsession with the constitutional status of Northern Ireland that still characterised the main political parties was blinding them to the realities of life for the young.

'The Good Friday Agreement has created a new generation of young people freed from the cultural constraints and prejudices of the one before,' she argued. 'It used to be that being a Unionist or a Nationalist was an accident of birth. You didn't decide ... the decision was made for you.' Looking at her own eclectic circle of friends she said that times had changed. 'Whilst I saw the tail end of the conflict, I didn't see enough to make me bitter towards "the other side". I saw enough that peace and moving forward seemed like the only options. Most children of the GFA generation, those born after 1998 ... saw no conflict at all.' A consensus was slowly but surely emerging that the national question was 'holding us back'.

She and her friends were preoccupied with economic survival.

*I'm worried about paying this month's bills. Work is hard to come by. The cost of [third-level] education is so high that the door has practically been closed on working class young people ... I don't want a United Ireland or a stronger Union. I just want a better life.*

It was a theme she returned to in 2016 in the piece for which she is probably best known, ‘Suicide of the Ceasefire Babies’. Her generation was, she said, ‘destined to never witness the horrors of war but to reap the spoils of peace. The spoils just never seemed to reach us.’

The red hands protest was subversive, creative and eloquent. It was incredibly powerful. It told those whose henchmen murdered Lyra that they had blood on their hands. It also unapologetically appropriated a symbol previously only used by loyalists for whom it was the red hand of Ulster. It insisted that the old war in Ireland was over, and that a new struggle had begun. This struggle is non-violent, inclusive, locally rooted and globally focused. It is political but not within the structures of the mainstream parties. It is being led, overwhelmingly, by young women.

Lyra wrote about how her generation wanted tangible change in Northern Ireland, and were prepared to cross all the old lines to go out and get it. Some of the young women I spoke to knew Lyra, some were inspired by hearing her speak or reading her work after her death. Some work with girls, the next generation. All of them share her passionate belief that you can make life better.



## Young people who feel they haven't much to hope for are getting lost.

Cali Morrow

‘We did it because we loved Lyra,’ says Cali Morrow, who along with her partner, Sharon McCloskey, took part in the red hands protest. ‘We wanted to show them we weren’t afraid. They’d killed our friend. They couldn’t hurt us any more than they already had.’ Cali grew up Protestant in Rathcoole, a huge working-class estate on the outer edge of Belfast. Sharon grew up Catholic in Derry, knowing from an early age she was different and didn’t fancy boys. ‘It hadn’t occurred

to me yet that I could fancy girls,' she says. She took up bodybuilding. 'I was the only woman in a group of men, a freak, and all the men supported me,' she recalls. Cali knew she was gay when she was 14 but got married because it was 'the done thing'. The marriage was abusive and she left it in 2005. 'I came out of my shell. I found my voice. I felt so free,' she says.

She met Sharon, by then a champion bodybuilder, a few years later, and they became a couple, and part of a group of friends to which Sara had introduced Lyra in 2018. Sharon is a carer for her brother. Cali is a special needs classroom assistant, though she is currently seeking a new job. In her last one, cutbacks meant that she was attending to the needs of six children with profound special needs when the maximum was meant to be two.

For most people, they believe, the kind of identity expressed by flags no longer matters. 'It's a distraction,' says Cali. 'You can't stand up and look for rights and deny them to others.' 'The Troubles were shameful,' says Sharon. 'Fighting over shit that happened hundreds of years ago. But there are still people who are stuck in their ways and they are tramping on the futures of the young. They have their claws in the



Sharon McCloskey (left) and Cali Morrow at Derry's walls. 'We did it because we loved Lyra,' they said of the red hands protest against the New IRA and Saoradh.



## Why not here?

Doire Flynn

community and young people who feel they haven't much to hope for are getting lost.' Cali agrees. 'Northern Ireland is a poor and troubled place and young people are being let down. They don't know how to control their aggression and it is coming out wrong.'

The proportion of Northern Irish people who identify as neither unionist nor nationalist has been growing steadily in the 21st century. Research by the young Queen's University academics Katy Hayward and Cathal McManus in 2018, using the NI Life and Times Survey, found that, overall, 45 per cent of those surveyed opted for neither/nor, and that this was the choice of 61 per cent of women:

*There is much research to show that women have tended to have been written out of their active role in Nationalist and Unionist mobilisation and conflict – and peace building – in Northern Ireland.*

*For women to constitute such a large portion of those identifying as Neither Unionist nor Nationalist suggests that the rejection of the Unionist/Nationalist typology may also be associated with a rejection of the type of macho, patriarchal politics that is still quite predominant.*

The central paradox of the Good Friday Agreement is that it promotes reconciliation while institutionalising sectarian identity. Hayward and McManus comment on this. Their conclusion, though it is perhaps more of a tentative suggestion, is that 20 years after the agreement, 'perhaps Northern Ireland is ready for a revolution from the centre: to make Neither/Nor into All/Together.'

Doire Flynn grew up in south Armagh, next to where the massive British Army check point used to mark the border. She was born in 1995, a year after the IRA ceasefire, so she heard about how disturbing it used to be, but did not herself experience it. 'Mum and Dad raised us not to get involved in identity politics,' she says.



We didn't believe in being Irish or British.' She did have an uncle who ran for the Social Democratic and Labour Party against Enoch Powell, 'which is awesome', she reckons, and she did grow up politically minded, studying politics and international conflict studies at Queen's University, founding the International Relations Society and becoming president of the Politics Society. 'We were encouraged by some excellent teachers to be free thinkers,' she says. She also got to spend several weeks on a study trip to China, funded by the British Council. 'It was incredible. It was so eye-opening just to see difference,' she says.

The Trump presidency in the US confirmed Doire's conviction that young people need to be active.

*Our generation in Northern Ireland is just tired hearing about pre-Good Friday Agreement politics. What we see is that we have a mental health crisis – in one 20-day period recently there were ten suicides in west Belfast. We see education in crisis too, and while all this Brexit thing is going on, we still have the environment being destroyed. We look at the south and we see that they have marriage equality and abortion. Why are we socially behind them? Why is the North always left behind? We were inspired by that – if it can happen in Ireland, which used to be socially conservative, why not here?*

At Lyra's funeral, the celebrant Father Martin Magill challenged the politicians. Stormont had collapsed in acrimony in 2017, but after Lyra's death the local parties had stood together to condemn it, and had pledged to resume talks about restoring local government. 'Why did it take the death of a young woman with her whole life in front of her?' he demanded, and the mourners in St Anne's Cathedral clapped and rose as a body to their feet.

The talks failed. In October 2019, the Catholic and Protestant churches in the North and the Irish Council of Churches united to issue a statement calling on the politicians to get back to Stormont to stop Westminster legislation which would decriminalise abortion from taking effect. Lyra's partner, Sara, had told the political leaders, including the prime minister, after the funeral that the political vacuum in the North had encouraged dissident republicans and that they therefore held some responsibility for Lyra's death. When in mid-October the secretary of state and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) supported the appeal from the church leaders, Sara was

furious. ‘It seems that pleas from people who have seen their loved one murdered mean a lot less than the demand of church men desperate to repress women,’ she tweeted. ‘Their time is over, their hold on society has slipped and we will not be dragged backwards.’

When, in 2018, Doire heard that a branch of the new UK youth organisation called Our Future, Our Choice was being set up in Northern Ireland to campaign for a people’s vote on Brexit, based on a choice between remaining in the EU and accepting a Brexit deal, she applied for and got the role of full-time organiser. ‘It is youth led – I’m the oldest, at 24,’ she says. Her wages and the running costs are met from crowdfunding. Since then she has spoken at the European Parliament, to a packed rally in the Ulster Hall, and to several local councils, as well as having meetings with senior figures like Michel Barnier. ‘He was very kind. He said his children were far less political than us!’

‘The Good Friday Agreement came about after a huge consultation. We haven’t had that with Brexit. People didn’t even realise why the EU was important until after the referendum,’ Doire says. ‘Here in Northern Ireland young people feel we have had no say. We haven’t been represented properly. I think there is a wave of young people who just want a different sort of politics.’

“

**You have to have hope  
or you’d do nothing.**

Maeve O’Neill

Doire ended her speech at the Ulster Hall rally with the words: 'The children of the peace process deserve better.'

Maeve O'Neill was in Derry's Guildhall celebrating the new legislation that decriminalises abortion and same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland when someone told her that the DUP leader, Arlene Foster, had warned that her party would look at getting the law repealed. Maeve laughed. 'Someone should tell her we know a thing or two about repeal,' Maeve said. Northern feminists had supported the successful campaign to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution in 2018, leading the way to legislation for abortion in the Republic. Southern feminists went on to lend support to 'the North is Next' movement. The border was not a barrier. Nor was the Irish Sea – it was British MPs, taking their direction from Northern Ireland activists, who got the new laws attached to the Northern Ireland Bill in the summer of 2019.

When Maeve gets to the diversity monitoring section of an official Northern Irish form these days, she circles all three options: Catholic, Protestant and Other. 'It's what I am,' she says. She respects the fact that the questions are meant to facilitate fair employment and balance the representation of 'the two sides', but she finds the choices too limiting. 'The Good Friday Agreement was good at the time it came in but it needs to be changed. It is still structured around the two blocs of orange and green.' From a Derry housing estate, she went to Catholic schools and 'didn't know any Protestants until I left to go to uni in Glasgow'. She says she was 'switched on to politics' by the Scottish independence referendum.

She came back in 2014 to work as a community health development worker with the Rainbow Project, which supports LGBT people and campaigns for their rights. 'So much in relation to health is also about equality,' Maeve says. After Lyra moved to Derry in 2018 she'd taken part in a *Strictly Come Dancing* fundraising benefit for the Rainbow Project.

Maeve, who's 32, now works as a physiotherapist with the local health trust, but says that although she loves it, her job is 'my downtime'. Her real work is as an activist. When she found out there was a plan to change the law so that health professionals could refuse services to LGBT people, she and friends organised a rally in Guildhall Square

in Derry. Maeve's parents supported her – they had demonstrated against the location of a major waste incinerator in the city and her mother had taught women in Bangladesh in the 1970s before helping to develop the Derry Well Woman Centre.

'Environmental rights is my *grá* [love],' she says.

*I love that we are fighting for something, not against. We need an independent environmental protection agency. It leads you into other issues, too. I went to a few socialist worker meetings and learned about the links between economic systems and the environment. The women's rights movement has such energy and excitement now as well and a lot of young women are gaining confidence from their involvement in that. More and more women are getting into politics.*

Maeve has joined People Before Profit.

*In Derry our activist circle is intergenerational – it's gorgeous. It is my community. Young people bring energy and optimism, but older people bring wisdom and experience. People care less about sectarianism now that there is more access to integration. At school I played Gaelic football – now I play rugby, which is lovely because it is super-mixed – but I know I live in a progressive bubble. The patriarchal structures are still embedded. Housing and education are still segregated.*



Maeve O'Neill: 'Catholic, Protestant and Other' in Derry.



## We are at risk of going backwards.

Ellen Murray

Working in the health system, Maeve is angry at the underfunding of key services. 'There are waiting lists for everything. Mental health services are diabolical. On my way to work this morning the bridge was gridlocked and the Foyle Search and Rescue boat was on the river. It is so sad.' Northern Ireland has the highest suicide rates in the UK and in Derry young people in despair have often chosen to throw themselves off the bridge. The volunteers of the Foyle Search and Rescue service patrol the streets as well as the river and its banks in a bid to avert these tragedies.

Maeve believes that activists have to take care of themselves. 'You have to avoid getting bogged down,' she says.

*I have a circle of beautiful, ridiculous women friends called the No Man Band Clan. We have an old broken-down caravan and we enjoy the good things in life, camping, swimming in the sea, a wee whiskey. A tribe of women watching sunsets. We look after ourselves to sustain our resistance. Sometimes, most of the time, I am hopeful. You have to have hope or you would do nothing.*

In the shocked weeks after Lyra's death, her close friend Ellen Murray wrote on her blog about trying to come to terms with Lyra's loss and understand it. She missed Lyra for their conversations and their journeys. She missed what Lyra modelled for others. 'Something about the way she knew herself was so empowering,' Ellen commented. She missed the way Lyra 'stood steadfast when her friends were being attacked.'

But she tried to look further. Was this shocking death on the streets of Derry 'a catalyst for societal change in Northern Ireland to move us further on the journey to peace, or perhaps ... a painful reminder

of the dangers of rolling backwards, of political vacuum, and of hopelessness'? For Ellen, it was both. The loss of someone she loved in an incident of a kind that seemed to have been consigned to history was shocking. It was also hard to deal with for a generation that had not had to learn to deal with such bereavements. However, Lyra had been 'a torchlight of courage' – and an advocate of hope.

Lyra was an innovator – she'd faced formidable economic obstacles and had taken up all the opportunities that came her way. She'd got a place with Children's Express, an NGO that opens up opportunities for talented young people who want to work in the media. She'd done a grant-supported master's by distance learning at Birmingham City University. She also got involved in a news startup and got part-time editing work with a US tech company, and she was an early pioneer of crowdfunding, using it to launch her first journalistic investigation. In the absence of traditional full-time jobs and career paths, working-class millennials need this versatility, this creative energy.

'When I say my cat paid my rent, it is true,' Ellen says. Her exceptionally handsome cat, Bilbo, has his own Twitter account, which Ellen set up in 2017. 'He has 63,000 followers and that is growing by around 1,000 a month.' She sells photos, paintings, stickers, badges and other Bilbo-themed merchandise. 'I work with artists all over the world – they license Bilbo fan art. As well as bringing joy to thousands of people and paying my rent, it allows a dozen creatives to make a significant income in royalties,' she says.

Ellen lives in social housing. She has a progressive connective tissue disease, and uses a disability walking aid. She is extraordinarily mobile. Based in a large, bright room in a social enterprise hub in one of west Belfast's old mills, she researches and produces resources on the needs and rights of trans people and travels the world as an activist. 'I'd known – it just felt like an innate truth – that I was trans from when I was about ten, but I didn't start to come out until 2013, when I was 20. It was a significant event and it opened my eyes to what marginalisation meant. I decided to drop out of uni to focus on working out how to do everything. There were doctors to see, mental health services, lawyers.'

It all went well. She started out using Tumblr to try to meet other young trans people, and went on to set up Genderjam, and later on a resource centre in Belfast. She now works for Global Action for

Trans Equality, advocating at the UN and other international forums. She is also studying disability law part-time at Galway University.

She grew up as a nationalist but says on balance she would 'prefer to see NI stay as it is but be treated fairly by the UK.' She ran as a Green Party candidate in the last local elections. 'I'm a socialist,' she says.

*The democratic deficit we have here is having a negative effect on marginalised lives. We don't normalise trade unions or cap rents, for example. The benefits model is disastrous. I think at the moment we are mitigating damage. There is a risk of going backwards. Look at the 1960s civil rights campaign which started out fighting for housing rights. The core issues then as now are to do with people living in poverty.*

As for her hopes: 'I hope I am changing Northern Ireland,' Ellen says.

'I was a very timid activist,' says Hamsavani Rajeswaren. 'I had imposter syndrome. It was Lyra who changed that.' Lyra continues to inspire many young women through her writing – she also found time in her short life to offer personal support to an astonishingly large circle of people. They include Hamsa, now the Students' Union's vice-president for equality and diversity at Queen's University. The young Indian woman certainly did not look timid when I saw her up at Stormont on the day abortion was decriminalised. On the front line at the celebratory demo, she was one of those holding the Alliance for Choice banner. She was wearing red lipstick and a 'Free Safe and Legal' t-shirt and she was yelling out the chant, 'Not the church, not the state, women shall decide their fate!'

Hamsa grew up in Singapore. She came to Belfast when she was 17 to study psychology.

*Looking back it seems quite a scary thing to do. Where I come from you didn't even move out of your parents' house until you get married but at the time I just jumped into it quite fearlessly.*

*Northern Ireland is beautiful and the people are so welcoming, but there are some serious fractures. Racism is a serious problem. A lot of young people come from rural backgrounds and they have never met a black person – more dangerously there has been a lot of strong anti-immigrant rhetoric from certain politicians in recent times.*

When she found out abortion was illegal she was shocked. ‘I thought, oh, I just signed away my bodily autonomy in exchange for an education,’ she says. ‘That got me thinking and I began to get involved in campaigns for social justice.’

One of Hamsa’s closest friends is Laura Corner, Lyra’s niece, who has the honour of having had one of Lyra’s first books, *Laura Sees A Fairy*, handwritten and illustrated by the author when Lyra was nine, named after her. Laura also worked as a students’ union activist. ‘Lyra was what my mum would have called a *chillipaddi*,’ Hamsa says. ‘It is Malay for someone who is small but powerful and fiery, a tiny person with a huge personality. She sat down with me for lunch and said, “you are a brilliant young lady, missis, and you need to fight for your space”.’

Hamsa went on to front campaigns on disability and LGBT rights, she introduced Black History Month and she joined the pro-choice task force. She does case work with individual students and she does policy work with senior management in the university and outreach with community groups. She has in particular championed international students, representing them at an all-party parliamentary group at Westminster. ‘I am very proud that I was a huge catalyst in changing the way the university looks at its international students,’ she says. ‘It is about internationalisation. They are no longer seen as just a way to bring in fees.’

She feels she is part of a tradition – the Students’ Union at Queen’s has a radical history. It was where some of the students who led People’s Democracy began their activism, and some members were prominent in the civil rights movement and became politicians. ‘Racist and fascist hate speech is around, but so are more and more of us, too. We are part of social movements that are making big wins,’ she says. ‘That re-energises people, seeing that after years of work, positive change can happen.’



**Lyra was ... a *chillipaddi*!**

Hamsavani Rajeswaren



Hamsa was going to Dublin for an awards ceremony on 18 March 2019, and was nervous about whether or not she was going to win. She called Lyra. ‘She said, “don’t let anyone try to put you down”,’ Hamsa says. On her way back to Belfast that night on the bus, the award stowed in her bag, Hamsa got a call from Laura to tell her that her Auntie Lyra had been shot and killed. ‘It has made me angry, and determined to go on,’ Hamsa says. ‘Lyra was the person here that made me believe there was space for a voice that wasn’t about green or orange.’

Lyra was 24 when she wrote her *Letter To My 14 Year Old Self*, which was later made into a moving short film. It begins, ‘It gets better kid...’ The letter is about how knowing as she did from a young age that she was gay, she went through years of torment because she knew her church condemned her sexuality, and recieved homophobic abuse from other teenagers. ‘Right now, you’re wondering if you’ll ever be “normal”,’ she wrote. ‘You are normal. There is nothing wrong with you. You are not going to hell. You did nothing to deserve their hate.’ She told her despairing younger self that life would get easier, that she would be liked and loved and regarded as cool. She finished with a plea: ‘Keep hanging on, kid. It’s worth it. I love you.’

The ‘uncomfortable conversations’ that Lyra urged are central to contemporary feminist youth work. In Derry and Belfast I met youth workers who are determined to liberate girls from what one of them calls ‘the gender strait jacket’ so that they can find themselves and have easier, better lives, as Lyra did. ‘You will smile every day,’ she’d promised her teenage self.

At 38 Emma Johnson unabashedly wears a t-shirt that says: ‘I am a girl. I am smart. I am strong. I can do anything.’ After 15 years of professional experience Emma firmly believes that all youth work needs to be gender conscious and that girls and young women need their own space within which to find themselves. ‘Traditional youth work was all about boys. But girls grow up in a gender strait jacket and you need to break out of it, but if you do, you are seen as a militant,’ she says. ‘We want girls to flourish.’ When she was 15, she was part of an early peace initiative called The Right to Hope, which led her to want to work with young people on imaginative peer-education projects that actively bring about social change.

‘We had an event earlier this year with outdoor education activities like climbing and biking. It is about connecting with the environment,



## We want girls to flourish.

Emma Johnson

and also a lot of young women have very poor aerobic health. When it is a female-only space they lose their embarrassment. We talk about stereotypes and role models and action.'

Emma's team gets philanthropic funding. It is aligned with the NI Gender Equality Strategy, which means she is well placed to take part in policy debates. She is involved with the NI Women's European Platform, which gives women the opportunity to contribute to international feminist debates – Emma has participated in an intergenerational event at the UN's huge global women's rights event, the Beijing Platform.

The key work is, however, finding ways to support young women to take control of 'the living breathing issues' of their day-to-day lives. 'We talk about consent and social media, which is a huge area of pressure,' says Emma. 'We target young mothers who may be very isolated and need to make friends. We talk about period poverty, choice, domestic violence.' Emma and her colleagues are always dreaming up creative ways to approach sensitive conversations. 'We do LGBT awareness – we had a fun day for families based around a dog show. We work in interface areas. We recently had an amazing drag storytelling session in the Waterside Library. Our mantra is we want to raise expectations among young women.'

Caoimhe O'Connell works in the Oh Yeah centre in Belfast. It is a non-profit music hub in an old record distribution centre in Belfast's Cathedral Quarter. Supported by philanthropic funds, it sets out to involve young people in 'hard-to-reach' communities in making music and training to work in the music industry. Gigs at the centre are organised and run by the young people. 'Success for us isn't about getting 200 people through the door,' says Caoimhe. 'It's about things like the group of young trans people at the back who feel comfortable about being there.'

Everything imaginable is done to make Oh Yeah inclusive and welcoming.

*We have projects that reach out to particular groups that are isolated – we have a Syrian women's choir – and to carers for people with dementia. We go to schools, bonfire sites, youth clubs and anywhere else where young people gather.*

*Music has always been a driving force for change in Northern Ireland from the Undertones back in the 1970s to the feminist punk bands that play at Alliance for Choice rallies today. Music transcends everything.*



## Music transcends everything.

Caoimhe O'Connell

*A lot of the kids who come here are from strongly loyalist or republican areas. They know about the constitutional issue but they don't care. It is the same with religion – at our Girls Rock School we had 20 girls and 13 of them said they had no religion. We had five Arab girls. They care about being stereotyped as a woman, they care about trans rights. We are completely cross-community and we have an anti-misogynist culture. The kids who come here write songs about the shit they've been through and they stand up there and sing about how they've been feeling. It is quite magical.*

Lyra wrote about how she had been conditioned into hating herself, and Caoimhe says she felt the same. She sees it as a mark of success for Oh Yeah that 'we have 15-year-old girls in here who love being 15!' She was 'a stressed and anxious teenager' herself and left school at 16. She went on to train as a teacher, and left a full-time and secure teaching job to work in the centre. She also runs an Irish language youth club. 'I don't have disposable income or free time but I love what I do. I jump out of bed in the morning and I can't wait to get in here.'

From west Belfast, Caoimhe used to vote Sinn Féin but became disillusioned. A year ago, she joined the Green Party and stood as a councillor in the 2019 local elections. She did 'shockingly well' and was almost elected. 'I have a Gaelic name and red hair but I polled ten per cent of the vote in one very traditionally loyalist area,' she says. 'It was a green wave. We offer a credible alternative to people who don't care about orange and green but do care about social issues and the environment.'

While the big parties, Sinn Féin and the DUP, still dominate at the Northern Ireland Assembly, the 2019 local government elections saw remarkable changes, with the Alliance party increasing its number of councillors by 65 per cent, the Greens doubling their previous vote, and socialists and independents making significant gains. Green Party leader Claire Bailey notes that her party has seen an upsurge in young members in their early 20s, and that there is a whole new post-conflict generation of under 18s who are looking out for a new political agenda.

Catherine Pollock finds that 'seeing both sides' of Northern Ireland's contentious issues can have its drawbacks, though she wouldn't have it any other way. 'I dance a fine line,' she says. 'In fact I seem to spend a lot of my time arguing!'

I meet with Catherine in a café in a community centre in Derry's Bogside. She has just dropped her daughter at the Irish language pre-school in the centre, her little boy goes to a *meánscoil* (Irish language primary school) up the street, and she works nearby for Cultúrlann, an Irish language cultural organisation. She is from a unionist part of town, and a fairly staunch working-class Protestant family. 'A lot of my close relations always vote DUP, and some even vote UKIP,' she says. She's a diplomat, a natural practitioner of Lyra's 'uncomfortable conversations'. When she talks with her family about contentious issues, she tells them why people from a nationalist or republican background feel differently to them. When she is discussing the same issues with colleagues and friends in the Bogside or Creggan, she insists they listen to the views and feelings her family have expressed. At the end of her TEDx talk Lyra had appealed to anyone who had a problem with her gayness to come and talk to her after the event. 'I won't call you a homophobe,' she promised. It is a radical stance in an era in which it is regarded as normal to hurl abuse on social media at anyone who departs from your own particular set of beliefs.



## I dance a fine line.

Catherine Pollock

Catherine grew up a church- and Sunday School-going Presbyterian, but as a teenager she began to rebel against the conservatism of the church's social teaching. 'We were told we had to be virtuous, no drinking, no sex before marriage, gays were going to hell. I said to my mother, 'I'm not going any more' and she said, 'that's fine' and I thought, 'after all these years, is that all it took?'

At university in England she was politicised by the role the UK government played in relation to the war in Iraq. When she returned to Northern Ireland she was shocked by the extent to which sectarian issues kept communities apart which had all kinds of social problems in common, many of them rooted in poverty. She began to work for community development organisations and also got to know and respect people involved with the campaign for justice for the Bloody



Catherine Pollock at the *Derry Girls* mural with her children, Frankie and Rohan: 'I don't want them to feel they can only have part of Derry. They can have all of it.'

Sunday families. ‘When I met the women fighting for abortion rights in the Alliance for Choice, I was like, “Hallelujah!”’ She loves the creativity of their protests – like changing a letter on Free Derry Wall so that it read, ‘You Are Not Entering Free Derry’.

Lyra’s friends also used the iconic wall – painting ‘RIP Lyra McKee #not in our name’ on it immediately after her death.

Catherine lives in the loyalist Fountain estate, works in the Bogside, and job-shares with Lisa Anderson, a Londoner whose parents immigrated from Tobago. She is impatient with the relatively new designation, Protestant Unionist Loyalist (PUL). ‘I hate the way we have all these acronyms dividing people up,’ she says. Her friends come from all backgrounds. ‘I feel very British and I am content to say I’m British. I feel culturally at home in Glasgow and London. But I am Irish too and I feel at home in Dublin and Donegal.’

Despite political differences, she has a loving relationship with her family. ‘My dad is no Irish language enthusiast but he’s impressed my kids are growing up bilingual and chuffed when my son says, “*Cá bhfuil Granda*”,’ she says.

*As a family my kids and I engage completely with both communities. They love the band parades and my son throws his red, white and blue band stick up in the air like the rest of the boys. But we also go to hear Songs of Resistance on the Free Derry stage. I am bringing them up to be community minded and compassionate. I don’t want them to feel they can only have part of Derry. They can have all of it.*

In October 2019 Lyra McKee’s name was inscribed on the international War Reporters Memorial in Bayeux. It was six months after she was killed. Sara said of the inscription, ‘We had hoped the war she wrote about was over, but there are those in our society desperate to drag us back into darker times. Let Lyra always stand as a reminder to look to the light.’ Lyra’s friends have a new way of urging each other to have courage when facing a challenge. ‘Be more Lyra,’ they say.

“

**I don't want them to feel they can only have part of Derry. They can have all of it.**

Photography credit

Katrina Taggart is a freelance photographer who began her career at her local newspaper in Omagh, County Tyrone and is now based in Belfast. She loves telling stories through her photographs, and is passionate about human rights and Irish culture.

She received a Master of Fine Arts in Photography from the University of Ulster in 2016.



**Glenn Patterson** was born, and lives, in Belfast. He is the author of ten novels, including *The International*, *The Mill for Grinding Old People Young* (Belfast's first One City One Book Choice) and *Gull*, set in the DeLorean Motor Company's Belfast factory in the early 1980s. He has published two collections of essays and articles – *Lapsed Protestant* and *Here's Me Here* – and two other non-fiction works, the most recent of which, *Backstop Land*, came out on 31 October 2019, the day that the UK didn't leave the EU. He is the co-writer, with Colin Carberry, of *Good Vibrations* (BBC Films), which the pair later adapted for stage, and in 2016 he wrote the libretto for *Long Story Short: the Belfast Opera*, composed by Neil Martin. A new novel, *Where Are We Now?*, will be published by Head of Zeus in March 2020. He is the director of the Seamus Heaney Centre at Queen's University Belfast.



# Making (short) work (of a couple of double gins) while the world spins

by Glenn Patterson

The man I will call Donovan (that being his name) and I have been trying to find a date for this since just after Christmas – ‘before the New Year is too far advanced,’ we said – and have arrived, a little sheepish at our crapness, at the early evening of Thursday 21 February, spring a mere hop and a skip away.

The arrangement is we will meet in Berts Bar on High Street. It's too soon to call it a haunt, but we have met there before – sat, in fact, in the exact same seats, at the short end of the counter, next to the door through to the toilets, and the Merchant Hotel's main entrance, facing on to Skipper Street.

As before, Donovan's motorbike helmet is already on the counter when I arrive. He will not be needing it again tonight: home is a short walk from wherever he has parked.

Home for me is a mile-long ride east from the Albert Clock stop on Belfast's new rapid transport system – the Glider – further down High Street.

(And, yes, I did think of changing ‘mile-long ride’ to ‘mile-long glide’, but then... well, wait till you've used it yourself then you tell me.)

If you had asked me, back when the two of us became friends at the end of the 1980s, five years before the first IRA ceasefire, to imagine the types of place where we might meet 30 years on, a 1950s retro

cocktail bar and grill would have come a considerable way down the list. But then I wouldn't have seen me living in east Belfast either (most people we knew then clung to the more religiously mixed south) or coming in and out of the city centre on a bendy purple bus, or Donovan for that matter ever having need of a motorbike helmet, let alone being able to fit all that hair he used to have inside one.

The hair is shorter now, and almost wholly grey. My own is coming up white these days in the photos I increasingly look at – like that bit in *The Exorcist* – through a lattice of fingers.

The barman asks me what I am having. I tell him another of whatever gin that is in the glass Donovan has set beside the helmet. 'So, a double, then?' the barman asks and Donovan deadpans.

'Sure,' I say, though I am not entirely, 'a double.'

We do the catching up, seven weeks more of it to get through than if we had managed to meet when we originally intended. We talk about partners and children and preparations for an annual charity event in memory of Donovan's late father-in-law, who died from muscular dystrophy, which ends with a description of a dinner served to Donovan and his ex-wife by Marco Pierre White – 'paté, kedgeree, crème brûlée: simple, but amazing.' As any Jimmie Lunceford fan knows, t'ain't what you do that gets results.

(I say that as though I am a Jimmie Lunceford fan, but in truth I am more Fun Boy Three/Bananarama vintage – *Do-do-do-do-do, do-do, do-dooo*. I only found the Jimmie Lunceford original when I was writing this.)

We talk, Donovan and I, university politics: we are professors now as well as parents. This in a sense is just how it goes: each generation is a tide that comes in and fills the holes or roles the last one left as it receded. Which isn't to say we haven't put a shift in. As people who entered the academy through the practice channel (theory for me runs to a single phrase: what you do defines you), we are constantly trying to keep our professional papers up to date.

I mention a movie I am working on about the two sets of Dunlop brothers – Joey and Robert, and Robert's sons William and Michael – whose lives and, in the case of the first three named, deaths have for nearly four decades defined Northern Ireland motorcycle road-racing.

Donovan tells me that he spent all his childhood summers at his grandparents' in Portrush – home to the biggest event in the road-racing calendar, the North West 200 – that he had, as a kid of seven or eight, a little motorbike of his own that he would ride up and down the drive, or endlessly take apart and reassemble, see how it worked. He went every year to watch the racing, until 1979, the year three riders died (one a close friend of Joey Dunlop, a member of the 'Armoy Armada'), after which the uncle who had always accompanied him said that was it, they were never going back again.

The day, some time after this, that he walked into his parents' room and saw a camera sitting on the bed, his first instinct was to take it apart too, see how it worked. (Though not, unfortunately, how to put it back together before his father came in.) Next thing he was a 17-year-old travelling Ireland with just the camera for company, persuading writers like Heaney, Banville – William Trevor – to contribute pieces to his debut *32 Counties* book.

(And as I write that, 30 years on, what strikes me most is not the literary figures he enlisted, but that title. *The chutzpah!*)

I cannot have known him as long as I have without hearing about this foundational road-racing passion before, but there could be as much as three decades' worth of other stuff piled on top, whole relationships begun and ended; the inside as well as the outside of my temples might be bleaching out a bit.

And then, even on first sip, this gin was unmistakably double. I can barely remember – halfway through it – what I had for lunch.

So, of course we order another, and keep talking.

I think, when we talk, we are – without saying as much, even to ourselves – looking for places of intersection: here perhaps – or here – there is something we could do together. Something like the essay about the border we did the year before last for the *Guardian Weekend* magazine and for which we revisited some of the south Armagh locations (Bessbrook, Forkhill) from Donovan's 2007 *British Watchtowers* series, though my abiding memory of those particular early spring days is again of talking – while we drove (we took it turn about and each came away convinced the other was the worse driver), while we ate, talking even while, each in our way, we worked.

I wrote mainly on the sheets of A4 I always carry around with me – folded three or four times (A7 or 8) to fit in the palm of my hand. When I ran out of paper I wrote – again as I often do – straight onto the hand. I don't know if it is an affectation, but it feels like the least mediated form of writing, as unconscious sometimes as scratching.

I was in the middle then of writing a novel, whose working title – *Iterations* – was informed by the sense, which Brexit enhanced rather than introduced, that all entities and identities were open to change and revision, informed too (if it isn't perverse to say) by a dislike of the word iterations and its creep into everyday discourse. As in 'chef has introduced a new iteration of the menu'.

I still dislike the word, but as with all titles chosen early it has sent down roots that are hard to extirpate without completely messing up the surface.

Until your publishers get the hold of it and tell you that they will publish, yes, but not, under any circumstances, with that title. So *Iterations* becomes *Where are we now?*

To those drives around the border with Donovan, I attribute the appearance in the finished novel of a locations management company, run by a brother and sister brought up, in Tyrone, by Esperanto-speaking parents ('the county's two and only'), which is tasked with finding a hill, somewhere along the border to stand in for the site of the battle of Annaberg, fought between Polish insurgents and German Freikorps during the Third Silesian Uprising of May 1921.

Well, why not?

Unfortunately, the company can't find any Northern Irish extras willing to play the parts of the Freikorps (proto Stormtroopers), so in the end it has to recruit them from Northern Ireland's own Polish community, a few of whom confide in the Esperantists' offspring that it might be the last thing they do before they move south, fearing the worst from Brexit.

Donovan, meanwhile, has been photographing lighthouses.

Correction, Donovan has been making work about lighthouses. That is the term he always uses. I remember – a decade ago – spending some time in Berlin with the artist Victor Sloan for an exhibition

and accompanying book on a Prenzlauer Berg bar called Luxus. I struggled all the time we were together to find the right term for what it was Victor was doing with his camera ... Taking pictures clearly wasn't it, as Victor demonstrated the night I said that by holding the camera out at arm's length and firing off a shot into the dark without even looking. (Although – and I could be wrong – I always thought a version of that off-the-cuff image found its way into the final exhibition.) So, I have adopted Donovan's term myself.

There is something pretty fundamental about make and work. Like all single-syllable words, they seem to go to the very core of the language and therefore of how we exist in the world, and never mind the political landscape. Well, all right then, how I as a writer exist. Sometimes I make work that people can read, sometimes I make work that people can watch, once or twice I have made work that people can sing, I have even made work that people can – with counters and cards and rolling dice – play.

But back to the lighthouses. Donovan has been collaborating with writer Chris Klatell, who has seen in them something of the same thing I have seen in *Iterations*, a pick to unlock the present moment, in this case the centrality of borders to its thinking. The lighthouses they are interested in are the ones that can be seen from the edge of one land mass, sending out their signal from the next land mass over. One of the prompts was a line in *To the Lighthouse*, by Virginia Woolf: '[W]e must wait for the future to show.'

Donovan has already exhibited some of the work – a single two metres squared lightbox image of Griz-Nez Lighthouse, Pas-de-Calais, taken from Cliffs of Dover as part of the 2018 Brighton Photo Biennial – but it is no more than an extract from a novel. This is still work in progress.

Just a couple of weeks before we meet, indeed, he was out again. The work he is making is not just concerned with geography, but also politics. The day, or rather the night, of his most recent foray was the occasion of the first meaningful vote (who knew, before Brexit began, they had meaningless ones?) on what we had all taken to calling 'Theresa May's Deal' on the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union.

He had, what's more, been keeping a close eye on the weather. The forecast on the morning of that day was for snow heading our way across the North Channel from the west coast of Scotland. Donovan, thinking to capture that too, was going to Torr Head, the closest part of Northern Ireland to Scotland, where, with a group of friends (and entirely incidental to what Donovan was about), I had watched the sunrise on 1 January 2000, having watched it go down from the most westerly part of Donegal on 31 December 1999. Torr is, to quote the Antrim Coast and Glens website, 'an excellent example of metamorphosed limestone and indicative of volcanic rock sequences in Ireland and Scotland' – as rugged a sentence as you could possibly meet – and is very, very exposed, especially on the far side of the ruined coastguard hut that sits atop the limestoney, volcanicky outcrop.

Standing up there some days, battered by the winds, you could be forgiven for thinking the hut had simply blown away and that you were doomed any minute to follow.

It was an area Donovan knew very well, having for the past several years spent most of his weekends there, but even in daylight, even in midsummer, the roads leading to it could be tricky, the steep path up to the headland treacherous, and this was night, midwinter, with weather closing in.

He had taken the precaution of phoning a friend who lived locally and asking him if he could meet him in his car and drive him, and his gear, to where the road ran out at the foot of the path. He had a bottle of whiskey with him as a thank you, and when, getting into the car, he turned to set the bottle in the back seat, was surprised to see his friend's ten-year-old son sitting there.

Donovan, who had arrived at the meeting point on his motorbike, was already dressed in multiple layers for the shoot and before getting out of the car again put on his motorcycle helmet – (a) because it was cold, and (b) because it really, really was treacherous up there – then shouldered everything he needed, including the couple of cans of beer that would keep him going while he waited, and struck out alone up the path.

To get the shot he had in mind, Donovan was going to have to wait until he saw the snowstorm begin its slow roll across the channel from Scotland, a distance of less than 15 miles.

And then there was the light itself.

'Each lighthouse has a different interval,' he tells me, 'like a signature. So, like, Mull is 21 seconds. If you're a sailor and see a flash of light and 21 seconds later another flash, you know you're at Mull.'

The interval at the lighthouse directly facing Torr is seven seconds.

So, geography, politics, meteorology and finally mathematics: 'You wait for the flash of the light and then you count seven seconds just to make sure: yes, there it is again, that's the right one. Now, the exposure on the camera is three seconds. So, you're going to have to press the trigger five seconds after the last flash to be sure of getting the next one. And you can't look down at your watch or phone or you'll miss it. So, what I've started to do is count out loud: one elephant, two elephant, three elephant ... Do you remember that?' he asks side-stepping out of the story ...

*'Gregory's Girl.'*

A nod, '... four elephant, five elephant – press ... got it. Or hope you have. Photography is all about control and surrender.' (The following morning, I find a folded napkin in my pocket with the big B for Berts printed on it and the words control + surrender in my handwriting. If I didn't know better, I'd wonder where I had been the night before.) 'And, of course,' Donovan says, 'the light' – the other light, he means, the photo in photography – 'keeps dropping, so you have to take that into account when you're calculating the exposure ... So, you count again: one elephant, two elephant ...'

He stops, freezes practically, his voice drops. 'I suddenly have this feeling there's somebody else there ...' He looks over his shoulder – in the then-and-there of us sitting on our stools, looks over his shoulder, where what I see is the half-curtained window looking out on to Skipper Street, but what Donovan sees or wants me to see is what he saw that night, as he stood on Torr Head in his helmet, one elephanting, two elephanting, open can of beer to hand: the kid, his friend's ten year-old son, who had somehow found his way up here, no layers, no motorbike helmet, no dad.

'What are you doing?' the kid asked, before Donovan (he's still looking over his shoulder in the bar) could ask him the same thing.

'I'm making work.'

And only now does he turn back to me to tell me the rest of the story, about the shot he got as the meaningful vote itself was taking place and the snow clouds arrived overhead, about the descent from the headland to the road below – ‘I was so scared, I was shouting at the kid as if he was one of my own’ – and already I am thinking I will write this, already I am trying out things in my head (the way Donovan looked over his shoulder just now: the boy was there) and two other guys have come in and sat at the counter, where the long leg of the L meets the short, and they are giving us the Belfast eye like it wouldn’t take a big lot for them to pick a fight – especially as Donovan has, mid-story, managed to get in ahead of them and order us another round of drinks.

A part of me wants to apologise to them – ‘he was caught up in telling me something, he didn’t see you’ – apologise for the whole spectacle of the two of us ... and another part doesn’t care what it looks like to them or anyone else: this is as much a record of our particular moment in time as any work either of us might make. No, wait: this is the work.

## Postscript, 6 April 2019

We are back on our stools at the short leg of the L-shaped counter of Berts Bar. Donovan has had a fight with a razor – his words – which has put paid to most of the rest of his hair. (In old barber’s parlance, I’d call it a Number 4.) On the other side of the counter, the barman is pouring cartons of tomato juice into a catering-size mayonnaise tub, it looks like, stripped of its label. To the tomato juice he adds, while Donovan and I do our catching up, a couple of small bottles of freshly squeezed lemon juice, a couple of tablespoons of celery salt, not that I could pick celery salt out with absolute confidence in any other twilit room, but I have a fair idea by now where this is going, or I have until he starts tearing up handfuls of basil and chopping chives. Not so Bloody Mary now, I think, as whatever you bloody well fancy. ‘Believe me,’ the barman says when I express surprise, ‘by the time that’s ready, the basil and the chives will have taken it into a different league.’

‘So when will it be ready?’

‘What’s this, Friday ...? Tuesday.’



I haven't told Donovan yet I am writing this, and there are a few things I need to check – it was risotto Marco Pierre White cooked you, right? No: kedgerree (as you now realise you are indeed reading the corrected version) – but before I have had a chance to we have gone off in another direction, talking about a cache of photographs he was recently shown that provide a new angle on Northern Ireland's recent past. It's the artist's role to deal with legacy, Donovan says, and I say what I have always said when the question of legacy is raised, that art might be the only way of dealing with it, for however much fact an official recovery process might amass there is unlikely to be much truth in it, to which Donovan is about to say something else when over the Berts Bar sound system comes a shuffling beat. 'When I was a kid about half-past three, my daddy said, son, come here to me. Says things may come and things may go, but this is one thing you ought to know ...'

It's only Jimmie Lunceford.

I stop Donovan: 'Remind me,' I say, 'to come back to that song ... Go on.'

And he does.

The barman does.

We all do.



**Diarmaid Ferriter**, born in Dublin in 1972, is Professor of Modern Irish History at University College Dublin. His books include *A Nation of Extremes: The Pioneers in twentieth century Ireland* (1998), *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (2004), *Judging Dev: A Reassessment of the life and legacy of Eamon de Valera* (2007), *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (2009), *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (2012), *A Nation and not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913–23* (2015), *On The Edge: Ireland's Offshore Islands, A Modern History* (2018) and *The Border: The Legacy of a Century of Anglo-Irish Relations* (2019). A weekly columnist with *The Irish Times* since 2014 and a regular television and radio broadcaster, he co-wrote with Nuala O'Connor a three-part television history of 20th-century Ireland, *The Limits of Liberty* (2010), and the film *Keepers of the Flame* (2018). He is a member of the government-appointed Expert Advisory Group on commemoration of the revolutionary decade 1913–23, and was elected a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 2019.

# The weight of Anglo-Irish history – much more than an external affair

by Diarmaid Ferriter

On 6 September 1997, I stood with my closest friend, fellow Irishman and London resident Kevin Maher, as the funeral cortege of Princess Diana made its way along Hyde Park.

## An English funeral

What on earth was I doing there? It was both by accident and design; an accident because I had booked a trip to London to see Kevin well before Diana's death; by design because we could not resist the funeral spectacle given the enormity of the reaction to the death of the princess. We were fascinated by the extent of the public emoting and the apparently deep grief of those who openly cried, even sobbed for a woman they had never met but seemingly loved. Kevin and I, as far from royalists as you could get, and grandsons of staunch and active republicans during the Irish War of Independence, were not disrespectful, but we did exchange some bemused glances.

The atmosphere was extraordinary; the much-vaunted stiff upper lips of the Brits were loosened beyond recognition. It was quite a day out; we moved into the park where the funeral service was relayed on a giant screen; we watched and listened intently as the princess's brother Charles Spencer took aim at the way the royal firm had treated Diana. Later that evening we imbibed in pubs where the

customers decided they would drink generously in memory of Diana and became increasingly loud; it was starting to look more like an Irish than an English funeral day.

For me, there was also a professional interest. As an undergraduate in 1990 I greatly enjoyed the lectures of University College Dublin (UCD) historian Fergus D'Arcy on 20th-century Britain and he gave a particularly absorbing lecture on the impact of the British monarchy. It was a subject I was to return to at various stages as a historian, partly because of all the factors that contributed to the civil war in Ireland in the early 1920s, the section of the Anglo-Irish Treaty requiring members of the Irish parliament to swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown seemed the most emotive and divisive.

But symbol was one thing and practice another. Over the years we seem to have managed to combine a deep-rooted republicanism with a fascination with the activities of the House of Windsor. There was always going to be a curiosity about a family that was deemed responsible for presiding over the historical oppression of the Irish; the royals inevitably became a focus for nationalist resentment and their visits to Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries galvanised political militants to object and form protest groups. The interest has always been there; historian James Murphy, who wrote about the relationship between nationalism and monarchy in Ireland during the reign of Queen Victoria in his book *Abject Loyalty* (2001) made the point that the increasing hostility displayed by nationalists towards monarchy in 19th-century Ireland was partly based on fear 'of the undoubted popularity of monarchy among large sections of the Irish Catholic nationalist population and fear of the uses to which that popularity might be put'.

Despite the protests, many Irish were not going to deprive themselves of keeping up to date on the glamour, romances and spectacle of the royals, particularly when they did not have their own royal family to gossip and read about. During bleak times economically and politically, there was light relief, frivolity and titillation to be enjoyed by following the scandals and developments at Buckingham Palace. In an Ireland where a strict Catholic and moral code was being imposed from the 1920s, the decadence, extravagance and colourful love lives of the Protestant House of Windsor were far too intriguing to ignore, a reminder of British–Irish differences but also shared cultural interests. In 1999, the Irish Benedictine monk Mark Hederman

recalled his mother's preoccupation with the Wallis-Simpson/King Edward VIII abdication crisis of 1936. She was well informed about the scandal despite something of a news blackout in Ireland:

*When my mother began to tell people at parties in Dublin they thought she was off her head. Being a conscientious Catholic she asked a Jesuit priest whether it was libel, detraction or scandal to be spreading news that was common knowledge in America but completely unknown over here. "I'm not quite sure which it is," he said, "but it's very interesting. Tell me more!"*

In tandem, military service by Irishmen under the royal insignia was a constant from the time they were allowed to join crown forces after the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century and by 1830 they were estimated to represent 42.2 per cent of the regular British Army, amounting to 40,979 soldiers. By 1878 a fifth of all British Army officers were Irish. More than 200,000 Irishmen fought in the First World War and were volunteers rather than conscripts. The Irish also made a significant contribution to the British Army during the Second World War; at least 60,000 Southern Irish citizens served and men of Irish origin won eight Victoria Crosses during that war. Joining the British Army was a family tradition for many, and was not seen by them as either pro-British or anti-Irish.

But that became an inconvenient truth. Because of the events of the War of Independence, the phrase 'crown forces' came to represent something abhorrent in the Irish republican narrative. The hatred of the brutal Black and Tans, the targeting of the Royal Irish Constabulary by the IRA and events such as Bloody Sunday in November 1920 when crown forces massacred 14 civilians in Croke Park at a Gaelic Athletic Association match, did much to cement that narrative.

## Kevin and me

On a previous trip to London two years before the death of Diana, I experienced anti-Irish sentiment when I was prevented from getting on a flight at a London airport for the simple reason that I was a young Irishman travelling alone and the police did not like the look of this Paddy. I was interrogated in an airport room and because I was unsure of the exact number of Kevin's apartment, it gave them licence to string out the inquisition; eventually they phoned Kevin and he confirmed where I had been, but I still missed my flight. The rage in me took a long time to subside.

I wrought a revenge of sorts in 1999 when Kevin married a Kensington woman from a wealthy Tory-supporting family. As his best man I read a fictitious telegram during my speech from the IRA, announcing that Kevin had been expelled from the organisation for his treachery. The Irish guests laughed; the English guests tittered nervously. In bad taste, perhaps, but it was also about me suggesting that in the post-IRA ceasefire and new peace process era of Anglo-Irish relations there could be a semi-humorous acknowledgement of the lifting of some of the weight of historic tensions and a swipe at particular toffs who were inclined to assume all the Irish were either latent or blatant terrorists.

Maybe I was also asserting that the Irish would not be playing second fiddle at an opulent Kensington wedding; after all, the pews in the church for the English guests were individually labelled with their names (and titles) while the pews for the Irish guests were sectioned off under one label: 'The Irish'. But it was also the case that we middle-class Dubliners, despite living 90 miles down the road, had always been a world removed from the Northern Irish Troubles and the IRA.

## Camaraderie of pain

I offer these personal memories and experiences to underline that Anglo-Irish and Irish North–South conundrums, ties, distances, absorptions, rejections and misunderstandings are not just matters of politics; they are economic, social, cultural, personal and profoundly emotional. Looming over them all is emigration and all the layers and entwinements it signifies. Over the last 30 years I have spent more time in London than Belfast and that is not unusual for my peers. Many of the emigrants of my generation, Kevin included, were graduates who thrived in London (Kevin is now chief film critic for *The Times*). Cheap fares, a large labour market and mostly ease of movement facilitated the continuance of a centuries-old tradition of exodus from an economically troubled Ireland. The historic Irish forays to Britain have been remarkable in their volume; over three million Irish-born people have emigrated to Britain since 1600; in the 20th century alone, 1.6 million Irish left for Britain, more than twice as many as went to North America. One in three people under the age of 30 in 1946 had left the Irish Republic by 1971 and during the 1980s emigration again became inevitable for many young Irish people with 70,600 emigrating in 1989 alone, the year I left school.

For something so pervasive and such an obvious safety valve, there was a reluctance to speak about it. In February 1946, Fine Gael leader Richard Mulcahy, then leading the opposition, was accused by the governing Fianna Fáil party of being ‘an emigrating agent or recruiting sergeant for another country’ because he had dared to describe some of the attractions England offered to Irish citizens. The use of such loaded and militaristic language harked back to the traditional nationalist response to emigration and was regarded by an *Irish Times* editorial writer as indicating there were members of the government ‘who resent any public mention of emigration. That attitude is both wrong and unhelpful. The labourers and the unemployed of this country know perfectly what Great Britain has to offer them and there is no point in any effort to conceal the facts.’ But the dislocation nonetheless caused pain; in the words of Irish writer and emigrant Donal Foley in the 1950s, many emigrants that decade had to cling to ‘the comradeship of adversity’.

An Irish psychiatric nurse working with some of the older Irish in Britain in 2004 commented ‘we’re finding deep wells of sadness in ordinary human lives’ and I would have seen some of those characters when Kevin lived for a time near Camden or when I was in the vicinity of Kilburn Road. I once spoke to Ultan Cowley, who interviewed Irish immigrants about the impact of alcoholism for his book *The Men Who Built Britain* (2001). One of them responded simply:

*I never felt that I fitted in. I took drink to make me fit in, to make me feel that I belonged. Who I belonged with was other Irish people living in the same shit-holes and there was a camaraderie of pain there, of knowing another man’s pain.*

But many others did well; the hierarchy of the London–Irish always created conflict and frustration, partly because the Irish were just as capable of exploiting and ill-treating their fellow natives as the English, and partly because of the belief that the term ‘Paddies’ was a liability. These fault lines were brought out strongly in Jimmy Murphy’s raw play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2000). Yet despite the title of Cowley’s book, the emigration was far from a male phenomenon; more women than men emigrated from Ireland in the late 1940s; one of them, Ethel, interviewed by Irish historian Mary Muldowney for her oral history *The Second World War and Irish Women* (2007), recalls

being proud of her service in a British uniform, and said of a later reunion with her former colleagues: 'I wasn't anybody's wife or anybody's daughter or sister. I was me and it was really marvellous. It's nice to be yourself once in a while'.

Fifty years later, my generation of Irish in London, highly educated, flourished in many areas, including in business and the media: I remember discovering an acronym about some of them: NIPPLES (new Irish professional people living in England), an illustration of a new chapter of the Irish emigrant story.

## Pawns in the game

Many also left Northern Ireland due to the Troubles or lack of opportunity; most went abroad, but some over the border in Ireland. Whatever the opportunities that mobility created, it did not solve problems of dislocation and lack of understanding or just plain prejudice. The Irish in England were still often treated as objects of suspicion, while for the Northern Irish in the Republic, there could be a curious muteness. Journalist Susan McKay, who grew up as a Protestant in Derry and came to Trinity College Dublin in 1975, referred to the 'strange silences' on the part of those who had lived through the early years of the Troubles and then moved to Dublin, and she felt that 'many in the Republic were oblivious'.

As a student of history I was certainly not oblivious; the themes of a divided Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations formed a core part of my historical education and continue to. Ronan Fanning in UCD ran a popular course on Anglo-Irish relations that I took in 1989–90 and it was a course with an edge due to the ongoing Troubles in Northern Ireland. From the 1970s, Fanning had skilfully mined the British and Irish archives to elaborate on this subject; his 2013 study, *Fatal Path*, made it clear, in looking at the attitude of Prime Ministers Herbert Asquith and David Lloyd George during the Irish revolutionary decade, that they were much more preoccupied with how the Irish question would impact on their own party and British politics than on Ireland, with Ireland as a pawn in the game of their career advancement. That theme was to endure and there were serious consequences for Ireland as a result.

Fanning was fond of reminding his students of the declaration of Desmond FitzGerald, the Southern Irish state's first Minister for External Affairs, that 'England is our most important external affair'.



Fanning added that for the first 20 years of the state's existence, 'England was not so much our most important external affair, as Ireland's only important external affair'. But the English influence was also relevant to the Southern Irish state's internal affairs, as evidenced by the extent to which, after the revolution, the new state mirrored so much of the ethos of British governance.

Fanning was also particularly interested in Ireland during the Second World War because:

*No state can claim to be truly independent unless it is in control of its own foreign policy. One measure of the depth of the British dimension is that, for Ireland, independence in this sense has meant independence of British foreign policy ... if Irish neutrality was in fact something of a sham, Irish foreign policy was never publicly perceived as subservient to British and that was what counted politically.*

When British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill insisted that the Irish had a genius for conspiracy rather than government he was engaging in wishful thinking. He had previously paid tribute to Irish valour, soldiery and antiquity: 'Ireland is not a daughter state. She is a parent nation. The Irish are an ancient race'. But there is also an abundance of correspondence and speeches that suggest, in historian Paul Bew's words in his book *Churchill and Ireland* (2016), 'the Irish were beyond his comprehension'. He read up on Irish history to a greater extent than most of his contemporaries, but he also saw the Irish as a people who needed to be 'managed' and dealt with 'according to the consciences and conviction of the English people'.

He more than met his match in facing the obduracy and firm dignity of Éamon de Valera in his quest to maximise Irish sovereignty. But neutrality was not just political, and this was something British politicians could not understand. The observations of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, who compiled wartime reports for the British government, are worth noting in relation to such misreckoning. In November 1940 she communicated the following:

*It may be felt in England that Éire is making a fetish of her neutrality. But this assertion of her neutrality is Éire's first free self-assertion: as such alone it would mean a great deal to her. Éire (and I think rightly) sees her neutrality as positive, not merely negative.*

## British attention

The failure to appreciate that and other priorities endured. During the mid-1980s, with the distressing backdrop of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Fanning noted wryly of the need to confront British–Irish realities: ‘Britain looms larger in the Irish consciousness than Ireland in the British; this has always been and will remain, among the most significant of these realities’. He also underlined ‘the perennial difficulty of commanding British attention’. European Economic Community (EEC) membership offered a certain relief. Back in the 1960s, Europhile Garret FitzGerald, a future taoiseach whose father fought in 1916, was adamant that joining the EEC, far from being a betrayal of the ‘ideals’ of 1916, was the logical culmination of the Irish struggle for independence, as it was about ‘rejoining once again the Europe from which for so many centuries she was cut off by the imposition of British rule’. In 1978, a senior Irish civil servant, Dermot Nally, privately informed Taoiseach Jack Lynch: ‘It would be no harm, if a suitable opportunity arises, to bring out once more again the fact that we are not an appendage of the British in the European communities’.

The following year there was reference in a file (released by the National Archive in London in 2009) to Queen Elizabeth’s ‘alleged dislike of the Irish’; an assertion made by a civil servant in the British Foreign Office looking at the possibility of a state visit to Britain by Irish President Patrick Hillery. Concern was expressed about diplomatic protocols and the activities of the IRA, but a longer report about the queen’s supposed personal attitudes was withheld from the released file. In any case, the British ambassador in Dublin at the time made it clear that the diplomatic difficulties involved in an invitation to Hillery would be too great to overcome, including unionist opposition to an Irish president, whose country formally claimed the North of Ireland in its constitution, being received by the queen. Two years later, President Hillery was refused permission by Charles Haughey’s Fianna Fáil government to attend the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Diana in July 1981 because of the turmoil in the North and the H-Block protests.

British ambassadors to Ireland during that era regularly sent their impressions of the Irish to ministers in London and could be insightful. In 1983 the ambassador suggested many in the Republic had little interest in seriously engaging with the idea of a united Ireland, but

that there was 'a raw nerve which never sleeps' in relation to British misgovernment, and events like Bloody Sunday in 1972, when 13 unarmed protestors were shot dead in Derry by British paratroopers. This was true; Bloody Sunday had created great anger in the Republic. On the evening of the slaughter in Derry, a distraught Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, rang his British counterpart, Edward Heath, Conservative Prime Minister since 1970. Lynch began by apologising for ringing at a late hour, 'but you will probably have heard the unfortunate news about Derry this afternoon'. Heath replied, 'It is very bad news, yes'. That was about all they agreed on.

The conversation was tense as an emotional Lynch grappled with the enormity of what had happened and the potential fall out. He told Heath:

*From reactions received around the country it looks as if a very serious point has now been reached and the situation could escalate beyond what any of us would anticipate at this stage. I am told that, according to reports I received and checked on the spot, the British troops reacted rather beyond what a disciplined force might be expected to, and, as you know, there were 13 killed and as many again injured.*

Heath was terse and defensive in reply:

*Well, now, as far as any accusations are concerned I obviously cannot accept that...I must also point out that this arose out of a march which was against the law. Now the people therefore who deliberately organised this march in circumstances which we all know in which the IRA were bound to intervene, carry a heavy responsibility for any damage which ensued.*

Yet in the same year, when asked by the British ambassador at that stage about how the Irish people felt about unification, Jack Lynch gave a response that, in the ambassador's words, 'amounted to saying that they could not care less'. Another British diplomat was also accurate in identifying in the aftermath of the republican hunger strikes in 1981, during which ten men died, 'the real fear of the Irish that violence could erupt here and destroy their institutions'. Stability of the Republic, it was fairly surmised, was more of a preoccupation than Irish unity.

But these files also reveal that British diplomats, especially in malevolent memoranda on Irish diplomats, could lapse into crude racial stereotypes that, it seemed, had not changed much since the *Punch* cartoons of the 19th century. One of the staff members of the British Embassy, referring to one of the most senior Irish diplomats in the Department of Foreign Affairs, complained about his anti-Britishness, which was apparent when he drank to excess: 'Many Irishmen become bellicose with drink and bellicosity here has only one direction'.

There was also the ongoing reality, suggested by Lord Salisbury, a senior Conservative in the early 1920s, that the average English voter had 'little interest in, and less understanding of, Irish affairs'. But the same was true of North–South relations. As veteran Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) politician Seamus Mallon has demonstrated in his recent memoir, *A Shared Home Place*, the SDLP by the late 1970s was 'depressed, even despairing', not helped by a 'Berlin wall of indifference between north and south'. How ironic it was that it was at Westminster that this Irish nationalist felt safest, 'even if I was not safe coming or going there'. In London, Mallon could talk freely with some unionists, partly because it appeared all Northern Irish politicians there were regarded as irritating Paddies and at the bottom of British politicians' list of priorities.

As a result, British interest in Ireland was never as deep as Irish politicians would have liked. William Shannon, US Ambassador to Ireland from 1977 to 1981, remarked acidly in 1986 that when in 1984 there was a debate in the House of Commons on the New Ireland Forum, which committed Irish nationalists to recognising the validity of both nationalist and unionist identities and the need for both to be reflected and protected in any future agreement, 'as usual most members of parliament chose a debate on Northern Ireland as the time to go to answer their mail or have a drink with a constituent'. The parliament 'dwindled to the usual hard core of Northern Ireland members and the few English members who interest themselves in the matter'.

## An era of agreement

The peace process was, therefore, partly about rectifying historic neglect but it was about much more, including legitimising new definitions of Irishness and British–Irish citizenship and emphasising the need for consent, power sharing, and the eradication of territorial claims. In 1998, at the time of the endorsement of the Belfast Agreement, journalist Fintan O'Toole observed that 'Northern Ireland is now a place that is arguably unique – a place that nobody claims and nobody owns, a place that is free to become whatever its people can agree that they want it to be.' There were obvious benefits to a previously strife-torn Northern Ireland, but also underpinning the changes was a significant thaw in Anglo-Irish tensions which was encapsulated in Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's words at the Palace of Westminster in 2007 when he addressed a joint session of parliament: 'We are now in an era of agreement – of new politics and new realities ... reconciliation has brought us closer'. The undisturbed playing of 'God Save the Queen' at the Ireland/England rugby match at Croke Park the same year prompted more assertions about the 'normalisation' of relations.

By the time of Queen Elizabeth's state visit to Ireland in 2011 the atmosphere had transformed. The defining image of the visit was powerful in its dignity and simplicity. Head bowed, Queen Elizabeth did in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin what she has done countless times in many countries at national shrines. But this was different; because of all that had happened in Anglo-Irish affairs in the 100 years since her grandfather, King George V, was in Dublin, and because she was there to pay respect to those who had died fighting against the British Empire, not to be received by loyal subjects as her grandfather was. That it happened was an indication of confidence on the British and Irish sides that both were ready for a gesture of this significance. It was moving, even emotional, and was inevitably and justifiably regarded as historic.

There was some far-fetched speculation about the possibility of an apology during the queen's visit, ignoring the fact that the monarchy does not any more intervene directly in politics; the contentious issue of articulating apologies for the sins of forefathers is for the politicians to deal with. What the queen did instead, when she spoke at Dublin Castle, was to maintain that it is 'impossible to ignore the weight of

history' and she acknowledged, 'With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all'. Much drafting must have gone in to that sentence.

While the rhetoric of reconciliation was full blown, there was also an assertion by President Mary McAleese of pride in 'Ireland's difficult journey to national sovereignty' and 'how we have used our independence to build a republic'. This was about diplomatic equality; that the queen was received in the historic centre of British rule in Ireland by the president of the Irish Republic underlined that emphatically.

This seemed to be the icing on the peace process cake on the back of a workable solution to the Anglo-Irish dilemma shared by London, Dublin and Belfast. Nearly 100 years previously, Irish republicans had emphasised the importance of the assistance and support of 'our gallant allies in Europe' when seeking to wrestle free from British colonisation. But such gallantry seemed open to question in 2011 given the financial crash and what the Irish Republic was being forced to do in accepting a bailout and making Irish private bank debts a public debt in the interests of the stability of the European project. In contrast, it was frequently asserted at the same time that Ireland had 'firm friends' in London.

The theme of shared or intertwined histories continued to be nurtured. In December 2013, Taoiseach Enda Kenny and British Prime Minister David Cameron spent a few hours together in the fields of Flanders in Belgium, visiting war graves, laying wreaths and paying homage to the dead. It was the first joint visit by a taoiseach and prime minister to honour the British and Irish men killed in that war as soldiers of the British Army. When he made the first official state visit of an Irish president to Britain in April 2014, President Michael D Higgins also took the opportunity to underline the historic ties that bind the two countries as a result of the war by invoking the memory of Tom Kettle, Irish nationalist politician and poet and one of the best-known Irish victims of the Battle of the Somme. Higgins suggested Kettle had died 'an Irish patriot, a British soldier and a true European'.

Such joint gestures and language marked a complete transformation in the attitude of the Irish state to the memory and legacy of the war. The same year, a report from a committee of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly asserted, 'relations between Britain and Ireland have never been stronger or more settled.'

## Commemorating the Easter Rising

I was back in London in early 2016 just before the centenary of the April 1916 rising to record a programme for BBC radio on a century of Anglo-Irish relations. It was an opportunity to underline the progress that had been made and therefore had an uplifting conclusion. But the same year, I was deeply sceptical of the idea of a royal presence in Dublin for the centenary.

During President Higgins's British visit Queen Elizabeth had announced in her speech at the State Banquet in Windsor Castle: 'My family and my government will stand alongside you, Mr President, and your ministers, throughout the anniversaries of the war and of the events that led to the creation of the Free State.' This followed the suggestion of Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore when speaking to the British-Irish Association in Cambridge in 2013 that 'if we are true to the lead' that President McAleese and the queen demonstrated during the state visit in 2011, 'then I would hope that we can host representatives of the royal family and the British government, along with the leaders of unionism, in Dublin in three years' time in remembering the Easter Rising'.

That would have been too much of a contrivance. The centenary of the 1916 rising offered an opportunity to emphasise the fundamental difference between a republic and a monarchy and why Irish republicans a century ago did what they did. Such a focus did not have to involve ignoring those who served in crown forces; we were long past the stage of just a single, heroic nationalist narrative of Irish history, and the state was fully committed to remembering the Irish who died in the First World War. But too much focus on what Britain and Ireland shared might have prevented an appreciation of what divided them, and it was correct to ensure reflection on those differences was not sidestepped or bullied out of existence.

None of these assertions are a criticism of the very welcome improvement in Anglo-Irish relations, the importance of the peace process and the numerous courageous compromises it has involved, but it was surely legitimate to suggest that a distinction be made between history and current politics in 2016, and that historical understanding would be best served by keeping the focus on the origins, development and nature of the Irish Republic rather than the peace process politics of every commemoration shared. Having royals at the table of all the Irish state's commemorations, I surmised,

could look like the state desired some kind of British approval, which smacked of a postcolonial inferiority complex.

I was also irritated in early 2017 on receiving a bizarre invitation from the British ambassador to Ireland to a reception in the British Embassy in Dublin ‘to congratulate those who delivered the remarkable 2016 commemorations’. I found that idea inappropriate and patronising, so I did not attend, and that is just as well, because it was subsequently reported that at the reception a letter was read out from the British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson.

In it, he praised the commemorations as they ‘struck exactly the right note’, with ‘the utmost tact and delicacy combined with a profound understanding of the past and its relationship with the present’ as well as ‘an abiding sense of reconciliation’. Johnson also wrote that it was ‘entirely fitting’ that President Michael D Higgins had attended events to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Indeed he did, but perhaps Johnson missed the speech by President Higgins in 2016 when he referred to the ‘violent, supremacist and militant imperialism’ of Britain a century ago.

Johnson had been centre stage during the Brexit referendum campaign and trumpeted all sorts of lazy noise about making Britain great again, ‘getting our country back’ and insisting ‘now is the time to believe in ourselves, and in what Britain can do, and to remember that we always do best when we believe in ourselves’. We, of all people, were always going to baulk at this, given the record of British imperialism in Ireland and other colonies. Britain’s romantic and selective historical view of itself was manifest in numerous other dishonest declarations during the Brexit campaign, including the Conservative MP Liam Fox’s risible assertion that ‘the UK is one of the few countries in the EU that does not need to bury its 20th-century history’. As Ireland commemorated 1916, a YouGov survey revealed that 43 per cent of the British public believed the empire was a ‘good thing’ with only 19 per cent seeing it as a ‘bad thing’; 44 per cent believed it is ‘something to be proud of’ with only 21 per cent seeing it as ‘something to regret’, a stark reminder of the need for a proper history of British imperialism to be taught in British schools.

With the Brexit referendum result in June 2016 the historian in me could only think of crisis, disunity and the extent to which Ireland and the border in Ireland had been relegated to not even an afterthought. As I have observed elsewhere big questions came tumbling fast: was



Irish unity now more likely? Was it the case that with Northern Ireland outside the EU, those northerners who wished to remain European citizens would be required to claim Irish citizenship, even if they saw themselves as British? The Belfast Agreement had included assertions about not changing the status of Northern Ireland without its peoples' consent and the right of the Northern Irish to be Irish or British citizens or both. While the issue of choice about status was framed in relation to the options of remaining part of the UK or Irish unification, the Brexit vote nonetheless raised legitimate, related concerns about self-determination and allegiance. The negotiated settlement of the late 1990s had done much to underwrite self-determination regarding status and citizenship in Northern Ireland as well as the idea of the British government as an 'honest broker' in dealing with the North. The prospect of those factors being diluted or undermined obviously had serious implications.

### **'Holding our breath again'**

Over the course of the next three years there was a return of Anglo-Irish distrust, coarse rhetoric and anger, undoing much of the progress that had been made. My most recent visit to London, in September 2019, to do research in the Parliamentary Archives in Westminster, coincided with the judgment of the Supreme Court that Prime Minister Johnson had acted unlawfully in proroguing parliament. I was conscious of an irony; the archive includes the papers of some Tories who genuinely believed a century ago that the Irish were not fit for self-government. But the archive also offers a reminder of how seriously that generation of politicians took the business of politics and statecraft and roaming through the intensity of the personal and political correspondence of two political giants like Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George underlines that emphatically. I was looking at how the two men responded to the bloody birth of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the parallel strife in the new Northern Ireland; the internal and Anglo-Irish communications were suffused with a sense that the stakes were enormously high for both countries.

What is striking is the volume of correspondence from politicians and civil servants on both sides as they sought to calm troubled waters, pre-empt potential flash points and manage expectations and bottom lines. In a letter to Lloyd George in September 1922 Churchill pointed out that it was not enough for politicians to just 'muddle through...

I am very much against a policy of scuttle'. Churchill also wrote to WT Cosgrave as head of the Free State government the same month to remind him 'personal relationships between high authorities are very important' and essential for smooth Anglo-Irish relations. Boris Johnson should spend a few weeks in this archive.

Whatever the big constitutional questions, it was the people living in the vicinity of the border in Ireland – a border that had become almost invisible over the previous 20 years owing to the Belfast Agreement, free trade and North–South co-operation in a whole host of areas – who had to endure the most uncertainty after the Brexit referendum. Belfast-born actor Stephen Rea narrated a short film by Clare Dwyer Hogg in September 2018, *Brexit: A cry from the Irish Border*, in which he spoke of the border progress of the previous 20 years:

*Roads that start here and end there, somehow allowing a wound to heal ... a gentleness in the mundanity ... daily travel across political lines; work, school, grocery shops, back again ... there, but not there; a line of imagination that needed imagination to make it exist while unseen ... we live here and we're holding our breath again.*

Watching the British political meltdown of recent times has been fascinating and frightening in equal measure because of the enormity of what is at stake for Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations. Fifty years on from the outbreak of the Troubles, there seemed to be a reversal of British–Irish roles, with more coherence on the Irish side and a reliance on rallying cries and emotion rather than intelligent strategy on the British side. The context in 2019, of course, is very different as the Irish dilemma has become an EU one; in that sense the Irish question has been internationalised in a way that was not achieved in 1969. But there are still relevant lessons today from the critical phase of Anglo-Irish relations that began 50 years ago.

Solutions cannot be formulated without direct and meaningful channels of communication, which require willingness on two sides, some degree of flexibility and soft diplomacy. Despite the contemporary stridency and the wilful ignorance displayed by some senior British figures in relation to the border in Ireland, Anglo-Irish relations need to be repaired and managed carefully to try and dilute the current-day version of what Hugh McCann, the Secretary of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, described to the British ambassador in 1969 as the 'momentum of disorder'.



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**Watching the British political meltdown of recent times has been fascinating and frightening in equal measure because of the enormity of what is at stake for Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations.**



**Grace Dyas**, an acclaimed artist, activist, writer, theatre director and actor, makes theatre, film and large-scale participation projects because she wants to change the world. And to change the world you must change power. In 2017, she shared her experience of abuse of power in the theatre world in Ireland, contributing to the global #MeToo movement. Her post to her blog opened the gate for others who followed from across Irish public life. This became an ongoing cause. Grace explored the legacies in her play *We Don't Know What's Buried Here*.

Grace creates durational art campaigns to coincide with important social moments. For the centenary of 1916, Grace co-authored *IT'S NOT OVER* with Barry O'Connor, a campaign to expose the reality that the conflict in the North of Ireland is unresolved. For the abortion referendum, she toured across Ireland to small towns and cities with *NOT AT HOME* – performing an archive, co-authored with Emma Fraser, of women's experiences of travelling for abortion.

# Remaining still and staying present

by Grace Dyas

I'm writing from Inisheer, the smallest of the Aran Islands. The day after I was asked to write this essay, I moved here from Dublin, to start a new life with my husband, Martin, after ten years of incredibly busy theatre-making and activism. I don't know what I'm going to do next.

I do some late night YouTubing and learn I am in liminal space: something has ended, but the next thing hasn't started yet.

Inisheer is an island because it's surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. The beauty is breathtaking. Martin says that living on the island is like waking up every day doing the same play but in a different set.

There's a population of about 250 islanders who live here full-time. There's one shop, three pubs and a small café. I'm intrigued by the life of the islanders. In my first few weeks here, while hanging around the one shop on the island (trying to make friends), one woman tells me that she has been on the island every Christmas for her whole life.

On the day before Christmas Eve, she loves watching the last ferry as it leaves the pier. She knows that everyone who is on the island is staying here and she knows everyone here. There's a clear border, a clear break between her and the rest of the world.

During the summer, every day the island fills up with waves of visitors who come here for the day from Galway and Clare. In the evenings they fan out and leave, like waves crashing off the rocks on the shore, they make their imprint into the 'set' of the island for that day, and then they are gone. In winter, the boats don't sail as often and there are no visitors. I ask another woman if it feels lonely in the winter, she says no, she loves it when the visitors stop coming because you know that if you go to something, it will only be islanders there: you know everyone.

On this island, we speak Irish. We're far enough from the mainland that the language has survived here, insulated by rock and seaweed. I learned the language in a school in Dublin's inner city. I'm complimented several times by the islanders and told that I have good Irish. I am grateful for knowing the language and not having it be a wall between us.

While we are washing dishes, Martin turns to me and says: 'It's nice to be known, isn't it?' Everyone says hello to each other as they pass each other on the beautiful roads lined with dry stone walls.

On my way to the island on the bus through Connemara, I was listening to a podcast. Russell Brand was interviewing Brene Brown. According to Brene's research, the people with the most compassion are those with the strongest boundaries.

## Wedding portents

I got married on this island. On the morning of our wedding, we heard the news that Britain had voted to leave the EU. For most of the guests, it felt like terrible shocking news, the combination of Brexit and the 2016 US election was spelling out overtones of 'the end of the world', and we were getting married, starting our lives, looking out at the sea in the same direction, towards our future. And the world as we knew it was changing exponentially.

I wondered, in keeping with Brene's research, would having stronger boundaries make the UK more compassionate to outsiders?

My aunt stuck out among the wedding guests. A UK resident, she had voted to leave the EU. She wanted better hospitals and schools. She felt the UK needed to do a better job looking after its own citizens. She believed being a member of the EU was preventing them from doing that. She had moved to the UK herself when she was 17, she had seen the signs on the doors of pubs that said 'No blacks, no dogs, no Irish' but now, 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, and married to an Englishman, living in one of the Shires, with a good British job, she felt the UK was her home, and she didn't want to let anyone else in. They were full. She was closing her boundaries. She was voting to leave. For her, the results boded well for her future. It was in keeping with the wedding festivities. My uncle, a Marxist, who had lived in London all of his adult life, also voted to leave the EU. For him it was about shaking up the establishment, and using the power of his vote to exercise his dissent and vote against the government.

To most of us, it felt like a shocking result that signified the rise of the right, that the world was moving backwards, not forwards.

I remember that the topic was carefully avoided. It's often thought wiser not to get into politics at an Irish wedding ... on an island, especially about England. England is like the ex-husband or father of all the guests, who did really well in the divorce and got the six counties. Except what Ireland doesn't really know a lot of the time, is that now they don't really want them either. Talk of England, at a celebration with drink taken, can send a shiver through the party. Those wounds are still raw.

For the last three and a half years, I've watched as Brexit deals were delayed and debated and kicked down the road again. Deadlines loomed in red and white letters on the news. The world is ending, but we don't know what will happen next. The UK is stuck in liminal space, and Ireland is the reason it can't move on. They can't find a solution to the problem of the Irish border. The only option – Theresa May tells us – is to leave and not leave at the same time, in the hopes that the solution will be invented in the future; the solution being to create a border that is there and not there at the same time. Trump is elected and the world feels more and more surreal.

## Performing Brexit

I didn't really get 'into' Brexit. I treated it like people in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s who used to change the channel when the North came on the television. It felt laborious, never ending and painful. I don't engage, and I don't feel compassion. But for the purposes of this essay it felt like the only thing to write about. I start to try to turn towards it and understand it.

I go for walks on the island and I let the last ten years catch up on me. I'm processing, I'm healing – I am in liminal space. I pick blackberries. I witness incredible sunsets. I watch crows on the road eat horse shite. I listen to Boris Johnson on Sky News. Why is it so hard to move on?

One day, I was finding it difficult to write this essay, and Martin offered a view, as we sat on the rocks on the boundary of this island with the sea, that Brexit is easier to perform than to write about.

In a way, it is nothing but a performance. To me it feels like Britain's membership of the EU is a fake problem, invented to distract the people from the real problem, their suffering under the weight of late capitalism. People want jobs and houses. They are scared that the stranger on the tube wants to blow them up. They are looking for a way to feel safe. For people in the UK, Brexit became the answer.

Brexit is the fake solution to the fake problem. It doesn't exist with any material substance that can truly be written about, only performed. It is a fiction. The emperor has no clothes, and the little boy who points it out is met with 'oh yeah, so what? We know he has no clothes. We don't care, he's entertaining us. Why aren't you in school little boy?'

I reflect on my last ten years working in theatre; I was fixated on the truth as were many other makers of my generation. I felt like the urgent problems of the world could only be confronted if we sat together and looked at the truth. I didn't want to provide any respite. I didn't want to show any fiction. As the truth floated from the screen of the television news and documentaries and onto the stages, the news became a Shakespeare play, where news itself ceased to exist, and the commentators focused on what they thought could or might happen next. When an event actually took place, it was barely dissected, just reported in big letters, a clip that was played over and over, and then back to guessing, surmising, imagining what could happen next. The world was in liminal space, caught in past and future thinking, with no capacity to regard the present.

Why is performance stronger than ideology? The viewers lost patience with analysis and everything became about entertainment, chaos, and the rhetoric of the desire to keep order, to feel safe. To reclaim our borders became the only soothing antidote.

It occurred to me, that in terms of this performance of political language, the partition of Ireland in and of itself was the 'backstop' of its day.

After Ireland's War of Independence, partition was put to Michael Collins and the delegation as a way to deal with the loyal unionist population in the North, a way of Ireland being in England and Ireland at the same time. But, like the sinister motivations behind Brexit and in the world of late capitalism, it was probably just a way of keeping the ports and the money in the North.



Collins and the delegation didn't have the military strength to resist Lloyd George's threat of war 'most bloody and awful', so he tried to sell the treaty to the rest of the teachtaí dálás of the first Dáil as a 'stepping stone' (read 1922 for 'backstop') towards a united Ireland. It's what we're going to do until we can think of something else; which is in short, how nearly 100 years later, Theresa May tried to sell the backstop to her parliament. It's only temporary, we'll come back to it later, we just need to get this done.

Brexit, like the partition of Ireland, is a trilemma. None of the solutions work for everyone, because we can't yet conceive of how to be in more than one place at the same time.

For the 2016 commemorations, I made a piece of work with Barry O'Connor that looked at the conflict between Ireland and England on this island. Inspired by the words of an IRA volunteer we interviewed, we named the project *IT'S NOT OVER*. The conflict in the North of Ireland had been largely sold to us in the South as resolved. It felt odd to me, to commemorate the Easter Rising of 1916 when the ideals that had been set forth in the Proclamation hadn't happened yet.

My generation had been sold the narrative that the conflict was well and truly over, and it wasn't to be discussed. We learned for our exams that the North was now at peace, that everyone was happy with the situation and that it was time to move on. We played 'IRA' in the schoolyard: I don't remember the rules but I do remember that rather than betray my teammates, and reveal my letter (I think?) I risked having a stick of dog shit smeared on my face and I gained the respect of the boys in my class. To us, the IRA was an abstract idea, happening somewhere very far away. It was as historic and ancient as Cowboys and Indians, so it could become a schoolyard game.

## Real war

In 2015, I was visiting a group of teenagers in Downpatrick, just outside Belfast. They would be coming as a class to see my play *HEROIN*. I asked them why they thought people took drugs. A young man said: 'Because they feel abandoned'. I inquire further: 'Abandoned by their fathers? By the state?' 'No,' he said, 'abandoned by you, in the South'. The teacher intervened: 'She doesn't want to hear about that, she's from the South, it's boring to them'. 'No,' I said, 'I do want to hear about it'. I listened as the young people told me about

an articulated truck that stood perched from a height in their town watching them. About family members who had died as a result of the same conflict, only weeks ago, that I had believed had ended 20 years ago.

For them, this wasn't a war game. It was still a real war and I had abandoned them. More people have died by suicide in the North of Ireland in the years since the Good Friday Agreement than died in the conflict.

In the course of making *IT'S NOT OVER*, I found myself sitting across the table from men and women who had devoted their lives to the cause of Irish freedom. I felt it was an incredible honour to meet these people and hear their perspectives which are so often dehumanised.

One volunteer told me a story about finding himself talking to his cellmate in prison; they had fought together for years and considered each other close friends. They were talking about what the new Ireland would be like. He was shocked that his friend had completely different views to him – he wasn't a feminist, he wasn't a socialist and he described a very different Ireland than the one this volunteer was fighting for. He explained that very often that happened. The priority was to get the English out, and we'll deal with all that later. It's only temporary, we'll come back to it later, we just need to get this done.

From being with these volunteers and trying to really listen and hear them, I realised that this conflict wasn't about borders or identities. It was about rights and having their basic needs met, the right to a house, the right to a good job.

## **NOT AT HOME**

In 2017, I made a piece with Emma Fraser, called *NOT AT HOME*. In the lead up to the referendum in the Irish Free State on abortion rights, we wanted to give voice to the women who had travelled to access safe abortion services in another country. Very quickly, we discovered that in this narrative, for women in these crisis situations, England became the hero and Ireland became the aggressor.

I flew to John Lennon International Airport for the day with Frank Sweeney, the sound designer on the project. We asked taxi drivers if we could interview them about bringing women back and forward

to the clinic for the price of a fare. I'm struck by one man, who talks about walking a very young Irish girl to the door of the clinic, to shield her from protestors. He said that it wasn't right, that she should be with her own father. The compassion he felt for these women was palpable.

I wonder if he had very strong boundaries?

Since the Good Friday Agreement, the border between North and South has been invisible, but it's felt. Since the referendum to repeal the eighth amendment in the South passed, women on one side can access healthcare at home, and on the other side they have to travel. My Ireland, encouraged by these social victories, the repeal referendum and the marriage equality movement, now felt that change was possible. 'The North is Next' was now the new slogan. People began to go back to what they had abandoned, and the language and feeling of solidarity rang true.

## Suspended spaces

It's very hard to leave a relationship, even one that isn't working for you. There are times when I catch myself on the island, and realise that in a way I haven't left Dublin, I'm still there in my head. I watch Leo Varadkar say of Brexit: 'There's no such thing as a clean break'. Nothing about any of this feels clean. I understand why Johnson wants to 'get it done'. In some ways the UK hasn't even reached the liminal space yet, because nothing has happened, they are in a suspended space.

For many of the volunteers I met while making *IT'S NOT OVER*, they lived in that suspended space for over 30 years. One man spent four years going to the same pub every day waiting for a phone call. Another told me that after 30 years of fighting, they had gained 'not one blade of grass' on either side of the Irish border. Not one blade of grass. The staticness of that image, compared with the chaos of the rest of his stories of the conflict, moved me. It can feel like everything is happening, when in some ways nothing is happening. Everything is moving and it's impossible to keep up, but really; we're stuck, not one blade of grass.

The more I think, the more I walk, the more sunsets I see, I think a lot about Ireland and England. There are times when it's painful, times when it's frustrating and more and more I realise I am seeing it

differently than I used to. There is a negative excitement in conflict that the viewer can get caught up in. But without that negative excitement, I start to see that same desire in the people who voted to leave the EU in Britain, as I heard about the lives of Catholics in the North that set off the conflict. Jobs, housing, safety.

The Catholics were being denied these things by an apartheid unionist state. The working classes in Britain were being denied these things too, by years of austerity.

Nineteen million people in Britain live in poverty, according to a UN report. Poor, young working-class men from UK cities were sent to Ireland, killing other poor, young working-class people from cities in the North. The system we are living under means we are perpetually stuck, not being able to get what we need. We never hear the word 'capitalism' in vox pops, but more and more to me, it seems like that's the root cause.

### Another backstop?

James Connolly said: 'What does it matter what flag flies over the GPO if people don't have enough to eat?' Most of my work has been about Ireland and what Irishness has meant. I've looked at polemic subjects like Brexit, and been asked to say what the work meant – is it either or? Are you doing a positive play or a negative play? Are you pro-IRA or anti-IRA? Are you pro-choice or pro-life? I've tried to avoid getting into those spaces, to be both and neither at the same time, to give audiences a perspective outside of politics and journalism where the true complexity of the situation can really be seen.

In 2018 I wrote a play called *We Don't Know What's Buried Here* where two women, magdalene ghosts, tried to unearth the secrets of Ireland, but the problem was they kept burying everything they found. This is how I see Ireland, a constant cyclical liminal landscape, perpetually between 'then' and 'next' with the border cutting off the circulation, finding it impossible to move on, looking for the next oppressor, the British, the Church, the next right-wing government.

In 2019 I wrote a play called *It was easy (in the end)* based on a concept by myself and Doireann Coady, inspired by the Zizek quote, 'It's easier to imagine the end of the world, than the end of capitalism'. I toyed around with the idea that capitalism would end on a certain date. It was 26 April. You may have noticed that it hasn't ended. I thought it would be fun to try and imagine it.

Is the world in a post-capitalist state of liminality? We know that capitalism has failed us, it has become what was and now we are waiting for the next. I crave resolution. But capitalism creates the problems it proposes to solve, so nothing gets resolved, everything is kicked down the road, to resurface again, be debated again, but not really talked about and never solved. Is capitalism now a 'backstop', something we'll do until we can think of something else?

I stand on this island, looking at the sea and thinking about the two islands of Ireland and Britain. I try to think about their relationship and I find it hard to see them as nationalities any more, now I just see people. People who aren't satisfied and who don't have enough to live, with no solution in sight, just reams of back-up plans. Do we want to stay entwined? It's a good distraction from our common problem – we don't have a system of living on this earth that supports our survival.

Liminal space is the time between what was and what's next – it is where all transformation happens.

## Imagining compassion

I imagine what the world might look like if we replaced capitalism with compassionism. An 'ism' is where that thing becomes the basis on which all decisions are made. So for the person suffering from alcoholism, all their decisions become about alcohol. Under capitalism, all decisions become about money, capital and greed. What if all our decisions were based on compassion? How strong would our boundaries need to be to enable us to travel towards that space? What would it take for that transformation to happen?

We are stuck.

It gets colder on the island, and it's hard to really be. We have days where we feel like we are going mad. I struggle to be on the island. I'm here in the now and in Dublin in the past in my head at the same time.

My brain feels mushy the more of Brexit I watch, and I think about the deadline of 31 October, when Johnson says the UK will leave the EU. It will be Halloween. In the Celtic calendar it's the end of the year and the beginning of the next one. Martin and I commit that we will stay here until then.



“

**She asked us to repeat  
a mantra: ‘The stone  
has survived everything  
by remaining still and  
staying present’. In the  
midst of all this chaos,  
that’s all we can do.**

What will happen between now and then?

I am pretty certain that the sun will rise and set. Inisheer will still be an island. Tomorrow I will submit this essay, and there will be notes, and back and forth. Less and less tourists will visit the colder it gets. We can never predict when the 'next' will start.

Things will get worse, things will get better, but all the while transformation will be happening, and we won't know what it is, it will be imperceptible to us, as it's happening. Water will flow all around us. We won't have what we need. We'll be waiting for the next thing. The sky will always be there. There'll be land under our feet. There'll be a deadline looming.

We'll watch journalists guess at what the news is going to be. Sea levels will rise, temperature heats up, we'll see maps of how the boundaries of the world are changing forever, everything we once knew is falling into the sea.

## Water will flow

There will be love, and I will hold Martin's hand. A couple of times a week we'll walk to the back of the island. When we get there we'll stop at a holy well, I'll pour the water on my lapsed Catholic forehead. We'll look out at the horizon. We'll gather stones and place them on top of each other; ancient Celtic prayers. Things will change. I will change. My creativity always leads me to truth and love. I try to believe that it will all work out for the best. I look at the news. I try to stay present and not change the channel.

We arrive at the back of the island again, and see that our prayers have survived the recent storm, precarious stones lying together, one on top of the other. They haven't collapsed under the force of the winds' change.

When I was in my early 20s I first discovered meditation on YouTube. One of the online instructors recommended getting a stone to hold in your hand during the sitting. She asked us to repeat a mantra: 'The stone has survived everything by remaining still and staying present'. In the midst of all this chaos, that's all we can do.



**Shannon Sickels (Yee)** is an award-winning playwright and producer whose perspectives as an immigrant, ethnic minority, queer artist–parent with a disability living in Northern Ireland are deeply embedded in her work.

Her *Reassembled, Slightly Askew* uses binaural sonic arts technology to immerse audiences in her autobiographical experience of nearly dying and subsequent acquired brain injury. *Reassembled ...* has received numerous accolades and has toured internationally since 2015. It has been used in medical training, most recently in New York City's Mount Sinai Rehabilitation Hospital.

Shannon was a 2017/18 Arts Council Northern Ireland Major Individual Artist Awardee for her project, *Starf\*cker*, exploring popular culture, social media and video projection mapping to tell a story of what makes our stars fall. Her recently published short story, *The Brightening Up Side* (Belfast Stories, Doire Press, 2019), tackles racism and new motherhood.

Shannon is also an LGBTQ+ activist; in 2005 she and her partner, who are currently taking legal action to bring same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland, were the first public civil partnership in the UK.



# Tectonic plates and pressure cookers

by Shannon Sickels (Yee)

I arrived on the island of Ireland on 4 July 2004. My jet-lagged self fell asleep on the drive up from Dublin Airport, but when I woke up, I knew we had crossed into the North. The road signs had changed font and tarmac texture had changed colour. The air felt different, heavier.

This length of time in Belfast is perhaps my fault. My partner, Gráinne, gave me the choice to decide if we would live in Dublin, Galway or Belfast, appreciating the massive culture shock that moving from New York City was. I chose Belfast. I felt an exciting potential, bubbling under the surface – I don't think it was simply the summer's sectarian tensions – there was community, kindness, goodwill, strength and a dedication to creating a better future.

I am now here in Northern Ireland longer than I have lived anywhere else; growing up in a US military family, that isn't difficult. In the process of resisting full cultural naturalisation, I still say car 'trunk' for 'boot', I refuse to call anything 'wee', but I've had to surrender to 'trousers' instead of 'pants' as I'm now a parent. I find myself explaining Northern Ireland's complications when I'm outside it: 'No, you can't use euros in Northern Ireland, you use sterling ... but you can't use Northern Irish sterling in England ...' I confess, there are times when I bite my lip and inch away from large groups of American tourists in search of their Irish heritage.

'Outside' is exactly what I am when I'm here. I am an immigrant, biracial, ethnic minority, queer artist-parent with a disability. Negotiating these multiple minority experiences while living in Northern Ireland is deeply embedded in my work as an artist. Depending on where I am, who I'm with, how much I want to delve into things, my internal borders and identities shift and reshuffle.

'What brought you here?' is a popular question from taxi drivers.  
'It must've been love. A man.'

*It was for love (but also, it's none of your business).*

'Fate,' I usually answer. 'Belfast has been good to me.' I find a neutral place that gives a polite amount of information away, and shift.

Often I'm struck with the out-of-body experience of, 'What am I doing here?' on this island within an island, an island squared, existing between Ireland, England, Europe and the United States. I can feel the tectonic plates of change here, shifting between stagnation and progress, grating against each other, creating a pressure cooker in Northern Ireland.

Previously, I was teaching English and history in New York City public schools. As an educator, I've always been passionate about the importance of storytelling in child development and healthy identity formation, particularly for those whose experiences are hidden or silenced from the mainstream, deliberately or not. I believe child development and language development are journeys of self-determination, expressions of freedom<sup>1</sup> to be supported and facilitated by a nurturing education system and teaching practices that utilise students' diversity as strengths. This is particularly relevant in storytelling. 'Children, like adults, use narrative to shape and reshape their lives ... stories, then, have interrelated evaluative and social functions.'<sup>2</sup> We use language, and story, to articulate who we are to ourselves and each other.

This applies to my work writing theatre. Increasingly, the theatre I'm excited about creating is that which breaks down artistic borders. By putting audiences at the centre of the experience to actively construct a narrative,<sup>3</sup> versus passively digesting information, theatre makes use of our neurological hardwiring to create meaning and make sense of the world around us, and our place in it. Identity is part of that relationship-making process, the relationship we have to ourselves and each other.

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1. Paulo Freire wrote about education as a practice of freedom in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968).

2. Dyson and Genishi (*The Need for Story*, 1994 National Council of Teachers of English).

3. Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed' practice of the 1970s is heavily influenced by Freire, applying Freire's theories to theatre as means of promoting social and political change.

Being half-Chinese and half-Caucasian from the United States, I'm used to the 'hyphenated identity', the challenge of identity in a third space, identity by default – where you're 'both' yet 'neither', you're 'other' and as defined in contrast to others. This 'third identity' seems prevalent in Northern Ireland; I've heard from friends here that they don't feel Irish – after all, you can't even get RTÉ on television up North – or English, despite how they are labelled when they go travelling.

In artist conferences and events, I often hear colleagues say, 'I want to be known as an artist first, not a queer artist, female artist, artist of colour, an artist with a disability.' I disagree. All those aspects are part of who I am, they inform the way I perceive the world and the way the world receives me. These aspects and the way they intersect form my voice. I am proud of every one, but the act of nurturing each as a minority in the minority has made me weary. I am weary of and livid about the stories of the many communities I'm a part of being carelessly sidelined, purposely omitted, or insidiously silenced.

My journey has been one of self-expression through writing and creating theatre.

To me, the personal is inherently political. My arts are a form of my activism, the largest aspect to date being LGBTQ rights.

## Same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland was the last place in the UK to decriminalise homosexuality in 1983, after an individual, Jeffrey Dudgeon, took a case to the European Court of Human Rights. Years later in 2004, despite relentless hard work by activists, the civil partnership legislation only came into Northern Ireland because the Northern Irish government had collapsed and was under direct rule from Westminster. If Northern Ireland had been run by its local politicians at the time, the legislation would have been blocked, as evidenced by the lengthy track record of abuse of the Petition of Concern, a mechanism designed from the Good Friday Agreement to protect, not persecute, minorities. Paperwork processing times were shorter in Northern Ireland than in England, landing Northern Ireland in the history books. Gráinne and I had the UK's first public civil partnership in Belfast, followed by Chris and Henry Flanagan-Kane. Our supporters outnumbered the haters, literally, who chanted 'Sodomy Is Sin' on our way in, sang church hymns during our vows and blocked our black taxi from leaving the grounds of Belfast City Hall afterwards.

Consequently, the last place in the UK to decriminalise homosexuality became the first in the UK to have a public civil partnership and currently is the last in both the UK and island of Ireland to allow same-sex civil marriage. Over a decade passed, with no further progress in Northern Ireland. Stagnation.

Shift.

In 2015, the grassroots marriage equality campaign in the South came to glorious fruition. I will always remember the great diaspora of Irish young people arriving at the airport to vote, to create change, to know that they could do so, to actively shift the narrative they wanted to be a part of for their future. I remember being at Dublin Castle for the results of the referendum, standing next to a straight couple, baby-wearing their daughter all day. 'We don't know what's ahead for her in life,' they explained to Gráinne and I. '[By voting 'yes'] we are in a position to make her life better. How could we not?' I remember the following morning, when Gráinne and I held hands on our walk into Dublin city centre, that we felt braver, stronger, justified, unabashedly visible in a way we hadn't realised we weren't. I remember returning to Belfast and slumping back into invisibility out of cautious habit.

Shift.

Around the time of civil partnership, there were rumblings of a need for a queer arts festival in Northern Ireland, to showcase the talent here and broaden the inspiration of what queer artistic expression here could be. I was one of a handful of queer artists who co-founded OUTBURST in 2007, a ten-day multidisciplinary arts festival which has grown from programming local, UK and Irish queer artists, to expanding its reach and legacy beyond those borders, building connection and community by proclaiming LGBTQ stories through artistic self-expression. Validating and celebrating LGBTQ stories is a matter of life or death for many; as of 2016, more people have taken their own lives than the number of people killed during the Troubles, and 35 per cent of the LGBT community self-harm, compared to 13 per cent in the rest of the UK.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Murray, N (2018) 'Suicide rates in Northern Ireland are rising—it's easy to see why, yet the government is doing little about it.' *The Independent*.

## Building community in the Troubles

One of the story-based projects I premiered was *Trouble*, an interview-based theatrical archive, about growing up LGBT during the Troubles. It was produced by Theatreofpluck, the only publicly funded LGBTQ theatre company in Northern Ireland, and performed by over 40 of the province's well-known actors.

These were stories I had always wanted to hear since arriving, and felt even more passionate about capturing since the civil partnership legislation had passed. I was uncertain about my place in running the project; being American, I had already received my share of 'Who does this American think she is?' backlash doing a few community development projects. Then I was told I was actually well placed to run the interviews because the very outsider status I was concerned about was a strength; people would open up to me because I didn't have an unconscious bias from growing up here.

I learned that the LGBT scene thrived during the Troubles; when nobody dared to venture into the city centre, 'the gays did'. Nobody cared what side you were from, everyone was invested in a good night out. Every single person I interviewed of the 46 said the Troubles and violence and bigotry stayed out of the gay scene. These stories of camaraderie and community are the antidote to the dividing and conquering narrative too often passed down through history, that the media perpetuate. So I wanted to archive these stories for not just the LGBTQ community, but for the historic record, to combat the limited narrative about the Troubles with true-life testimonies of LGBTQ people who have navigated more than 40 years of living, loving and building community in Northern Ireland.

An education researcher, Jerome Bruner, states, 'a life is not "how it was" but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold.'<sup>5</sup> The stories shared with me from the LGBTQ interviewees were universal – we all are on individual journeys discovering who we are, who we love, and why we matter in this world, regardless of our sexual orientation. A version of *Trouble* was exhibited in Belfast City Hall, during December 2015, the ten-year anniversary of the civil partnership legislation, broadening the visible history of the Troubles to new audiences.

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5. Bruner, J (1994) 'Life as Narrative', in Dyson and Genishi (ed.) *The Need for Story*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

While Gráinne and I weren't part of LGBTQ history during the Troubles, we joined the narrative after being the first public UK civil partnership in 2005. We didn't want the media attention or personal risk of making history; we did want to do our part to address the gender imbalance in LGBT visibility, and to give homage to the tireless work of activists who came before us to make that moment possible. On a personal level, we especially wanted the rights and recognition of 'next of kin' status if anything tragic happened to either one of us. Little did we think that only three years later, we would have to use it.

### *Reassembled, Slightly Askew*

Writing was always a way to make sense of myself, the world around me and my place in the world. When I suddenly woke up in the acute neurosurgical ward of the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast in 2008, paralysed down the left side of my body, with a section of my skull beneath the skin of my abdomen, I knew I would eventually write and create art about it.

*Reassembled, Slightly Askew* is an autobiographical, audio-based artwork about my experience of falling critically ill with a rare brain infection and my journey of rehabilitation with an acquired brain injury. Audience members experience *Reassembled* ... individually, listening to the audio via headphones, while lying on a hospital bed. The audio technology makes the sound three-dimensional, causing listeners to feel they are inside my head, viscerally experiencing my descent into coma, brain surgeries, early days in the hospital, and re-integration into the world with a hidden disability. It was a new kind of storytelling, never done before about this topic in this way, that places the listener safely in the first-person perspective.

Theatre director Anna Newell, sonic artist Paul Stapleton, dramaturg Hanna Slattné, choreographer Stevie Prickett and I set about a five-year creative 'stumbling forward with confidence' (as Anna accurately put it), to try and integrate sonic arts technology, sound, drama and movement to capture my experience. It was the first piece I made after having my disability, and about my disability. During the five years it took to make, the artistic team and I found new ways of communicating across artistic disciplines. I ran focus groups with the general public, arts and medical professionals, and collaborated with

my medical team, all the while securing funding and support from the Wellcome Trust, the University of Atypical, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast, and the Metropolitan Arts Centre. Since its world premiere at the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival at the MAC (2015) in Belfast, *Reassembled ...* has toured across Northern Ireland, England, Canada, to Hong Kong, to Dublin, to London in arts festivals and as medical training for doctors, surgeons and healthcare professionals to improve their practice and empathy for their patients.

While *Reassembled ...* takes audiences through the first 18 months of my being 'disassembled, and reassembled, slightly askew', audience feedback has been that *Reassembled ...* is also a love story. Gráinne and I were catapulted into a world where she witnessed my potential death, became my carer, and we adapted to my newly acquired brain injury world together. It is a story of terror, discovery, humour, but above all, hope. I didn't set out to make a piece about a queer couple facing trauma. It was a facet of the emotional journey of the story. Audiences left *Reassembled ...* with not only greater empathy for hidden disabilities, but also for LGBTQ relationships.

The working title of *Reassembled ...* was Recovery. As I progressed along that journey of shifting my identity and learning how to manage my new 'askew'-ed brain, the word 'recovery' implied a medical model of deficit – something is broken, it can be fixed and return to the way it was. I will never be back to the way I was; at best I have learned how to manage my disability. Despite my fear of never being able to work, or even walk, again, I began the challenging and humbling journey of identifying as an artist with a disability.

Shift.

My disability became a strength when I was commissioned to work with Replay Productions under the brilliant vision of Anna Newell, who is revolutionising access to theatre for the most overlooked – babies and children or young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states children have a right to engage in play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts.<sup>6</sup> This 'right to play' is often denied to children with additional needs, where physical interactions, usually

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6. <http://ipaworld.org/childs-right-to-play/article-31/summary-gc17/>

personal care, are primarily transactional, and the PMLD child/young person has things done to them rather than with them. As part of the artistic team, my sensory sensitivities from my acquired brain injury helped set the pacing and craft the story of *BLISS*, an immersive theatrical production that came into special schools in Northern Ireland, bringing PMLD students into the dome-performance space in individual boats and immersed in beauty, through song, visuals, textures, and play. The actors tailored their interactions with each young person, deferring to them as audience members at the centre of their own theatrical experiences as they actively constructed them.

### *So I Can Breathe This Air*

As an ethnic minority writer, I've always been passionate about broadening the stories told in Northern Ireland theatre, but there are limited opportunities to do so, particularly as Terra Nova Productions, Northern Ireland's only professional intercultural theatre production company, has had its funding cut.

The opportunity to highlight stories from fellow immigrants came about with *So I Can Breathe This Air*, an outreach initiative and audio-based theatre project which shared various stories of LGBTQ ethnic minority individuals who live in Northern Ireland. It was run by Dean Lee of the Rainbow Project's Gay Ethnic Group (GEG), a Northern-Irish born Chinese licensed counsellor, in partnership with Theatreofpluck. GEG provided year-round social activities to build community for LGBTQ individuals who also were from ethnic minorities, many of whom, but not all, were seeking asylum in Northern Ireland because of their sexuality.

GEG members participated in a range of arts-based workshops, went to see theatre, and had the option to be interviewed anonymously by me about their experiences as a 'multiple minority' living in Northern Ireland. Many of them wanted to share their stories, but didn't; they didn't want to revisit the traumatic experience of being smuggled from their home country, or jeopardise the delicate stability they were trying to create in Northern Ireland against the barriers of being denied proper work, housing, and safety in political status.

*So I Can ...* blurred the borders of race, sexuality, nationality and gender through an escorted soundwalk that layered the audio-based narrative with the physical surroundings of Belfast city centre to create additional meaning to the intimate stories from the interviews.



The project was showcased in Belfast, Newry and Derry Pride in 2018, and in the Eastside Arts Festival, but also in academic research and conferences within ‘Sounding Conflict: From Resistance to Reconciliation’ carried out by Dr Stefanie Lehner (Queen’s University Belfast) to better understand how sound, music, and storytelling practices can contribute to conflict transformation.

## The importance of story

We are neurobiologically hard-wired to create meaning from what we see around us, and through story, our brains have the ability to mirror each other in basic acts of empathy and understanding. 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the start of the Troubles, and these stories continue to dominate, as people grieve, purge and try to heal. The Northern Ireland ‘Peace and Reconciliation’ agenda is fundamentally to promote compassion and understanding for difference and foster strength in diversity, rather than the sectarian binaries that are presented in the media and hardened by Northern Irish politicians. Contemporary Northern Ireland feels like it is viciously struggling to construct its identity, one that is defined by itself, rather than by default and by that which it is not.

In *Hatch*, a short comedy I wrote in 2007, a group of post-conflict chickens who have gone from battery cages to free-range living negotiate the mental effects of the removal of physical borders. At one point, they argue about whether the distant landscape contains a mountain or a molehill. Different realities may be perceived, but they are realities nonetheless. Today in Belfast, the new purple Glider bus connects working-class Lenadoon in west Belfast to trendy Ballyhackamore in east Belfast: how many people from those neighbourhoods (or north Belfast’s Ardoyne or south Belfast’s the Village) truly feel comfortable socialising anywhere in Belfast, year-round? From what I can see, the borders remain, internalised and self-censoring, but can be changed by our children and young people as they are creating our future through their daily construction of their lived stories.

Shift.

As the world appears to crumble around us with democratic processes corrupted, media impartiality and credibility weakened, rainforests on fire and the worst of humanity making nightly headlines from war, violence, and torture, it is time for a drastic reset.

How often do we consume instead of critically think, bully instead of constructively critique? How can we consciously co-exist, collaborate, and improve? We have the DNA of pack animals – we rely on each other, whether we like it or not. We are afraid of each other at first, and must wrangle with the power of the group, with all its cruelty and kindness. The arts enable us to collectively celebrate, grieve, purge terror, and combat the isolation that allows us to be divided, told a different narrative, and be conquered.

Fundamentally, we are emotional beings and we are the same – vulnerable and resilient, caring and selfish, terrified and courageous, arrogant and unconfident, thoughtful and thoughtless.

Artistic experiences provide us with the grounding journeys that remind us of this. Through artistic expression, we can connect to our shared hope, our terror, our fear and a gathering of our courage. The arts and the function they serve for storytelling and self-expression are essential to our adult lives, but especially to our children's as their identity formation is more nascent, delicate and vulnerable. We must diversify the stories that are told and develop the diverse voices out there, for as theatre director Anne Bogart points out, 'those who can formulate the stories that make the world understandable will redefine the experience of those who live in it.' To make art, to tell our stories, and to hear each other's, is a radical and essential act, for us alone, for us together as a society, and for our future so that we may survive the shifting tectonic plates and change the course of events exacerbating the global pressure cooker which is about to explode.



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**Through artistic expression, we can connect to our shared hope, our terror, our fear and a gathering of our courage.**



**Conall McDevitt** was born in Dublin in the early 1970s but spent most of his youth in Malaga, Spain. He has been politically active most of his adult life.

Conall served as junior adviser in the Irish government during the Fianna Fáil–Labour coalition in the early 1990s and also worked in the European Parliament. He is a former vice-president of the youth wing of the Party of European Socialists. He was the Social Democratic and Labour Party's director of communications during the Good Friday Agreement negotiations and subsequent referendum and election, later serving as a special adviser in the first power-sharing government in Northern Ireland.

He served as Member of the Legislative Assembly for South Belfast from 2010 to 2013, during which time he led the campaign for a public inquiry into historic institutional abuse, chaired the assembly's All Party Group on International Development and served as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Today he is chief executive of Hume Brophy, a global communications and government relations firm with offices in Dublin, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Brussels, Hong Kong, Singapore and New York. He still runs, just not as quickly, and is most happy at sea, literally!



**The Irish are the blacks of Europe, Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland, and the North Siders are the blacks of Dublin ... so say it loud – I'm black and I'm proud!**

Jimmy Rabbitte, *The Commitments*, 1991

# My choice and your choice

by Conall McDevitt

John Hume said that the real borders are in people's minds and not on maps. He was right of course, and the past 20 years on the island of Ireland have been a journey into those borders – a slow process of dismantling the conscious and unconscious prejudices, barriers, walls and hates that divide people.

It's been a hell of a journey too. Through the contested street politics of Drumcree, the conflagration of flags and the killing field of Omagh. The long and winding road of devolution, suspension, devolution and more suspension of Northern Ireland's shared institutions of government trundles on.

The journey has also been a tremendously social one, from the protests of Free Presbyterians at Belfast's magnificent Pride marches, to referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion changing discourse and attitudes, not just in the Republic of Ireland but across our island. The taoiseach can now parade in Belfast Pride as a celebrity and a hero not to some nationalist cause but to progress, openness, liberal attitudes and a 21st-century island whose people increasingly share more attitudes and opinions than those that divide them.

I am writing these words in my house in Belfast. That I am here is not an accident of my birth nor a consequence of my upbringing. It is my choice.

I was born in Dublin, on the north side in 1972, into a family with some northern history but with no immediate northern relatives. Aged ten, we moved to Malaga in the south of Spain: a port city which at the time was just emerging from the long shadow of the Franco dictatorship. I remember seeing the posters go up that spring for the candidates in the second free election and I recall well a young Felipe González being elected premier. It was also the year of the World Cup in Spain

and just down the road in a stadium I would have the privilege of playing in myself years later, Gerry Armstrong and the rest of the Northern Ireland football team were to make their own little bit of history.

My dad had no interest in fraternising with their supporters that summer; they represented a 'Protestant North'. They were the embodiment of 'a sectarian statelet, failed and doomed to fail'. To be honest at the time none of this had any impact on me. I was more concerned with keeping my head above water in my new Spanish school as no one spoke English and I didn't speak Spanish.

I did love football though and became good enough to roll out in the stadium. I was known as 'Patrick' because, if you're a kid from Andalusia and truth be told, a skinny rake from some northern place – Conall just led to endless barbs about being Conan the Barbarian.

By the age of 15, five years into my Spanish life, I considered myself Andalusian, and as Spanish as any of my teammates or my class. That's not to say I wasn't still Irish, coming from a home with very little means and never having the money to go home to Ireland to visit, my relationship with the land of my birth was different.

It was, I guess, very similar to the relationship many immigrants would've felt in the 19th and early 20th century as they left for far away lands, never to return. And that is what happens, or at least what happened to me in my formative years. The next time I would set sail for Ireland I would be a man.

## Multiple identities

You never realise these things at the time, but the fact is my life has been an experiment in the great richness of multiple identities. I am a Dubliner even though I have lived less than a quarter of my life in Dublin. I am an Andalusian even though I've only lived about a quarter of my life in Andalusia. I am a northerner, even though it's been around a third of my life. And these are just my regional identities. My Irishness is an accident of birth but also a source of inspiration, of pride and a purpose. My Spanishness has a huge impact on my culture and my taste in music that many around me consider eclectic. On the upside, it has impacted my ability to cook in which I have considerably more followers.

These levels of identity can be confusing at times. I am so proud that my beloved Dublin Gaelic Athletic Association team has now won five All Irelands in a row, yet I have never followed an Ulster county, but have a much softer spot for Ulster rugby than I do for Leinster.

I am, by conviction and belief, a constitutional nationalist in the Irish sense of the word, a person who believes that the people of Ireland should be united. However, that conviction is rooted in the right of the people of Northern Ireland to self-determination – that right, enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement, that is known as the principle of consent.

The Spanish part of me is a product of my education as a member of the group which in Spain is known as the ‘transition generation’: those who were a product of the 1978 constitution. As recent events in Catalonia remind us, the question of self-determination for regional people in Spain is seen differently to the way we see it here. I would be lying to say that the Spanish me is not a unionist, in that my preference would be to see the Spain I know and love under the 1978 constitution continue to exist and to prosper, preferably under a socialist government of course! That said, I struggle with my Irish self that believes the people of Catalonia should have the right to self-determination.

How do these contradictions reconcile? Am I just messed up? When Theresa May, a woman I have grown to respect for her integrity and courage in the face of great adversity and considerable sexism, said that global citizens were just citizens of nowhere, I wondered if she meant people like me? I don’t agree with the statement. But it is an important thought-provoking question. Can you have multiple identities? And if you do, how do you reconcile them? Do they even need to be reconciled?

I think this question would’ve been much more difficult to answer 30 or 40 years ago. But today, things are just different. The fact is identity is chosen, and in a well-worn phrase ‘fluid’ – and that’s not just a reference to gender.

To take one more very different example that matters most to me. In 2010 my daughter was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. She was six and we decided to go public to raise awareness of this terrible chronic disease for which there is no cure and which strikes without warning

and with no known cause. That happenstance brought me into a community of mums and dads who shared the same challenges. You would never believe me if I told you some of the people who came into my office to share their experience, asking me to give voice to their kid's needs. They came from every strata of our society, from all communities and none and several had their own 'past' to contend with. It was a great honour to campaign for them, always, and I am very proud of all the little victories we achieved. I am also bound forever to the sufferers of muscular dystrophy for whom I did my best. I was humbled to be trusted by the survivors of a history of institutional abuse to speak for them and lead their campaign for justice in the Northern Ireland Assembly. They had their family and personal identities robbed and their humanity abused. They lost faith and trust but in the end were at least given access to justice.

## Tokyo and New York

I took a trip to Japan this summer with my eldest son: a man himself now and a student of the Japanese tradition of manga and anime. We were on a pilgrimage into the heart of Tokyo's electric town and the great manga studios of Kyoto and Osaka. It was a real adventure for me and deeply enriching. I know we were so privileged to be able to make the trip and I wish every young animation and art student on this island could do the same.

Because to understand the culture of anime and manga is to understand one of the most important sub-cultures in British and Irish youth culture today. Comic-cons, cosplaying, dungeons and dragons, gaming and general 'nerdness' is a very big part of our kids' lives. They are able to be multiple things. Their identities – who they believe themselves to be – are not binary or linear but fluid. That same man considers himself a northerner and an Irish person, but there is a bit of him that may as well be culturally Japanese.

I was sitting in a beautiful office on 345 Park Avenue last week talking with Ireland's consul general in New York. We were chatting about the diaspora, about the challenges that he faces representing Ireland in one of the greatest, most cosmopolitan, cultural and commercial capitals of the world. New York is the home of the world's largest Saint Patrick's Day parade, a very traditional expression of a very traditional view of Irishness. It's green, it's folksy, it's Catholic, it's Ireland.



## Hercules Mulligan and the diaspora

But in New York you will find many other expressions of identity that are equally rooted in our island. Captains of industry carry surnames of planters, farmers and refugees, 20th-century economic migrants, and a few who go back so far and whose wealth has been accumulated over so many generations that they undoubtedly have a bitter legacy of colonial slavery too.

I am very interested in the concept of diaspora because I was for an important part of my life an immigrant, and I believe passionately in the importance of celebrating, connecting, understanding and being influenced by the diaspora when you are from a place that is much bigger abroad than it is at home. (I understand there are over 70 million members of the Irish diaspora, North and South, around the world and to fewer than seven million of us on this island.)

My job also takes me to Asia a lot. It's interesting to walk down the streets of Hong Kong and Singapore that remind you of home. Connaught Road, Killiney Road, Dublin Street, Harcourt Place are all direct reminders of the reach of the British Empire and the obvious involvement of Irish people in its expansion – Irish people who, of course, would have been British people, there on behalf of empire and serving their nation, however they may have defined it. Differently, I suspect to how we define nations on these islands today. Do they feel less Irish to me because of that? Well, no. No more than do the Irish names on the tombstones of the war dead on the western front of France and Belgium feel less Irish. No more than do those in the republican plots in Dublin or Belfast.

If you fancy a fun exploration of this notion and a great night out, save up and get some tickets to the musical *Hamilton*. The character Hercules Mulligan is a reminder of the Irish in empire (subversive or not) and *Hamilton* tells the story of this essay ten times better than I ever will.

## Side stories

There is another side story to that one too. I served in the Northern Ireland Assembly with Sinn Féin MLAs whose grandfathers fought in the First World War for the British Army. My great grandfather was a tailor in Belfast at the turn of the 20th century, and when James Connolly came to the city to organise trade unions he stayed in my grandparents' house. When the First World War broke out, my great grandfather Danny McDevitt provided refuge in the attic of his tailor's shop in Rosemary Street to Englishmen who were dodging the conscription that all young males in Great Britain faced at that time. It is a curious example of how identity changes and evolves, but is essentially plural and complicated.

I have cousins who grew up in England in working-class communities who went on to join the British Army and serve in Northern Ireland. In fact one of them was posted in Lisburn when I was the Social and Democratic Labour Party's director of communications during the talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. It took, pardon the pun, a minor military operation to organise for me to bring him up one day to meet some of our negotiators and tour the building. This was a big deal for him. He was meeting the people who represented him whilst still serving loyally and with distinction in the British Army. He and my other cousins are Irish (as well as British) and I would advise you never to challenge their right to be so and certainly never to their face. Yet to the modern republican movement at that time they could never be Irish because Irish people couldn't possibly be in the British Army.

The First World War was a long time ago. But I acknowledge that it is very important to very, very many people in Northern Ireland and indeed across Ireland. A wider discussion is probably best left to the historians for now.

And then there's the future. I used to love talking with the A-level Politics students who'd troop into a briefing room in Parliament Buildings, Stormont, a class at a time, to meet some 'MLAs'. I rarely refused the opportunity to engage with them no matter where they came from and because of our largely segregated education system in Northern Ireland, they were coming in from Catholic, non-Catholic (generally overwhelmingly Protestant) and integrated schools. They were further divided into secondary and grammar students – a peculiar Northern Irish way of ensuring class division on top of sectarian division in second level schools.

I always had three questions for them (don't worry these came after them giving me a thorough cross-examination ...).

**Question 1** – Who are you? Like Irish, British, Northern, what?

**Question 2** – What does this place mean to you?

**Question 3** – What are your hopes?

Question 1 would get a series of answers. The overwhelming majority would answer according to their community background, 'I'm Northern and Irish', 'I'm Northern and British' or 'I'm just Northern'. There were of course some who would say 'I'm Irish' or 'I'm British', but they were the few and most often the very few.

To Question 2 the answer was invariably 'this is our parliament', you make the laws that govern us and you fund our schools, hospitals, etc.

To Question 3 it was always the same. We want to see this region succeed. We want to be part of its success and we want you to make sure that happens.

## Their right

Non-binary, that's a word we hear lots these days. Whether it's a popstar or other prominent public figure using their position to help explain that not everyone identifies or feels the same way we do, it is really important to my mind. I'm a white middle-aged straight man. I wish I understood what someone meant when they wanted to be described as 'they'. The honest answer is I don't, but I'm entirely comfortable acknowledging their right to feel this way and supporting their demands to be acknowledged in this manner.

It was Darwin who taught us that evolution is in fact adaptation. As a species we continue to evolve and adapt. Our thinking, our creativity, our imagination or identity itself is constantly evolving and adapting.

I have never bought into the idea that humanity should be dictated to by any fundamental rules written millennia ago. But I wholly embrace the idea that we should be guided by principles that have stood the test of time and by great philosophy, however ancient it may be. There is a great difference between blind obedience and enlightened evolution.

Our great societies of the West were built on beliefs that were often considered heretical when they were first conceived. In the past 50 years we have achieved more scientific innovation and progress than at any point in our great journey as a species. And every year we more than double the amount of information that is processed. I am desperately optimistic about humanity and about the ability of our species to reach a higher form of reasoning and to evolve to a state where conflict, war and famine are consigned to the history books.

## The message of populism

I do not see this in any way as a utopian vision. It is, though, an outright rejection of Hobbesian philosophy and of the populism that in recent years seems to have taken hold in the so-called democratic world.

That populism is a message sent to our better selves. It is, I believe, telling us that if we keep looking over our shoulders expecting some elder to address the challenge that is in fact in front of us, then we will retreat into an introverted atavistic mindset. It is a symptom of our inability to think about the challenges that face us on a community level, regionally, nationally, as a continent and globally. It chooses to disconnect all these things, and to reduce our politics to one which refuses to recognise that all of our societies are increasingly diverse. It rejects the idea that all of us embody many different expressions of identity. It hankers after the era of empires, and confuses nations and states. It breeds on war and division between people. It does all this when in fact the greatest challenges we know and face as a civilisation are shared by all of us, irrespective of how rich or poor we are, and wherever in the world we may live.

The great achievement of the nation states of the 20th century was to create a civilisation which now needs to solve its problems as an international community of interest. Identity matters when you're trying to fix problems that are bigger than nations. I think our kids understand this. They are globalised. They mobilise and come onto the streets to condemn our generation for its inability to tackle the climate crisis. They are inspiring not just because of their energy and their dignity and good humour, but in their challenge to us to look beyond the narrow prism of our community, our regional, national or continental self-interest, and to think about our duty to everyone on the planet.

If we are willing to accept that sexual identity is non-binary, or a little fluid, then surely we should be open minded enough to understand that the same applies to one's national or cultural identity.

## Religion

I am not an active participant in any of the great faiths of the world. That may be the Spaniard of the post-Franco transition generation in me, a socialist internationalist who feels more comfortable with humanist values. But I am still deeply, culturally Catholic. How could I not be? I grew up in Andalusia and Ireland!

The Andalusian in me is particularly interested in religion's impact on our cultural identity. This region of southern Spain was for 700 years home to some of the greatest cities in the Moorish world. It was to Granada that Christopher Columbus returned to present his credentials to the Catholic Queen Isabel after his first voyage to what he believed was 'the Indies'. You cannot sit in that throne room of the Alhambra in Granada, where the Khalifa presided over a great period of enlightenment and tolerance, and not appreciate that it's all a bit complicated. I still rage at people who see Islam as a backward, reactionary, dangerous religion. No such religion could ever have built the mosque in Córdoba, the Alhambra in Granada or the golden tower of Seville. But that's not my point on this particular occasion. My point is that if you think Spanish Catholic identity and culture is in fact just Spanish, or just Catholic, then you're kidding yourself. The origin of the word *Olé* is in fact *à-la* – 'God', the Christian and also the Muslim one.

## Then there's Britain ...

This meandering is all quite important in my little head because it's just what's there. It's what has shaped me. It's my identity or dare I say my identities. I haven't spoken much about Britain yet and that is because with the exception of a short period in 1990 and my life since leaving the assembly, I've never really spent a lot of time in Great Britain.

I'd like to think I know London well and for the record, I love it. It's probably the greatest city in the world. But because my youth was spent in Spain my first team is Real Madrid and then Manchester United. My first pop idols are El Último De La Fila and not the Smiths.

That makes me a little different from most of my friends and colleagues, be they Northern or Southern Irish, who grew up influenced by British sports and popular culture.

But please don't think that because Britain has had no active role in my life there is not a great influence. I am a Dubliner you will remember: we are the children of the second city of the empire. We are the capital of the 'Pale'. We would be kidding ourselves to think that our city's identity has not got a deep, deep Anglicised tinge. In fact, it is a simple truth that Irish people, of whatever tradition, know the British much better than they know us. We know this because we are still carrying a little bit of them in all of us, a privilege they cannot claim back.

As I write in the dying days of October 2019 with a Brexit crisis now in its third year, life, economic development, and our political discourse is still paralysed by the decision taken in the referendum of June 2016. You could be forgiven for feeling that we are indeed at the end of an era. During the May and June 2016 referendum campaign, where was the meaningful debate about Ireland? And subsequently, despite appeals from Tony Blair and John Major and Gordon Brown – all former British prime ministers – there was no interest in seriously debating the impact Brexit might have on the island of Ireland. Yet Ireland, and a border that hardly exists, has become the red line in the entire sorry saga. The casual return of a border in the minds of those in England and in Ireland tells us a lot about identity and conflict on these islands in the 21st century.

The border in people's minds that John Hume talked about so often was done away with in May 1998. By removing it, the people of these islands chose to embark on an even more difficult journey: to tackle prejudice and hatred head on, and give enough time for grievances to emerge, to be discussed and ultimately to heal. As we see in modern-day Spain, you can pass a 'law of forgetting' but people do not forget the past – they live it every day and Ireland's past has also to be faced and acknowledged, however painful that is.

For Northern Ireland to succeed we must embrace and build on our diversity for its own sake. For Ireland to succeed, Northern Ireland must be a success and for the UK to succeed Ireland must too (North and South). To do all that we must feel comfortable in ourselves, we must embrace others and accept that we all have more than one identity. As my anime-mad son would say, 'that's cool'.



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**The casual return of a border in the minds of those in England and in Ireland tells us a lot about identity and conflict on these islands in the 21st century.**



**Ian Marshall** was the first Ulster Unionist elected to serve as an Independent senator in Seanad Éireann in April 2018 following a nomination by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. He works as a business development manager at the Institute for Global Food Security, Queen's University Belfast, established to address the key international challenges of the future of the world's food systems.

Ian joined the university following two terms as vice-president and a term as president of the Ulster Farmers' Union. Married with three children, he was born on a mixed family farm near Markethill in County Armagh, Northern Ireland. He went to Greenmount Agricultural College to further his education with a view to returning to the farm to expand and grow the family business. Over 20 years later he returned to academia to complete a Master's in Agri-Food Business Development at Ulster University and Babson College in Boston, USA.

He has also served on the Agri-Food Strategy Board for Northern Ireland and an extensive list of boards and committees, and is a professional member of the Institute of Agricultural Management (P Agric).



# Relationships, realities and representation

by Ian Marshall

In 1979, I went from a small 'country' primary school in a local town to a Protestant grammar school in Armagh. For the first time I came into contact with people from the 'other side'. The Troubles were at their height with atrocities and horrors filtering into our lives from news reports on a daily basis. The country appeared trapped in a cycle of murder and mayhem, aggression and counterattack, confrontation and confusion about what should happen to bring it all to an end.

For me, this move from a close-knit community to the realities of a city education was shocking from the outset, first and foremost because of the tension between the school students travelling back and forth on a daily basis by bus. Children who'd grown up knowing nothing else but division and separation, whose years of primary education consisted of schooling with 'their own side', playing sport with 'their own side', attending youth groups with 'their own side', and a social life built around the safety blanket of their own community – trust had disintegrated to such a level. Mistrust was very much the order of the day.

Born in the late 1960s at the beginning of the period referred to as 'the Troubles', it was these tensions between young people from different backgrounds and religions that made them the people they were. This was the mould we fitted into. Not the multicultural mix of race and identity we know today, but the very basic binary identity of green or orange, Protestant or Catholic, 'fenian' or 'prod'. It was this that defined you.

Flags were despised and revered depending upon your identity and culture, and colours were tremendously important. The primary colours – not ones any artist would identify – were in two distinct camps of 'red, white and blue' and 'green, white and gold' – or 'green, white and orange' as even gold and orange had a contentious meaning in the six counties.

Nor in these early years of education in Armagh did the contention stop there. It went on to include many forms of symbolism and identity and language. The Irish language, in the opinion of many in the unionist community, was a statement of 'Irishness' and 'anti-Britishness' used to antagonise, as the 'wee prods' couldn't understand it!

Any inadvertent reference to the 'North of Ireland' (a nationalist/republican term) or alternatively 'Northern Ireland' (a unionist/loyalist term), or to Derry or Londonderry in conversation would define you as from, or empathising with, one side or the other. The list went on and on.

This was a time when I recall as an 11-year-old farm boy impatient to get home, waiting and waiting until the first strike of the bell signalled my release from school. If I ran really fast I could just make it to the first 15.30 bus home, returning me to a life I believed at the time infinitely more important than studying. However, if I missed this first bus I definitely didn't want to catch the second, because the second bus was what we referred to with disrespect and disdain as the 'fenian bus'.

On it, children from the other, Catholic schools in Armagh had already boarded and didn't relish children from the local Protestant schools entering their space. When it did happen, on a daily basis, the vitriol and hatred manifested itself from both sides of the bus, with each side displaying their mistrust of the other in verbal abuse, spitting, the throwing of inanimate objects and a general display of mob dissent. This was far from the normal respectful conduct all had been taught at home, and all knew that it was an unacceptable standard of behaviour, irrespective of your background or religion.

I refer to this experience because this was normality, and was regarded as normal even though it was far from such. This was a set of circumstances we'd all come to know as acceptable, even though by anyone's standards it was a completely unacceptable situation: a deep-rooted scorn for each other that would ultimately embed prejudices and fears that would take generations to subside.

This was at a time when the local area was gripped with horrors and atrocities such as the Kingsmill massacre and the murder of the Reavey brothers at Whitecross, set against a backdrop of murder and death on a daily basis and a relentless cycle of ethnic cleansing along the border, destroying trust and co-operation between communities

for decades. Friendships and partnerships built up over lifetimes would be torn apart and not rekindled for generations and, in some circumstances, never rebuilt.

A damaged society would emerge built on tribal lines where survival and self-preservation were the order of the day, with communities divided along religious and cultural lines even though most participants, especially in rural areas, were actually wholly dependent on working with each other in order to flourish from day to day.

### Far-off friendships

Amidst all the darkness, one recollection that continually re-emerges is that most people were fundamentally good. Most wanted to get on with their lives and businesses and just hoped and prayed (because it was a deeply religious society at this time) that the violence and mayhem didn't come to their household and that some divine force would ensure that their family remained safe through it all.

In fact, few were preoccupied with Irish unity or the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and many were quite happy to befriend and socialise with those from the other community when they were taken out of the goldfish bowl of Northern Ireland and its divisive politics.

I recollect a summer holiday as a youthful 18-year-old, heading off to Spain with my mates. A small tight-knit group of friends, all unionists and Protestants who played sport together and socialised together and who never fraternised with Catholics, getting away to the sun and a break from home. We became best friends with a group of young people from west Belfast; a group of Irish nationalists and republicans.

For one week we had a fantastic experience, sharing our culture and identity in craic and conversation, partying and revelling, demonstrating all the things we had in common and never highlighting anything that made us different let alone diametrically opposed. In a place far removed from home, we could agree and enjoy each other's company, accepting our differences and not feeling threatened by them.

Yet, even with the strong bonds we developed and the good times we'd shared, we all knew that on our return to Belfast, as we went our separate ways at Aldergrove airport, we would or could never meet again. This was how it was.

## Unprecedented change

But change happens. Change is a bit like the seasons, creeping up without anyone realising. Even though expected, no one notices it happen. With the passage of time, for a variety of reasons, Northern Ireland witnessed unprecedented change. In a conflict that neither republicans nor the British could ever win and a struggle that would take in excess of 3,700 lives, we eventually witnessed the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, or Belfast Agreement, in 1998. The very naming of course had significance. But it was an agreement based on the founding principles of mutual respect and parity of esteem for all, as important today as it was at the time of signing.

Undoubtedly this was a monumental moment in history; one where, even though all did not agree, the vast majority of the elected representatives and leaders signed up to a commitment to move forward, one where peace and prosperity would be the priority. Future generations would never have to endure the anger, violence and hatred all had experienced for the previous 30 years.

This change would deliver relative peace in the following years and even become something that many took for granted, thinking naively that once secured it could never be lost.

However, this newfound stability and security would still leave a number of questions unanswered, a number of concerns we need to address about human rights, identity and culture and the issue of Irish unity and the constitution. Following the Brexit referendum of 2016 raising the question of the UK's relationship to the EU, the issue of a hugely important symbiotic relationship would rise to the fore. This would challenge Northern Ireland's position in the EU and the UK, and our relationship with Ireland, our nearest neighbours and arguably our most important trading partners and allies.

This conversation has now raised questions about both British and Irish identities that are so complicated that they cannot be answered in any simplistic or straightforward fashion. No binary choice between being either British or Irish in Northern Ireland, or even the option where citizens could define themselves as both, could possibly deal with the complex tapestry of history and heritage. But many people do indeed define themselves as both British and Irish, a description difficult to understand outside the six counties, including for many citizens in the Republic of Ireland.

Former Ireland and British and Irish Lions rugby international player Hugo MacNeill fondly recalls a conversation between teammates Brian O'Driscoll and Rory Best, where O'Driscoll couldn't understand Best's position. Best, as a northern Protestant and a British citizen proudly captaining Ireland in the Aviva Stadium in Dublin, would stand to attention to '*Amhrán na bhFiann*' ('The Soldier's Song') and 'Ireland's Call', whilst retaining an immense pride in his British identity. This was a significant contrast to O'Driscoll's much more clear-cut identity as a Leinster-born Irishman. Yet this position of not being conflicted by a dual identity, being comfortable with both, is one I wholeheartedly share along with many colleagues and friends, and indeed a significant majority of the people in Northern Ireland from both nationalist and unionist backgrounds.

Everyone has a unique identity in Northern Ireland based on many factors. Even if a majority currently prefers to remain in this arrangement, the changing demographics and changing political environment have raised some interesting questions about the future relationship between Britain and Ireland, North and South, and our constitutional position within the UK.

But this relationship has also always presented challenges, and often overlooked opportunities: two nations linked by a small channel of water in a push–pull, love–hate relationship, with cultures and traditions shared and boundless synergies, whilst having tensions and strains synonymous with the healthy competition and rivalry of siblings trying to outdo each other, a relationship evolved over generations with two nation states trading and working with each other, people travelling, mixing, marrying and forming partnerships, businesses dealing with each other co-operating and collaborating together; all made much more complicated, admittedly, by the legacy of the Potato Famine, the Great War, the Easter Rising, the civil war, partition and independence, the civil rights movement, and the Troubles.

Tensions persist today without any real justification from people who invariably watch British television, support British football teams, shop in British shops, go to British universities and have many friends and relations living and working in Britain – yet still appear to harbour resentful feelings towards it. Sentiments defended by the reference to 800 years of oppression and occupation are in my opinion more about the absorption and adoption of ideas from parents and grandparents, not grounded in any contemporary rationale or logic regarding two nations which have much more uniting them than dividing them.

Unquestionably, Brexit is the ‘hand grenade’ now thrown into this mix to raise serious issues and challenge conventional thinking. Some commentators regard the elevation of the Irish unity question as opportunistic and divisive, whilst others see it as merely bringing the unresolved issue of partition back onto the table. Most would agree that partition never delivered what was promised or became what was intended. It was a ‘convenient’ model dealing with short-term concerns whilst failing to take into account major shortcomings in relationships built up over centuries, one that would be bound to compromise arrangements in the future.

The creation of a northern Protestant state for Protestants and a southern Catholic state for Catholics was always destined to present as many challenges as opportunities both on the island of Ireland and between the two islands of Great Britain and Ireland. Interestingly, for those who consider that partition was flawed and was a failed policy founded on the forced separation of land and people, logic dictates that any repetition of such a model founded on the forced unification of land and people would prove equally flawed. Any belief in the value or benefits of a border poll in advance of a deep and meaningful public debate is premature and potentially divisive.

It would be of paramount importance to clearly define beforehand what any such proposal would involve. What would health and education, social services, government look like? Would people be richer or poorer? The lack of any modelling or studies to establish impact and outcomes, and the failure of protagonists to consider the pros and cons of any such venture, can only result in a poorly informed electorate unable to consider such radical changes.

In addition, there would be a substantial risk that we would repeat the mistakes of the past. Many in Northern Ireland will feel that ideology and aspirations are fine, but these only become meaningful and tangible when everyone grasps more fully the implications of any divergence from the status quo.

## United people

Ultimately, the immediate goal must be to have a ‘united people’ across both jurisdictions; an all-island ecology and economy where North and South complement each other, where seamless, frictionless trade exists North and South, East and West, both on the island and between the two islands of Britain and Ireland. This unity of people has the advantage of reducing tensions and differences and makes any changes or amendments to borders less threatening to anyone’s culture or identity in the truly multicultural society we witness evolving in Ireland, irrespective of geography. The Irish unity conversation has been re-energised, especially as a consequence of Brexit, but shouldn’t be conflated or confused with the conversation about whether the UK decides to leave the EU. Although Brexit and Irish unity are not mutually exclusive, they are separate topics and one should not define the other.

Some have stated that ‘the train of Irish unity has left the station’. However, this train will only remain on the tracks if the destination remains open and if the option remains to decide the endpoint as we learn more on the journey. The union (Great Britain and Northern Ireland) or unity (Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland) must both be choices until such time as consideration can be given to all the advantages and disadvantages of either. Why would any unionist board such a train if the destination was only unity? Undoubtedly and understandably unionists would endeavour to build more track or derail this train!

Any Irish unity conversation must give all parties and perspectives a mechanism to present evidence and supporting arguments for their individual positions. The human mind is like a parachute: working best when it’s open – and for this reason this discussion can only be facilitated by strong leadership and open minds, leaders at ease with their identity and open to alternative thinking, receptive to

considering ideas not normally within their comfort zone based on the merits and values of any such proposals and devoid of prejudice or preconceptions. Good shepherds (not a religious reference!) don't lead from the front but direct their flocks from behind by identifying the leaders in the flock and letting them guide the rest. We will need a few good shepherds!

The biggest enemy could be impatience. All options are dependent upon Ireland, North and South, being a peaceful, harmonious place where businesses thrive, jobs are created, wealth is generated, where people want to live and that 'everyone can call home'.

### **Building bridges; bringing people together**

This awareness of a place we all can call home on an island where everyone can live together with respect was in my thoughts when, in early 2018, I was asked by Taoiseach Leo Varadkar to run as an independent candidate in a Seanad by-election. Following the campaign in April that year, I was duly elected to serve as the first Ulster Unionist elected to Seanad Éireann. This was a huge privilege and I will always be sincerely grateful to those teachtaí dásas and senators who supported me without knowing very much about me, in the task of representing the people of Ireland, North and South in the Seanad. It is a debt of gratitude I will endeavour to repay: by working hard to bring a different perspective to debate and discussion; striving to build relationships across the island in civic dialogue and political conversations; and by creating an environment where businesses can work together North and South for mutual benefit.

The idea of working together for mutual benefit must be underpinned by a mutual respect and a commitment to understanding all perspectives. Many politicians north and south of the border harbour opinions and perspectives based on ideology and sketchy information, often misguided and inaccurate, often absorbed from news channels and social media outlets, frequently based on hearsay and urban myths. We all have a responsibility to ensure that we open up communication and understand each other better.

'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. Until you climb into his skin and walk around in it', as Atticus Finch puts it, in the 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a*



*Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee, dealing with injustice and prejudice, race, class and gender inequality in the deep south in the United States. There is no better reference book. Herein lies the lesson, because if we are serious about opening up a conversation across the island of Ireland, we must admit that we have failed to get to grips with this mutual understanding and respect between republicans and unionists. Yet this is fundamental to delivering the Good Friday Agreement, with its inclusion of ‘mutual respect and parity of esteem for all’; not just one side or the other!

This lack of understanding founded in 30 years of violence has been highlighted by my travelling between Belfast and Dublin in both my role within Queen’s University and my work in the Seanad. Those people I engage with on a daily basis in Belfast have a surprisingly limited knowledge of Dublin, its people, politics and culture, with opinions formed from second- and third-hand sources. Meanwhile those I work with in Dublin, many from the 26 counties, have little or no knowledge of Belfast, its people, politics and culture. Considering that these two cities on one island are separated by only 100 miles, this ‘light years’ of distance in understanding is startling.

## The vision

Roles like mine in the senate are critical because, as defined in the Good Friday Agreement, the future will be built on good governance based on the integrity of an open, inclusive conversation. The function and role of the senate is crucial as a mechanism to scrutinise and interrogate legislation, a platform to amend and challenge legislation before passing it back to a lower house – something I believe we lack in Northern Ireland, despite the fact that we do have a senate chamber, and actually used to have senators. Reinstating the upper chamber is a discussion we need to develop.

People in Northern Ireland are apathetic and frustrated with the stalemate in Stormont. They demand more from their politicians. A conversation has already commenced in communities across the length and breadth of Ireland within the silent majority who wish to see change. They are the vast majority of people whose concern is more devoted to health provision, education, business, environment and economy, than any preoccupation about the union or unity.

Leadership will be required on a number of fronts. Firstly, we need leadership from elected representatives and a move away from identity politics. We live in a diverse, multicultural society where the binary choice of Protestant and Catholic is out-dated, if only due to the myriad of religions and beliefs from Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, notwithstanding the large numbers expressing positions of atheism or agnosticism, where Protestantism or Catholicism has less and less relevance. The fact that you're from Ballymena or Balbriggan, Coleraine or Cork should merely serve as a mechanism to highlight similarities rather than something exposing differences. We need to create a culture where it's positive to define yourself as unionist or nationalist, republican or loyalist, to be proud of and comfortable in your identity, without feeling threatened by someone who doesn't share the same ideals and aspirations.

Political leadership must demand that doing the right thing for the greater good will be much more important than doing the best thing for short-term political gain. The era of political structures based on creating an environment of fear and insecurity must be banished.

Only a civic dialogue on a cross-community basis can provide the right kind of platform to mandate elected representatives. This civic dialogue can be facilitated and supported by both governments allowing all perspectives to have a voice, so that people can help build the template themselves and lay out the future roadmap. Politicians will then have a mandate to lead by telling people it's fine to be British or Irish, or British and Irish without any sense of undermining your identity, building the importance of 'interdependence' between the people on the island of Ireland and between the islands of Great Britain and Ireland. Strong leadership will create a platform for people to tell their story and voice their opinion, to share experience and most of all learn from this experience, to ensure that we never repeat the mistakes of the past.

Many young people have little or no concept of 'the Troubles' and definitely don't want to revisit our violent past, despite some of the messages delivered on a daily basis to their smartphones and devices by the more radical elements of Northern Irish politics. So secondly, we must demand a culture with media responsibility and accountability, where we focus on the thousands of projects demonstrating the good

work to date where cross-community schemes are reaching out, building bridges and healing hurt. Schemes unreported, where individuals and groups are working North and South between divided communities, building trust and reconciliation. All of this must ensure a move away from giving 'oxygen' to the extremists and the polarised opinions, giving the false impression that this is the majority view rather than an ideal to which only a few subscribe. It's through these younger voices, devoid of bigotry and prejudice, forming the vast majority in society, that we can deliver a 'renewed Ireland' where all can live and work together.

Finally, I'd like to quote a verse that I used in my maiden speech in the Seanad, from a poem by Domingo Ortega that John F Kennedy claimed he tucked into his wallet and walked around with every day. Ortega – like myself – was a farmer's son who went on to become a bullfighter, knowing well that everyone outside the ring always thought they knew better:

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows  
Crowd the enormous Plaza full;  
But only one is there who knows –  
And he's the man who fights the bull.*

As citizens of Great Britain and Ireland and Northern Ireland we all have a responsibility to 'fight the bull'. We must work together, building on what unites us whilst respecting our differences, learning from the past and ensuring that North, South, East and West, we recognise our interdependence and our 'lives entwined'.



**Kate Ewart-Biggs** leads the British Council's Global Network providing strategic leadership to our overseas network of offices around the world. Responsible for representing our work and offices overseas on the Senior Leadership Team, she ensures that the organisation has a connected network. Kate is also responsible for managing strategic relationships with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Whitehall partners with a geopolitical focus.

Prior to her current role, Kate was regional head covering the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia regions. At the heart of developing the British Council's response to the Arab Spring, she worked on how the British Council could best respond to the needs of young people in that region in terms of access to education, skills and the opportunity to participate in the new democratic processes emerging in their countries.

Kate also ran the British Council operations in Uganda and Tanzania and has worked in Egypt and in Central and Eastern Europe. Before joining the British Council, Kate worked for organisations working on behalf of street children in South Africa, Brazil, Indonesia and Eastern Europe. Kate is passionate about giving young people, whatever their circumstances, the opportunity to engage actively in their communities.

# Skiing uphill

by Kate Ewart-Biggs

I remember vividly when I first heard about a place called Ireland. I was eight when I was told over the dinner table that we were moving there. I was given strict instructions not to tell anyone, but at the first opportunity I announced the news to my friends at school. Fully bilingual at a French school, in many ways I felt more French than English. At the time, my father was number two in the British Embassy in Paris and we had spent five happy years in Paris as a family. My parents had loved their time there. My mother called them the golden years.

I had no idea where or what Ireland represented, but as an adventurous eight-year-old I was up for the move. A few months later, in July 1976, we arrived in Dublin; a heatwave was overtaking Europe and Dublin basked in what I found out later was rather rare sunshine. We had taken the overnight ferry and I remember the excitement of being shown round by the captain and the feeling that my father was somehow someone vaguely important. He was taking up post as British ambassador to Ireland at the very height of the Troubles.

My father was a gentle, clever man, a pacifist who had lost his eye in the Second World War, five minutes into his first active duty as an 18-year-old officer in El Alamein. He had not wanted to fight but always said he was not brave enough to be a conscientious objector. I think those early experiences of violence and the horror of war had built in him an abhorrence and hatred of violence. He saw his posting to Ireland as an opportunity to make a real difference, to use his position in all the ways he could to progress peace in Northern Ireland, to build the bridges that led so many years later to the Good Friday Agreement. He had already in early interviews expressed these views strongly. In an interview with the British-Irish Association he said: 'I have one

prejudice, acquired during the Second World War and reinforced again in Algeria: a very distinct and strong prejudice against violence for political ends’.

On 21 July 1976 I woke early in the big embassy residence that was now ours on the outskirts of Dublin. It was an ugly house, but to me it was the perfect abode, with huge gardens and a resident donkey. We had been in Dublin for only two weeks and the night before my mother had travelled overnight to London to buy some material to make new curtains in the residence. I padded into my parents’ room, feeling a bit lonely and spent the morning with my father, as he had breakfast reading the papers, and getting ready for his day ahead. I remember choosing his tie and feeling sad that he had to go to work. I held on to him tight as he left in the Jaguar with his driver, a visiting senior civil servant, and his young private secretary. I wandered outside to find Owen, my new friend, the driver’s son, and we set about a game in the garden. We were very soon stopped in our tracks as we heard a large bang and felt the ground shake – we looked at each other for a minute, shrugged our shoulders and carried on playing – I learned later that the noise was a mine being detonated underneath my father’s car. It killed him and the private secretary instantly and injured Owen’s father, Brian, and the visiting colleague. Brian went on to be one of the people in my upbringing who I always felt close to – the person who had been with my father in that last moment.

Although now so long ago I remember every detail of that day. I only learned of my father’s death when my mother arrived home much later on. My sister and brother, 15 and 12, were told beforehand, but I was not. I remember knowing there was something going on and being cross that they wouldn’t tell me. I came to the conclusion that my mother had been killed in an aeroplane accident, and after a long day of pitied looks and hushed tones, took myself outside to ride my bike. As I did, a cavalcade of black cars filed down the drive and my mother emerged from one. She picked me up and took me inside where we were greeted by a line of staff, all of them crying, and I knew in that moment without anyone having to say anything that my father had died.

My mother was a very remarkable woman. She must have trusted her instinct on what path to take in those moments and days after my father's death. She was no doubt traumatised; I witnessed that late at night when she couldn't sleep and when her raw loss would take grip. But she knew she needed to do something positive and was determined to live by my father's ideals. A few days after his death she did a television broadcast from our sitting room.

I watched it the other day and she begins by introducing the three of us: my sister Henrietta, 15 and desperately self-conscious, wanting to be anywhere but standing in front of the camera; my brother Robin, who, having turned 13 five days after losing his father, had to look like he was now taking on the responsibility of this family; and me desperately striving to look positive with a little shy smile.

My mother then goes on to speak about forgiveness and tolerance and peace and reconciliation. There is no anger, no calls for retribution and hunting down the perpetrators, no damning of one side or another, but instead words of unity and trust building. Those words and her demeanour in those days were so critical, as she shone a light on the possibility of hope prevailing over violence, not just for my family but for two nations. As Garret FitzGerald said at the service in St Patrick's Cathedral a week after the murder in words which fully bear repeating:

*No doubt the perpetrators calculated that relations between us would be severely weakened, perhaps permanently damaged by such an atrocity. That the opposite has been the case is now evident to all. Our two peoples, whose pasts have been so closely linked for ill and for good throughout eight centuries, have confounded our common enemy by responding to this tragedy with a deepened sense of our close interdependence, and of our common interest in combating violence and averting anarchy.*

*Politicians, press and people in our two islands have instinctively understood the trap set for them by evil men and have been drawn closer together in the aftermath of this murder. Christopher Ewart-Biggs could not have conceived that within two brief weeks of his arrival, he would have made, at the cost of his own gallant life, a unique contribution to the aims he fought to serve, a contribution which, had he lived, he would have dedicated himself to achieving by the slower process of diplomatic action.*

My mother went on to commit herself to the life of service which was living the ideals of my father. She devoted her life to campaigning for peace and reconciliation in Ireland. It remains a striking paradox that both my parents, who were so completely and quintessentially English, ended by devoting themselves to Ireland and the betterment of British–Irish relations.

## Growing up

There is little doubt that my mother's stance has shaped my view of my role in the world. She created in me no ability to hate, to bear a grudge, or indeed to participate in the distancing of a next generation from a country that had so affected my future. My mother could have instilled in all of us a sense of betrayal by the people of Ireland, a hatred of all those associated with the conflict. But in fact the opposite was the case. Over the years after my father's death we visited Ireland and Northern Ireland often, we felt loved by those we met, who wanted to try and make our loss better. They had a sense that my mother loved Ireland. As Mary Holland, who received the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize in 1989, said: 'She didn't turn away from us.'

It was only as an adult that I really understood what she had done for me; that she had created in me an ability to transcend a personal loss to see something good and positive. She had taught me the value of individual relationships across the divides. When I watch scenes of the Troubles, listen to voices of the IRA or nationalists, and meet others affected during the Troubles, I can disconnect from my own loss and be aware of the responsibility all of us have when we react; the responsibility of creating spaces for interaction rather than distance. I stood with my mother on so many occasions on the divided streets of Belfast and understood the notion of the generational perpetuation of hatred and violence.

So, from a young age, I have felt intimately the power of connections and divides between countries, but I have never felt very British. I think I always preferred mainland Europe, the sophistication of life that I had tasted in those years in Paris, the smell of southern France, the food and the language. I spent the first eight years of my life in francophone countries, first in Belgium and then Paris, and was educated until secondary school in the French system. This gave me and my siblings the ability to communicate in two languages,



shifting in and out when one word feels better. Before we returned to London, I had felt the comfort in being English but also French when I wanted to be.

As the child of a diplomat you are brought up with a sense that the country that your parents are representing in is a wonderful haven of all things good, while you are also surrounded by reminders of what it means to be British. Even in the gastronomic capital of Europe the British Embassy had a 'commissariat shop' and we used to go there to buy marmite and tea bags. I still hate tea to this day having been forced to drink it as a child. My mother loved and embraced all things French – having been taught French by a series of French au pairs during her own childhood, she spoke beautiful perfect French. But at the many dinner parties in our embassy flat she would often serve British traditional dishes to amuse the French guests – spotted dick, apple crumble and shepherd's pie were all on the menu. Unlike many diplomatic families, my parents both created a very French environment for us at home – we all went to French schools rather than boarded and all our friends were French.

So, for me, it was something of a romantic mystery what the real UK really was. Three weeks after the death of my father, we arrived in Dover in my mother's Triumph Stag, which my father had given her just before he died. When we were taken aside by Customs, I thought this was part of the attention we had got used to in Dublin, and some sort of welcome to Britain. It was not. Rather my mother was handed a stiff tax bill for importing her car. She lay down on the floor next to the car and sobbed.

Indeed 1976 London was not quite the place I had imagined: it was grey and drab, with power strikes, rubbish collecting in the street and a grimness about it all. Our little house had been unloved for many years and was dark and cold. The wonderful Britain I had been envisaging was not at all what I experienced. I felt I didn't really belong, and that I had only belonged in embassies, or in Ireland where we had a role and an impact.

The years after my father's death were not easy, but for my mother they held great purpose. Her way to deal with her own loss was to channel it. Together with Thomas Pakenham and supported by Garrett Fitzgerald and others, she set up the Christopher Ewart-Biggs

Memorial Prize. This is a prize which recognises literary work that promotes and encourages peace and reconciliation in Ireland, a greater understanding between the peoples of Britain and Ireland, or closer co-operation between the partners of the European Community. My mother also launched a community prize alongside the literary one. She joined the Irish Peace People campaign founded by Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams. She toured the US to try and halt the flow of US funding for the IRA. To pay some of the bills she joined the Women's Institute lecture circuit, taking her 'wife of a diplomat' speech on tour. I went with her a few times. I would sit in the back of a church hall, the youngest member of the audience by about 80 years, and listen to the stories of our previous glamorous life in embassies. Deep in her heart, she really wanted to be a Labour MP, but her background and posh voice got in the way and she never got past the selection process. In 1982, however, she was asked by Michael Foot to join the House of Lords as a life peer. She dreamed that night that she was skiing uphill.

## Resilient young women

My nephew recently found a brilliant interview my mother did in the late 1980s where she talks very unemotionally about how she dealt with her personal loss by focusing on the values that my father had held and on how to live those. To many on the outside, the story of my family was perhaps one of how hope and purpose can transcend tragedy. This was so in many ways. But I feel strongly that it is really important to recognise the impact this kind of loss and trauma wreaks on so many across the world who have suffered in ethnic conflicts. It is important not to lose the stories of that impact.

Because we did not emerge unscathed. We all suffered and continue to suffer from the events of that day – we have experienced ongoing loss throughout the generations. I lost my wonderful mother when I was 22 and it was then that all the trauma of my childhood really hit me. She was at a stage of life just when she was beginning to feel calmer and happier and given the platform she needed in the House of Lords, to raise all those issues close to her. She had given me a sense of what it was to be in this world, and just as she was finally able to feel some peace perhaps and I was embarking on my own life as an adult, she died. I felt anchorless and lost and had to build a purpose for

myself. I found that anchor abroad. I left Britain and took off to Sub-Saharan Africa where I lived for many years. There I was able to find a warmth I craved, a place where life is precious because it is often threatened. I was lucky to have friends in the UK and across the world who helped me to recover from her loss, and as I have got older I have been able to sit back and reflect on how I wanted to continue to live her values.

For me that found its form in how people connect to each other across societies. A degree in social anthropology prepared me for no obvious job, but as a student I landed myself a voluntary role in a programme working with street girls in Recife, north-east Brazil as part of my ethnography degree. The girls there, all of whom had suffered terrible abuse at home, were brave and powerful. The project had been set up by a feminist lawyer and rather than rescuing the girls from the street, it gave them the tools to leave it themselves. The violence and prejudice directed at them as girls was astounding, but the whole ethos of the 'passage house' was dedicated to empowering them as women to take control of their futures.

I worked for the next five years in projects in Indonesia, South Africa, Eastern and Central Europe and learned so much from the young people I encountered. In a girls' project I worked in in Cape Town, I found the same power and resilience among those young women. South Africa of the mid-1990s was a deeply divided place and I inhabited two distinct worlds. With black women and women of colour in the project by day and in the evenings, I would return to a very white world, living in a flat with white friends on the coast and enjoying all the nightlife Cape Town had to offer a young white person. I experienced indirectly the racist and bigoted attitudes so entrenched in South African society and I felt a constant personal guilt that I couldn't do more.

## **Proud citizens of the world**

I joined the British Council soon after and lived and worked across East Africa and Eastern and Central Europe. The work we do is at the heart of the real practice of cultural relations. In Uganda where I worked for five years, we built a programme focused on giving young people skills for the workplace of the future. Our school-linking programme gave Ugandan headteachers, teachers and students the

chance to partner with schools in the UK. Part of the challenge was to confront the old paternalistic assumption that the UK schools were there to provide a model for the Ugandan ones. We found that when teachers and students visited Uganda all their preconceived views of capability were thrown out of the window. They would find in Ugandan schools hugely skilled teachers and dedicated students committed to getting the best out of their poor educational resources. The Ugandan group I know who came back from a visit to secondary schools in Slough similarly had their preconceptions challenged. They were rather shocked by the standards of behaviour and commitment they found, and rather than envy the resources available, went home valuing their own systems more.

The power of connections across cultures is so powerful and it has at its foundation person-to-person interaction. It is most challenged in extreme situations like conflict and ethnic divides. I have met young people in our programmes in Syria and Lebanon who have had a glimpse of what is possible if you take a personal stand against following the patterns laid out for you based on your religion or ethnicity. I watched my mother do that in 1976 and I met hundreds of street kids who had done it by leaving their homes to get away from abuse. Every day now, I see people across our programmes in the British Council who are making this same journey.

But it is not easy to challenge and to step out. I have had to confront my own understanding of difference through seeing the world through my daughter's lens. She is half-Ugandan and as a mixed-race person is having to navigate a world which is still very focused on race and what it means. When she was very little and living in Tanzania where I was running the British Council, she started saying that she didn't like her 'brown' and that she wanted to be 'pink' like me. I pointed out the irony of my spending years sunbathing to look more brown like her. But at the age of three, despite being in a very black environment in Tanzania, she had somehow absorbed that unfruitful desire. She now lives in a very diverse part of London and as a teenager is still grappling with identity, nationality, class, intercultural living. We have constant discussion about her experience, what helps and what doesn't, to make her feel part of all the component parts of society which she fits within. In very culturally and ethnically mixed

schools she is actually much more defined by her class than her race. Both sides of her family have educated and internationally minded backgrounds and it is those groups of friends she has gravitated towards.

Yet I have found that it is very difficult to have a real conversation about race in my white community where people don't really want to accept that racial prejudice still exists in our liberal worlds. I get a lot of 'well my daughter has red hair' as if it is the same as not being white. When I was visiting secondary schools for my daughter I always asked about the data on ethnic mix and was often met with the answer that the school was colour blind and that there was no racial bullying. When I tried to explain that my daughter does see colour because she has to and it is of interest to her what mix there will be around her, I get blank looks or a defence of the policy on bullying.

Despite the gauntlet thrown down by our last prime minister, who famously said – 'if you are a citizen of the world you are a citizen of nowhere' – there are so many young people now living in the UK from mixed heritage who straddle worlds and who are indeed global citizens. My daughter and I found this deeply offensive as it went against everything that we both feel about our place in the world. We are proud citizens of the world.

## Engagement and co-operation

As I reflect on my background in the world and where we are in the UK in the current post-referendum environment, I have a deep sadness. It feels very personal to me that we are risking our position in the world, and going against the principles of engagement and co-operation that my parents both stood for. I have spent my adult life living and working internationally, looking for ways to link and partner and learn from others. In a post-Brexit Britain it will be ever more important to give our young people the chances I had to explore and inhabit many worlds and identities and to challenge all forms of intolerance and prejudice. Prejudice is always personal – as I learned as a child, it does not happen to someone else so that you can walk away from it. The UK's departure from the EU is about more than just staying part of a trading and security union: it is about who we want our young people to be in the future.



“

**There is much research that shows how one personal interaction with a country through learning the language, one course or one visit, significantly increases the trust in that country.**

There is much research that shows how one personal interaction with a country through learning the language, one course or one visit, significantly increases the trust in that country. Trust pays. The British Council is all about providing that bridge and link for millions of young people around the world, through an English course, a British exam, skills programmes, art workshops and exhibitions, all of which give young people a glimpse of a new idea, a different way of looking at the world and the possible chance to influence their societies for the better.

I feel privileged to have had the chance to find a form of belonging which has straddled so many communities across the diplomatic world in Ireland, Europe, Africa. I have learned something in each of them that has enabled me to always seek more connection. In the dry cleaners this morning I learned about carpets from a northern part of Afghanistan where the shopkeeper comes from. Together we shared a moment transported away from west London to a home to which he cannot return because of the conflict which has assailed his country for so long. I have told you a little of my story and I will continue to try to tell the stories of others all around the world who step beyond themselves to create newer, better narratives for their children of how we can connect across boundaries worldwide. My mother did this for me, and I can only hope that I am doing the same for my own daughter.



Poet and theologian **Pádraig Ó Tuama's** work centres around themes of language, power, conflict and religion. Working fluently on the page and in public, Pádraig is a compelling poet and skilled speaker, teacher and group worker. Introducing Pádraig's TEDx talk on Story, BBC journalist William Crawley said: 'He's probably the best public speaker I know.'

Ó Tuama's published work incorporates poetry (*Readings from the Book of Exile* [longlisted for the Polari Prize 2013] and *Sorry For Your Troubles*), prose (*In the Shelter*) and theology (*Daily Prayer*, 'The Place Between'). His poems and prose have been featured in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Academy of American Poets*, *Post Road*, *Cream City Review*, *Holden Village Voice*, *Proximity Magazine*, *On Being*, *Gutter*, *America* and *Seminary Ridge Review*.

From 2014 to 2019 he was the leader of the Corrymeela Community, Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation community. He has been featured multiple times on the renowned American radio programme *On Being with Krista Tippett* and, from early 2020, he will present a new poetry programme – *Poetry Unbound* – as part of the On Being Project.



# There is no such thing as the future

by Pádraig Ó Tuama

All summer long, I have been thinking about the future, and how it hasn't happened yet.

But I couldn't get that damnable line from Eugene O'Neill out of my mind:

*There is no present or future — only the past, happening over and over again — now.*

I remember it as the epigraph from the beginning of Leon Uris' novel *Trinity*, only I swear that the version I read wrote:

*For Ireland, there is no present or future – only the past, happening over and over again – now.*

That's not what it says but it's how I've told it for years. Some memories, it seems, are accidentally true.

Anyway, I've been in the future all summer long, even though I don't believe in it. I don't believe in it because it hasn't happened yet. And – I wish this weren't true, but I fear it might be – much of the future will remain predictable if we continue doing as we do. Only if something surprising happens will something surprising happen – on the first day there was a surprise; then everything exploded.

I tried writing poems about Brexit. I turned to forms that use repeating lines to create a sonic and visual representation of how, now, in 2019, nearing the centenary of when Ireland was partitioned, we are facing into questions of the reiteration of the border. I made vocabulary lists: Brexit & Backstop & Trade Deals, oh my.

(Backstop, I understand, comes from baseball, and is something like the function of a wicket-keeper in cricket. Ireland has a cricket team now. *Surprisingly good*, an Indian friend said to me recently.)

Anyway, British–Irish relations – or, to be more accurate, Anglo-Irish relations, because it's mostly with England that our beef is – have been under strain. The debates of the past few years have focused on the achievement of trade deals, backstops, customs arrangements, as if those will be the things to address whatever is going on. They'll help, that's true, but they're just a start. Partition happened 100 years ago in Ireland and families are still split about who to vote for: the parties that accepted the compromise of partition, or the parties that opposed it – separation is measured in decades not days.

When I tried to write poems about what's happening, I riffed on tumbling forms – villanelles and pantoums – inventing new patterns for repeating lines increasing in intense repetitions.

### British–Irish relations, July–October 2019

All summer long  
I've wondered what to say  
not because I don't know what to say  
but because I don't want to say it.

I don't want to say it because  
all summer long I've wondered  
whether saying it is  
what I want to say.

Saying something during uncertain times  
is an uncertain art  
because uncertain times make  
saying anything an uncertain art.

And the trouble with history is that  
history's troubled by the past. And  
the past is history, or at least, in some parts,  
in other parts its troubled presence

is an ever living present. And this  
troubles us when we try to tell our  
history to the present. That's the trouble  
with history; it's not past. Not always.

And if you ask me where the border is  
the border is all round me. I drove through it  
yesterday, or rather, it through me. It weaves  
its way across the laneway near my house;

near my house it weaves its way  
around me, this blade of grass is Irish, this is British  
this is through me, I drove through it.  
A blade of sharpened history.

But I was unsatisfied with that poem. What's the point of poems that tell us what we know? Clever little forms that do nothing do nothing for me. I don't know if art has a purpose, but I wanted a poem about British–Irish relations to do more than that.

One of the terrible things about British–Irish relations is that we have no shared story of the past, and this makes it terribly difficult to describe the present. In an uneasy peace, there exist parallel, but distinct, narratives about who the aggressor was in the question of how British presence on the island of Ireland over the past 700 years can be narrated – as if blame can only be apportioned in one direction.

*God you love talking about the past*, a person in London said to me recently, when I mentioned the upcoming centenary of partition. Only that week, my insurance company had sent me the green card that I'll need to keep in my car should a bad version of Brexit occur. The green card – it's more of a green form to be honest, but who's asking? – will ensure that my insurance works if I'm in an accident south of the border.

I told the person in London that the past wasn't the past for us when we have to navigate across borders that are being reignited with attention. The person didn't know what to say. I found myself in an awkward position. I felt the need to change the subject, more so to ease their tension than mine.

What do we say when we don't know what to say because there's something new every day in the unfolding relationship between our governments? I tried poems like the one above, but while I enjoyed the formplay, I was inherently dissatisfied with smart repetitions of things that give no hope. So, I turned to the past, to the often forgotten past. It astonishes me how few people in Britain know about the famine in Ireland. Or, if they know about it, they call it the Potato Famine.

My grandad's grandad survived the famine. He had gone to a soup kitchen in Irish-speaking West Cork, in the arms of his mother – his brother in the arms of his father – and got separated from them. He was taken in by a Protestant family and the rest of his family all died, it's presumed. Mother, father, brother. Cousins, aunties, grandparents too. He never saw them again. He was six. The story of the famine reaches into Irish consciousness like a rot, because we know that there was food enough to feed us throughout it. Famine isn't ever just famine; it's also policy. There were abominable things said about the convenience of a potato blight in reducing the population.

And – in heroism and horror – people like the Clergyman John Mitchel in Derry came to the fore. He was heroically accurate when he said that it wasn't God who created the famine. He was diabolically inaccurate when – years after having been incarcerated in Van Diemen's Land – he moved to the southern part of the United States and insisted on the morality of enslavement. To look to the past, we may imagine that the story of victimhood will leave the victims with a pure sense of identity while tainting the taunters with guilt and blame. British and Irish pasts are not so convenient.

## The Potato Famine

*The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight,  
but the English created the Famine.*

*John Mitchel*

My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate.  
My mother likes her peace and her diet magazines.  
My great-great grandad was the only one who made it.

At the heart of every famine is the scheming of a state  
to bring a people to their knees for the state's convenience.  
My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate.

On the phone an English woman says the Irish are fixated  
with our stories of the past in a way that's quite obscene, but  
my great-great grandad was the only one who made it.

My auntie moved to England and learnt how to translate  
between the way a people are and the way their history's been.  
My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate.

There are proteins in our grass from forgotten famine graves,  
some families fed on rotten grass and – my mother tells me –  
my grandad's grandad was the only one who made it.

His family had all starved so he missed his Confirmation.  
Decades later, a priest arranged it. Didn't make a scene.  
My father likes his spuds piled high upon his plate and  
my great-great grandad was the only one who made it.

## Phytophthora Infestans

*The Institution of Negro Slavery is a sound, just, wholesome Institution; and therefore that the question of re-opening the African Slave Trade is a question of expediency alone.*

*John Mitchel*

We love to blame the British for our past  
but our past is blighted by a story we won't own.  
God knows, it wasn't that our suffering was mild at home,  
but when we travelled, we shackled up with empire  
and smited other places while crying about our home.  
Not with a rot of other people's making; but with a rot our own.  
And not because of how an empire shackled us  
but because of something rotten in us.

Certainly, a rot of other people's making – not our own –  
starved us from our villages and homes.  
But because of something rotten in us,  
and not a blight that was exploited, we went and  
starved other peoples from their villages and homes.  
Our suffering was far from mild at home. But far from home,  
we uncovered something white inside us.  
We cannot blame the British for the stories we won't own.

What gives hope? It's hard to say. We can hope in the future, but I always want some evidence of the present to build on. And anyway, it hasn't happened yet. The future I mean, not the past.

Sometimes a story can give hope: stories go beyond data and speak to the human condition. So, as I've been thinking about British–Irish relations, I decided to take an old idea, I wondered about stories about pilgrims.

British interests have impacted Ireland for the past 700 years, so it's worthwhile reckoning that we're stuck with each other, and anything that is going to be good for us will need to be good for all. Enemies is no longer a fruitful term, even when the term has echoes of truths from the past. So, I decided to pick pilgrims as a metaphor for a story about unequal pilgrim partners who are tied up in story, pain, death, the past and the future. The inequality was important. No analysis of the past can lead anyone to think that Ireland was ever as equal a threat to Britain as Britain was to Ireland. However, even unequal pilgrim partners can cause mutually exchanged horror.

We know this. It continues.

So unequal pilgrims are on paths of pilgrimage with each other. Pilgrimage towards where?

That's one of the things that the summer of 2019 has confused. But what we know is what has saved lives: the spirit of concord that allows for peaceful, democratic solutions whereby the question of the population of the jurisdictions of Ireland is debated and discussed with information, care, creativity, tension and precision. All of this looks like argument, and when done by peaceful means, that looks like creativity and democracy.

In this Pilgrim poem, the Pilgrims are unlikely companions. They fight, they are knotted together with holy and unholy knots, they are in tension with each other, and they are pursued by the Dead. They meet the ghost of a Princess who directs them towards story, they take risks of disclosure with each other, and they fall apart when they take those risks. Even still, they still take risks, and occasionally make gestures of kindness to each other. The Dead are not the glorious Dead. These Dead have things to say.

Pilgrimages are known for reaching fulfilment from the moment they begin. 'The destination is all around' is the sometimes frustrating advice given to people on hundred-mile walks to a specific pilgrimage destination. Or someone might speak of the journey as the thing that means much more than the final arrival. This can sound soppy, but in general, I'm inclined to agree with Annie Dillard when she says *How you live a day is, after all, how you live a life*. If we are to take the wisdom from these maxims as a lens through which to view British–Irish relations, it's difficult to find a day in the last three years that gives hope that the future will be anything other than a frustrating unfolding of predictable patterns.

Worrisome as this is, it is not the final word. Because days happen all the time, and – with courage, gesture, consideration, leadership, acknowledgment of pain, and recognition of power – we can make new days, days the like of which we might wish to repeat every so often, or perhaps more often than only every so often.

In a time when we spend a lot of time speaking about the future, it is worthwhile focusing on the present, because whatever the future is, it'll be practised in the present.

The quality of any future will only be a magnification of the qualities exhibited in the present.

Pilgrims, let us pick up stories.

Pilgrims – fighting, unlikely, unwinding Pilgrims – let us Pilgrim.



## The Future

*There is no present or future – only the past,  
happening over and over again – now.*

*A Moon for the Misbegotten, Eugene O'Neill*

*We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have  
followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.*

*The Book of Common Prayer (1789)*

### A Cast of Characters.

- Two Living Pilgrims, frequently fighting in the Present.
- The Dead, frequently watching, from the Past,  
the Fighting Pilgrims in the Present.
- A Princess, also dead. She has other business.  
She also has a horse.
- The Buried; whose Names Nobody Remembers.
- A Watcher, who Watches.

#### (i)

Before a broken throne  
two Pilgrims stood  
and put their hands  
around each other's  
throats.

One bigger than the other.

Each wished the other  
dead  
or worse.

Watching them: the Dead.

*Watch them love  
to threaten life*  
the Dead all said.

Each Pilgrim prayed  
they'd  
win  
to whatever God was  
listening.

(ii)

One Pilgrim  
noticed they  
were noticed  
turned around and said:  
*We're not alone.*

*Thank God,* the other said.

The Dead said  
*Wait.*

The Dead said  
*Watch.*

The Dead said  
*You'll both  
need each other.*

*And it might mean  
the death of all  
you've come to know.  
Watch, we'll show you.*

(iii)

The Pilgrims pilgrimed  
passing many graves  
along their way.

*Are these the  
lonely resting places  
of the Dead?* one Pilgrim asked

The Dead  
said  
nothing.

Some forgotten things  
are lost  
but might be found.

Some forgotten things  
are just  
forgotten.

**(iv)**

The Pilgrims fought.

And fought about  
the things  
they fought about.

A blade was bought;  
and brought;  
and then a cut was made;  
and a hand fell  
to the dirt.

(There's always something  
sacrificed to earth  
for the sake of someone's  
fantasy of winning.)

*Pick it up and take it with you,*  
the Dead ones said,  
*make it make you*  
*make.*

**(v)**

The Pilgrims fought  
about the question  
of who'd been hurt  
the most.

Fighting about old hurts  
made old hurts hurt  
much more.

And then one fell.

And the other hated helping,  
but still tried to help.  
And the helped one hated  
being helped.

And they dreamt of  
separating.

Their lives had been entwined,  
like families,  
for centuries by now.

Not by promises,  
or priests.  
but by griefs sustained.

**(vi)**

The Pilgrims' fighting paused from  
time to time.

When one found  
a way to make a  
kindness  
to the other,  
the other made a  
kindness back.

But then they took it back.

But then they offered it again.

And things went on like this for  
longer than you'd think  
a connection should survive.

**(vii)**

And sometimes along the way  
a story cracked. And then again.  
And then again, again.

*What's your name today?*  
one Pilgrim asked the other.  
The other didn't answer.

It wasn't that they didn't wish to share.  
It's that they  
didn't know.

Stories are a name, but stories only  
grow with  
stories told.

**(viii)**

Along the way  
a Princess came,  
a dead one, riding on a horsey  
ghost.

She said:  
*The Future's made of storied stuff  
provided you keep storying  
each  
other.*

**(ix)**

The bigger Pilgrim turned to face the other:  
*I know you've hated me most of your days.*

*So make your meaning plain.  
Speak out from that pain you're holding.  
Spare no  
thought  
for how you'll break our Future.*

The other Pilgrim said:

*I know that my dead  
mother  
and her mother's mother  
and that woman's mother's mother's mother  
went to death  
repeating the same  
question:*

*Don't they have some  
other fields to  
sow other than  
these fields of ours  
they've stolen?*

(x)

Then the bigger Pilgrim cried.  
Lay down and cried.  
Lay down and curled up on the ground and cried.

Lay down,  
believed the story that was stated  
defined them wholly hated;

and knew that it was  
true, but it was not  
the only truth.

Stood up and shouted:  
*We were hurting too.*  
*While you were grieving for your country*  
*we were foreigners in fields whose language*  
*hated us with centuries of hatred.*

And then one Pilgrim produced placards  
filled with poison for the other.  
And a Pilgrim blamed a Pilgrim for the other Pilgrim's hatred.

And then everything grew loud.  
And the sounds of violence  
electrified their ears.

Of course they thought about partition,  
but some  
hates run deeper than a border.  
Hope too. And sometimes  
truth.

**(xi)**

The Dead returned with force.  
 Howling, they lamented  
 everything they lost.  
 Like some kind of storm  
 they crossed the space  
 between the living and the dead.

They brought songs, and stories.

*We are not your glory.  
 We were empty sacrifices  
 required by emptier devices and desires  
 of power hungry people.  
 We were vassals  
 broken by a castle-dwelling class  
 whose names and stories  
 we forget now.*

**(xii)**

The Dead saw death  
 arriving on the faces  
 of the pilgrims.

The Dead toned down,  
 they said:

*Make stories while you live.  
 Where we stand now  
 you do not stand.  
 But where you stand, you can  
 risk a bit for living.*

**(xiii)**

One of the Pilgrims  
 went right up to the other  
 and pulled out salve  
 and tried to soothe  
 some sores.

And then the other, sitting, sitting, sitting  
 letting what the other touched  
 sting  
 with the stinging  
 of the living living living.

And for a moment they were looking  
 looking  
 looking at the  
  
 ways of  
 living.

**(xiv)**

And when the Pilgrims — fighting Pilgrims —  
 saw all that  
 they saw  
 they thought about the future  
 and how it hadn't happened  
 yet.

And how they didn't know a way  
 to make it grow.  
 And how the centuries all groaned  
 for victory and for  
 blame.

They turned to face  
 their destiny —  
 each other.  
 They turned to  
 face fragility —  
 each other.

They turned to  
 face their hatreds —  
 each other.

They turned to face  
 each other face  
 each  
 other.







**Back cover photograph: Tripod**

by Donovan Wylie

Torr Head, Northern Ireland, looking towards Mull of Kintyre, Scotland, 2019. Awaiting sunset, when Lighthouse will begin. Image made during the project Lighthouse/Donovan Wylie and Chris Klatell. 2017–20. To be published by Steidl 2020.

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