

Towards a shared future

(4) Explorations of Identity

Compiled by

Michael Hall

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466 Springfield Road, Belfast BT12 7DW

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mikehall.island@yahoo.co.uk
<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

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Introduction

In the previous pamphlet in this series [No. 103, *Towards a shared future (3) Irreconcilable identities?*] a number of grassroots activists were asked to discuss what they considered to be their ‘identity’, whether cultural, political or religious. Significantly, many of the interviewees were more concerned with highlighting perceived threats to that identity, rather than exploring its varied components. Feeling, therefore, that it might be useful to supplement those interviews with more in-depth material, this pamphlet presents a number of articles which will hopefully add to, and extend, the debate around identity and culture.

A cross-border exploration of history (*page 4*)

This is a selection of comments made during a 2008 discussion involving community activists from Belfast, Drogheda and Buncrana, during which they explored aspects of culture, history and identity, and touched upon the difficulties encountered when promoting them.

Towards a shared remembrance: a grassroots success story (*page 11*)

Many people assume that our two main traditions are unlikely to view any major aspect of this island’s history from a shared perspective; this section reveals just how productive grassroots initiatives can sometimes prove to be.

Is there a ‘Northern Irish’ identity? (*page 15*)

I was motivated to write this paper in the aftermath of apparent media surprise that 21% of the population of Northern Ireland (28% in the Omagh area) identified themselves as ‘Northern Irish only’ in the 2011 Census.

‘Britishness’ and ‘Irishness’ – a challenge (*page 20*)

This is a paper I prepared at the request of the Shankill Think Tank in 1995. It was suggested that I reprint it here because of its relevance to the topics under discussion.

Michael Hall *Farset Community Think Tanks Co-ordinator*

A cross-border exploration of history

The following quotes have been taken from Island Pamphlet No. 87, Divided by History? which is an account of discussions (held in 2008) involving members of community projects based in Belfast, Drogheda and Inishowen.

Sean Collins It has been about twenty-five years since I first started to take Northern groups to the Boyne. And, looking back, I was always intrigued by the perceptions held by people then. The inhabitants of the South would have looked north every Twelfth of July to see the Ulstermen celebrating their heritage and their culture, and would have assumed that most Ulster Protestants were well versed in the history of the 1690 period. Yet when Protestant groups first began to come down to the Boyne, and I started to engage with them, it always surprised me that few of them really understood the background to the battle. It was as if everything just began in July 1690 with the battle and nothing much had happened before that. No-one could tell me *why* King William and King James had found themselves in conflict, and what took them to the Boyne. Most of them didn't even know that William was James' son-in-law. They certainly didn't know that William's elite unit, the Dutch Blue Guards, were largely Catholics. This lack of any real understanding was once highlighted for me by a lady from Belfast who was part of a senior citizens' group which had got involved in a North/South project. When I asked the group for their views this lady said that she was born in Sandy Row and asked whether I knew it. I replied that I did. And she said, 'Do you know the Boyne Bridge [which runs from Sandy Row over the railway line]?' And again I said that I did. And she said, 'Well, that's where I always thought it took place.' So, for all of her life she had believed that the Battle of the Boyne had taken place at the end of her street! So there's perceptions for you.

George Newell People in the Protestant working class were never taught what our real history was, either concerning the island of Ireland, or even Ulster. We were told the basics about Orangeism or Unionist politics and that was it. About two years ago, there was one particular group of young people we were working with, and we asked them to identify their culture. And they said that they were British and Loyalist. We then asked them how they would promote this culture. One lad said that he would promote his culture by wearing a Rangers top, for he felt that people would look at it and say, 'Well, he must be a loyalist; he must be a unionist.' And a girl of sixteen said, 'Well, I would do it by eating an "Ulster fry" every Saturday morning.' Because it connected with the word 'Ulster', she felt that by eating an Ulster fry once a week this was her way of showing how good a Loyalist she was. And that was the limit of it. No other ways of promoting

their culture were voiced by the group. They didn't really know how else to express it. Indeed, just recently one of the girls from our present class got married to a Turkish guy, over in Turkey. She told us that her husband and his family were able to explain everything about their culture: the dance, the music, the language. But when they asked her what *her* culture was and how she expressed it, she admitted to us that she didn't know what to say – all she could tell them was that she went to see the Orange bands and watched the Twelfth parade every July. Other than that she didn't really know much about culture. So, it is a major problem in Protestant working-class communities. For outsiders readily attach labels like 'bigoted' and 'sectarian' to our culture, and we don't know how to counteract that, to express our culture and heritage in a more positive manner.

Michael Hall I used to be involved in sending 120 children to Holland every summer, as part of a scheme organised by the Dutch children's charity, Pax Christi Kinderhulp, and the Dutch organisers would regularly visit Northern Ireland for planning sessions, or to meet the children and their parents. I always took each group of Dutch on a short history tour. I would usually begin the tour with a walk up beyond the treeline just below Cave Hill, for it was an ideal vantage point to explain how Belfast had developed demographically, and indicate where the working-class areas had grown up around the shipyards and the mills. I would then point across Belfast Lough in the direction of Bangor, explaining that the monastic settlement which was founded there in 555 AD by St. Comgall held a pre-eminent place in European history, for it was from there that St. Columbanus and St. Gall departed on their great missionary journey to 'barbarian' Europe, and in so doing laid the foundations for the revival of European civilisation and culture in the period following the collapse of the Roman Empire. I would also note that the vibrant creativity emanating from the scriptoria of the monastic settlements in north-east Ulster resulted in this part of Ireland becoming the cradle of written Irish literature, and one of the products of that creativity – the *Táin*, or 'Cattle Raid of Cooley' – is the *oldest* story, written in a vernacular language, in Western European literature. I would further point out that during the American War of Independence young America won its first naval battle when John Paul Jones, the 'Father of the American Navy', sailed into Belfast Lough and captured the British warship *HMS Drake* in 1778. Almost a quarter of a million Ulster men and women had already emigrated to America by then, and many of these 'Scots-Irish' formed the backbone of the American revolutionary armies. I would also explain that the summit of the Cave Hill was where Wolfe Tone and the Belfast Presbyterian leaders of the United Irishmen swore an oath to fight for the independence of Ireland. Then, finally, I would point across to Scotland – the Dutch were always surprised that it was so close [indeed, it is only thirteen miles at one point] – and list all the different historical, cultural, religious and linguistic connections between Ireland and Scotland.

The reason I am mentioning all this is that on a number of occasions we were

accompanied up the Cave Hill by some of the young local volunteers who were to go with the children to Holland. And on each occasion they would say more or less the same thing: ‘You know, you’re here giving a history lesson to the Dutch, but none of us know anything about this history either.’ In fact, one young girl summed it up somewhat colourfully when she said, ‘See that ‘cattle raid’ story you mentioned... See if the “oldest story in Western Europe” had been written in England, we’d all be fed up to the back teeth doing GCSEs and ‘O’ levels on it!’

George Newell I think one of the causes of our lack of knowledge is down to the cocoon-like way we all lived at that time. We lived our lives within a restricted area; it was an environment where we were more or less shielded from having any real awareness of what lay outside. And added to that was the lack of a proper education, which in large part you could put down to our own Unionist politicians, who were in charge of our education. Within the education curriculum there was nothing which would help us understand our own local culture and history, let alone Irish history. We were denied that. So we lived in an environment where it would be quite understandable for someone to believe that the Battle of the Boyne was fought at the Boyne Bridge on Sandy Row, and that the Orangemen were King William’s army. We knew next to nothing about it all. Even if you take the 1st July parade over in East Belfast: it was always known as the ‘wee Twelfth’ or the ‘mini-Twelfth’, it was never known as the Somme Parade. And yet that is what it originally was – a celebration of the sacrifice made on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. It was generally seen as a wee demonstration by the bands in Ballymacarrett in advance of the main Twelfth. It is only lately that its real meaning has been recognised again.

Sean Collins In the 1970s Robert Kee did a TV series on the history of Ireland, and during one episode he showed an Orange parade, and a man carrying a banner depicting the Catholic Confederacy rebellion of 1641, during which Protestants were drowned in the River Bann. And Kee asked the man, ‘What’s your banner about?’ And the man replied, ‘Well, it was like this. Catholics and Protestants had two separate Bibles; there was a Catholic Bible and a Protestant one. And because the Protestants wouldn’t read the Catholic Bible the Catholics drowned them.’ And this is what he thought his banner was representing.

Michael Hall In 1985, whenever I was writing *Ulster: the Hidden History*¹, I showed the draft to various people on both sides of the community, seeking feedback. One of those I gave it to was an ex-UDA member, a community worker from Highfield estate. When I called with him to hear what he thought about it he said, ‘I really liked it – except for that bit there.’ And he indicated a section entitled ‘Twenty Historic Sites’, in which I had listed my favourite dolmens, castles, monasteries and so on, throughout Ireland. ‘What did you not like about it?’ I asked. ‘It’s bloody ridiculous,’ he replied. Now, I must admit that I immediately assumed that he was reacting in a sectarian fashion – as if information extolling

locations right across Ireland had no place in a book about Ulster. ‘Oh no,’ he assured me, ‘it’s ridiculous that I have never heard about any of these places. In school I was told about the Tower of London but never about Dunluce Castle; I heard mention of Stonehenge but never anything about Newgrange. I went through the Northern Ireland school system and came out knowing next to nothing about my own country – the whole focus was on *English* history.’

Fearghal O Boyle I took a group of kids for a walk around Dublin and we went to Harcourt Street and showed them where Sir Edward Carson had been born. And they just could not believe that he was a Dubliner. And I was saying to them, ‘See when Carson was addressing crowds in Belfast? Well, his accent would have sounded a lot more like mine than yours.’ And they were amazed. And then we came to the College of Surgeons, and I said to them, ‘This is a Royal college. Look up at the flag. That’s the flag of St. Patrick with a crown in the middle of it.’ They were gobsmacked by all these things. And not only the ones from Belfast, but the Dublin kids as well.

Every year for the last twenty-five years or so, my village, Muff, has held a festival, and as part of it, on the Sunday, there has been an outdoor céilidh in the carpark of ‘The Squealing Pig’ pub. And two years ago Mura McLaughlin got on to the Scottish Country Dancers in Ballyarnett and asked them to participate. So on the Saturday night there was another ceildhe – that’s the Ulster-Scots spelling. And there were hundreds at it, people came along out of curiosity, and Stewart Buchanan and his Ulster-Scots band were playing at it. And as I was standing there, people I knew came over and stood beside me, and one said, ‘Is this the Irish one or the Scottish one?’ And I said, ‘Now, I don’t know; could you tell the difference?’ And, to be honest, it was more or less the same style of music, and most people couldn’t tell the difference between the two.

Sean Collins Drogheda used to have a grammar school which was once seen as the great bastion of education for the children of Irish gentlemen. When Gratton held his parliament in the 1780s it had to be closed whenever the school was having its prize-giving day, because so many members of the parliament had sons attending the school. They were the elite; they were the ruling class. And yet the Franciscans were teaching Irish at the school at that time. The school had asked them to come in, and so the gentlemen’s sons were learning Irish from Franciscan priests who by law shouldn’t have been in the town at all, the Penal Laws were still in place. In the 1980s, when there was talk as to whether to knock down the old school – it was still a very fine architectural building – I remember the Town Clerk saying, ‘That bloody English hole; who wants it anyway? All they ever did was teach English.’ That’s how little he knew about his own town.

George Newell When we talk of culture we automatically think in terms of religion, nationality and identity, but when I was growing up the one thing which stood out far more than anything else was that there was a class culture, and we

were all working class. And whether we were Protestant or Catholic, we suffered the same conditions. I was recently looking at a video made in the early 1970s on the Shankill and I couldn't believe that that was the type of environment we put up with, the depressed environment that people had to bring up their families in. And what stood out more than anything else, in terms of my own life experience, was this class system that operated within society. There were those 'above' you – the local minister, school teacher, politician and others – and they were in the hierarchy, while everybody else was underneath that. And we were all, Protestant and Catholic, in the same boat. But few people today consider 'class' as being part of their cultural identity; we are fixated with religion and nationality.

Noel Large Republicans claim that they want to stop our bands walking through or near their areas because we are 'forcing' our heritage onto their community. But they do the exact same thing with the Irish language. I'll give you an example. Bertie Ahern came to the Springfield Road about two years ago for a community event; Gerry Adams was at it too. Ahern got up and said a few phrases in Irish then quickly went into his spiel, spoke for about ten minutes and finished with *Go raibh mile maith agaibh* – 'thank you'. He sat down and Adams got up. He spoke for over five minutes in Irish and I hadn't a clue what he was on about. Now, here's the leading Republican politician from down South who doesn't feel the need to fill my face with ten minutes of the Irish language, while the man from West Belfast feels he does. They are using it as a weapon. And both sides are guilty of this. We use aspects of our cultures as weapons to beat each other with, instead of using them as something which we can all enjoy and cherish – and share. And we are bastardising our culture and heritage in the process.

Fearghal O Boyle I would agree with you totally about the way in which some Republicans – probably quite a few of them – are using the Irish language. 'P J' and I were at an event there in Lifford, in the council offices, when Bairbre de Brún brought along a crowd of European MEPs, and there were Polish, French and others among them. They were sitting there with their English-language translators. And, of course, de Brún had her Irish-language translators. So here were all these Europeans who could just about speak English and she insisted on speaking in Irish, holding the whole thing up, while one fellow translated from Irish into English, and then the other translators translated the English into the European languages. The event was opened by a councillor from Gweedore, who is a Gaelgoir, and he just said a couple of formal, welcoming words in Irish, which is grand. But not de Brún; her Irish was being done to make a political point: 'I am going to force this Irish on you all.' So I think you are right; I think it is being used as a political weapon, even as a form of oneupmanship.

P J Hallinan We were up in Belfast with a group just before Christmas and we took them to the Shankill and hooked up with a guy from EPIC [Loyalist ex-prisoner support group]. He took us up to the interface and gave us a history

of things, and a very balanced history it was. The guy had himself done time in the Kesh. We ended up in the Rex Bar. We sat down and in the course of our conversation he asked me, 'Do you speak Gaelic?' I said I did, so he started to talk to me in Irish. And he called his friend over and he too spoke some Gaelic. And I asked them, 'Are there many people around here would be able to speak a bit of Gaelic?' And they said, 'Most of us in here would speak some.' And I thought it was fantastic to be down in the middle of the Shankill and to be talking Irish in a manner in which we understood each other. We were educating one another.

Fearghal O Boyle But equally, in response to the way nationalists have utilised the Irish language as a weapon, people in the unionist community sought to elevate Ulster-Scots to the same level; to me that was a political response, rather than a thought-out cultural response.

Sean Collins I would agree. Now, I accept that there is an Ulster-Scots musical tradition, as well as other aspects of that culture, but if I read Ulster-Scots literature phonetically I can read it in English. To me it's not a language; I don't know what you would call it. I think that someone has got totally carried away with themselves, and that in about ten years' time they're all going to say to themselves: what on earth were we thinking!

Barney McCaughey I would also be a bit difficult to convince that Ulster-Scots is really an actual language. But whether it is or isn't, it is nevertheless what I spoke when I was growing up in Newtownards. Around the Ards Peninsula that's how everybody spoke. When I went to grammar school I remember having to train myself to use different words so that I could fit into the school. So it was there, whatever it is. It's certainly a reality, it's a way of speaking.

Jackie Hewitt Barney is right. What we didn't recognise when we were growing up was that we were actually *living* a culture, which was based on Ulster-Scots traditions. And this was reflected in our language, in the words we used. Words like sheugh, thrawn, oxters, halion, skite, pachle, skelf.... As I said, this wasn't recognised at that time – and the present focus on Ulster-Scots, and the development of Ulster-Scots Associations is comparatively new – but we were actually living it when we were young. Anyway, what *is* culture? The events of today will become part of the culture of tomorrow, and I'm sure as time goes on all sorts of myths will grow up about many of the main events of the Troubles, and they'll probably be viewed just as inaccurately as the events of 1641 or 1690.

Michael Hall Not only that, but there are many aspects of culture which seem to have existed from time immemorial but which, on deeper investigation, are revealed to be relatively modern developments. Irish folklorist Kevin Danaher pointed out that it is wrong to claim that the so-called 'Irish kilt', as worn by Irish dancers, is some form of Irish national costume. According to him it is a bogus invention originating from what he termed 'the uncritical enthusiasm' of

the early days of the National movement – the real Irish dress was nothing like that.² Likewise, there exists this romantic notion that there was a ‘King of all Ireland’ located at Tara. In reality there were probably no less than 150 kings in the country at any given date between the fifth and twelfth centuries.³ Also, the oft-promoted tourist image of Ireland, one which is supposed to be quintessentially Irish, is that of the isolated thatched cottage, standing alone amidst beautiful scenery. Whilst the scenery might be quintessentially Irish the lone homestead is not. For most of this island’s history the mass of people in rural Ireland lived in small hamlets [kin-clusters or *clachans*], and it was only in the nineteenth century, when this ancient communal way of life had been fundamentally eroded, that the lone cottage came into its own.⁴

Jackie Hewitt George talked earlier about not being taught Ulster history at school, but only an English history, a British history. Now, the majority of people in the Protestant community genuinely feel they are British. And the Battle of the Boyne was more than simply an Irish battle, it was an integral part of British history. So it doesn’t annoy me that we were taught British history; the problem is that we weren’t taught the *whole* history, of the British Isles. If that had happened, we all might have been able to put a better perspective on things; indeed, embracing not only the history of the whole British Isles but the history of Europe as well, and how it all relates together.

P J Hallinan This is an island. We have music, song and dance and history that is unique, that is ours, and the only ones who are going to destroy that is us. And the challenge for us is to make sure that there is informed information out there that people respect. As a nationalist I cannot be proud that the Tricolour and the Union Jack have both been used and abused over the last number of years. They should only be used on occasions which merit their use, rather than being wrapped around every pole in the country – and with every kerbstone painted in their colours – for all that has done is to desecrate what they stand for. They should be used as emblems of respect. But they are too often used to mark out territory, and basically it’s about creating aggro. We can’t rewrite our history, but we can learn from it. If we use it properly as a tool for engaging people in a positive way then we’re winning, we’re going places with it.

References

- 1 Michael Hall, *Ulster: the Hidden History*, Pretani Press, Belfast, 1986.
- 2 Kevin Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, Mercier Press, 1978, p80-1.
- 3 Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, Batsford, 1973, p7.
- 4 E. Estyn Evans, *The Personality of Ireland*, Blackstaff Press, 1981, p55-57.

Towards a shared remembrance: a grassroots success story

This account has been distilled from Island Pamphlet No. 84, A shared sacrifice for peace, which can be downloaded from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/islandpublications>

Preparing the ground

Farset Youth & Community Development Project emerged as one of a number of community-based attempts to counteract the social breakdown which followed in the wake of the escalating Troubles. Farset's primary concern was for young people, seeking ways to turn them away from ingrained sectarian attitudes or even just to get them 'offside' for a while, to allow them to view their own society more objectively. In 1983 Farset initiated a youth exchange scheme, taking a group of young people to France. But on the last day of that first trip something unplanned-for occurred. As Jackie Hewitt, Farset's Manager, recalled:

On our way back to the boat, we realised we would arrive at the channel port far too early, so Ian Adamson suggested that we make a detour to the Ulster Tower† at Thiepval, on the Somme battlefield. We parked at the nearby war cemetery and immediately our group of young people – who were from Dublin as well as Belfast – were soon engrossed walking round the headstones, identifying the different Irish regiments. They were so enthusiastic that we decided we would take them inside the tower itself. A notice on the door said that anyone seeking access had to see a Madame Van Suyt, who lived at nearby Hamel. At the young people's insistence we went to see her and she duly opened up the Tower. The interior was full of spiders, cobwebs and dead flies, while dust was lying thick on the floor. When we returned to Belfast some of the young people, still enthused, asked if we couldn't do something about it. And so, with the help of local politicians, we eventually secured government funding to initiate a Farset Somme Project, for the purpose of refurbishing the Ulster Tower, opening it up again to visitors, and reinstating it as a place of remembrance. As the project developed it soon became quite clear the massive interest we had generated.

On subsequent visits an extensive programme incorporated tours of the Somme area. It was explained to the young people that the purpose was not to glorify war, but to

† Thiepval Memorial Tower, known as the Ulster Tower, was erected in 1921 by public subscription raised in Northern Ireland in memory of the officers and men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, and all Ulstermen, who died in the Great War. It is modelled on Helen's Tower in Clondeboye estate, Co. Down, where the Division trained before being sent to France.

make them aware of the devastation and loss of life, not forgetting those left bereaved throughout Ireland. In 1987 Farset's 'Somme Tour' broadened out to include sites in neighbouring Belgium: Messines, Ypres, the Menin Gate and the 16th (Irish) Division memorial at Wyteschaete. 1987 also saw the start of official ceremonies to which were invited dignitaries and local councillors from across Northern Ireland.

Michael Hall's publication *Sacrifice on the Somme*, commissioned by Farset in 1988, greatly helped to encourage people to look at this part of Ulster's history in a new way, focusing on the cross-community nature of the sacrifice. 5000 copies were distributed and helped to consolidate Farset's efforts.

On 1 July 1989, Farset held an official Re-dedication Ceremony at the Tower, in the presence of Princess Alice, the Duchess of Gloucester.

When the suggestion was made to purchase Thiepval Wood, which had been the 36th Division's base prior to the battle, it was realised that this needed the setting up of a separate company. And so the Somme Association was established in 1990, under the management of David Campbell, who had worked for the Farset Somme Project. In 1994 the Association opened a visitors' centre at Thiepval, and also the Somme Heritage Centre, a registered museum located at Conlig, near Newtownards, Co. Down. [The Somme Association, with government assistance, finally purchased Thiepval Wood in 2004.]

Complementary efforts at Messines

With public interest now aroused by the work initiated by Farset, other people began to add to its impact. Former loyalist politician Glen Barr and Southern TD Paddy Harte launched the Island of Ireland Peace Park, located at Messines in Belgium, where a replica of an Irish round tower was erected as its central focus. The Peace Park was officially opened on 11 November 1998, in the presence of Queen Elizabeth, Irish President Mary McAleese, and King Albert of Belgium. [On 7 June 2007 the 90th anniversary of the Battle of Messines was celebrated there, and, as a further sign of changing attitudes, Sinn Féin sent its first official representatives, although individual Sinn Féin members had previously supported Farset's efforts.]

Inishowen remembrance at Fort Dunree (Republic of Ireland)

Yet another strand to the process of shared remembrance was to develop. After accompanying Glen Barr on one of the trips to Messines, community worker 'P J' Hallinan, from Inishowen, County Donegal, was motivated, along with others, to establish the Inishowen Partnership Friends of Messines. As well as taking people to Belgium, they decided that they were also going to remember the men – and two women – of Inishowen who were killed in the Great War. They decided that the best way to do this would be to hold a service of commemoration at Dunree Military Fort, located a few miles north of Buncrana.

They were concerned that people in the Irish Republic might not appreciate a memorial to the First World War. However, they received great local support, a sign that people's attitudes were slowly changing. Indeed, at subsequent commemorations,

not only did they fly the Irish Tricolour, but the Union Jack, the EU flag, and the German flag – in that way remembering *all* those who gave their lives.

Cross-community impact

It has been the peace-building aspects which have provided the most important ingredient for many. Hundreds of people from both main traditions in Northern Ireland, as well as people from the Republic, have participated in programmes either at the Somme, or in Belgium. So productive were these programmes – in terms of cross-community engagement and education – that in 2000 an International School for Peace Studies was established in Belgium.

Given the positive response, Glen Barr and ‘P J’ Hallinan even paraded the Irish Tricolour and the Union Jack together to the cenotaph in Derry/Londonderry, the first time it had ever been done. The event received a lot of media coverage, and only one person condemned it. In Belgium the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Apprentice Boys of Derry have paraded to the Peace Tower, not in separate groups but mingling with one another.

[It was also significant that when Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern addressed a joint session of the British Houses of Parliament in May 2007 he mentioned Messines as a place of ‘shared history’.]

The role of ex-combatants

In 2002 the Fellowship of Messines Association was established, the core of its membership being loyalist and republican ex-combatants. Frankie Gallagher initially encountered hostility among fellow loyalists to any engagement with republicans, but those animosities gradually faded. As he noted, with regard to one particular community initiative:

We decided to replace a loyalist paramilitary mural in Tullycarnet [East Belfast] with one depicting the only Northern Ireland recipient of the VC during World War II – James Magennis, a Catholic from the Falls Road. We initially thought we were going to get a lot of criticism and were quite anxious as to what the local response would be. We needn’t have worried, because the people of Tullycarnet made it abundantly clear that it was a great thing to recognise someone like that. And when we brought people from the Irish Republic, and representatives of the Dublin Fusiliers and others, up to the unveiling ceremony, I was really pleased at how welcome the residents of Tullycarnet made them feel. I think they saw it as an opportunity to express something positive and non-sectarian about themselves, because they were sick of being stigmatised as bigots, and a lot of people in the Protestant community aren’t like that at all.

Irish republican Harry Donnaghy also felt positive about the engagement.

When we first developed the Messines Fellowship I suppose some of us felt it would only be a short-lived thing: you might be able to get republicans and loyalists to meet together for a brief period of time but it wouldn't be sustained. But not only has it been sustained it has grown. And it is being used in a very challenging and educational way. Not only do we deal with events like the Somme and Messines, but we ask each group: why? why did these guys think that this was the right thing to do at that time? what happened to them afterwards? I think that Irish Nationalism now has the maturity and the compassion to re-evaluate the actions of those men who were castigated and cast into the margins of history for nearly ninety years. When I first got involved in the Messines project I faced open hostility from people within the republican movement – I was called a traitor, an apologist for imperialism – and I always responded: if you had grown up on the Falls Road, or the Shankill Road, or in any other town on this island at that time, and whether you were unionist or nationalist, would you have acted any differently, especially when you were being told by your politicians that this is what you have to do? My grandfather was always proud of having enlisted with the Connaught Rangers, and fighting on virtually every front. He survived the war, but his brother was killed at Gallipoli. My grandmother's two brothers are buried within a mile of one another at Messines Ridge. The greatest indictment on our generation would be if we were to pass on our own inherited sectarian attitudes to another generation.

Jackie Hewitt summed up the impact of the whole initiative:

I think that, when you look at all that has been done – from the first Farset involvement (which came about solely because of the enthusiasm of a cross-community group of young people), the development of the Somme Association, and right up to what is happening now in Inishowen and out at the Somme and Messines – it was a marvellous feat and one of the most significant elements in the development of a peace process. The peace process is not the outcome of a couple of days spent at Leeds Castle by a group of politicians. The peace process is a manifestation of what has gone on in the community over the years, what the community has been saying, where they want to get to... all these things contributed to the peace process. And I genuinely believe that what we have all done, through our different projects, has been a valuable part of that.

When the Queen, accompanied by Irish President Mary McAleese, laid wreaths at both the Garden of Remembrance and the National War Memorial Gardens, Dublin, during her highly successful visit to Ireland in 2011, she was treading a path which had already been well prepared for her by people who had been working away quietly at the grassroots to find ways of embracing their shared history.

Is there a ‘Northern Irish’ identity?

A number of media commentators voiced a degree of surprise when, according to 2011 Census statistics, 21% of the population of Northern Ireland indicated that they identified themselves as ‘Northern Irish only’ rather than ‘British’ or ‘Irish’. But is this really so surprising? And is there any basis for it in our history?

A shared inheritance

The communal divisions (cultural/religious/political) which exist in Northern Ireland today are assumed to date back to the collision between ‘Planter’ and ‘Gael’, compounded because Planters and Gaels are deemed to have been two quite distinct and separate peoples, with little in common except perhaps their shared animosity. However, anyone who has gazed seawards from one of the headlands along the Antrim or North Down coasts and realised just how close Scotland is must surely have doubted that the first substantial contact between the peoples on either side of the North Channel could have occurred only four hundred years ago during the Plantation. And indeed, when we investigate the connection between the two areas more deeply, we discover just how close and ancient it actually is. As Irish historian Liam de Paor noted:

The gene pool of the Irish... is probably very closely related to the gene pools of highland Britain.... Within that fringe area, relationships, both cultural and genetic, almost certainly go back to a much more distant time than that uncertain period when Celtic languages and customs came to dominate both Great Britain and Ireland. Therefore, so far as the physical make-up of the Irish goes... they share these origins with their fellows in the neighbouring parts – the north and west – of the next-door island of Great Britain.¹

Indeed, an extensive DNA study by Bryan Sykes concluded that ‘there is a very close genetic affinity between Scotland and Ireland.’²

However, even if it was to be conceded that the Scottish arrivals might have had some distant kinship with the Irish among whom they were being planted, it is widely presumed that the two peoples now developed separately – an Irish version of apartheid. Yet, contrary to such a belief, the Planters did not drive the native Irish off the planted territories *en masse*. While the Gaelic landlords and their followers were certainly dispossessed, it is now realised that the entire pre-plantation population was not. Historian A T Q Stewart pointed out:

Neither the undertakers nor the London companies found it expedient or possible to clear all the native Irish from their lands, and therefore they accepted them as tenants, violating their contracts with the Crown in order

to do so. Without the Irish tenants it is doubtful whether the Scots and English planters could have made such limited progress as they had by 1641. The great concealed factor in this whole ‘British’ plantation is the part played by the relatively undisturbed Irish population in building the towns, fortified bawns and planter castles, and in developing the resources of forests, rivers and loughs... When we remember that the servitors and Irish grantees were actually permitted to take Irish tenants, it becomes clear beyond doubt that a very substantial proportion of the original population was not disturbed at all. Modern historical research on the plantation has thrown much light on this continuity of population.³

With the two communities living in close proximity, interaction inevitably resulted. Estyn Evans pointed out that ‘There was much more intermarriage, with or without the benefit of the clergy, than the conventional histories make allowance for.’⁴ There is abundant evidence of people changing their religion, with many planters becoming Catholic and many native Irish becoming Protestant. The process of interaction still continues – many people in Northern Ireland today have ‘mixed’ marriages in their family trees. Even surnames do not guarantee a means of surmising someone’s background, a point Ulick O’Connor made in relation to IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands:

It is ironic that he, who more than anyone else by his devotion to the Irish language while in Long Kesh helped to contribute to the present renaissance of the language in West Belfast, should not have a Gaelic name. (I once published a list of eleven names that could well have been those of a Protestant hockey team of boys and girls from a posh Belfast school. It was, in fact, compiled from a list of members of the Provisional IRA who had been killed in action.) You can see the influence of this mixed background in Bobby Sands’ writing – Scots dialogue here and there; ‘the sleekit old Brit’ for instance.⁵

Is there a Northern Irish Identity?

Even if the reader accepts – grudgingly or otherwise – that the present-day descendants of the Planters and Gaels *might* have a more common ancestry than is popularly believed, how does that relate to a specifically *Northern Irish identity*? The reality is that throughout its history Ulster† and its people have exhibited a distinctive identity. Now, a distinctive identity does not necessarily imply a *separate* identity; the Ulster people have too many long-standing ties with the people in the rest of Ireland and mainland Britain to allow for that. Yet when you make mention of an ‘Ulster/Northern Irish identity’ the suspicion is voiced that your intentions are separatist. Why does it have to be viewed that way? Family

† Many readers will be quick to point out that ‘Northern Ireland’ and ‘Ulster’ are not coterminous. But even in Donegal some years ago local newspapers were complaining that Donegal was the ‘forgotten county’ of Ireland, and many people there felt a deep estrangement from Dublin.

members frequently celebrate their own unique togetherness without at the same time desiring to live separately from their next-door neighbours.

So let us take a look at this Ulster identity – without those who identify with either a United Ireland or the Union with Britain feeling that it threatens their deeply-held aspirations. Indeed, both aspirations can only be strengthened by a deeper understanding of what the people of Northern Ireland share in common.

P L Henry described the difference between Ulster and the rest of Ireland as ‘one of the most deeply-rooted, ancient, and – from a literary point of view – most productive facts of early Irish history.’⁶ And Estyn Evans wrote: ‘The two communities in the north, however deeply divided by religion, share an outlook on life which is different from that prevailing in the south and which bears the stamp of a common heritage.’⁴ Even the arrival of the Celts, as Evans suggested, ‘reinforced an older and persistent regional distinction... Gaelic culture as a whole, like the Gaelic language, seems to have taken shape by being poured into an Irish mould, a mould having varied regional designs.’

Ulster’s chieftains certainly considered their territory to be the true bastion of Gaelic Ireland. No-one epitomised this better than Owen Roe O’Neill, who was as staunch an Ulsterman as any present-day Northern loyalist. Owen spent more than half of his life in exile on the Continent, and whilst there he and his fellow Ulstermen associated so much together that other Irish leaders sarcastically labelled them the ‘northern clique’. When he returned to play a prominent part in the 1641 rebellion he was met by constant suspicion and intrigue from the Southerners, and formed his own ‘Catholic Army of Ulster’. As Jerrold Casway noted: ‘Rather than accept assistance from Owen O’Neill and the Ulster Irish, many Anglo-Irishmen preferred the Leinster forces... Owen and his northern army, they asserted, should remain in the north where they belonged.’⁷ Rinuccini, the Papal Nuncio, ascribed this animosity to ‘no other ends than the bad feeling which is cherished towards the men of Ulster’. However, it was Owen’s Catholic Army of Ulster which fought the greatest battle of the war at Benburb, the high point of the Gaelic struggle. Before the battle Owen exhorted his men with a ‘Caesar-like oration’, in which he told them: ‘You are the flower of Ulster, descended from as ancient and honourable a stock of people as any in Europe.’

Before the rebellion collapsed, the Gaelic rebels, in one of those twists of history, for a moment found themselves in alliance with Protestant parliamentary forces against the Crown. Derry was surrounded by royalists and its commander, Sir Charles Coote, appealed to Owen for assistance. Owen’s Army of Ulster marched to relieve the city.

The relief of Londonderry created a momentary atmosphere of satisfaction and celebration unique to Ulster. Owen and Sir Charles met for the first time. The native Irish Catholic general and the commander of the leading Protestant-planter stronghold in Derry toasted each other within the walls of that city. Coote paid Owen O’Neill many compliments and in his letter to the English Council of State spoke of his respect for the Ulster leader.⁷

A sense of regional identity was noted by visitors to Ireland during the Williamite period. As Raymond Gillespie and Harold O'Sullivan commented:

This division was reflected in differing attitudes and native Irish Ulstermen were by no means comfortable in seventeenth century Munster. George Storey, an officer in the Williamite army, noted in 1691 that after the war the Ulstermen who had fled to Kerry and Clare during the war began to return home 'which was a little odd to see' since it was a long journey, they had no assurance of regaining their farms in Ulster and there was a real risk of retaliation from the settlers. In contrast, land in Munster was cheap and available 'but', Storey noted, 'the reason for this is plain, for there is so great an antipathy between the Ulster Irish and those in other parts of the kingdom, as nothing can be more, and the feuds amongst them greater than between either and their injured protestant neighbours.'⁸

However, despite such examples of a shared identity, today's reality is that community perceptions in Northern Ireland are not founded on commonality, but on deep divisions. The Troubles were, in large part, the result of one community feeling forcibly separated from their southern co-religionists and the other community feeling under siege by those who threatened to separate *them* from their British heritage. Ironically, the violence which ensued only increased the impression of regional difference – when viewed from *outside* by those to whom the two communities afforded such undying loyalty. In 1978 writer Dervla Murphy remarked that, 'In Ireland, during recent years, many Southerners have been voicing anti-Northern sentiments with increasing vehemence and frequency.'⁹ Why should that be so? Because the unrelenting violence, which was barbaric rather than romantic, had appalled the vast majority of people in the rest of the island. As Bowyer Bell wrote:

The Republic wanted no part of the Troubles, no part of Northern Ireland in whatever guise... Dublin gradually accepted that Ireland was not only a divided island but also a divided society and to incorporate the latter into the former was beyond power and desire. As the Orangemen said, six into twenty-six won't go; nor, felt Dublin, should it... The majority still wanted unity but without cost and without complication. Most feared violence and the six counties were violent... For Dublin the dream now is that the North could stay silent in the margins as it did for so long – unknown, mysterious, unredeemed, and forgotten but on patriot holidays. Now the prospect of the Black North as a Green province appals all but the few faithful republicans and the romantics.¹⁰

On the British mainland, a distancing process had also been under way – assuming that many there cared much for this 'other part' of the United Kingdom in the first place. The Northern Irish, then, as much because of the bitterness of their quarrel, had been steadily losing friends. How much this has since been rectified by the 'peace process' remains unclear.

However, the violence, while engendering an ever-deepening polarisation, had, at the same time, made both communities much more aware of each other's hopes and fears, and, for those with humane sensitivities, brought an acknowledgment, mostly unspoken but nevertheless real, of the pain and suffering they had been visiting upon one another. As Dervla Murphy noted:

More than ten years ago M W Heslinga discerned within both Northern tribes 'a sense of regional fellowship, a sense of difference from Southerners, that mixture of contempt and defensiveness that is typical of the strongly-marked provincial character'. Since then this sense of regional fellowship has been strengthened by the horrors the Northerners have been sharing even while they have been inflicting them on each other's communities.⁹

Ulick O'Connor remarked: 'What is important is that there is a growing grassroots acceptance of the idea of a shared community.'¹¹ Such an idea is nothing new. The Siege of Derry centenary commemoration, held on 7 December 1788, showed, as A T Q Stewart pointed out, 'how the celebration of the historic event might have developed in a more 'natural' way, allowing the townsfolk of both creeds to take civic pride in it.'³ An early history of the siege described how the celebrations culminated:

...the mayor and corporation, the clergy, the officers of the navy and army, the clergy of the Church of Rome, the gentlemen from the country, volunteers, citizens, scholars and apprentices set down to a plain but plentiful dinner in the Town Hall. Religious dissensions, in particular, seemed to be buried in oblivion, and Roman Catholic vied with Protestant in expressing... their sense of the blessings secured to them by the event which they were commemorating.

The shared sacrifice made by Protestants and Catholics during the First World War was repeated during the Second World War. Of the 38,000 volunteers from Northern Ireland some 4,500 were killed. The war effort helped forge a new bond between the two communities, as Jonathan Bardon noted:

Catholics and Protestants alike felt proud when General Eisenhower saluted them from the steps of the City Hall.... In addition, the horrors of the Blitz, by throwing together people from both communities, had reduced sectarian animosity in the city to its lowest level since the founding of Northern Ireland.¹²

The people of Northern Ireland are the product of a shared cultural and historical inheritance, one which has constantly thrown them together just as frequently as it has managed to drive them apart. Certainly a 'British' and an 'Irish' identity both exist – but so too does an 'Northern Irish' identity.

[References for this chapter are on page 24)

‘Britishness’ and ‘Irishness’ – a challenge

This document was compiled in 1995 at the request of the Shankill Think Tank

Irreconcilable identities?

It is often claimed that the inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland is unsolvable, because its roots lie in the collision between two irreconcilable national identities. However, this follows as much because of the exclusive manner in which those two identities are invariably expressed: to be Irish one cannot seemingly be British, to be British one cannot be Irish. There also abound gross misunderstandings as to what each identity entails. Gerry Adams, in his book *Free Ireland: Towards a Lasting Peace*, wrote that ‘The loyalists have a desperate identity crisis. They agonise over whether they are Ulster-Scotch, Picts, English or British.’¹ Now, not one of the members of the Shankill Think Tank knew of *any* Ulster loyalists who had ever agonised over whether they were ‘English’. Such a misconception might be expected from a badly-informed foreign journalist, but not from a major player in the politics of the past twenty-five years, and is a reflection of the many misconceptions held by each community about the other.

Just as questionable is the attempt to deny that the other community’s identity is valid. To quote again from Adams: ‘There are no cultural or national links between the loyalists and the British, no matter how much the loyalists scream about their “British way of life”.’ Not only is this comment quite inaccurate, but even a brief overview of different facets of our shared history can reveal the extent of the ‘cultural and national’ links which have existed, not only between ‘the loyalists and the British’, but between *all* the inhabitants of Ireland and those on the British mainland.

A common inheritance

- Identical Stone Age burial monuments exist in the northern half of Ireland and south-west Scotland, of which Séan O Ríordain commented: ‘The tombs and the finds from them form a continuous province *joined rather than divided* by the narrow waters of the North Channel.’² [*Italics added*] Archaeologists have labelled these tombs the ‘Clyde-Carlingford cairns’ to signify the close relationship between the two regions.
- Not only was the North Channel between Scotland and Ulster a constant point of contact between the two islands, but the entire Irish Sea is seen by some scholars as providing for more complex patterns of social interaction than first believed. As archaeologist John Waddell suggested: ‘Perhaps we have greatly underestimated the extent to which this body of water linked the two islands in prehistoric times....’

Maybe we should consider the Irish Sea as a “great land-locked lake”, to use Dillon and Chadwick’s phrase.’³

- The prehistoric link between the two islands also suggests a shared kinship. As Irish historian Liam de Paor commented: ‘The gene pool of the Irish... is probably very closely related to the gene pools of highland Britain.... So far as the physical make-up of the Irish goes... they share their origins with their fellows in the neighbouring parts of the next-door island of Great Britain.’⁴
- It was settlers from the north of Ireland, labelled ‘Scotti’ by the Romans, who bequeathed the name ‘Scotland’ to their new homeland.
- From the 5th to the 8th centuries the Ulster-Scottish kingdom of Dalriada encompassed territory on both sides of the North Channel. From Dalriada emerged the kings who united Scots and Picts in what became Scotland.
- The Gaelic language was brought from Ireland by such settlers and it eventually spread throughout Scotland, a prime example of the close interrelationship between the two islands. In more recent times the influence has been in the opposite direction and much of the distinctive vocabulary of the North of Ireland is of Scottish origin, including words such as *skunder* (sicken), *thole* (endure), *byre*, *corn*, *dander* (stroll), *lift* (steal) and *mind* (remember).
- St. Patrick was a migrant from Britain whose influence on Irish history and culture has been profound.
- When St. Columba sailed from Ulster to Iona, the monastery he founded there proved of vital importance to the religious and cultural history of Scotland. As the Dutch geographer Heslinga wrote, it was settlers from Ulster who ‘gave Scotland her name, her first kings, her Gaelic language and her faith.’⁵
- The cross-fertilisation between east Ulster and northern Britain gave rise to what Proinsias Mac Cana described as ‘a North Channel culture-province within which obtained a free currency of ideas, literary, intellectual and artistic.’⁶ It was this artistic environment – centered in the scriptoria of the more progressive monasteries – which directly led, according to Mac Cana, to east Ulster becoming ‘the cradle of written Irish literature’.
- Some of the ancient annals of early Irish history concern themselves as much with events in Scotland as with those in Ireland.
- Even in the great Irish sagas major characters such as Cúchulainn and Deirdre regularly commute between Ireland and mainland Britain.
- At the Battle of Moira in 637, reputedly the greatest battle ever fought in Ireland, the over-king of Ulster, Congal Cláen, had in his army – according to Colgan – contingents of Picts (Scottish), Anglo-Saxons (English) and Britons (Welsh).

- In 1316, at the request of Ireland's Gaelic chiefs, Edward Bruce of Scotland was proclaimed King of Ireland.
- Between the 13th and 16th centuries the importation by the Irish chieftains of large numbers of Scots mercenaries (the gallowglass) – many of whom settled in Ireland – was to prove vital to the resurgence of Gaelic Ireland.
- The Plantation is the most famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) period of major population movement between Britain and Ireland, but it was not the first such movement, nor was it the last – those of Irish descent have made a significant contribution to the present population of Great Britain.
- Rather than the modern Irish Republic being the embodiment of traditional Gaelic aspirations, 'the concept and the institutions of the modern nation-state were, ironically, imported from England.'⁷
- Irish Republicanism owes much to the radical ideals of Scottish Presbyterianism.
- Despite the conflict which has perennially soured Irish-British relationships, Irishmen have long maintained links with the British Army, epitomised at Waterloo where it is estimated half the British Army were Irishmen. This close connection was also evidenced in the First World War, during which some 50,000 Irishmen died fighting in the British Army. And in the Second World War 80,000 Southern Irishmen volunteered to join the British forces.
- Irish writers of English descent (the Anglo-Irish), alongside those of native Irish descent writing in English, have established one of the most vibrant branches of English literature (with a roll-call of names that includes Spenser, Congreve, Goldsmith, Swift, Sheridan, Wilde, Yeats, Synge, Shaw, O'Casey, Beckett and Heaney). As Robert McCrum noted:

In a remarkable way the Irish have made English their own, and have preserved qualities of speech and writing that many Standard English speakers feel they have lost.... In the fusion of the two traditions, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic, it is sometimes said that Irish Gaelic was the loser. The language was certainly transmuted into English, but it found, in another language, ways of expressing the cultural nuances of Irish society, of making English in its own image.⁸
- The history of the Labour movement has also linked the working-class peoples of the two islands, as did some of its greatest leaders: such as Larkin, who was born in Liverpool, and Connolly, who was born in Edinburgh. During the 1913 Dublin lock-out, for example, English workers organised food-ships to help ameliorate the suffering of their Irish comrades.

This list could easily be extended, but it should be sufficient to refute Adams' assertion that 'Protestants need to be encouraged to recognise that the common history they

share with their Catholic fellow countrymen and women in the common territory of Ireland is *quite foreign to any British experience*.¹ [*Italics added*] On the contrary, it is Irish Catholics who need to recognise that *their own* history is not ‘foreign’ to the historical and cultural experience of mainland Britain, but is an integral part of it. Such a recognition need not threaten either Britishness or Irishness, but enrich both, and serve to promote a more inclusive identity. Gusty Spence made such a point when a loyalist delegation visited the USA:

We were addressing this gathering of people with Irish ‘connections’ and when I told them I was proud to be British but also proud to be Irish, one man remarked, in an irritated tone, ‘Why is it that you loyalists can’t make up your minds what you are!’ I asked him: ‘I take it you are American, sir?’ ‘How perceptive,’ was the gruff response. ‘I take it you are also proud of your Irish roots?’ ‘I am indeed,’ was the more cautious reply. ‘Then if *you* can be proud of your “Irish-American” heritage, are *we* not entitled to be proud of *our* dual heritage?’ The man nodded and sat down.

Our mixed background

There are many in Northern Ireland today who still cling to the notion that each community has somehow managed to emerge from centuries of history relatively free from any ‘contamination’ by the other. By playing their ‘own’ music, their ‘own’ sports, and sustaining a host of other more subtle ‘differences’, they imagine that the two communities have managed to remain two distinct and separate tribes. The reality of our history tells quite a different story.

The document ended with the following challenge from the Shankill Think Tank:

We challenge Ulster Loyalists to redefine their Unionism. Instead of remaining trapped by exclusivist definitions they should have the confidence to celebrate their link with the peoples of Britain in a way that transcends religious or cultural differences within Northern Ireland. We challenge them to develop a Unionism which is truly inclusive of *all* sections of our people.

We challenge Irish Republicans to redefine their Nationalism. Instead of remaining trapped in exclusivist definitions they should have the confidence to celebrate *all* the facets that make up this island’s heritage and not suggest that some are ‘alien’ and hence inferior. Their Nationalism must become truly inclusive. No longer must they assert that a sizeable section of the people living in Ireland can only be considered Irish once they relinquish their Britishness.

Furthermore, we challenge both Loyalists and Republicans to acknowledge that over the centuries each community has imbued many of the other’s attributes, to the extent that the heritage of both traditions has increasingly become a shared one. We challenge Loyalists to acknowledge the Irish component of their heritage, and Republicans to acknowledge the British component of theirs.

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A personal footnote

In 1973, while involved in cross-community endeavours, I received threats from both republicans and loyalists, and was spurred to undertake something I had long aspired to: back-pack around Asia. That experience only confirmed what I already felt: that the peoples of our world, despite their religious and cultural differences, share identical needs, hopes and fears. Furthermore, the hospitality shown by people in every country – from Iran and Afghanistan to Japan and the former Soviet Union – revealed a common generosity of spirit. Behind our own centuries-old divisions that same commonality exists – if we could only admit to it.

Foreign travel also lets us see how our own country is perceived by others. Although the two years of travelling were largely hassle-free, one unsettling incident occurred when my wife and I were detained by the Turkish Army ‘on suspicion of spying for Greece’. At one point during our five-hour ordeal one of the interrogating officers examined my passport. ‘Ah, I see you are from Belfast. Tell me: are you Protestant or Catholic?’ Is that *really* how we want the rest of the world to see us? Will Northern Ireland forever be viewed by others as a land of perpetual sectarian divisions? Surely there is more to our combined cultural identities and traditions than that?

Michael Hall