*View over West Belfast, 1993*

# Introduction


## Clem McCartney


*History says, 'Don't hope*
*On this side of the grave.'*
*But then, once in a lifetime,*
*The longed-for tidal wave*
*Of justice can rise up,*
*And hope and history rhyme.*

from The Cure at Troy
by Seamus Heaney


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The conflict in Northern Ireland is in many ways a paradox. The region has adequate resources and, although it has been a rather marginal area of the British Isles, is nonetheless quite affluent compared to most of the rest of the world. The people are invariably described as friendly and hospitable and to outsiders they seem to form a homogeneous community. The United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is a part, is a functioning democracy where it might be argued there is no need for violence in order to bring about political change. What kind of problem can make people with this background engage in a thirty-year violent struggle against their neighbours and produce some of the most effective militant groups of modern times?

Northern Ireland challenges the assumption that conflicts only occur in underdeveloped countries where tribal loyalties are more important than citizenship, where there is a limited democratic tradition and where there are massive problems of poverty and inequality. There have, of course, been other conflicts in Western Europe since the Second World War including the Basque country and Corsica, but apart from perhaps Cyprus few have been so bitter and none as long-lasting.

Although there have been issues, such as discrimination in housing and employment, electoral manipulation and religious histories, which have separated the two sides, the conflict can be stripped down to the core issues of the balance of power, relations between the communities, and questions of governance. It is rooted in the struggle of one part of the community for an independent and unified Ireland and hostility to that struggle from the other part of the community wanting to remain within the United Kingdom.

For the people living in Northern Ireland the situation has proved so intractable because of a vivid awareness of

Source: Frankie Quinn

past attitudes and behaviour and the fear that these will be replicated in the future. Their concerns about the past and the future in turn govern and limit their present conduct and reconfirm the belief that opponents have learnt nothing from the past: they have not and will not change. It is important to appreciate these perceptions and relationships in order to understand the processes, mechanisms and proposals which were needed to allow the parties to negotiate the Belfast Agreement in April 1998 and to understand the continuing hesitation and opposition to completing this process.

The conflict is complex because of the number of actors involved, both inside and outside Northern Ireland. The states most directly affected are the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Ireland began to come under English influence and control from the twelfth century when Anglo–Norman knights were invited to assist Irish chieftains in a local conflict. Hadrian IV, the only English Pope, then issued the papal bull Lauda Abiliter in 1155–56 allowing Henry II to conquer Ireland. Eventually the country became an integrated part of the United Kingdom. Since then there has always been some level of resistance to English and later British involvement in Ireland. In the early years of the twentieth century the demands for independence became overwhelming following the Easter rising of 1916. In 1921, after a nationalist revolt, the major part of the island became a separate state under the terms of the Anglo–Irish Treaty of 1921. This confirmed the partition of Ireland into the largely Catholic Irish Free State and Northern Ireland where the majority Protestant community wished to remain part of the United Kingdom. Until recently, colonial history continued to influence the attitudes of the English and the Irish towards each other (with the Scots and Welsh less involved) and to dominate relationships between the two governments. At the extremes of these intercultural relations the English displayed an underlying sense of superiority towards the Irish, who in turn struggled to overcome a sense of inferiority and impotence at their inability to prevent the partition of the island.

## Interlocking interests

The relationship became more balanced in recent years, not least because of the common British and Irish membership of the European Union (EU). Partly as a result of EU membership, Ireland's economy has prospered to the extent that it is now known as the 'Celtic Tiger' and Britain's world standing has diminished from the days of the British Empire. These changes have had a significant effect on British–Irish relations and have helped both countries to leave behind past assumptions and work together to find a way out of the conflict.

The EU's concerns over a situation of instability within its borders make it a relevant party to the conflict. The EU Parliament has made recommendations, most notably in the Haagerup Report of 1984, which advocated a greater role for the EU in Northern Ireland, for power-sharing and increased intergovernmental co-operation. More important than its specific conclusions was the signal it gave that the EU considered it had the competence to comment on the hitherto 'internal' affairs of the UK. The Commission has since provided generous financial aid to try to improve living conditions and create a greater sense of normality in Northern Ireland.

The other key international actor that has played a significant third-party role is the United States of America. Over the centuries of emigration from Ireland to North America, the nationalist community there has maintained its identity and formed one of the most effective lobbies in the US. The US administration has tended to be sympathetic to its case and sensitive to its political leverage and has used what influence it has with the British government. Irish American individuals and groups have consistently given financial support to organizations in Ireland, mainly nationalist and reconciliation groups, with whom they identify.

## Identity and ethnic background

Over the centuries the communities living in the northern part of Ireland have found it difficult to coexist. Suspicion and hostility have been a significant feature of their inter-communal relationships. Although there are many examples of co-operation and good neighbourliness, mutual distrust has fed the conflict and in turn provided numerous experiences of hurt and grievance, which have reinforced hostilities.

The two communities are distinct in their backgrounds and in their religious and cultural practices and many within them have believed that their interests are incompatible. Consequently they have developed their sense of identity in opposition to each other, stressing those aspects which are different – encouraged by a common fear of cultural assimilation. However, there are no obvious physical features to distinguish them, nor are their family names always a good guide. For example, the republican leader Gerry Adams, who identifies himself as Irish, has a family name of English origin while a leading unionist, Ken Maginnis, who identifies himself as British, has an Irish family name.

## The religious divide

The most obvious difference between the two communities is religion – Protestantism and Catholicism – although there have also been bitter disputes between

Source: Crispin Rodwell

different strains of Protestantism. But the conflict is not about religion, though the churches as institutions have worked to safeguard the religious identities of their communities and in doing so have reinforced the divisions. A few people reject the dominant political aspirations of their community of origin: some Catholics are happy to be part of the UK while some Protestants favour a united Ireland. Consequently, the use of political categories such as unionist and nationalist is more accurate, though the religious distinction is very strong.

Most Catholics consider themselves to have descended from the Celts or Gaels, the people already living in Ireland when British influence began. They are typically proud to be Irish and identify with Irish or Celtic culture. Many resent the partition of Ireland and their lack of influence in the new polity. Politically they have tended to want Northern Ireland to lose its link with the UK and become part of the Republic of Ireland, and their usual political identity is therefore nationalist. More uncompromising nationalists are known as republicans, a term used to describe both those who have a strong commitment to the goal of a united Ireland and those who accept the use of violence to achieve that end, though not all republicans support the use of violence. The republican adversary was Britain, which they believed had a continuing imperialist interest in Northern Ireland. Hardline republicans tended to see all Protestants as puppets of the British state and the legitimate targets of their antipathy.

Protestants come from two main backgrounds: Scotland and England. The twelve-mile stretch of sea between Scotland and Ireland has always facilitated contact and movement back and forth, and there were many Scots living in the north-east of Ireland before the arrival of the English settlers. The Celtic leaders in this part of Ireland failed in their resistance to growing English influence and went into exile. Their lands were confiscated by the British government and awarded to merchant companies in London who in 1609 developed a settlement scheme, known as the Plantation of Ulster, offering tenancies to English settlers or planters. These settlers, and the increasing numbers of Scot immigrants, were mainly Protestants in contrast to the Catholic farmers who were displaced. It was said that 'the Protestants got the best land and the Catholics got the best views'. Some settlers had influence with the British administration in Dublin but believed that their economic and material success was based more on their Protestant habits of thrift and hard work rather than political privilege. Not surprisingly, there was suspicion and hostility between the old Irish and the new settlers. Sectional or sectarian tension and recurring violence, occasional massacres and rebellion marked their subsequent history. The settlers distinguished themselves from the native Irish whom they believed threatened their way of life. They therefore sought to subordinate the Catholic population.

Consequently, in the nineteenth century, the northern Protestant community was best placed to take advantage of the industrial revolution. Industries were established in towns and villages throughout the North so that by the end of the century the region had very different economic interests from the rest of Ireland and looked to Britain and the British Empire as the key to their continued prosperity. When the rest of Ireland wanted independence the northern Protestants believed that their social and economic interests were best served by remaining within the United Kingdom and mobilized


PORTADOWN
DISTRICT L.O.L. No 1
OUR
BANNERETTE
IS STILL AT
DRUMCREE

*Orangeman at Portadown, July 1999*

successfully to ensure that outcome. Their political identity emerged as unionist reflecting their desire to maintain the union with Britain. More uncompromising unionists are known as loyalists, though all unionists share loyalty to the British monarch.

## The Stormont era

This pattern of sectarian relationships continued and even intensified within the new Northern Ireland. Under the Government of Ireland Act 1920, which was intended to establish arrangements for the future administration of Ireland, a subordinate administration was established in Belfast and an imposing parliament building was erected in the suburbs at Stormont. Though in principle subordinate, it acted with no oversight from the British Parliament and this contributed to the entrenchment of relationships between the communities.

The unionists held a majority of seats in the new parliament that was described by Sir James Craig, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, as 'a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people'. This was taken to mean that it would ensure priority of Protestant interests. Despite these constitutional safeguards, many Protestants continued to feel threatened by the Irish state and were aware that the small Protestant population there had declined rapidly after independence. Marriage opportunities within the community were limited and in mixed marriages the Catholic Church ruled that children be brought up Catholic. Whatever the reason, Protestants in the North were reinforced in their fear of assimilation by Catholics and were suspicious of the minority population in Northern Ireland whose opportunities for advancement they restricted. The nationalist population dealt with the discrimination and alienation that they felt by withdrawing socially and politically, and for much of the next fifty years they did not take their seats in the Stormont parliament.

## Persisting insecurities

It seems remarkable that the conflict has persisted and remained significant for so many people despite changes in the surrounding environment. It is perhaps not surprising that there are contradictory views on the nature of the problem. Some see it as unfinished business from the colonial era that will only be resolved when the United Kingdom, as the colonial power, has no further involvement. Others see it as a new, post-colonial problem of two communities who are thrust together by history and need to find ways to manage their differences.

The concept of the 'double minority' may give the best insight into why the conflict has persisted. Nationalists have felt themselves to be a marginalized minority in Northern Ireland while Protestants are aware that they are a minority within Ireland as a whole and have consequently developed a siege mentality. In the context of the British Isles Irish nationalists are aware that they again comprise a minority of the total population. The nature of the conflict has encouraged the fear in each community that it will be undermined from within by individuals and groups becoming more accommodating to the other side. While the conflict is unacceptable to many, some consider it to be tolerable and that any change could make the situation worse. There is a fear of assimilation of one community by the other because there are so few differences between them. In this context small differences become important and symbolic. Practices such as the aggressive display of flags and slogans and,

*Republican band at IRA Funeral, Belfast, 1972*

Sources: Left - Reuters Newmedia Inc/CORBIS, Right - Leif Skoogfors/CORBIS

especially among loyalists, parades and marches are a way of giving both an uncompromising message to opponents and maintaining internal cohesion.

In these circumstances there has been little room for the middle ground. Unionism and nationalism have reinforced traditional attitudes making it difficult to promote more inclusive politics. For example, there has never been much support for class-based politics, which could unite Protestants and Catholics. While there have been progressive individuals within the institutions of civil society who have campaigned for greater popular participation, they have tended to be typical of their communities and have reflected the fundamental division in society. The phrase 'tyranny of democracy' has been an apt description of politics in Northern Ireland. The public trusted and supported populist political leaders who reflected sectarian politics even if they would have liked them to work for better community relations. Politicians dared not challenge the conventional sectarian political attitudes for fear that they would be rejected. If politics were to become less sectarian, politicians and the public would have to move at the same time and this has been difficult to achieve.

## Similarity in difference

Although the unionist and nationalist communities define themselves in terms of their differences, on the surface, the lifestyles of the communities are not dissimilar. Traditionally both communities consisted of small farmers and, from the early 1800s, they became increasingly urbanized working in the tough and squalid conditions of the factories of the industrial revolution and living in the neighbouring terraces of poor overcrowded houses. Each community had its share of all social classes but Protestants had a bigger and more influential landed and business class whereas a much more significant proportion of the Catholic community lived in poverty. There were Protestant poor, but they valued their sense of privilege or comparative advantage even if it was more apparent than real. They felt connected to the Protestant establishment and their families always had the hope that they might gain some benefit from this connection. In more recent times improved standards of living and public welfare have meant that the circumstances of both communities have improved.

The communities have always lived close to each other, in a patchwork of small Protestant, Catholic and mixed communities. During periods of overt violence there has been a tendency for the mixed areas to become more homogeneous either by the forceful expulsion of one or other section of the community or by the withdrawal of one section of the community to the security of their co-religionists. This demographic mosaic has meant that it is impossible to solve the problem by creating two new political units: one predominantly Catholic and one largely Protestant. It has also increased the possibility for direct confrontation between the communities. While sectarian attitudes and hostility have always existed across the entire community, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the location of violence was in poor rural areas. Since the middle of the nineteenth century the urban slums have been the major sites for the most overt sectarianism and inter-community rioting. These are the areas which today show the most direct evidence of the underlying tensions and which are often separated by 'peace walls' or boarded up dwellings. The violence is therefore localized, and away from these areas life can be peaceful and untouched by the Troubles. But, with the segregation of social institutions such as education, the same sectarian attitudes are present. There is less incentive to move away from the traditional uncompromising politics. It is perhaps therefore no surprise that much of the new inclusive thinking about the way forward has come from the 'front-line' areas and paramilitary groups.

The uneasy balance between the two communities, which lasted for fifty years from the partition of Ireland in 1921, was often threatened by the nationalist population's aspiration for more equality and the reunification of the island. In the 1940s and 1950s there were ineffective campaigns of violence by the IRA. With the creation of the Welfare State after the Second World War living conditions improved and, most notably, educational opportunities were provided for people from working class backgrounds. This had a more significant impact in the nationalist community where access to higher education had been restricted. In the 1960s a new unionist prime minister, Terence O'Neill, made some attempt to modernize the region and shed some of the more traditional sectarian attitudes in order to make it more able to compete in the emerging global economy. As is often the case, with improving conditions came fresh demands for faster development.

## The civil rights movement

In the late 1960s individuals from the new educated classes, unionist and nationalist, spearheaded the civil rights movement which was inspired by the civil rights campaign in the USA and stimulated by the student protests of 1968 in Paris and elsewhere. They included John Hume, the future leader of moderate nationalism. In the past the nationalist argument had been that Northern Ireland was 'irreformable' in the sense that it had been established to protect unionist interests and could therefore never become an equitable society. The civil rights movement took a different approach and believed, or at least acted on the assumption, that Northern Ireland could become a society where the civil rights of all citizens were protected and everyone had

Source: Adam Woolfitt/CORBIS

equal opportunities. They took no position on the reunification of Ireland, but many unionists, most notably the emerging leader of uncompromising unionism Ian Paisley, believed that they were the republican movement under a new guise and opposed their demands and public demonstrations.

Rally and counter rally led to minor violence and the confrontations were joined by more militant sections of each community. In trying to control the situation the police force and its reserves, the 'B-Specials', were not impartial. Largely Protestant themselves, they tended to sympathize with unionist opinion and to act more harshly against the civil rights campaigners. In any case, the situation was moving further out of their control. The escalation seemed to confirm for both the nationalist and unionist communities that gradual reform was impossible. For unionists that meant that all protest needed to be suppressed and for nationalists that only strong concerted action would bring about any change. In August 1969 British troops were deployed to try to maintain control of the situation on behalf of the Stormont administration. A loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), was already being revived but the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was uncertain how to respond to the situation. In the mid-1960s it had moved away from a military strategy because of its failure to gain popular support for its previous campaign and because of its espousal of a Marxist ideology which called for the building of alliances between the Protestant and Catholic working classes. However after the arrival of British troops there was a rapid growth of underground armed groups, often known as paramilitaries.

## Conflict-related deaths in Northern Ireland 1969-94

| Year | Security forces | Civilians | Total N.I. |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1969 | 1 | 12 | 13 |
| 1970 | 2 | 23 | 25 |
| 1971 | 59 | 115 | 174 |
| 1972 | 146 | 321 | 467 |
| 1973 | 80 | 171 | 251 |
| 1974 | 50 | 166 | 216 |
| 1975 | 31 | 216 | 247 |
| 1976 | 52 | 245 | 297 |
| 1977 | 43 | 69 | 112 |
| 1978 | 31 | 50 | 81 |
| 1979 | 62 | 51 | 113 |
| 1980 | 26 | 50 | 76 |
| 1981 | 44 | 57 | 101 |
| 1982 | 40 | 57 | 97 |
| 1983 | 33 | 44 | 77 |
| 1984 | 28 | 36 | 64 |
| 1985 | 29 | 25 | 54 |
| 1986 | 24 | 37 | 61 |
| 1987 | 27 | 66 | 93 |
| 1988 | 39 | 54 | 93 |
| 1989 | 23 | 39 | 62 |
| 1990 | 27 | 49 | 76 |
| 1991 | 19 | 75 | 94 |
| 1992 | 9 | 76 | 85 |
| 1993 | 14 | 70 | 84 |
| 1994 | 6 | 54 | 60 |
| TOTAL | 945 | 2,228 | 3,173 |

*Source: Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey, Police Authority, 1996*

For republicans the presence and activities of British troops in their communities focused attention on the role of Britain in supporting the unionist system and encouraged the arguments for armed struggle against the British and their unionist 'surrogates'. Loyalists did not believe that the authorities would take sufficient action to deal with the threat which they saw coming from the nationalist community. They felt that the threat could only be handled by moving outside the rule of law, even though the state had special powers and were using army forces to deal with the civilian population. They formed defence groups, most of which in time merged into the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

## The Troubles

By the early 1970s a new phase of open and violent hostility had developed between the two communities, which is euphemistically known as the Troubles. On the streets rioting was a daily occurrence though it later diminished as shootings became more commonplace. On each side a number of paramilitary groups were using violence and terror to achieve their ends. Most constitutional politicians and the public at large were against the use of force by paramilitary groups but there was little consensus on an acceptable way to govern Northern Ireland. Moderate nationalists, mainly in the new coalition known as the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), hoped for some kind of power-sharing or co-operative arrangement of government between unionists and nationalists. Most unionists were unwilling to lose any of their authority and distrusted all nationalists as ultimately working to undermine Northern Ireland and join with the Irish Republic. Many in the Republic of Ireland felt sympathy for the nationalists but also felt unable to make a significant impact and were afraid that the instability would spread to their state. The British tended to see themselves as somehow above the conflict. In 1972 they dissolved the Stormont parliament in the face of its incapacity to contain the growing violence and its unwillingness to accept more British control of the security response. Direct rule was established and the British presence, together with a measure of self-control on all sides, prevented the situation from breaking down completely. Had Britain not intervened the situation might have escalated further, or there could have been stronger pressures to resolve it.

A number of peace campaigns emerged from within civil society calling for an end to the violence. The most remarkable of these was the Peace People campaign, which quickly gained mass support in 1976. However, as with smaller initiatives, there was no consensus on how the conflict should end and its efforts made little long-term impact. Since the 1970s there have been repeated attempts to find a constitutional settlement. The main thrust of these efforts was to find arrangements for the constitutional parties to work together in such a way as to satisfy nationalist demands while limiting the scope for change enough to prevent unionist withdrawal. Initiatives were based around three elements: giving expression to the conflicting aspirations of the parties, creating a more equal society, and meeting the need for security and protection of the community. It was hoped that these arrangements would marginalize the paramilitary groups whose campaign would become irrelevant as had happened in the past. All of these attempts failed and the paramilitary campaigns continued.

During the 1970s the scars of the conflict were allowed to remain very evident, perhaps in the hope that the sight of damage and destruction would shock the public into rejecting violence. However, in the 1980s there was another shift in government policy to create an air of normality. Damage was repaired quickly and the dividing lines between the communities were masked by environmental improvement schemes, which it was thought might create more optimistic attitudes, and make the conflict irrelevant. The hunger strikes of 1981 signalled a further intensification of the struggle. Little progress was made through a campaign to win over the 'hearts and minds' of those people who supported paramilitary groups by improving their quality of life and creating a more fair and non-discriminatory society.

## Reaching agreement

In 1985 the British and Irish governments signed the Anglo–Irish Agreement which indicated their willingness to accept each other's goodwill and work together with the common aim of destroying the paramilitary threat. It was hoped that a combination of tighter security measures and the involvement of the Irish government in policy making would achieve this. It was strongly opposed by the unionist community, which objected to the role given to the Irish government in the domestic affairs of Northern Ireland. The IRA also perceived the co-operation between the British and Irish governments as a threat. However, as a treaty between two states, it was an attempt to create a structure for dealing with the conflict which was impervious to political and community pressure within Northern Ireland.

Consequently the parties realized that they needed new strategies which might accommodate the interests of their opponents and in this way the Anglo–Irish Agreement became the stimulus for the creation of a new basis on which a peace process could be built. The awareness of other realities was also encouraging parties to rethink. It had proved impossible for the constitutional parties to create and maintain a political settlement in the face of the instability caused by the paramilitary groups. Republicans were becoming aware that IRA attacks on members of the security forces from the Protestant community only increased Protestant reliance on the British state to protect their interests and prolonged the conflict. It was also becoming clear that the SDLP did not have sufficient leverage on their own to achieve a settlement that they would accept as fair and reasonable. Unionists had also to face up to the steady erosion of their position while the conflict continued and the fact that the population balance was shifting in favour of Catholics. The conclusion was that a political settlement and an end to violence were mutually beneficial, but the determination not to compromise on core commitments and values was still strong. At this point there was still a long way to go if those initial vague hopes were to lead to a durable settlement.