

Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries
(Discussion 2)

The Belfast & Lisburn Expulsions, 1920

Guest Speaker

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compiled by

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Introduction

The Fellowship of Messines Association was formed in May 2002 by a diverse group of individuals from Loyalist, Republican and other backgrounds, united in their realisation of the need to confront sectarianism in our society as a necessary means to realistic peace-building.

In 2020 the Association launched its ‘Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries’ programme. This programme would comprise a series of discussions which were intended to create opportunities for participants, from various backgrounds and political viewpoints, to engage in discussion on some of the more significant historical events of 100 years and 50 years ago, the consequences of which all of us are still living with today.

The discussions would also afford an opportunity for those taking part to engage in the important process of challenging some of the myths and folklore associated with past events, by means of an open and respectful engagement with factual history. To assist this, participants would have access to the reflections of former protagonists, whose testimonies of lived experience would hopefully enable all participants, and especially those from the younger generation, to understand the importance of critical historical inquiry when conducting discourses that can accept and respect different identities.

The theme for the second discussion in the series was: *The Belfast & Lisburn Expulsions, 1920*. The main speaker was to be **Dr Brian Hanley**, author and historian. The original intention was to have other guest speakers, followed by a general discussion involving individuals representing a wide diversity of political backgrounds and allegiances.

However, as readers of the pamphlet dealing with the *first* discussion in this series will be aware, the Covid-19 ‘lock-down’, to the great disappointment of all those hoping to attend, severely disrupted our plans. Nevertheless, as with the first discussion, it was decided to send Dr Hanley’s talk to prospective participants via email, and invite feedback and reflections. It was from the material gathered in this way that this pamphlet has been compiled.

Harry Donaghy, Project Manager, The Fellowship of Messines Association

Reflections on Centenaries & Anniversaries

The Belfast & Lisburn Expulsions, 1920

by **Dr Brian Hanley**

Thanks again to the Messines Project for the opportunity to present this paper, once again in circumstances none of us could have envisaged just a short time ago!

1920 was the year that the conflict became a war in a real sense and when Ulster and more particularly Belfast, experienced its worst violence since the 1880s, perhaps even since 1798. In 1919 around 20 people had died in political violence in Ireland, mostly in Munster and Dublin. In 1920 over 1,000 were killed, while 1,500 would die in the first six months of 1921. So things got bad during 1920 and were getting worse by the time of the Truce in July 1921. The violence was worst in Cork, Dublin and Belfast, with several other parts of Munster also badly affected. In contrast only Longford in the Irish midlands saw serious casualties and some areas remained relatively quiet. However, Derry saw intense clashes during June 1920, which marked the spread of the conflict north. Along with deaths and injuries, 1920 also saw widespread destruction of property, including the burning of Cork City centre and the forcing of hundreds of people from their homes in Lisburn, Banbridge and Belfast and the expulsion of thousands of workers from Belfast's major industries.

Despite our tendency to see everything in local terms, Ireland was often the focus of global attention in those years. Significant figures in the British establishment such as the (Irish-born) Unionist, General Sir. Henry Wilson were in no doubt that in fighting the IRA Britain was actually "fighting New York and Cairo and Calcutta and Moscow who are only using Ireland as a tool and lever against England". Wilson feared that

the Irishmen who are clever enough are gradually looping into their toils Labour in England ... in the very near future the Irish question will be so complicated with the Labour question in England that it will become insoluble, and this would mean the loss of Ireland to begin with; the loss of the Empire in the second place; and the loss of England itself to finish up with.

On the opposite side the leading Republican Harry Boland concluded that given the IRA's comparative military weakness,

it is obvious that left to ourselves in Ireland we cannot hope to win the final victory without tremendous loss ... Our dream is a world-wide organisation ... with a plan of campaign whereby we can meet the enemy not alone in Ireland but all over the globe. Thus only can Britain be shown the power of Ireland ... To Australia, Canada, South Africa, India, Egypt and Moscow our men must go to make common cause against our common foe.

Irish republicans travelled to Petrograd, Berlin, Paris, Madrid and Rome, meeting not only political activists of every stripe, but also representatives of Indian and Egyptian nationalism. But Republicans were not the only ones to understand the need for a trans-national focus. Eamon De Valera's triumphant tour across the United States from 1919-20 is well known, but Unionist MPs also toured America. While Republicans organized political campaigns in every part of the British Empire, Loyalist organizations also mobilized against Sinn Féin in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Irish Republicans though were acutely aware of the need to win international support and placed a great degree of emphasis on publicizing events in Ireland abroad, not least in Britain itself. Cork Lord Mayor Terence MacSwiney's death on hunger strike in October 1920 achieved international headlines. Indeed news of events in Ireland had led to a mutiny by the Connaught Rangers in India during June 1920. While the IRA's campaign became deadlier, culminating in Bloody Sunday in Dublin and the Kilmichael ambush in Cork, both during November, much of the Republican effort was actually on political campaigning. Local elections in January and June, in which Sinn Féin, in cooperation with Labour, won control of most local councils, a general strike which forced the release of hundreds of prisoners and a trade union boycott of military transport along with the effort to build a counter state through the operation of Dáil Courts, were all regarded as key to undermining British authority. That authority relied more and more on military force, augmented from January 1920 by the recruitment of thousands of new policemen (soon nicknamed the Black and Tans, though most never wore a special uniform, and some months later, the Auxiliaries) and the use of more and more regular troops.

By 1920 the British government were talking about partition and the formation of two Irish Home Rule parliaments. In December 1918 the general election results had seen a majority of the Ulster electorate vote for the Unionist party. In the six counties that were to make up Northern Ireland the Unionists took 255,819 to 116,888 votes, roughly a 2-1 majority (though there were substantial Unionist votes in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal). Having strongly opposed self-government for any part of

Ireland, demographic realities made it inevitable that the Unionist case would rest in the only area where a clear majority could be secured. Edward Carson, though very much a southern Unionist, was forced to declare that protection of the ‘irreducible minimum’, just six counties, was the most that could be hoped for. That in itself was the result of much wrangling. Carson and Sir James Craig had struggled with various proposals which included maintaining a nine county state, favoured by Unionists in Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan most fervently, who argued that this still gave Unionists a majority and would also prove a more equitable settlement for nationalists. In the end one border Unionist complained that the *‘three counties were thrown to the wolves with very little compunction.’* Another possibility, favoured by Carson himself at one point, was to simply partition four counties, Antrim, Down, Derry and Armagh. He argued that this would be perfectly viable, containing as it did most of the region’s industry and having a larger population than New Zealand or Newfoundland. In the end the desire to incorporate as many of Fermanagh and Tyrone’s Protestants while maintaining an overall two to one majority won out.

To complicate matters further Ulster Nationalists bucked the nationwide trend in many places in 1918, voting for the Home Rule party in much larger numbers than elsewhere. Intra-Nationalist conflict was bitter and often violent with clashes between Hibernians and Sinn Féiners in several places during 1918. An RIC report on rival political organisations in Belfast during September 1918 noted that the Irish Volunteers had about 500 members and Sinn Fein 950. The Redmondite National Volunteers had 1,310 members, the United Irish League 5,995 members and the Ancient Order of Hibernians 8,000. IRA officer Seamus Woods reckoned that

prior to the signing of the Truce in July 1921 the percentage of Catholic population in the Division (Belfast) that was in sympathy with the IRA was roughly 25%. Taking into consideration the proportion of the Catholic population to the whole, our support in the Division would have been something less than 10% of the entire civil population.

In December 1918 the Falls Road saw clashes between Volunteers and Hibernian *‘baton men’* who even forced Sinn Fein supporters from their homes in parts of West Belfast. In the election Sinn Féin President, Eamon de Valera, lost out to Joe Devlin. To further complicate matters during the election a complaint from a priest about an RIC baton charge on Sinn Fein supporters led to the Policeman’s Guild of the Holy Family Confraternity leaving Clonard Monastery in protest. After some negotiation the RIC men agreed to return to their regular place of worship.

What this showed of course was that a substantial number of the Belfast RIC were Catholic and often southerners, a fact resented by Unionists. Ever since bloody riots in 1886 when Protestants claimed that the Police had taken the Catholic side, Unionists had suspected that the RIC were not really to be trusted.

This had implications for their own strategies during the Troubles. As war spread across southern Ireland the Unionists' intelligence network noted that '*older, inefficient and even suspect*' RIC constables were being sent north while loyalist policemen were being sent to reinforce their beleaguered colleagues in the south. Alarmed reports suggested that in Glenravel Street barracks only 24 of the 81 policemen were Protestant and that Detective Inspector McConnell was of '*strong Sinn Fein sympathies*' and was visited regularly by a priest. Detective Sergeant Rowlands was also considered '*hard on Loyalists, soft on R.C.s.*' Unionist paranoia had some basis in reality. The photograph that allowed the IRA's Squad to identify Assistant Commissioner William Redmond before shooting him dead in Dublin during January 1920 had been supplied by a Belfast Policeman to Michael Collins. Therefore many Unionists preferred to see the UVF or a plethora of other organizations such as the Ulster Ex-Servicemen's Association, the Ulster Protestant Association, the Ulster Unionist Labour Association and the Cromwell Clubs as more reliable defenders of their security.

Inter-communal tension had been growing since the end of the World War with thousands of ex-servicemen facing unemployment and competing for jobs and with a major downturn in the local economy with the loss of war time orders; the fear of displacement by Catholic labour should not be underestimated as a factor in the violence of 1920-22. However this competition was as much perceived as real. Catholics were concentrated in the unskilled sector making up 41% of dockers and 33% of general labourers. The other notable factor was the involvement of ex-soldiers in the violence on all sides. Thousands of Protestant ex-soldiers of all classes enrolled in the revived UVF; as Captain Sir Basil Brooke, a Fermanagh landlord and Military Cross winner testified '*I had thought my soldiering days were over (but) I was to become a soldier of a very different sort but I had the added stimulant that I was defending my own birthplace.*' Catholic ex-servicemen were also to the fore in local defence committees or the IRA. As conflict developed in the south it had a knock-on effect in increasing tension especially when northerners were involved. In May 1919 riots had broken out at Windsor Park during a game between Glentoran and Belfast Celtic. Unionist fears were increased by the IRA's raid for arms at Ballyedmond Castle, the home of Major Arthur Nugent, the commander of the South Down UVF.

Reports that over 100 IRA men from Co. Louth were involved stoked up visions of invasion from the south. Yet there was no offensive IRA action in Belfast during 1919. In October the Government of Ireland bill with its provisions for home rule in two new Irish jurisdictions was introduced in parliament. The southern nationalist press dubbed the proposed six county state '*Carsonia*' a term also used internally by the IRA, which implicitly minimized the seriousness of the idea of Northern Ireland.

The 1920 local elections took place in January, against a backdrop of increased IRA activity. The results showed both how the Unionist majority in the proposed Northern Ireland was geographically confined mainly to the immediate north-east and also how Proportional Representation had helped minority representation. Nationalists and Sinn Féin candidates won majorities in Derry City, Fermanagh and Tyrone County Councils and ten urban district councils including Armagh, Newry, Omagh and Strabane. Nationalists elected a Catholic mayor in Derry, Hugh O'Doherty, for the first time since the 17th century and the council recognised Dáil Éireann; the euphoria among Nationalists was well captured by the *Derry Journal's* headline; '*No Surrender*'- *Citadel captured after centuries of oppression- overthrow of Ascendancy.*' In Belfast Unionists won a majority but their number of council seats was cut from 51 to 29, largely because of a strong Labour showing. Socialists won 12 seats, including one for Trade Unionist Sam Kyle on the Shankill.

The prospect of Derry city seceding from a new state seemed a real one; especially as offensive action by the IRA began to take place in Ulster. During rioting in Derry during April a detective was shot dead and another policeman was killed in Armagh a month later. In June the first IRA volunteer to die in Ulster was shot in Cookstown. In Belfast however most activity was confined to property damage. After the killing of Tomas McCurtain in Cork the Belfast IRA burned down several tax offices and other government property. For Unionists this was evidence that the '*Sinn Féin*' campaign as they generally referred to it was being stepped up. Several incidents in the south were interpreted as motivated by Catholic religious bigotry; IRA raids for arms on homes owned by Protestants in Fermoy, Co. Cork were presented by the Unionist press as the opening shots of an IRA attack on Protestantism itself. In Derry the UVF took over Foyle Bridge and positions in the city centre in response to what they claimed was Nationalist provocation and the killing of the local policeman. Clashes with the IRA erupted; the UVF fired from Derry's walls into the Bogside. The IRA backed up by its Donegal units responded and the UVF dug in the grounds of St. Columb's college where gun battles raged for a week. Catholic families were burnt out of the Waterside and Protestants forced from the Bogside. Among those killed was

Howard McKay, son of the Governor of the city's Apprentice Boys. The Derry IRA was not the only armed nationalist force in the city; Catholic ex-servicemen, members of the Hibernians and the Irish National Foresters were also involved. 1,500 British troops forced the IRA back onto the defensive; the British shot dead six Catholics in the Bogside. The violence, in which 40 people died had a huge knock-on effect and the Unionist press blamed nationalists for provoking the trouble. However in Derry Nationalists claimed that the Army had taken the UVF's side and openly co-operated with them. A curfew remained in operation in the city until October.

At the same time the Unionist press was paying great attention to what British Conservatives were alleging was a Sinn Féin-Bolshevik plot to undermine Ulster's industry and the working conditions of Protestants in particular. Sir. Henry Wilson and James Craig genuinely believed that Sinn Féin was part of a Bolshevik plan to undermine the entire British Empire (as did a wide variety of British right-wing opinion). In January 1920 a meeting on the Shankill Road heard that in '*Belfast at present Sinn Feiners are taking jobs from the men who volunteered*' for the war. Speakers warned that until '*the employers of Belfast took up their proper position and ceased employing Sinn Feiners and other rebels from the south and west, they could never hope to occupy their right position in the city, which had been built up by Protestant energy and enterprise and that the murders going on throughout the country might before long lead to retaliation.*' On the 12th July Edward Carson made a speech at Finaghy in which he warned of the need to re-mobilise the UVF in order to ensure that the British government did not sell out Unionists. Carson warned that '*we in Ulster will tolerate no Sinn Fein- no Sinn Fein organisation, no Sinn Fein methods ... and these are not mere words. I hate words without action.*' He also warned unionists that labour activists were a stalking horse for Sinn Féin and that in reality socialists cared no more for unionist workers

than the man in the moon ... their real object and the real insidious nature of their propaganda is that they mislead and bring about disunity among our own people, and in the end, before we know where we are, we may find ourselves in the same bondage and slavery as in the rest of Ireland in the south and west.

The spark for trouble was initially provided by events in the south. On 17th July RIC District Commissioner Gerald Smyth was shot dead in Cork. A Great War veteran, Smyth had made a notorious speech in Listowel earlier in the year justifying reprisals on behalf of the police. He was buried in Banbridge (his mother's home town) and

sectarian violence erupted there after his funeral. On the day Smyth was buried, workers returned to the shipyards after the 12th of July holidays to find posters advertising a meeting for '*Protestants and Unionists*' at dinner hour. When the meeting ended a group of between 500-1,000 apprentices from Workman and Clark marched through the yards of the larger Harland and Wolff works ordering out Catholic workers and beating up those who refused to leave. (These young workers, organized by the Belfast Protestant Association, were key to the initial expulsions.) Some men had their shirts ripped off to ascertain if they wore religious emblems. Some were pelted with stones and rivets and others made their escape by swimming to the south side of the Musgrave channel. All known Catholics and several hundred Protestants were forced out on the first day. The Protestants were targeted because they were active trade unionists or socialists, the so-called '*rotten Prods.*' Over the next few days workers were expelled from engineering factories, linen mills and other industries including Barbour's, Musgraves, Moates, Gallaghers, the Sirocco works and McLaughlin and Harvey's. At Sirocco, workers passed a resolution stating that they would '*decline to work with those men who have been expelled recently until the Sinn Fein assassination in Ireland cease.*' Up to 11,000 men and women lost their jobs. An estimated ¼ of the men were ex-servicemen and war veterans and it is suggested that around 700 were Protestants, many of whom had been active in the 1919 engineering strike.

On the first day of the expulsions rumours spread that several Catholic workers had been drowned; crowds gathered in the Markets and other Catholic areas and attacked shipyard workers returning home by tram. That evening rival crowds gathered in Catholic and Protestant districts and serious rioting broke out. There was widespread looting and burning of Catholic shops in Protestant areas. Crowds attacked the Short Strand district and burned the convent attached to St. Matthews Church. Seven Catholics and six Protestants were killed in three days of fighting. The expulsions marked the beginning of the Belfast troubles that were to last until the summer of 1922. In October 1920 Carson told the Commons that he was '*prouder of my friends in the shipyards than of any other friends I have in the whole world.*'

The Trade Unions condemned the expulsions but were divided on how to deal with them. The Irish Trade Union Congress established an expelled workers fund and support was canvassed from the British TUC; many of the workers belonged to Unions with their headquarters in Britain. The Amalgamated Carpenters and Joiners, based in Manchester, called on the shipyards and other firms to give jobs back to those driven out for religious and political reasons. When there was no response it called on its members to cease work in protest. 2,000 of its members

ignored this call and were then expelled from the Union. The other major Unions however were not prepared to risk losing members or influence.

The Belfast IRA initially declined to become involved in what they considered sectarian warfare because *'their main object was to carry out aggressive action against the British forces of occupation.'* Seamus McKenna remembered that

at the beginning the Volunteers were ordered not to take part in what was regarded as fratricidal strife. After a week or two, however, it was obvious that, if the Catholic population were to survive at all, it would be necessary for the Volunteers to protect them in some way, and accordingly the IRA became involved in a struggle against disciplined and undisciplined Orange factions.

As a result of the July violence the IRA grew in numbers but McKenna lamented that *'about two-thirds of these recruits joined for sectarian reasons only, to fight defensively or offensively against the Orange gangs. Few of them had any conception of Irish-Ireland principles.'* (There are several layers to this story, including far more material than ever available before in the Military Service Pensions, with evidence of there being a handful of Protestant IRA men in Belfast at this time. There are far fewer sources on loyalist armed groups.)

During the July trouble sniping from district into district had become common. Both Nationalists and Unionists stored rifles, shotguns and ammunition close to streets adjoining rival areas and these all became battlegrounds for the next two years. Cupar Street, Kashmir Road, Albert Street and Durham Street, York Street and North Queen Street, the Lower Newtownards Road in Ballymacarret and the Short Strand all saw riots, assassinations, bombings and sniping. Fred Crawford, an organiser for the UVF both before and after the Great War, had half a million rounds of ammunition stored in the factory he owned in Brown Square. Houses were turned over to the manufacture of grenades and bombs and children carried handguns and ammunition from area to area. Regular British troops were centrally involved in quelling riots and between 1920-22 killed 70 people. But the IRA was more often involved in clashes with loyalist gunmen, the RIC, Black and Tans and after the autumn of 1920, Special Constabulary. This was reflected in the numbers of fatalities; just four soldiers were killed, as opposed to 20 policemen, 13 Specials and 14 IRA members, but these numbers are dwarfed by those of civilians; 181 Protestants and 266 Catholics.

More violence followed in August. On 22nd August, the IRA tracked District

Inspector Oswald Swanzy, widely believed to have been centrally involved in the killing of Cork Lord Mayor Tomas McCurtain, to Lisburn. He was shot dead by a largely southern IRA unit who then took the first train to Dublin. As they left Lisburn they could see Catholic shops being set alight. Over the next few days sixty Catholic-owned pubs and businesses were burned out, private homes including that of the local priest were attacked and the majority of the town's Catholics forced to flee, many going to Dundalk or Belfast. In Belfast violence broke out again as crowds attacked isolated Catholic districts such as the Bone, north of the Crumlin Road. Fighting spread across Belfast as men returned from the shipyards were stoned in Catholic areas and responded by burning and looting Catholic shops. A week of violence followed; in all 22 people were killed and hundreds injured. Catholics made up a majority of casualties but Unionists could point to incidents such as the shooting dead of an 11 year old Protestant boy to argue that Nationalist gunmen were the real threat.

The violence had a major effect on British public opinion, which almost unanimously blamed the Unionists for the trouble. Unionist leaders were aware that mob violence could damage their case in London. Nationalists pointed out how many of those forced from their homes had recently served in British army uniforms in the Great War. But Unionist leaders also warned that things could get far worse. In September James Craig warned that *'the situation is becoming desperate, unless the government takes immediate action ... it may be advisable for them to see what steps can be taken towards a system of organised reprisals ... partly to restrain their own followers.'* The British government faced a dilemma; its forces were increasingly stretched by the IRA in Munster and Dublin. Rather than devote more military resources to the north they could utilize the services of loyalists and the revived UVF. Dublin Castle had warned early on against the idea and when Winston Churchill put the question to cabinet in July they had told him that the Catholics in Belfast would be reduced to a state of terror by this development. However Lloyd George and Hamar Greenwood unofficially gave the nod in September and the British Army began to co-operate with locally-raised Special Constables. They overlooked the fact that many Special Constables had been arrested during the troubles in Belfast for attacking and looting Catholic property and that the RIC were aghast at the idea. In turn the British Army were being advised that the RIC were unreliable allies. On 22nd October 1920 Lloyd George announced the official formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary, which was to form part of the RIC.

There were to be three categories of constable, A, B and C. The A-Specials which numbered 2,000 were full time, uniformed and received the same arms,

equipment and pay as the RIC. The B-Specials, also armed, were the largest section, numbering 19,500, were part time and their duties were to patrol, man roadblocks and conduct searches; they were unpaid. The 'C' category was for emergency call up. The USC was the responsibility of Lieutenant Colonel Charles Wickham, the new RIC divisional Commander in the north, freshly returned from service with the British Expeditionary Force fighting the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War. The structure of the Specials, as advised by James Craig, was closely modelled on the UVF. Whole UVF units simply joined en masse and their commanders, such as Basil Brooke in Fermanagh, General Ambrose Ricardo in Tyrone and John Webster in Armagh were given officerships. The RIC Chief Inspector in Derry warned of the potential for violence between the Specials and the ordinary police. In the House of Commons Joe Devlin expressed the general nationalist view:

the Chief Secretary is going to arm Pogromists to murder Catholics ... we would not touch your special constabulary with a 40 foot pole. Their pogrom is to be made less difficult. Instead of paving stones and sticks they are to be given rifles.

The *Westminster Gazette* commented that

this is the most inhuman expedient the government could have devised ... all the eager spirits who have driven nationalist workmen from the docks and or have demonstrated their loyalty by looting Catholic shops will be eligible.

But the British government were grateful to have a special force to augment their efforts in the north while resources could be diverted to the war raging in the southwest. The influence that Unionists had at government level cannot be underestimated. The Tories were then genuinely the Conservative and Unionist Party. Their leader Andrew Bonar Law was also Deputy Prime Minister and often chaired cabinet meetings in Lloyd George's absence. Walter Long and Sir. Austen Chamberlain, both avowed Unionists, were important members of the British government.

As violence in Belfast escalated Nationalist members of Belfast Corporation presented a petition to Dáil Eireann drawing attention to what they called '*a war of extermination*' being waged against Catholics. They asked for a boycott of goods produced in Unionist Ulster, aimed at what they called the '*chief promoters of Orange intolerance*' concentrated on the distributing trade. It was hoped that this would force Unionist business to demand an end to the violence and also to reinstate expelled

workers. Opinion in the Dáil was divided. Ernest Blythe, himself an Ulster Protestant, felt that a boycott '*would destroy for ever the possibility of union.*' Cathal Brugha described it as '*an admission that Belfast was outside Ireland.*' Others felt that it would simply benefit English industry. But as attacks on Catholics intensified the Dáil agreed to boycott banks and insurance companies who had their headquarters in Belfast. Local councils all over Ireland undertook to support the boycott, which spread beyond financial institutions; a car carrying goods from Belfast was thrown into the Erne at Ballyshannon, and shops and merchants were visited by armed men demanding that they cancel orders to Belfast. In September the boycott was extended to all Belfast goods, which was interpreted differently from place to place. In Monaghan Protestant owned shops were boycotted; in Naas, Co. Kildare all northern goods were targeted. By 1921 the Police were admitting that the boycott was having an effect across the south and northern merchants in particular were badly hit.

However, there was a fairly obvious problem with such a boycott. Republicans argued that Belfast was as Irish as Dublin or anywhere else; yet they were encouraging people to boycott goods produced in an Irish city thus helping promote the idea that the north was indeed a foreign place. Furthermore, at least some businesses hit were owned by Catholics or even republicans. Denis McCullough, the veteran Belfast IRB organizer, and a member of the Boycott committee, saw his bagpipe factory go out of business as people bought British-made instruments rather than those from Belfast. Furthermore, as Ernest Blythe pointed out, the major northern industries such as shipbuilding and engineering did not depend for their sales on the southern Irish market. A later Free State assessment suggested that '*our boycott would threaten the Northern ship building industry as much as a summer shower would threaten Cave Hill.*' People were killed in arson attacks on firms selling or distributing Belfast goods.

As the violence in Belfast continued into 1922 the boycott did not end with the Truce but was carried by the Anti-Treaty forces. Winston Churchill suggested that the boycott

recognised and established real partition, spiritual and voluntary partition, before actual partition was established ... it did not secure the reinstatement of a single expelled Nationalist, nor the conversion of a single Unionist. It was merely a blind suicidal contribution to the general hate.

The Truce of July 1921 brought relief in much of Ireland, but the period afterwards saw only more violence in Belfast. The northern IRA would split over the Treaty,

though both factions would unite in a short-lived offensive in 1922, while Michael Collins and James Craig would agree a short-lived pact aimed at ending conflict. With the beginning of the Civil War in July 1922 the focus of the IRA moved completely south. Between 1920 and 1922 nearly 500 people, most of them civilians, were killed in Belfast. At least 1,000 were wounded. While violence subsided in much of Ireland after July 1921, it intensified in the north. 230 people were killed in Belfast during early 1922 (more than died in revolutionary violence in Germany in the same period). Up to 11,000 people were expelled from their workplaces and over 20,000 people were forced to leave their homes. The violence left long-lasting scars, reopened in many cases after 1969. It was also remembered intensely, but very differently by both communities, but in contrast largely forgotten in Britain and in southern Ireland, where the War of Independence was remembered as a conflict between the IRA and British forces. Belfast's inter-communal strife complicates that narrative. How to commemorate these events remains extremely problematic, to put it mildly.

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Peter Bunting

This excellent paper by Brian Hanley is very illuminating of the events of Belfast and Lisburn during the period involved. So much history in Northern Ireland has a tendency to repeat itself over the intervening years. This is best exemplified by the following: the displacement of workers from the traditional old manufacturing enterprises; the internal dispute among the Roman Catholic community between Republicans and Nationalists; the ability of the PUL [Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist] leadership to condemn Socialists as stooges for the Republican Movement; the main sectarian interfaces are the same 100 years later.

Taking the content of this paper into an analysis of history in Northern Ireland you could say we have gained nothing nor learned nothing from past history. It is this salient lesson we should really be conscious of, when we consider how we influence political developments in Northern Ireland for the future.

All of the above points which I have extracted from Brian's paper will I believe occur again if we fail each other in whatever political entity is finally decided on by the citizens of Northern Ireland. I am opposed to the Sinn Féin demand for a Border Poll. To instigate that poll in the current climate would be seen by the PUL community as a signal that they would be forced into a United Ireland. Such

foolishness is a recipe for a repeat of sectarian pogroms which have bedevilled our society for nigh over a hundred years.

Maybe I am too optimistic but there is a sense of communal harmony arising from the British Tory policies of Austerity, Brexit, Covid-19 and their intent to pursue a no-extension to Brexit at the end of 2020. All of these actions have visited huge hardships on the Working Class in Northern Ireland. The future in social and economic terms is fraught with more hardship, thus creating a mood for political change which has greater prospects for achieving a Unitary State dependent on inbuilt safeguards for the rights the PUL Community will require to reassure them of equality, peace and justice for all.

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Jim McDermott

Brian Hanley’s well written paper covers events in Ireland from the start of 1919 to the summer of 1922 with its chief focus being on Belfast and Lisburn. It certainly explodes the myth that the War of Independence was a struggle between the IRA and the British armed forces over Irish sovereignty. Brian Hanley shows this was a much more complicated, nuanced period wherein few inhabitants of the island got what they wanted some ten years previously.

Between 1920-22 two jurisdictions were established in Ireland neither of which were universally desired. By August 1922 a protestant and unionist state had been established in six of the nine Ulster counties. It was the most prosperous part of Ireland at a time when four fifths of the wealth of the country was concentrated on Belfast and three adjoining counties. In 1912 unionists in all the Ulster counties had opposed Home Rule for Ireland. They had signed the Ulster Covenant, joined the Ulster Volunteer Force, participated in or supported the Larne gun-running and then fought in the 36th (Ulster) Division in the Great War. Essentially they just wanted Ireland to be linked as closely as ever before with Britain without the threat of government by Home Rule. By the August of 1922 the irreducible minimum of a six-county Ulster had excluded the three Ulster counties of Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan. The reduced Ulster was loyal to, but suspicious of, the British government.

By the August of 1922 there was a Provisional Government established in the 26 counties in the south and west of Ireland. It had far more autonomy than the Home Rule government which was the aspiration of most nationalists in 1912. It was set up following a propaganda and guerrilla war between the IRA and the forces of the British government but it too did not enjoy universal support. The IRA and the country

split on the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and a bitter civil war followed. The outworking of the Irish civil war left scars that are still present today. The setting up of the government in the north left a cowed and resentful minority who felt that they had been forced to accept an imposed political settlement which they felt gave power to the very unionists who had turned a blind eye when they were driven from their workplaces and homes. It was a government moreover which had the exclusively unionist Ulster Special Constabulary armed and paid by the British government but whose function, it seemed to northern nationalists, was to keep them in subservience.

The two years since July 1920 alone witnessed the deaths of almost 500 people, the overwhelming majority of whom were absolutely innocent. It is to Brian Hanley's credit that he covers the convoluted events surrounding partition 1920-22 with objectivity, economy and compassion.

* * * * *

Michael Hall

In Brian's excellent and extremely thorough presentation, he makes mention of 'rotten Prods', the derogatory term used by Unionist politicians and others to denigrate those Protestants who showed solidarity with their Catholic fellow-workers. Given that one of the intentions of the Messines Association is to bring these often forgotten aspects of our history to the attention of today's generation, I feel it might be helpful to add some further explanatory comments regarding that particular category. Many young people today might assume that a 'rotten Prod' was simply a liberal-minded Protestant, someone who had no anti-Catholic biases. But, for many so-called 'rotten Prods', it went much deeper than that.

I come from a family of 'rotten Prods', for whom the 'Protestant' label was completely irrelevant: we were agnostics and atheists for whom socialism was a more meaningful philosophy of life. My uncle was an active trade unionist in Harland & Wolff Shipyard. My mother, whenever our door would have been knocked by religious proselitizers – which seemed to be a more regular occurrence back in those days – would have politely suggested to them that they engage in a 'more useful occupation'. And not a single person in my immediate family ever gave their vote to a Unionist or Nationalist election candidate: if there was no Labour candidate standing then we just didn't vote. On the cultural side of things my sister and I were sent to Patricia Mulholland's School of Irish Dancing, and two of my other siblings were given Irish names. (Having said that, in my *wider* family some were members of Orange and Masonic lodges, or had been in the B-Specials – but that is another story.)

The first member of my family who could have been termed a ‘rotten Prod’ (if I leave aside my paternal grandmother’s unshakeable belief that her family lineage – her maiden name was Gray – connected her to Betsy Gray of United Irish fame) was my maternal grandfather, Robert Atkinson, who I never met as he died a few months before I was born. An East Belfast-man, he worked as a plater in ‘the Yard’ during the twenties, and he and his shipyard mates would often meet in one another’s houses and discuss the works of Voltaire, Rousseau, Thomas Paine and others. Indeed, in relation to Belfast politics of the twenties and thirties some of the streets in working-class East Belfast have since been referred to by some historians as ‘the red streets’, because of the prominence of leftist and Labour sympathies among the residents.

My grandfather also gained some local renown as a ‘shipyard poet’[†] and many of his poems and short stories were published, under different pseudonyms, in *The Ulster*, or *Ireland’s Saturday Night*. Indeed, during a period of redundancy from the Yard, the meagre pittance he received from his literary efforts almost got him into trouble with the ‘buroo’ (the government’s labour or unemployment bureau), when two ‘dole snoopers’ visited the offices of the newspaper seeking the writer’s real name. To the newspaper’s credit the proprietors unceremoniously showed the two snoopers the door!

My grandfather’s only son – my uncle – followed his father into the Yard as a plater, but was a more active proponent of socialism. Whereas my grandfather was content to hold discussions on radical and socialist ideals, my uncle endeavoured to put these into practice, by helping to organise strikes and engage in other such activities. Although he was in the Yard at a later period than that covered by Brian’s presentation, some of his experiences reveal that the issues Brain talked about were still prevalent in the fifties and sixties. One such incident can testify to that:

My uncle was given the task of looking after two young apprentices, one a Protestant, the other a Catholic. I cannot recall their names, but let’s be stereotypical and call them ‘Billy’ and ‘Sean’. Sean was a diligent worker, good time-keeper and conscientious, whereas Billy was in every way the opposite. Anyway, one day a member of middle management approached my uncle: “Atkinson, we’re having to lay off workers. You are to lose one of your two apprentices.”

My uncle, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, replied: “Oh well, I trust young Billy will get another job soon enough.”

[†] Some of these poems were published in Island Pamphlet No. 4, *Idle Hours: Belfast Working-Class Poetry by Robert Atkinson and Robert Atkinson Jnr*, Island Publications, 1993.

The manager looked at him in surprise.

“But we’re not laying off young Billy, we’re laying off your other one.”

“But why him?” protested my uncle. “Sean is a far better worker. Surely it’s good, reliable workers that the Yard needs?”

“You know rightly why he’s the one being laid off.”

Feigning bewilderment, my uncle replied: “No, I don’t.”

“Because he’s a Fenian!”

And with that statement the manager stomped off, as much to forestall any further argument. (It was this and other such incidents that finally prompted my uncle to leave the Yard and go to work in Mackie’s [engineering works].)

During his time at the Yard my uncle and his closest comrades, conscious that at any time the expulsions that Brian talked about could reoccur, tried to identify vulnerable Catholic workers and laid plans as to how they could be got safely out of the Yard or, failing that, hidden in safe locations.

I can also recall his annoyance at a major TV documentary featuring the Shipyard which avoided any mention of the industrial-related diseases and deaths suffered by many of the workforce. Nor was there any reference to what he termed the ‘blood money’ which was expected by certain individuals in lower management when workers sought to secure future employment for their sons or nephews. Indeed, my uncle and his comrades once went to one of the gaffer’s huts and, when no-one was looking, painted the slogan ‘BLOOD DONATIONS WELCOME’ on the side.

I can remember, at the age of eleven, being taken into the Yard by him to witness the launch of the *Canberra*. I stood, not in the visitors’ section, but amidst a dense crowd of my uncle’s workmates, looking up at the vast hulk of the ship as it towered above us on the slipway. The men around me indulged in the usual grumbling about not having being paid enough for their work, but at the same time I could sense the intense pride they had in their work and their craftsmanship. Indeed, I remember one of them turning to me and saying:

“Son, *we* built that, you know.”

The Yard men were also generous to a fault. During the first two weeks of each December my uncle would stand outside the wages office seeking donations to buy toys for local children’s homes – I think Barnardo’s was the primary recipient. The men would invariably grumble:

“Hold on to you money, lads; there’s bloody “Aki” trying to steal it off us again for those damn kids!”

But this was all bluff, and they never failed to respond generously. And my

siblings and I used to love going into the city centre toyshops with him to buy suitable presents, and then spend hours at home wrapping them.

[Ironically, time was to repeat itself, when I became a social worker for the NSPCC and had to get my own children to engage in the same task.]

In the latter years of his life my uncle became more and more disillusioned: mainly about capitalism and sectarianism. Capitalism, he was convinced, could never be defeated because it had learnt how to adapt to each new circumstance, even cloaking itself in benign clothing. As for sectarianism, he was doubly disillusioned: firstly, by those in leadership levels of society who manipulated it for their own ends, but also because many ordinary people seemed either unable, or unwilling, to rid themselves of this ‘disease’, irrespective of whether it was of an Orange hue or a Green one.

If I can indulge myself here with one further anecdote, this time a humorous one:

During my uncle’s time in Mackie’s the firm went through a difficult period when orders were dropping dramatically. To be fair to the firm they tried to hold on to as many workers as they could, my uncle included, in the hope that there would be an eventual upturn. However, for some of the workers there was little work to do, and my uncle, who hated being idle, used to make ‘homers’ [items that you could smuggle ‘home’ with you from work] for friends, relations and elderly neighbours.

One day a senior manager came over to him.

‘Atkinson, I hear you make a very good angler’s scoop net.’

My uncle feigned ignorance.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘I saw one of them. It looks really good. It’s nice and light [it was made of aluminium] and I like the way the two arms fold back over the handle so that it’s easy to carry.’

My uncle continued to feign ignorance, so the manager smiled.

‘I’m not trying to catch you out, Atkinson, I just want to know ... could you make *me* one?’

My uncle laughed.

‘It’ll be ready by the end of the week.’

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Partition and its aftermath

The Fellowship of Messines Association would like to take this opportunity to announce their plans to undertake a new series of talks and discussions, this time focused on different aspects of Partition and its aftermath.

As before, each talk/discussion will be published in pamphlet format, to allow the discussion to reach a wider grassroots audience.

Leading historians have been approached and have agreed to present papers, which will then be opened up to a general discussion involving invited participants.

As the reader will have noted – with regard to this present pamphlet and the preceding one – the Covid-19 situation has caused us real problems. Our previous lively group debates of 2018 and 2019 could not be replicated due to ‘social distancing’ restrictions, and our efforts to substitute group discussions by soliciting email responses proved decidedly unproductive.

Hence, unless the Covid situation improves – and small groups of people are allowed to meet together again – each presentation by the historians will be followed by a general discussion conducted on an online platform basis.

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The titles of the talks agreed to date give a clear indication of their breadth and scope:

Kevin Meagher: *The Partition of Ireland: Great Mistake or Least Bad Option?*

Prof. Richard Grayson: *A Land fit for Heroes? State Formation and First World War Veterans in Belfast and Dublin in the 1920s*

Dr Aaron Edwards: *Northern Ireland 1921: A State Born in Violence*

Dr Pdraig Yeates: *A Carnival of Reaction? Labour’s response to Partition*

Dr Margaret O’Callaghan: *Entrenching the Partition of Ireland: the Boundary Commission of 1925*

Colin Halliday, Chairman South Belfast UPRG: *The Legacy of Partition and the ‘Common Sense’ paper of 1987*

* * *

To set the scene for the new series of talks – and to get the debate off to a lively, and, to some, perhaps controversial start – it was decided to end this pamphlet with a contribution by Michael Hall, in which he sets out to challenge some of the myths routinely held regarding this fundamental part of our island’s history.

Partition: a reassessment

compiled by **Michael Hall**

When Irish Republicans and Nationalists talk about Partition their analysis is invariably based on several main arguments:

- That any fears that were expressed within the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community regarding Home Rule/Irish Unity were not the product of any ill-will from their Catholic fellow-countrymen and women, but deliberately manufactured ones, cynically created by their own Unionist leadership.
- That the physical partition of the island of Ireland was an unnatural event, largely promoted and imposed upon the Irish by a nefarious British government.
- That the main reason behind Partition was that it was necessary for the British Imperialist ruling class to maintain their strategic hold over at least part of Ireland.
- That the antithetical attitude of the Protestant working class towards Home Rule/Irish Unity was an obvious example of ‘false consciousness’ and that it was the Catholic working class who displayed a true consciousness.

As a prelude to the new series of talks which will look in depth at Partition and its aftermath, I felt it would be useful to share with the reader the analysis of writers who have challenged these largely unquestioned assumptions. Some of those I quote are not coming from a Unionist perspective – the usual source of such arguments – but from the Left.

Protestant fears: real or imagined?

In Jonathan Bardon’s *A History of Ulster*, he notes:

“‘No Surrender’—Citadel Conquered After Centuries of Oppression—Overthrow of Ascendancy’: this is how the *Derry Journal* trumpeted the Unionists’ first ever loss of control over the Londonderry Corporation in January 1920. Alderman Hugh O’Doherty, the city’s first Catholic mayor put in office by the combined vote of Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin councillors, in his inaugural speech had few words of comfort for local loyalists: “Rest assured that mighty changes are coming in Ireland. . . . The Unionist position is no longer tenable. . . . Ireland’s right to determine her own destiny will come about whether the Protestants of Ulster like it or not.”

In *God's Frontiersmen: The Scots-Irish Epic*, Rory Fitzpatrick wrote:

In 1883 Tim Healy, a Home Ruler from Bantry. . . won a by-election in County Monaghan and proclaimed 'the invasion of Ulster'. No other phrase would have better authenticated for Ulster Protestants the view they had of Home Rule. 'All Ulster is ours' said Healy, and it was plain that this was no marginal victory in the knockabout of Catholic-Protestant politics but a breakthrough into Scots-Irish territory by the land-hungry 'Celts'.

There was a widespread assumption that Home Rule would mean the greatest eviction that Ireland had even seen – the turning-out of the Scots-Irish from their lands, their factories and their homes. Ulster was filled with rumours of Protestant property being raffled at Catholic churches in anticipation. 'Lots were drawn', says Frankfort Moore†, 'for certain houses, with the grounds, timber and livestock.' In Belfast, people living in the more prosperous part of the city 'were surprised to come suddenly upon strangers measuring their lawns and examining their fences'. One householder politely asked an intruder what he was doing; 'The man replied with equal civility, that he had merely come to have a good look at the place, as he had been fortunate enough to win it in the raffle. . . . [in] the Nationalist club.' No doubt the impracticalities of a immediate wholesale expropriation of Ulster-Scots property – a reversal of the Plantation settlement – was realised at the higher levels of Nationalist leadership, but within the Catholic rank and file the expectation was there.

This dismissive attitude towards the Protestant community was carried on into the new Irish Free State. In a radio broadcast on St Patrick's Day, 1935, De Valera said: "Since the coming of Saint Patrick. . . Ireland has been a Christian and a Catholic nation. . . . She remains a Catholic nation." This statement demonstrated, according to Conor Cruise O'Brien, "the peculiar nature of Irish nationalism, as it is actually felt, not as it is rhetorically expressed. The nation is felt to be the Gaelic nation, Catholic by religion. Protestants are welcome to join this nation. If they do, they may or may not retain their religious profession, but they become, as it were, Catholic by nationality."

Indeed, the current Sinn Féin President, Mary Lou McDonald, recently acknowledged that there was some truth in the old Unionist slogan that 'Home Rule means Rome Rule'.

† Frank Frankfort Moore (1855–1931) was an Irish dramatist, biographer, novelist and poet. Born in Limerick, he worked as a journalist before gaining fame as an author of fiction.

In 1998, Danny Morrison, former Director of Publicity for Sinn Féin, wrote: “As a republican I believe in breaking the connection with Britain.” What exactly does this mean? If Protestant Ulstermen and women want to celebrate the cultural and kinship ties which ‘connect’ them with mainland Britain does that place them ‘beyond the pale’ by Irish republicans? And, likewise, if Irish Catholics want to be considered *true* republicans do they have to overcome their obsession with the English Premier League, as well as endeavour not to add further to the vast Irish diaspora already in England? Indeed, if Irish republicans genuinely wish to ‘break the connection with Britain’ do they have to renounce one of the most unique features of that ‘connection’ – the Common Travel Area?

Morrison also wrote “I believed that armed struggle could sap the will of the British establishment to remain in Ireland.” Given that the *vast majority* of those ‘remaining’ within Northern Ireland’s local ‘establishment’ – whether in the civil service, the judiciary, the churches, the business community, etc. – were *Ulster-born*, many of whom saw their identity as British, was it Morrison’s hope that it was these same people who would lose ‘the will to remain’?

Such dismissive attitudes are unfortunately quite prevalent. When teaching at Magee University College historian Liam Kennedy had a disturbing conversation with a young man who he considered to be possibly the brightest student of the year. The young man had commenced the conversation as follows:

“Protestants should accept that they are Irish.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Well, that’s up to them, but the future is a united Ireland.”

“But they don’t want a united Ireland.”

“They have to accept it or get out. That’s the choice.”

Partition: newly imposed or already a reality?

In a cross-community debate held in 1999, Bernadette McAlisky asserted that Partition was the root of the Irish problem. Boyd Black, giving a Unionist perspective, took issue with this. The ‘problem’, as he saw it, was that two communities with divergent aspirations *already existed* in 1920, and Partition was not so much a *political* reality imposed *by* Britain, but a *social* reality imposed *upon* Britain. One set of aspirations could only have been granted by coercing the other. “Now either you say that the British government should have coerced one grouping, or that the British didn’t have much alternative and took the line of least resistance.”

In *The Hidden Ground: Patterns of Ulster History*, A T Q Stewart wrote:

[T]he truth is that partition is not a line drawn on the map; it exists in the hearts and minds of Irish people. . . . Nationalists may or may not be justified in their attempts to remove it and to annex the other six counties of Ireland to the Republic, but there is little point in so doing unless they can find a way to eliminate that other border in the mind. . . . In the long run the one decisive factor in partition is not the weakness of Irish nationalism, nor the guile of unionists, nor the chicanery of British statesmanship. It is the simple determination of Protestants in north-east Ireland not to become a minority in a Catholic Ireland. It is towards weakening this determination that all the efforts of Irish nationalism ought in theory to have been aimed. Instead they have been largely directed to strengthening it in every possible way.

Economic Partition

The reality of a pre-existing division on the island of Ireland was most evident in the economic sphere. As Anders Boserup, in *Socialist Register 1972*, wrote:

In fact, the counties of Antrim and Down along the North-Eastern coast, now the most developed parts of Ulster, were not planted by the English government at all, but privately by Scottish immigrants. The ‘Ulster custom’[†] made investment in agriculture profitable for the tenant and permitted the growth of cottage industries, principally linen manufacture. It thus facilitated local capital accumulation and the emergence of a domestic market for industrial and artisanal goods. . . . Ulster was therefore able to benefit fully from the growth of the linen industry after 1820.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Ireland consisted of two economies, but they were geographically separate: the South had a vast subsistence level peasantry which was only slowly recovering from the years of the Great Famine and a thin upper stratum of landlords and trading bourgeoisie. Industry was not far developed. In Ulster, on the other hand, the

[†] Tenant-right is a term in the common law system expressing the right to compensation which a tenant has, either by custom or by law, against his landlord for improvements at the termination of his tenancy. In Ireland, tenant-right was a custom, prevailing particularly in Ulster, known as the Custom of Ulster, by which the tenant acquired a right not to have his rent raised arbitrarily at the expiration of his term. This resulted in Ulster in considerable fixity of tenure and, in case of a desire on the part of the tenant to sell his farm, made the tenant-right of considerable capital value, amounting often to many years’ rent. (Wikipedia)

economically dominant class was the industrial bourgeoisie, and this class was in the process of achieving political dominance as well against the landlord class. Belfast was a rapidly expanding modern industrial and commercial centre with all the dynamism, self-confidence and abject popular misery of early capitalism. In short, the South was a kind of neo-colonial society while Ulster was no more or less than an integral part of the British economy.

These were the hard realities behind partition. ... They rendered the united and independent Ireland of the Nationalists utopian. Not only were the economies of the two halves of the island different, they were neither complementary nor compatible. The Northern industries were entirely dependent upon the preservation of the British market, and to it the market of the South was no alternative.

[The] interests of the dominant classes in the North and in the South were opposed: the industries in the North could only survive with a free trade policy towards Britain; but such a policy was not to be expected of an Irish republic, for the development of industry in the South would not be possible except behind the shield of a protective tariff.

Ulster was no doubt the more progressive part of Ireland, and its refusal to be coerced into a state with which it had no affinity of nationality, no community of interests in economic terms, and which promised to be politically reactionary and dominated by the Catholic Church, was never well understood by the Nationalists. Instead, they seemed to assume that the Unionist movement consisted of little more than a lumpen bourgeoisie and a lumpen proletariat which landlords were leading by the nose. . . . In fact the most advanced sector of the Irish working class, the Protestant workers of Belfast, were firmly aligned behind Unionism and this for no bad reason: Home Rule constituted a direct threat to their jobs and incomes, as it did to those of most other people in the North.

British Imperial interests: real or imagined?

As Boserup noted (writing in 1972):

Today one can find this same tendency among Catholic Nationalists to attribute Protestant working and lower-middle class opposition to the reunification of Ireland to plots and manipulation by imperialism and by the Ulster ruling class. In the nineteen-seventies as in the nineteen-

twenties this results in a gross underestimation of the forces Nationalists are up against. [In fact] before Partition came in 1920 the political predominance of the landlord class in the Unionist movement had been all but destroyed by the land reforms at the turn of the century.

British domination is . . . seen as the root of all the problems of Ireland. In the socialist ideology British domination becomes British imperialism. . . . Divisions among the people are [usually portrayed as] the result of “false consciousness”, itself the consequence of the divide-and-rule policies of imperialism and its local executioners. . . . Bringing in British imperialism has the distinct advantage that it is then clearly seen to be the Protestant, rather than the Catholic workers, whose consciousness is “false”. In the end they will join the Catholics in their struggle, and they will do so in all essentials on the terms now demanded by the Catholics.

Nor is it surprising that it should have gained such wide currency throughout the Catholic left and far into nationalist circles. Its attractiveness lies precisely in the fact that it reconciles nationalist and socialist ideologies.

This theory of the left in which British imperialism provides the connecting link between nationalism and socialism and explains the main features of Orange rule in the North cannot stand up to closer scrutiny. The “cement” in the theory, the force which connects everything and explains everything, British imperialism, is simply not an important force in contemporary Irish politics. Moreover, to the limited extent that it is, its interests are *antithetical* to those of Protestant rule, not coincident with them.

[Historical British interests in Ireland] have lost all importance today. . . . [The] interests of British imperialism are today of such a nature that they are served just as well in the Republic as they are in Northern Ireland. These interests do not depend in any substantial way on continued administrative control. The upkeep of Northern Ireland is a considerable drain on the British Treasury and it is hard to think of any compensating benefits for British capital. Nor do the interests of British imperialism militate in favour of continued Orange rule [*again, Boserup was writing in 1972*] and the perpetuations of the divisions of the working class. On the contrary, the Orange system is antithetical to [Britain’s current] interests. To British capital Ireland provides a supply of labour, a protected environment for ailing companies and a not unimportant export market. None of these would be jeopardised by Irish unity and Irish independence.

The truth of the matter is that British control over Ireland had lost most of its importance by the middle of the 19th century and has today become an almost pure liability. This is the reason why Gladstone was willing to grant Home Rule in exchange for no more substantial benefits to British capital than a transient Liberal-Nationalist coalition at Westminster. This is also the reason why opposition to Home Rule *was not led by British capital* but by Ulster Protestants and British Tories, army officers and landlords. It was these forces which imposed Partition. ... [One needs to recognise] that British imperialist interests in Ulster are quite marginal.

Historian Liam Kennedy would also concur with such an assessment:

Much ink has been spilled on the issue of whether or not the United Kingdom had economic, political, and strategic interests in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century. . . . Whether Britain had an economic interest in Northern Ireland in the depressed interwar period is debatable . . . but this was certainly not true from the 1970s onwards when the region was propped up by massive subsidies from the British exchequer. Moreover, as the technology of warfare changed in the postwar decades, particularly with the advent of nuclear weaponry, the military and strategic interest of Northern Ireland to Britain became peripheral at best.

Kennedy then gives the following example:

The more detailed picture for Northern Ireland for the financial year 2013-14 is as follows (and is indicative of earlier drains on the British exchequer dating back to the 1970s):

Public sector revenue: £14.9 billion

Public sector expenditure: £24.1 billion

Deficit: £9.2 billion.

This subsidy amounts to the equivalent of £5,000 per head of population in Northern Ireland. . . . Thus, in recent decades, although Britain had interests in Northern Ireland, perversely these seem to have been embedded in mainly *negative* assets. It is simply a fiction to believe that Britain was clinging to some remnant of empire, as the more polemical critiques of British policy put it.

Kennedy further notes:

Viewed in international terms, the British position on the Belfast Agreement was a remarkably liberal stance, as unlike most states faced with secessionist movements, ranging from Spain and France to the Russian Federation and Ukraine, the UK state has long accepted the right of a section of its citizens to exit collectively and take a part of its sovereign territory with it.

In a pamphlet entitled *Crossing the Border: Class Unity and the Partition of Ireland*, the author(s), on behalf of *Organise!*, also came to similar conclusions:

The anti-imperialist position cannot, we believe, take adequate account of the fact that the most significant ‘British’ presence in Northern Ireland consists of a majority of the area’s population – it is not the case that the British presence can simply be represented in terms of British troops or direct rule ministers. ... We must also point out that the armed struggle conducted by the IRA over the past few decades led to a reduction in the amount of people who felt they could accommodate an Irish identity, or elements of this within, or as opposed to, the expression of Britishness.

The northeast of Ulster became an integral part of British industrial output centred on the industrial triangle of Belfast, Merseyside and Glasgow. Free trade throughout the empire and access to the overseas markets it provided were essential to the economy of Belfast and its periphery.

That partition is responsible for the non-appearance of mass socialist politics in the working class in Ireland is surely a flight of fancy and mimics the worst of the ‘labour must wait’ school of thought.

The British policy was for Home Rule for Ireland; it was a policy that met with considerable resistance from unionists and the Conservative opposition. [In relation to the oft-claimed ‘interests of British imperialism’] it was the British ruling party that, during different terms of office at Westminster, proposed the three Home Rule for Ireland Bills.

It verges on paranoia to suggest, or repeat an oft-heard but ill-informed position usually spouted by the authoritarian left and left republicans, that partition was carried out ‘to divide the working class’. That was not the reason for partition. In fact, division in the working class *pre-dated*

partition by a long time.

It must be acknowledged that in the context of capitalism and without a viable movement towards socialism or workers' control that [Partition] also favoured northern workers who 'enjoyed' better wages than the rest of Ireland, wages that in some industries were on a par with English wages. Workers who would have heard and largely accepted the arguments that Home Rule would mean protectionism that would damage export-based industry in the northeast, and would therefore damage their standard of living, had *hard economic reasons to support the Union*. By the same token southern workers could be persuaded that Home Rule and a protectionist economy would be beneficial to *their* interests.

[Irish Republicans and many others on the Left assert that] protestant workers must be split from Loyalism, but catholic workers [seemingly] do not need to be won away from Irish nationalism. [The] absence of any desire to break catholic workers from Irish nationalism is in essence sectarian.

Where does 'false consciousness' really lie?

Maurice Brinton, writing in *Solidarity*, July 1974, commented:

How different would the situation be in Ireland today if there had been a socialist movement committed to working-class unity, rather than the slavish and uncritical support given to Catholic nationalism by the traditional left which over the years has actually contributed to worsening sectarian divisions?

All those who have for so long been shouting "Victory to the IRA" now find themselves in a difficult position. Their mindless generalisations about British imperialism in Ulster and support for Irish Catholic nationalism have placed them miles away from anywhere workers struggle for their [real class] interests.

Anders Boserup also wrote:

[The] strategy of "national liberation" which the left is presently pursuing is based on a faulty analysis and leads absolutely nowhere. It portrays the windmills of British imperialism as a mighty army and overlooks the real enemy [capitalist exploitation]. In so doing, far from enriching the revolutionary experience of the working class and preparing the ground for the more meaningful struggle of the future, it is trapping the working

class ever more firmly in its sectarian ideologies.

To prevent splits among the Unionist voters and to check the growth of class-based parties is the one thing the Protestants cannot achieve without some sort of assistance from the Catholics. ... The attacks of the IRA and the loud noises from the Republic about its determination to see Partition ended [provided such assistance].

Ultimately it is to put the cart before the horse to demand a 32-county Republic and hope that it can then develop towards socialism. There is no surer way of perpetuating religious divisions than to impose Irish unity against the will of almost a quarter of its population, and a state so created would be socialist, if at all, only in name. ... To start with an imposed unity is to betray the ideals of internationalism, socialism and democracy. But it is also to betray the working class and its struggle for socialism.

The affirmation that Northern Irish Protestants constitute a separate national entity with a right to refuse incorporation in the Republic is usually considered to be divisive of the working class and therefore anti-socialist. On the contrary I think that it is the stubborn affirmation of unity and solidarity where none exists and the extravagant claim of Irish Catholics to the whole island which is divisive. ... The Catholic left, by its espousal of the demand for a united Ireland, has demonstrated that even those who claim to constitute the socialist vanguard are trapped in nationalist ideologies.

It is therefore important that British and other socialists should realise that in responding to the call for “solidarity in the struggle against British imperialism” they are in effect betraying socialist ideals and backing policies of national oppression of the Protestant minority in Ireland.

With regard to Boserup’s reference to an ‘extravagant claim’, perhaps an analogy could be made with the USA. While the official plantation of Ulster began in 1609, a smaller private plantation by wealthy landowners began in 1606. The first permanent English settlement in America (Jamestown) was established in May 1607. Hence, *the plantation of Ulster is older than the plantation of America*. Yet somehow some Irish nationalists imagine that the Ulster Plantation is so ‘recent’ an event that its 400-year-old longevity and demographic, cultural and political legacy can be easily undone (witness the student mentioned earlier who, when conversing with historian Liam Kennedy,

was of the firm opinion that if Protestant didn't accept a United Ireland, then they should "get out"). It is impossible to imagine that Americans – including Irish-Americans – would not look askance at a similar expectation being voiced by today's Native Americans, with regard to undoing or reversing the 400-year-old European take-over of their lands.

A final word from the the authors of the *Organise!* pamphlet:

Class interests are made subservient to the task of ending partition, of "removing the British presence", of ending the "British occupation", which is in reality the prioritising of the Irish national project above class interests and unity of struggle.

Sources:

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