

Grassroots Experiences

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Published June 2023 by
Island Publications
132 Serpentine Road, Newtownabbey BT36 7JQ

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Introduction

Island Pamphlets first received EU funding beginning with Pamphlet no. 19 (prior to that half the titles had been produced at my own expense). The EU funding (administered through the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the International Fund for Ireland) continued until Pamphlet no.78.† During this time most of the pamphlets were edited accounts of discussions which had taken place in what were termed ‘community think tanks’, involving no more than ten to twelve participants (any more was felt to inhibit proper debate). Each series of Think Tank discussions involved two or three separate one-and-a-half-hour sessions, and usually resulted in a pamphlet containing between 32 and 36 pages.

When direct funding for the project ended, from pamphlet no. 113 onwards I have worked in collaboration with Harry Donaghy and the Fellowship of Messines Association, with the bulk of *these* pamphlets focusing on half-day workshops/talks organised by the Messines project. When the edited transcriptions of these workshops sometimes fell short of the normal pamphlet length I was often encouraged, when compiling the draft, to describe in more depth some of the personal experiences I had made reference to in the workshops. This pamphlet brings together some of those experiences. Although they can be read as stand-alone segments, I have indicated from which Island Pamphlet they were taken, in case the reader wants to explore further the context surrounding them.

When it became apparent that my pamphlet series was being read well beyond the confines of Northern Ireland I began to add additional ‘notes’ to supplement some of the comments made. Indeed, these were often found enlightening to a local readership as well. In this pamphlet I have retained some of those notes.

Michael Hall

† CRC funding subsequently also assisted with pamphlet nos. 96 to 106.

[**Michael Hall**] In Brian [Hanley]'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 they 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 Brian 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 do not know 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.”

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?”

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

“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 your 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, this event was to be repeated, 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.”

From Pamphlet No. 126, The Republican Movement divides, December 1969–January 1970

[**Michael Hall**] I can readily concur with what Brian [Hanley] was saying about the ‘anti-red’ feeling which was prevalent at the time. I can best illustrate this by a couple of experiences of my own.

The first one occurred when People’s Democracy was organising a public event in St Mary’s Hall in Bank Street. Three of us were on the lower Falls Road putting up flyers. As we were pasting a flyer on an empty hoarding – belonging to Laing’s construction firm – a priest approached. “What are you boys up to?” he demanded, “you’re defacing private property!” “It’s only a small flyer,” we responded, “and it’s not as if it’s on anyone’s house.” The priest peered closely at the flyer, on which the word SOCIALISM was prominent. “You’re a bunch of communists! We don’t want communists on this road!” Upon which he signalled to a group of five young men standing on the far side of the road. As they came over to us, the priest said to them: “Get these boyos off the road – they’re communists.” The five men moved menacingly towards us: “You heard the Father – piss off now!” I then noticed that two of them were wearing the metal Connolly badges which the ‘Stickies’ [Official republicans] had recently produced, and so I felt sure we would receive a supportive hearing. “We’re not doing anything wrong; the priest here just doesn’t like socialists.” “Nor do we! So fuck away off right now!” “But you two are wearing Connolly badges! Connolly was a socialist.” “Fucking sure he wasn’t! He was a good nationalist! Now fuck off!” And so, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, we ‘fucked off’, having learnt – not for the first or last time – that not everything is as it seems in this country.

The second incident also took place in the Falls Road area. Again I was with a small group of PD members; we were all drinking in a pub. (I cannot recall which pub it was; born and bred in Protestant working-class East Belfast, the Falls then was unfamiliar territory to me.)

Our table was in one corner of the room, while in another corner sat a larger crowd of Celtic supporters, most in their twenties. And as well as being noisily drunk, the songs they were singing were blatantly sectarian. After we got tired of hearing all these

demented shouts of ‘Fuck Rangers!’ ‘Fuck the Prods!’ we decided to respond by singing *The Internationale*. For a while the other crowd just looked over at us, bewildered, then it must have dawned on some of them what we were singing, and a number of them stormed over to our table. “Fuckin’ Commie bastards! We don’t need the fuckin’ likes of you around here!” When none of the PD crowd moved, within seconds fists began to fly from a couple of the Celtic supporters.

As the fighting erupted a number of women began to scream, chairs crashed to the floor and there was pandemonium throughout the room. At that very moment I happened to be up at the bar waiting to buy a drink, and found the route back to our table blocked by people attempting to flee the melee. A number of older women were frantically trying to escape out through a door but it had jammed against one of the tables. As I was close to the door I began to pull at it, endeavouring to free it. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the Celtic supporters head aggressively towards me, realising that not only was I a member of the PD group, but that I was now isolated from my comrades. I gave the door one last frantic heave . . . and to my astonishment the bloody door partly came away from one of its hinges! My advancing would-be assailant looked as amazed as I was and, presumably having second thoughts, proceeded no further! When we all eventually got to the safety of the street the Celtic supporters continued to hurl insults at us but thankfully no further fighting ensued.

Brian also talked about how the pre-Troubles focus of the IRA – under Goulding, Johnston and others – had been on community-based activism, but that this had been quickly swept aside by those who wanted a return to the traditional ‘armed force’ strategy. I also had an experience which clearly highlighted that new reality.

In the early years of the Troubles I once found myself, along with two friends, amongst a large crowd of people at a makeshift barricade in West Belfast. On the far side of the barricade stood a line of British soldiers. The officer in charge was clearly uneasy, for he paced agitatedly up and down.

But it was the composition of the crowd which took up most of my attention. There were males and females, young and old, and I walked around listening to snippets of different conversations. One group of people was talking about getting local teenagers engaged in constructive tasks, believing that otherwise they would get into mischief. In another group of people someone wanted to approach the Protestant community and

offer to organise joint patrols in an attempt to prevent further inter-communal conflict. Others were talking about ensuring that the elderly had sufficient provisions – such as milk, bread and coal – because many senior citizens were afraid to leave their houses with all that had been going on. It was a veritable hive of disparate discussions, and the buzz of energy being generated within the crowd was palpable. Indeed, at the time I even let myself imagine that it was akin to what the French students must have experienced in the Sorbonne during the ‘May Events’ in Paris in 1968.

And then something began to intrude upon all these earnest discussions, and with an urgent persistence an ‘instruction’ was passed around the crowd: “Clear the street – ‘the boys’ are coming out!” As I surveyed the crowd I could see that this instruction was not universally welcomed. Admittedly, some young people seemed excited by the prospect, but many older people had looks of consternation and apprehension on their faces. These feelings were matched by the comments voiced.

“They don’t bloody need to come out! Sure we control the street!”

“I think it’s a risky move – God knows what could happen afterwards.”

“Well, we’re unlikely to be able to stop them, so we’d better get offside.”

And slowly the street emptied of people. One man, discovering that we were strangers to the area, suggested we accompany him to his house, where we went into his front room to observe what was to transpire. As I looked over at the line of soldiers it was clear that they too had been taken by surprise by this inexplicable emptying of the street. The officer had ceased his pacing and was staring, perplexed, over the barricade.

And then the house-owner drew my attention to a vehicle slowly approaching a nearby gable wall where it stopped, just out of sight of the line of soldiers.

What happened next is indelibly imprinted on my memory. Two men got out of the vehicle – if I recall correctly it was a Mini Countryman – and walked slowly in the direction of the barricade, both men with one hand behind their backs – and each holding a gun. Ever so nonchalantly, the two men drew closer to the barricade and then suddenly revealed their weapons, aimed at the soldiers, and opened fire. All of us in the room, in an automatic reflex, threw ourselves to the floor. By the time I had scrambled to my feet it was to see that the two gunmen had made a quick retreat to their vehicle – and were soon speeding away from the scene. It all seemed so surreal that for a

moment I couldn't believe that it had happened at all.

But it was real enough, for we could see feverish activity taking place among the soldiers. It was obvious that they were preparing to advance towards the now-undefended barricade. In our room we looked at one another, and I could only guess that a similar question was being asked in every household: do we stay put or do we return to the street? If we stayed put, then the Army would most likely enter and smash up each house in turn. If we returned to the street, who could predict what might ensue?

But within minutes the residents had returned to the street and set out to defend their flimsy barricade, in a dramatically-changed situation where violence soon erupted. And when my mind replayed the image of those two gunmen sauntering towards their enemy it evoked teenage memories of the 'Gunfight at the O.K. Corral'. For to me that's what the gunmen's action had amounted to – a swaggering show of cinematic bravado, which had overturned a situation where ordinary people had been in the ascendancy but now those same people were put in great danger to life and limb. Indeed, later that day, when I returned to the remains of the barricade, someone had placed an empty milk bottle, containing a solitary flower, on a spot where dried blood stained the ground. What had happened, I wondered? Who had been injured there? And how seriously?

The whole incident left me with tangled emotions and confused thoughts. But one lingering feeling I had was that the involvement of the gunmen was, in effect, the IRA stamping their authority on the situation, as if to say: 'We know best how to deal with this – leave it to us.' Any spontaneous, and undoubtedly more creative, actions by ordinary people – the things many of us in the PD had been encouraging – were definitely now a thing of the past; those whose focus was now set on armed struggle were determined to exert *their* control over unfolding events. Any community-based, and community-controlled, *mass movement* to counteract the escalating events was over, all that had now been superseded by the single-minded pursuit of a 'Brits Out' campaign.

In those early days of the Troubles I had little time for the usual 'isms' so prevalent in this society – Unionism, Loyalism, Orangeism, Republicanism, Nationalism. However, I knew from numerous republican friends that there existed a wide diversity of stances within their movement, some reactionary, some progressive. Indeed, I was

a personal recipient of that strange diversity: one organisation threatened to knee-cap me for criticisms I had publicly voiced about the ‘armed struggle’, while another asked if I would consider becoming one of their ‘education officers’!

Hence, acknowledging the rich diversity of viewpoints which then existed within Republicanism, I personally felt that the IRA ‘split’ was a tragedy, for the opportunity to share different views and explore alternative responses was lost when people divided into bitterly opposing camps. If the movement had stayed together, and provided all these diverse viewpoints with an equal hearing – in the hope that a more progressive approach could be achieved – then perhaps the way the ‘war’ was ultimately to be pursued might have been different. As it was, the internal divisions could only but exacerbate the slow spiral downwards into a situation which I feel was encapsulated by Liam McMillan when he said (in 1973): “We stand not on the brink of victory but on the brink of sectarian disaster.” Perhaps if there had been *no* split things could have worked out quite differently.

For the understandable anger and genuine emotions which were fuelling the split were also, unfortunately, replicated within the mindset of local communities. I had a vivid personal experience of this when I facilitated a discussion group in West Belfast.

This particular discussion took place on 14 March 1996. As the participants gradually arrived for the discussion it was evident that everyone was in shock from the events of the previous day. For in the town of Dunblane, Scotland, a man had entered the small primary school there and shot dead sixteen children, all in the 5-6 age range, and one teacher, before turning one of his weapons on himself.

As we sat there waiting for everyone to assemble, the sadness of the tragedy had clearly impacted upon all those present. Some of the women were fighting back tears, and one former member of the IRA could barely disguise his shock and disbelief, shaking his head repeatedly. After a brief discussion on the massacre we set down to our own task and commenced our own discussion.

During the discussion I decided to raise the question of the morality of some of the killings carried out by the IRA, presumably on the Nationalist community’s behalf. I asked the group members: was everything that the IRA had done in their pursuit of ‘armed struggle’ acceptable to them, or did any of them have grave misgivings? As an example – which to me seemed a clear-cut one – I mentioned the case of Patsy

Gillespie, a victim of the IRA's first use of the stratagem which became known as the 'human bomb'. (Mr Gillespie was a canteen worker at Fort George army base in Derry, and on 24 October 1990 armed IRA members arrived at his house, held his family captive and ordered him to drive a van bomb to Coshquin vehicle checkpoint on the border with Donegal. Once there the bomb was detonated, killing him and five British soldiers.)

I was taken aback by the response from the members of the group. "He shouldn't have been working in a British Army base." "He knew the risks he was taking."

"But do you think that still justified his killing?"

"It was a tragedy, yes – but he was still a legitimate target."

He was a 'legitimate target' for murder? A canteen worker? Perhaps some of those present had different views to the ones expressed, but if so, they kept them to themselves, and the general consensus was that it had been an understandable action on behalf of the IRA. Yet I couldn't quite square what I was hearing. I knew these people were all humane, could weep at human tragedy; indeed, some had been close to tears only half an hour before. Yet if I had walked in on this group – *without* having known that other side to them – I could easily have felt that they were heartless and uncaring. But I knew different.

So, what was it about our conflict which allowed ordinary, caring people to accept a 'war narrative' which enabled them to pull down shutters on their deepest humane feelings?

To come back to the point I am trying to make about the republican split. If the split had *not* occurred within the republican movement back in 1969-70, and all shades of thought within republicanism had been allowed to engage in a free debate as to what actions might be productive and what might be counter-productive, what actions could be considered 'right' and what could be considered 'wrong', we might have ended up in a far better place, with far less blood having been spilled on all sides.

In a separate 'Think Tank' discussion which I facilitated, involving Republican ex-combatants, a leading member of the IRSP surprised many of the other participants when he said: "Within republican history, especially militant republicanism, it is common for us to say that there was 'no alternative'. In fact, there were plenty of alternatives – we just didn't like them."† (see next page)

It did not *have to be* armed struggle. There have been numerous examples in modern history of *non-violent* alternatives which succeeded in bringing about fundamental system change.†† Perhaps if the IRA split had *not* occurred, similar alternatives might have been tried here.

From Pamphlet No. 123, The Irish Diaspora in Britain & America: Benign or Malign Forces?

Appendix 1 Paul O'Dwyer's rethink

That leading Irish-Americans were willing to rethink old assumptions and engage with the Loyalist/Unionist community is evidenced by comments made in a letter to me by Paul O'Dwyer, dated 7 October 1987.

Dear Michael

. . . Now what about the Protestant community. My visits to Belfast, Derry and Dungannon have taught me a great deal and I wish that we had the opportunity to engage in more communications. I know I have a lot to learn. I try to make up for the lack of more intimate contacts by reading and find it is helpful but no substitute. I have tried to fill in with literature such as your writings and the interesting history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and in the U.S. It gives me a better understanding of the thinking, the hopes and the fears of so many of the Protestant community. As a result I can understand the sometimes less than rational outcries, but I do understand the genuine and understandable anger of insecure Protestants who feel so threatened. . . . I am not alarmed by the cries in the street which when stripped of their much quoted verbiage is no more than a plea to have their fears of the destruction of their tradition recognized and ancient hard-won rights to freedom of conscience honored and protected.

† Island Pamphlet No. 99, *Republicanism in Transition (4) The question of 'Armed Struggle'*, page 6, available as a free pdf download from <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/islandpublications>

†† Gandhi's 'Salt Satyagraha' (India, 1930); the 'Carnation Revolution' (Portugal, 1974); the 'Yellow Revolution' (Philippines, 1986); the 'Singing Revolution' (Baltic States, 1987-9); the 'Velvet Revolution' (Czechoslovakia, 1989); the 'Peaceful Revolution' (East Germany, 1989)

At a time when I was President of the New York City Council . . . I was challenged by a Northern Ireland reporter about my right to speak about Civil Rights in Northern Ireland without speaking to representative Protestants. I concluded it was a just criticism. I had come through our own civil rights war and we won major battles and at last changed national policy towards our minorities, but having been brought up during the Black & Tan War I considered only the right of Ireland to get rid of the invader without giving proper thought to the rights of Irish Protestants.

On my next visit with the help of Canon Arlow, whom I had met in New York, Ulick O'Connor and Senator Trevor West, I met Martin Smyth and others but wanted to meet [Andy] Tyrie and related that fact to the threesome. Soon I found myself winding my way where no Fenian should be heading: [over to] UDA headquarters. I believe the result was, to say the least, enlightening. I am not naive enough to overlook Tyrie's or Adams' role or their respective positions, but I know where they stand and if peace comes I'm sure it will come with justice if these people are at the table. It is for all these diverse reasons I have recommended to American journalists that they interview Andy whom I regard as a mature politician, and I mean that in the best sense, and now with your permission I will also send them your way and Ian's [Adamson].

Fraternally, Paul O'Dwyer

*From Pamphlet No. 113, **The Social, Economic & Political background to the 'Long 60s'***

[**Michael Hall**] I was completely turned off by local politics. I was brought up in a secular household, and even though my grandfather had been a B-Special and other relatives were in the Orange Order, my immediate family members were all Labour people. My uncle was a trade unionist in the shipyard and a member of the Communist Party. I was in the People's Democracy from its founding and was at Burntolllet: and on the way into Derry, along Irish Street, we were attacked; somebody punched me in the face so I punched him right back, and at that moment I realised I had never really been exposed to the sectarian divisions existing in my own country. I thought: what is going on here? where is all this going to lead? who

are these people with hate-filled eyes charging down at me, and who are these people who have come out from Derry to join us? In the sixties my political consciousness had nothing to do with Northern Ireland, or Irish history, it was focused *outside* Northern Ireland: the shooting of Rudi Dutschke in Germany, the ‘May events’ in France, the ‘Prague Spring’ . . . local politics was not on my radar. . . . In the sixties I read dozens of radical books – by authors like Frantz Fanon, Herbert Marcuse, Raoul Vaneigem, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, R D Laing, A S Neill... And yet the irony is that – until the personal shock of the Burntollet ambush – I had little or no interest in reading about Ireland or Irish history – for up to then Irish history, to me at least, was just boring and divisive.

*From Pamphlet No. 114, **Civil Rights Internationally and the Crisis of the 1960s***

[**Michael Hall**] I think there is also a major problem in that some people assume that there is a kind of continuity between the Civil Rights demands of 1968 and today’s issues . . . They somehow imagine that this was all part of a continuum, as if the last forty years had all been about unresolved civil liberties issues. But I think any genuine pursuit of Civil Rights issues actually *stopped* in 1970, and an entirely different struggle took over. I will give you a personal experience of trying to exercise *my* ‘civil rights’. In 1973 I brought out a pamphlet† in which I criticised the Unionist legacy of discrimination and gerrymandering, but I also criticised the Provisionals’ indiscriminate bombing campaign. Now, a friend of mine had close links to the Provisionals, and they asked him if he knew who wrote the pamphlet. When he said he did, they said: “Well, tell yer mate this: if he writes *anything* like that again he’ll get his knees ventilated!” Two weeks later I was walking near where I lived and two Loyalists blocked my path and said, “We’re watching you, you bastard, and we’re going to get you soon!” A concern with civil liberties, from *either* side, was non-existent. It was no longer anything to do with civil rights. So to me there never was any continuum, the way some republicans claim that they took up the ‘mantle’ of civil rights.

† *Ireland: Dead or Alive?*, Belfast Libertarian Group, Belfast, 1973.

From Pamphlet No. 122, Loyalism and Unionism under Threat?

[**Michael Hall**] During an earlier discussion someone said he couldn't understand *why* the Protestant community should have felt that Civil Rights was a threat to them. I think it is quite a complex issue. Even as early as August 1969 Eamonn McCann lamented that the Civil Rights movement was becoming more and more a specifically Catholic movement.† I also think that those of us on the Left let down the Protestant working class; indeed, we betrayed them in many ways. I was a member of PD [People's Democracy] – and was at Burntollet – and we repeatedly appealed to working-class Protestants to join with us.†† The

† In a leaflet produced just days before the 'Battle of the Bogside', McCann had written: "Once upon a time we all talked about the non-sectarian nature of the Civil Rights movement. Now we are planning to seal off the Catholic area of Derry on the Twelfth of August. We are accepting, deepening and physically drawing the line between Catholic and Protestant working-class people." He then describes going to speak to a gathering of residents in the Protestant Fountain area, asking them how they could justify minority Unionist rule by Derry Corporation: "A middle-aged woman told me immediately: 'But if you Catholics were in control there would be no life for us here. We would have to leave our homes and get out.' It was clear that every one of them actually *believed* it. It is ridiculous, I told them. They must have been brainwashed by the Unionist Party." McCann then adds: "But then, look at it from another point of view. Recall the mass march of November 16th. . . . In the Diamond afterwards speaker after speaker attacked the Unionist Party. Unionist political personalities were very effectively torn to shreds. Reference was made to [a local Protestant] slum landlord. All the attack was concentrated on the political philosophy which happens to be accepted by the overwhelming majority of Protestants. No attack was made on any political philosophy accepted by *any* section of the Catholics. No mention was made of [a local Catholic] slum landlord. Because by that time the movement . . . was a mass Catholic alliance, uniting Catholics of all classes and all non-Unionist political parties . . . As a result, it is easy for an adept propagandist to represent the whole Civil Rights movement as anti-Protestant."

†† In May 1969, in the *New Left Review*, Eamonn McCann admitted that the Civil Rights campaign, instead of uniting the two communities as originally hoped, was dividing them more than ever: "We keep saying parrot-like that we are fighting on working-class issues for working-class unity. . . It is a lot of pompous nonsense. . . The consciousness of the people who are fighting in the streets at the moment is sectarian and bigoted . . . Everyone applauds loudly when one says in a speech that we are not sectarian, we are fighting for the rights of all Irish workers, but really that's because they see this as the new way of getting at the Protestants."

Even constitutional nationalists spoke in ways which the Protestant community found threatening. On 2 January 1972 at a rally in Falls Park, Austin Currie, SDLP, told the crowd: "I have no doubt that within the next six or seven months Brian Faulkner and his rotten Unionist system will have been smashed. [T]he writing is on the wall for Unionism... I say to [British Home Secretary] Maudling: why the hell should we talk to you? We are winning and you are not."

problem was that during the Sixties the radical Left were fixated by the world-wide upheavals of that period, and one unfortunate consequence was that 'national liberation' struggles were too often seen to be synonymous with Socialism. I had always felt that was a delusion, but – and I know that this is taking our discussion into a later time period – when the Civil Rights period morphed into the Troubles proper I know that many working-class Protestants thought: here's these people who were talking about working-class unity, yet they are now supporting the IRA.

And that's what eventually happened. I will give you a personal example. Quite a few years into the Troubles, I was taking some Dutch people around the areas from which I selected children for a summer scheme in Holland, and we happened to be in the Beechmount area of the Falls Road. The Dutch pointed over to one particular building and asked: "What's that over there?" I told them it was a Sinn Féin advice centre. They asked me to take them inside. And as soon as I stepped through the door a voice said, "Mike, where have you been all these years?" Sitting behind a desk was a friend of mine, who had been in PD with me. He said: "You'll be surprised to know that I've joined Sinn Féin." I said, "It certainly is a surprise! But tell me this: for the last lot of years all I have heard talk of is 'Prods and Taigs', nobody has been talking about socialism, or anarchism – all the things we used to discuss. So tell me this: seeing that you are now in Sinn Féin, what is their take on the economy? Are they happy for it to remain a capitalist economy, or is there even any talk of workers' control?" And what he said shook me to the core: "Christ's sake, Mike, we'll worry about all that when the Brits are kicked out!" And I was stunned.

I know I am jumping ahead in time here, but I really think it was the way Civil Rights seemingly morphed into a new IRA campaign that confirmed many of the initial fears and suspicions that Protestants had held. I think that sometimes *we* have a tendency to mentally separate the Civil Rights period from the later Troubles, and yet to many Protestants they meshed effortlessly.

Once the violence escalated the PD, in my view, seemed unable, or unwilling, to promote a radical socialist alternative to physical force Irish republicanism. Even McCann was to write that "There is no such thing as an anti-Imperialist who

does not support the Provos, and no such thing as a socialist who is not anti-Imperialist”.†

[**Michael Hall**] My understanding, after working for many years at a grassroots level, is that while certain hardline Unionist politicians had no desire to sit down with Catholics in *any* type of power-sharing arrangement, most ordinary working-class Protestants were not so much concerned over that, what they were worried about was the Council of Ireland, and the threat it seemed to pose to the Union. Eamonn McCann recalled SDLP leaders telling people in Derry that Sunningdale was a step towards ending the state of Northern Ireland.††

[**Michael Hall**] We also have to remember that the Troubles coincided with the beginning of a gradual downturn in the economy. A lot of industrial jobs, which would have helped give the loyalist working class a sense of security, were slowly disappearing.

I realise I am again jumping ahead of the 1969 period, but here is an anecdote from [a more recent period] which sums up the social impact of this slow erosion of traditional industrial jobs. George Newell, a community worker in East Belfast, had been trying to bring young Protestant males into an engagement with their local history, their culture, and also with the ‘other’ community. He once invited a theatre-based group to his community facility in East Belfast. And what

† Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, New Updated Edition, Pluto Press, 1980, p.176.

PD leader Michael Farrell noted that PD, which had evolved from “a leftist, student-based” body to “become a much more tightly-organised marxist group”, was “the only leftist organisation to give support to the Provisionals’ military campaign.” Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, Pluto Press, 1983, p 358.

†† “[In] order to sell the deal to the Catholic community the SDLP had to present it not just as a means of expressing its aspiration towards a United Ireland but as a means of achieving it. Thus, while formal statements at Westminster and elsewhere concentrated on the marvellous fact that representatives of the two communities were ‘working together’ within Northern Ireland, the line in the Bogside from local SDLP chiefs was that the Agreement should be supported because it helped towards the work of ending Northern Ireland – and that there was therefore no need for the IRA any longer. Meanwhile Protestants were being urged by Mr Faulkner to believe that the Council of Ireland would be a mere talking shop, that insofar as Catholics accepted the Agreement they were accepting the Northern State. . . . Andy Tyrie, leader of the UDA, remarked: ‘Somebody isn’t telling the truth.’ Actually nobody was.” Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town*, New Updated Edition, Pluto Press, 1980, p.141

this group was going to do was to put on a role-play about the Apprentice Boys march in Derry (which at that time was still deemed contentious). And the organiser said: “Okay, who wants to play a policeman? Who will play a shopkeeper? A Bogside resident? An Apprentice Boys marcher?” And all the young males got involved. At the end of it the organiser turned to the youths and said: “Right, any questions?” And George told me that he was stunned by the first question – “Mister: what’s an apprentice?” George said that that question, coming from a young Protestant male living in what was once seen as the industrial heartland of Belfast, where apprenticeships were what most young Protestant males had automatically moved into, was a stark reminder of how much things had changed, and changed for the worse.†

[**Michael Hall**] Connal Parr [during a previous talk on ‘rotten Prods’] noted that an RTÉ series on the period never mentioned *any* Protestant workers being expelled.†† Indeed, another RTÉ series, *1916*, effectively airbrushed Protestants out of Irish history. It referred to Wolfe Tone leading “tens of thousands of Irish rebels”, but made no mention of the United Irishmen or their Presbyterian leadership. It lauded the American Declaration of Independence yet ignored the massive Ulster-Scots input. It talked about a European Enlightenment, but made no mention of the profound influence of the *Scottish* Enlightenment. It was as if any talk of progressive Protestants just didn’t fit their preferred narrative.

† “The Protestant working class has been demoralised on two fronts simultaneously. The Troubles – which forced Protestants into cultural and political retreat – have coincided with the massive erosion of the industrial base which had provided them with their economic security. Put simply, many in the Protestant working class are no longer ‘working’ class. The workforce at Belfast Shipyard has plummeted from its peak of 42,000 to just 2,000; Mackies Engineering Foundry has dropped from 7,500 to 390. Many major outside companies with local plants have since departed Northern Ireland: I.C.I., Courtaulds, British Enkalon, G.E.C., Goodyear, Michelen. The collapse of the linen industry saw the closure of numerous mills. Decline or demise has hit other major employing sectors: Gallaghers, the Ropeworks, the stevedores at the docks. . . Small businesses in the Greater Shankill area, once numbering [many hundreds] now only total 127.”

The Protestant Working Class, Island Pamphlet No 9, Island Publications, 1994.

†† Of the 7,500 workers expelled throughout Belfast during the expulsions of 1920 approximately 2,250 were from the shipyards, the rest from other industries. Most of them were Catholics but they included a substantial minority of Protestants, 1,850 in total.

[**Michael Hall**] I think that what has happened is that over the last number of years there has been a *conflict containment* process here, not a *conflict resolution* process. And people confuse an all-embracing ‘peace process’ with a much narrower *political* process. Before the All-Party Talks and the setting up of the new Assembly you could have said that, within *all* sectors of this society – grassroots, ex-combatant, even (if somewhat reluctantly) party political – there was a genuine ‘peace process’. You had the likes of former UVF member Billy Hutchinson going into Catholic/nationalist areas to sit on discussion panels. Likewise you had the likes of former IRA member Tommy Gorman getting involved in discussions in Protestant/loyalist communities; and you had a lot of people at the grassroots almost pushing the politicians towards some sort of accommodation. There was a genuine, all-enveloping *peace* process.

Then whenever the politicians came back centre-frame again and got into Stormont, they said: ‘leave it to us now’. And activists working at the grassroots, who had enough on their hands dealing with socio-economic deprivation, were glad enough to focus their energies on that. And so the people withdrew from the ongoing peace process, assuming that it was now the focus of the politicians’ energies. But what they got instead was a process which might have sold itself as a continuation or a consolidation of the *peace* process but wasn’t: it was a *political* process. And it eventually became divorced from the former peace process, so much so that can anyone now imagine the Shinners or the DUP sitting down together in committees to determine how to consolidate and extend the peace process? They are doing nothing of the sort: they are part of a political continuation of what went before – the old struggle for dominance – except without the violence. So a process in which the grassroots had some say has now become remote from them. That is why the type of meetings, discussions and workshops that Harry and the Messines project organise are so vital. And, as Harry always reminds us, we need these discussions now more than ever before.

[**Michael Hall**] The community sector, as it developed in the immediate wake of the Troubles, is in so many ways in retreat. Whenever I started publishing my pamphlet series, over twenty-five years ago, I compiled a ‘distribution list’ of all

those community groups I had forged links with – and it also included individuals like the UDA’s Andy Tyrie and Sinn Féin’s Tom Hartley who would pass the pamphlets on to their associates – and that list was 120 strong. Within ten years it was down to 80, then it dropped to 60, and now less than 30 of those original community groups still exist. Okay, a lot of groups went into decline naturally, and some just couldn’t get funding. But others were caught out by the new ‘equality’ legislation, which, although well-intentioned, meant that many people who had given years working voluntarily for their local community, now found themselves unable to apply for some of the new funded community posts, because they had never acquired qualifications. And community groups were afraid of being in breach of equality legislation if they didn’t select the most qualified applicant. And to me this was detrimental to the voluntary sector.

[**Michael Hall**] I am reminded of the local government elections of May 1985. I was then a member of the Rathcoole Self-Help Group and for those elections the group decided to form a ‘political’ party. It was called the ‘All Night Party’, and its banner across the entrance to Rathcoole estate read: NO MORE SHITE! VOTE ALL NIGHT! Our candidate, Hagar the Horrible, went around Rathcoole wearing a Viking helmet. And our election manifesto ‘promised’ to rebuild Stormont in Rathcoole and make it an all-night disco, to hold the next Olympics in Rathcoole, and to tilt the earth’s axis so as to give Rathcoole more



Election poster designed by Dougie Edwards

sunshine. And the DUP and the UUP were absolutely livid. They actually said to us: “You people are bringing politics into disrepute!” To which our response was that the sectarian and corrupt politics of Northern Ireland were a sad joke to start with, so why not make it official.

But, more maliciously, the DUP also made a public allegation that the Self-Help Group members were all ‘Cathal Gouldingites’. Of course, the local UDA, when they learned that Cathal Goulding was a former leader of the IRA, became extremely concerned about us. I had to take a delegation from the Self-Help Group over to UDA headquarters in Gawn Street in East Belfast to meet with Andy Tyrie. And Tyrie said: “Look, I know you lads are okay, I’ll clear up any concerns on the ground. And keep doing what you are doing: our local politics needs to be shaken up.” But that’s the way the unionist political parties have *always* confronted any type of perceived threat in their own midst – by using the old scare of ‘republicans or reds under the bed’.

[**Michael Hall**] Some Irish republicans and nationalists seek to dismiss the Protestant working class as irredeemably reactionary. Yet one academic, when he compared instances of new political thinking within the Protestant working class and within the Catholic working class, found that Catholic working-class thinking was generally circumscribed by the goal of a United Ireland, whereas the Protestant community had often been forced by circumstances to move outside their normal comfort zone. For example, the (short-lived) talk of an Independent Ulster, the *Beyond the Religious Divide* document, the *Common Sense* proposals, and so on. And we don’t always give them credit for that. But the question now is: how do we resurrect that? How do we say to progressive elements within the Protestant working class that there is still a vital role for you within your community? But they can’t do it alone, and one of the problems I see is that there are very few people on the nationalist/republican side offering support. Indeed, some of them seem to be glad that the Protestant community finds itself on this current precipice.

[**Michael Hall**] Ray Smallwoods was enthusiastic about the work I had been engaged in promoting the *shared* heritage of our two communities, and had asked to come to my house to talk about it, to see how it might help with trying to move things forward. Now, he was fully aware of the strong condemnation I repeatedly voiced about *all* the violence going on, whether emanating from Republicans or Loyalists – but everything he said during our discussion that day was progressive, positive and peace-oriented. And I remember saying to myself: hopefully, this is Loyalism at last moving constructively forward again. Yet two weeks after sitting in my house he was murdered!† The opinion of many Loyalists at the time was that the IRA did not want outsiders to see that progressive loyalism existed; the Provisionals needed to portray Loyalists as backwoods neanderthals, so that they could say to their international audience: look, you can see why we had no option but to engage in armed struggle against these bigots. Articulate and accommodating Loyalists just didn’t fit in with that narrative. There was also a suspicion that the IRA leadership would have been uncomfortable having to sit at the negotiating table with people who might have had just as much political nous as *they* did. Indeed, as [another speaker] has just said, the Provisionals were so fixated with the military struggle they hadn’t put much political analysis into what might come when the fighting eventually had to stop.

I also want to say here that Loyalists are often their own worst enemy. In the early years of the Troubles I used to send children from disadvantaged areas on a cross-community holiday scheme to Holland [through Pax Christi Kinderhulp], and on one occasion, as I was driving some of the Dutch volunteers along the lower Shankill, one

† Peace advocate Rev Roy Magee stated that, despite Smallwood’s endorsement of a policy of targeting Republicans, he proved to be an important voice for moderation in the UDA’s Inner Council and a prime architect of the eventual loyalist ceasefire. Indeed, following prompting from Magee, Smallwoods opened communication with two priests from Clonard Monastery on the Falls Road, Alec Reid and Gerry Reynolds. Smallwoods, the first high-ranking Loyalist to hold regular dialogue with Catholic clergy, intimated to them that the UDA was hoping to see peace. Both priests were amongst the mourners at his funeral. Loyalists decided not to retaliate for his murder, and instead released a statement that had been drafted by Smallwoods shortly before his death in which the CLMC [Combined Loyalist Military Command] said it would go on ceasefire if the IRA did so.

of them asked me: “Why do these Catholics paint their kerbstones red, white and blue?” And when I told them that this was a Protestant area one of them responded: “But how can they be Protestants? This looks like a poor area.” So, right at the beginning of the Troubles, the outside world imagined this place to be like an Algerian situation, with the French colonists – in our case the Protestants – being all middle class, while the Catholic community represented the oppressed natives. So I deliberately took this same party of Dutch around different interface areas, to let them see the identical working-class conditions – the social deprivation and poor housing. And when we were in Tigers Bay, taking photographs, a couple of Loyalists stormed over and aggressively accosted us: “Away and fuck off, you bastards!” The Dutch were quite shaken up, and were in a hurry to get back into my car! So, Loyalists are often their own worst enemy. They had, and in many ways still have, no real clue about how to present their side of the story constructively to outsiders, certainly not in the slick way the Republican movement has been able to portray *its* side of the story.

[**Michael Hall**] One positive thing about John McMichael: he genuinely broadened his outreach. While he was working on the draft of *Common Sense* – and knowing that I worked in both communities – he gave me a copy of it and asked me if I could add anything to it from a cross-community perspective. So I wrote down some suggestions. But that revealed to me that John wasn’t looking at it solely from a purely Loyalist paramilitary organisation perspective, he was willing to engage with other people in a much broader debate.†

From Pamphlet No. 88, A grassroots achievement: Reflections on the ‘peace process’

[**Michael Hall**] I remember once organising a Think Tank which sought to include individuals from Loyalist and Republican paramilitary organisations. Now, there was a lot of tension in the community during that particular period, and people were still very suspicious of one another, but at the same time the Think Tank process had

† Notwithstanding John McMichael’s military role in the ongoing conflict, Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, Catholic Primate of Ireland, described him as having been “untiring, fresh and constructive and ready to cross the religious divide to find a solution for Northern Ireland.”

established itself – in both communities – as an acceptable and trusted process. Anyway, I asked a well-known Loyalist leader if he would participate. And his response was: “No problem, but could you write me a letter inviting me. Because if anyone in my organisation objects to me sitting down with Republicans I could end up in big trouble. But if I can explain that *you* have invited me, then they’ll say, ‘Oh yes, we know what those Think Tanks are all about; that’s okay, go ahead.’ ” So community activists can help to create *mechanisms* through which people, including those at different leadership levels, can engage with one another with minimum risk.

*From Pamphlet No. 87, **Divided by History? A grassroots exploration***

[**Michael Hall**] I used to be involved in sending 120 children to Holland every year, as part of a scheme organised by the Dutch children’s charity, Pax Christi Kinderhulp, and the Dutch organisers would regularly visit Northern Ireland – for planning sessions, or to meet the children and their parents. I always took each group of Dutch on a short history tour. I would usually begin each tour with a walk up to the first cave on Cave Hill, for it was an ideal vantage point to explain how Belfast had developed demographically, and indicate where the working-class areas had grown up around the shipyards and the mills. I would then point across Belfast Lough in the direction of Bangor, explaining that the monastic settlement which was founded there in 555 AD by St Comgall held a pre-eminent place in European history, for it was from there that St Columbanus and St Gall departed on their great missionary journey to ‘barbarian’ Europe, and in so doing laid the foundations for the revival of European civilisation and culture in the period following the collapse of the Roman Empire. I would also note that the vibrant creativity emanating from the scriptoria of the monastic settlements in north-east Ulster resulted in this part of Ireland becoming the cradle of written Irish literature, and one of the most important products of that creativity – the Táin, or ‘Cattle Raid of Cooley’ – is the *oldest* story, written in a vernacular language, in Western European literature.

I would further point out that during the American War of Independence young America won its first naval battle when John Paul Jones, the ‘Father of the American

Navy’, sailed into Belfast Lough and captured the British warship HMS *Drake* in 1778. Almost a quarter of a million Ulster men and women had already emigrated to America by then, and many of these ‘Scots-Irish’ formed the backbone of the American revolutionary armies. I also explain that the summit of the Cave Hill was where Wolfe Tone and the Belfast Presbyterian leaders of the United Irishmen swore an oath to fight for the independence of Ireland. Then, finally, I would point across to Scotland – the Dutch were always surprised that it was so close (indeed, only thirteen miles at one point) – and list all the different historical, cultural, religious and linguistic connections between Ireland and Scotland.

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

[**Michael Hall**] In 1985, whenever I was writing *Ulster: the Hidden History*[†], I showed the draft to various people on both sides of the community, seeking feedback. One of those I gave it to was an ex-UDA member, a community worker from Highfield estate. When I called with him to hear what he thought about it he said, “I really liked it, except for that bit there.” And he indicated a section entitled ‘Twenty Historic Sites’, in which I had listed my favourite dolmens, castles, monasteries and so on, throughout Ireland. “What did you not like about it?” I asked. “Bloody ridiculous!” he replied. Now, I must admit that I immediately assumed that he was reacting in a sectarian fashion – as if information extolling other places in Ireland had no place in a book about Ulster. “Oh no,” he assured me, “it’s ridiculous that I have never heard about any of these places. In school I was told about the Tower of London but never about Dunluce Castle; I heard mention of Stonehenge but never anything about Newgrange. I went through the Northern Ireland school system and came out knowing next to nothing about my own country, the whole focus was on English history.”

[†] Michael Hall, *Ulster: the Hidden History*, Pretani Press, Belfast, 1986 (revised 1989)

[**Michael Hall**] I was born in Protestant working-class East Belfast, but my upbringing was totally secular and socialist. I don't even retain a memory of the flags and bunting which must have adorned our street every July, for Orangeism and its rituals meant absolutely nothing to our family. Nor, indeed, did Protestantism. Now, the disadvantage of being in a society but not really part of its predominant 'culture', was that you were, in many ways, an outsider. I remember, many years later, when I participated in the Civil Rights movement and was at Burntollet Bridge in January 1969 when the People's Democracy marchers were ambushed by Protestants, that not only was that experience a physical shock – literally – but a complete cultural shock. Here was I marching alongside people some of whom held Irish Nationalist sympathies I had little time for, and being attacked by people, from supposedly my 'own' community, whose aspirations I was equally distant from. I realised there and then that throughout all my years of growing up the whole cultural question had washed completely over my head and I was in total ignorance of either its everyday reality or of its depth. And I felt at a real loss to explain what was going on around me.

[**Michael Hall**] I have a small booklet published by the Sinn Féin Cultural Department in the 1980s, called *Learning Irish* – the contents are presented in both English and Irish. † And it states: "Every minute you are speaking English you are contributing to the sum total of English culture in this island. . . . Every phrase [of Irish] you learn is a bullet in a freedom struggle." And some years ago I remember a community worker in the Protestant working-class estate of Highfield wanting to run a class in Irish, and about a dozen local people put their names down. Now, it didn't take place – they couldn't get a tutor or whatever. But I happened to make mention of it to some young nationalists and one of them said, "What the fuck's our language got to do with them!"

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

† *Ag Foghlaim na Gaeilge: Leabhrán Eolais agus Díospóireachta (Learning Irish: A Discussion and Information Booklet)*, Oifigeach Cultúir Shinn Féin, Béal Feirste, 1982

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

[**Michael Hall**] And this society tries to fit each one of us into those identities. Even those who at first glance don’t seem to fit – atheists, for example – are expected to fit in somewhere: “Okay, you might be an atheist, but are you a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?” In 1996 Alwyn Thomson, Research Officer for ECONI (Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland) contacted me to say that he was compiling a book in which people from the Protestant/Unionist community were being asked to explain what the phrase ‘For God and Ulster’ meant to them. I said, “Why did you phone *me*, then? I am neither a Protestant nor a Unionist.” “Well” he said, “you know what I mean.” I did indeed know what he meant: that, if you went back far enough in my ancestry, I had come from what is perceived to be the Protestant/Unionist community. (I did actually submit a piece for the book*, for I felt Alwyn was doing some challenging work which I wanted to support.) But it was a reminder to me of how the prevailing identity-related expectations can actually narrow your cultural heritage rather than broaden it. I refuse to define myself as either culturally ‘Irish’ or ‘British’, or even as an ‘Ulsterman’, as all these labels fail to describe the totality of *my* cultural inheritance. For the inheritance I value is not confined to homegrown culture, but

† Kevin Danaher, *In Ireland Long Ago*, Mercier Press, 1978, p80-1.

†† Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, Batsford, 1973, p7 and p41.

‡ E. Estyn Evans, *The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage and History*, Blackstaff, 1981, p55-57.

* *Faith in Ulster*, ed. Alwyn Thomson, Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland, Belfast, 1996

embraces Rachmaninov, Indian sitar music, Zen poetry, Islamic art . . . my inheritance is international, one that connects me to cultures far from these shores. I have travelled in over forty countries – from Afghanistan to Japan – and the further you go from Northern Ireland the more you realise how myopic and parochial we often are here.

From Pamphlet No. 84, A shared sacrifice for peace

[**Jackie Hewitt**] I must reinforce the fact that, right from the beginning, Farset endeavoured to develop the [Farset Somme] Project as a cross-community one; we wanted it to embrace all sections of the community. That approach proved to be very productive, to such an extent that those who go over to the Somme today range from members of the Democratic Unionist Party to Sinn Féin. Indeed, because it is now so commonplace, people forget the painstaking path which had to be trodden to change former perceptions and attitudes. Michael Hall's booklet *Sacrifice on the Somme*, commissioned by Farset in 1988, greatly helped to influence people to look at this whole part of our shared history in a new way. To be honest, I can remember reading through the draft and feeling extremely uneasy: the contents mentioned not only the 10th and 16th (Irish) Divisions, but James Connolly, the Easter Rising, Partition and the Russian Revolution! At first I thought, as did others, that we wouldn't get away with this. Then we decided: let's put it out and see. And, although there were some negative comments, at a grassroots level the response was largely positive. That booklet, of which 5000 copies were eventually distributed, helped to consolidate Farset's efforts to make the initiative all-inclusive.

From unpublished discussion †

[**Michael Hall**] I believe that a proper exploration of our shared history is still lacking adequate funding support. As an example, let us take St Comgall's 6th century monastic foundation at Bangor, from where one of his disciples, Columbanus, departed in 589 for his missionary journey to mainland Europe, and was destined to

† This anecdote and others on a similar theme were first detailed in my Island Pamphlet no. 7, *The Cruthin Controversy*

make a significant impact on European history. Indeed, Robert Schumann, a former French Foreign Minister and one of the founders of the European Union, said that “St Columbanus is the patron saint of those who seek to construct a united Europe.”

Accordingly, in 1990 a group was brought together at Farset [Youth and Community Development Project], whose purpose was to develop a project around Columbanus and his legacy. The project, which had the support of Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, was to have three components. Farset’s audio-visual unit would make a video on Columbanus’ travels and his impact on European history. Then there would be an essay competition involving local schools, and the winners (selected on a cross-community basis) would be taken by coach to follow in Columbanus’ ‘footsteps’ in France and Italy. Thirdly, I would write a book – aimed at a general readership – which would take a very broad look at Ireland’s religious heritage – detailing not only the story of Columbanus and the early Irish church, but many *pre-Christian* aspects of our ‘religious’ heritage: such as the great stone-age tomb at Newgrange†, the ‘Elder Faiths’, and the continuing survival into modern times of pagan superstitions.

I submitted a proposal to the Cultural Traditions Group of the Community Relations Council seeking funding assistance for the book. We at Farset felt confident that it would be successful, for not only was the project cross-community in its composition – and we were focusing on an aspect of our historical inheritance which belonged to *both* communities – but we were also endeavouring to direct the attention of our young people outwards, by involving a European dimension. Yet, to our great surprise, the application was turned down. I wrote to the Cultural Traditions Group asking why they had rejected the application, and received the following reply: “In relation to ‘The Steps of Columbanus’, the Publications Group decided that it was not the kind of publication that they wish to support.” [letter 30.10.90]

Anyway, after this rejection things began to unravel, and although a rough pilot video was made – and shown to Cardinal Ó Fiaich at Ara Coeli, his residence in Armagh – the project finally had to be abandoned. I felt that a primary reason for this lay in the lack of vision within those individuals and organisations who could, and should, have been more supportive.

† www.newgrange.com notes: ‘Archaeologists classified Newgrange as a passage tomb; however, Newgrange is now recognised to be much more than a passage tomb. *Ancient Temple* is a more fitting classification, a place of astrological, spiritual, religious and ceremonial importance.’



Contents of Selection 1

- Pamphlet no. 27 **Seeds of Hope** *A joint exploration by Republican and Loyalist ex-prisoners*
 Pamphlet no. 39 **The forgotten victims** *Victims relate the impact of a loved one's murder*
 Pamphlet no. 90 **Self-help at the grassroots** *Examples of innovative community activism*
 Pamphlet no. 95 **'Time stands still'** *The untold story of prisoners' families*
 Pamphlet no.109 **A process of analysis** *An attempt to engender a conflict resolution process*
 Pamphlet no.112 **Celebrating a Shared Heritage** *Essays on our common inheritance*

Contents of Selection 2

- Pamphlet no. 05 **Expecting the Future** *A community play focusing on the legacy of violence*
 Pamphlet no. 07 **The Cruthin Controversy** *A response to academic misrepresentation*
 Pamphlet no. 14 **Reinforcing Powerlessness** *Curtailing the voices of ordinary people*
 Pamphlet no. 78 **Grassroots leadership (7)** *Recollections by Michael Hall*
 Pamphlet no.134 **This is it!** *A community play exploring Loyalism*

Supplementary Material:

1: Creating a vehicle for debate

2: The Think Tank Process

3: The pamphlets listed chronologically and thematically

Both books are available as a set (£16.00) from Ebay or directly from myself.