

Memoirs of the 1960s in Northern Ireland.

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The official perception, as it were, of Northern Ireland in the eyes of governing Ulster Unionism on the eve of the troubles was of a province divided by religion, politics and race. As a pamphlet issued by the Northern Ireland Government and authored by Hugh Shearman put it:

Northern Ireland today inherits two distinct and, in some respects, conflicting traditions.... In appearance, in attitude, in their family names and often even in their way of speaking, many Ulster people clearly show their British origins. The other principal element, accounting for about one third of the population, consists of descendants of the original Irish inhabitants of pre-plantation times. Roman Catholic and religion, the section of the people retains, in many respects, and essentially 'Irish' social and cultural pattern. ... [This division] remains a fundamental fact of Ulster society, creating in many respects a racial, religious and political dualism not unlike that of French Canada.¹

This divide, many felt, was being softened by the religious ecumenism of the 1960s. Nonetheless, this was not a symmetrical process. A survey conducted in late 1968 and early 1969 found that while 78% of Catholics were very strongly in favour of closer relations between the Catholic and Protestant churches, this compared to only 34% of the Church of Ireland adherents, and 28% of Presbyterians.² While politically it had become unacceptable to overtly describe Catholic nationalists as 'second-class citizens' the idea was not far beneath the surface. Under the shock of the Civil Rights movement that would erupt from 1968, it re-emerged in at least the less inhibited circles of loyalism. D. P. Robinson of the Patriot Ulster Protestant Volunteers wrote at the outset of the troubles:

It has been said that the Roman Catholics of Northern Ireland have existed with the label 'Second Class Citizen', pinned to them. I ask only one question – is a second-class citizen a person who does not respect the monarch of the country that he lives in, does not acknowledge its national anthem, national flag, or constitution, and above all, offers his allegiance to an enemy country? If the answer is affirmative then the label should remain.³

Even Nationalist MPs at Stormont felt their elevation to the devolved parliament not as an inclusion but as a reinforced exclusion. "It was difficult to feel any sense of identity with Stormont," Austin Currie recalled of his election to the Northern Ireland parliament in 1964, "This striking symbol of Unionist power and domination was also the symbol of our powerlessness and second-class status."⁴

The political memoirs of the 1960s suggest, in fact, that this was a label worn with pride by many Catholic nationalists. There existed a fundamental sense of frozen rebellion against the state. The

¹ Hugh Shearman, *Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1968), p. 67.

² Opinion Research Centre, *Religion in Northern Ireland* (nd, London, 1969) 6.

³ D. P. Robinson, *The North Answers Back* (n.d., 1969), p. 18.

⁴ Austin Currie, *All Hell Will Break Loose* (Dublin, 2004), p. 61.

classic delineation of this psychology, based upon his experience of growing up in Derry mixed with a broadly Marxist analytical perspective, can be found in Eamonn McCann's classic memoir, *War and an Irish Town* (1974). McCann explained the general prestige for physical force nationalism in Catholic Derry. In the eyes of nationalists, the Fenian martyrs of past generations "had all died in the fight to free Ireland from British rule, a fight which had paused in partial victory in 1922 when twenty-six of our thirty-two counties won their independence. It was our task to finish the job, to cleanse the remaining traces of foreign rule from the face of Ireland."⁵ In this atmosphere, local Republicans were "regarded with guilty pride in the great majority as living out to urgently the ideals to which, tacitly, we were all committed."⁶ Nationalism and Catholicism were not logically coterminous, but in practice "Religion and politics were bound up together, were regarded, indeed, as being in many ways the same thing."⁷

The Catholic community in Derry, however, while oppositional, was not insurgent. Poverty was rife, but there "was no revolutionary ferment arising from it all. Expectations were little higher than reality."⁸ Discrimination was an accepted fact of life. "The fact that the resultant miseries could be looked on as a price to be paid for remaining true to the national ideal made them more easily acceptable."⁹

Paddy Doherty, from the tradition of Catholic self-help and self-improvement, similarly delineated an insular, inward-looking Catholic ethos. He acknowledged – for the period between the 1920s and the 1950s – the "tight hold the Church had on the Catholic community in Derry."¹⁰ This was restrictive and conformist in many respects, and Doherty himself never quite saw eye to eye with the Roman Catholic Church. Nonetheless his "period of association with the Church was a formative time. I learned discipline and developed a sense of identity."¹¹ By the late 1950s, "a wind of change was already blowing through the universal Church. Here and there, priests were challenging the conservative nature of the Church, and many people were criticising the dominance of dogma over spirituality."¹² An ethos of self-reliance inculcated by the Catholic Church was being gradually released from its institutional framework.

A combination of working class tradition and educational opportunities introduced by the 1947 Education Act, which gave working-class Catholics access to grammar school education, slowly generated a new mode of Catholic assertion. Doherty was one of the founders of the Credit Union in Derry, alongside John Hume, the son of a trade union official. Around the same time, he also became acquainted with the young Gary radical, Eamonn McCann. "John Hume epitomised the solid, respectable, church-going, conscientious working-class people of Derry. Eamonn McCann represented another social strand. McCann's father, like John Hume's, was a trade unionist.... Their sons grew up in the same kind of two-up, two-down house.... both won scholarships to grammar

⁵ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 9.

⁶ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 10.

⁷ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 13.

⁸ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 25.

⁹ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 25.

¹⁰ Paddy Doherty, *Paddy Bogside*, ed. Peter Hegarty (Cork, 2000), p. 23.

¹¹ Paddy Doherty, *Paddy Bogside*, ed. Peter Hegarty (Cork, 2000), p. 14.

¹² Paddy Doherty, *Paddy Bogside*, ed. Peter Hegarty (Cork, 2000), pp. 26-7.

school.”¹³ It is not so much the creation of a new middle class that was to drive the Catholic Civil Rights movement, as the extension of capabilities amongst a working class vanguard.

Rather different dynamics were at work in the protestant community. Partly this was because of a different religious and class structuring which militated against uniformity of social and political evolution. A consciousness of difference was developed to a sophisticated degree by Protestant precision in demarcation. Charles Brett, a middle-class member of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), was deeply conscious of hailing from an Anglican tradition:

I remain to some extent the prisoner of my upbringing. I find something unsatisfying in the Roman Catholic form of service, especially now that the mass said in English. I find the Presbyterian tradition of extempore prayer profoundly off-putting.... I like the stately role of seventeenth-century English: I like the seemingly stylisation of its forms and ceremonies. I have, sadly, had occasion to go to the funerals of many friends, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Church of Ireland. I never leave the church in such an occasion without thinking to myself, *malgré moi* – ‘Perhaps I am an atheist, but if I am, I am a Church of Ireland atheist’.¹⁴

The essential liberalism of Protestant pluralism, which informs into its secularised homologue, was, however, badly warped by the ‘siege mentality’. This in turn was consequent of a Union between Great Britain and Northern Ireland reliant upon Protestant unity in the face of Catholic nationalist rejectionism and Great British indifference. As the Unionist government minister Ivan Neill put it in his memoirs:

Division is the antithesis of Unionism and forerunner of weakness.... Ulster has suffered more from the division of her pro-British people than from all the damage caused by her enemies within and without. Freedom of speech and opinion are basic principles of democracy and I am a resolute defender of the freedom, but when it comes to freedom of divisive action in a tenuously based political structure that is a luxury but Ulster cannot afford.¹⁵

The implicit soft-authoritarianism of this political psychology found expression in the administrative-party system that governed Northern Ireland.

The most systematic apologist for this administrative-party state, if not the most readable, was John A Oliver, a senior civil servant who published memoirs entitled *Working at Stormont* in 1978. Oliver, whose father was a Protestant Home Ruler, came from a large Presbyterian family of tenant farmers in North Derry. When he joined the Northern Ireland civil service, he found it to be based less upon a rule-bound Weberian ideal-type, more upon pragmatism and personal relations. For Oliver, this was a positive and outstanding advantages of devolved government: it was impressively open to local voices. But the potential for sectarian patronage was evident.

Everywhere in this book [Oliver reflected] there have been references to the easy access which local interests have to ministers; one can get to see a minister at Stormont within a

¹³ Paddy Doherty, *Paddy Bogside*, ed. Peter Hegarty (Cork, 2000), p. 31, see 41.

¹⁴ Charles Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 80.

¹⁵ Ivan Neill, *Church and State* (Dunmurray, 1995), p. 69.

matter of hours. But the obverse of that coin is the sheer pressure which such interests can exert, and the time and energy which ministers must then put into dealing with it.¹⁶

From the outset, it is clear how such pressures operated. Preference was given to Protestants ex-soldiers and ardent supporters of the Unionist cause.¹⁷ The Ministry of Home Affairs was particularly politicised, with decisions firmly in the hands of Ministers and second rank civil servants expected to stay out of policy decision-making.¹⁸ The administration of local government was an almost fully owned Department of the Unionist Party.

At the intersection between state administration and society, the notion of an apolitical bureaucracy almost entirely faded out. In 1969, Civil Rights activists called on Mr William McKee, a butcher, who lived in Main Street, Maghera, in a quest to find out how local loyalists – mostly off-duty policeman – were able to arm themselves with sticks and sundries to attack Civil Rights marchers at Burntollet Bridge. Mr McKee was in charge of supervising the local Orange Hall, where weapons had been stockpiled. He assured his visitors: “There were no arms out there that I could see. And I was around most of the time. As a Justice of the Peace I would not put up with that. Plenty of sticks and cudgels yes – but arms – certainly not.”¹⁹ The innocence of the admission here – that a Justice of the peace could gladly oversee the accumulation of cudgels at an Orange Hall with which to batter Civil Rights marchers – is striking. In Northern Ireland, the liberal state was never far off its primal origin as armed bodies of men.

Oliver had been put in charge of a pseudo-reform of local government which would have reproduced Unionist gerrymandering. When this was precipitously abandoned by the genuine and radical reform of local government under an independent commission headed up by Patrick McCrory from December 1969, Oliver was cut to the quick. It was “a tergiversation that strained my mental and emotional system to the limit,” he wrote with a laboured pain.²⁰ His memoirs were an attempt, markedly unsuccessful, to restore a civil service reputation so devastatingly tarnished.

The Catholic civil servant, Maurice Hays, was dismissive of Oliver-style arguments which attempted on balance to see more merit than demerit in Northern Ireland devolution system. “It is common, in these days of Unionist revisionism,” he wrote in his memoirs “to look back on the post-war period as a sort of golden age for local democracy, with councillors close to, and accountable to, an interested and involved electorate. In fact, once it had been settled which side had won control of the council, and that council was likely to last for years, the prevailing spirit was apathy.”²¹ In Hayes’ view, moreover, the class dynamics of the Protestant community worked to reinforce rather than soften Protestant exclusivity.

One feature that struck me increasingly over the years is that Ulster Protestants do not seem to be happy living in an area where Catholics are in the majority. Middle-class Catholics are content to live in middle-class Protestant areas; perhaps to do so is a confirmation of upward social mobility. Middle-class and professional Protestants, on the other hand, tend to move

¹⁶ John A Oliver, *Working at Stormont: Memoirs* (Dublin, 1978), p. 238.

¹⁷ John A Oliver, *Working at Stormont: Memoirs* (Dublin, 1978), pp. 57-8.

¹⁸ John A Oliver, *Working at Stormont: Memoirs* (Dublin, 1978), p. 91.

¹⁹ Bowes Egan and Vincent McCormack, *Burntollet* (London, 1969), p. 14.

²⁰ John A Oliver, *Working at Stormont: Memoirs* (Dublin, 1978), p. 144.

²¹ Maurice Hayes, *Minority Verdict: Experiences of a Catholic Civil Servant* (Belfast, 1995), p. 24.

out and re-establish themselves among their own – from Malone Road in Belfast to Cultra, from the Cityside in Derry to the Waterside. This rather dents the theory that sectarianism in Northern Ireland as a working class phenomenon.²²

We can infer from Hayes' discussion an evolution of the class structure of the Protestant community characteristic of contemporary 'affluence' – tending towards a bifurcation between work-place socialisation and the privatisation of family life – contrasted to a traditional Catholic class structure still more focused on the 'classic slum'.²³ "Unemployment rates were higher in catholic areas," Hayes writes "which provided a pool of intelligent, underused people who were waiting for an opportunity to do something constructive. In Protestant areas their counterparts were more likely to be in jobs where they could exercise their leadership potential as shop stewards, and their political activism through the trade union movement."²⁴

Trade unionism was certainly not a recognised branch of the Unionist administration (though there was far more by way of working class representation in the Ulster Unionist Party in comparison to the Conservative Party in Great Britain). However, trade unionism did nestle fairly comfortably in the established systems of political regulation. About 20% of trade union branch secretaries were catholic and 80% Protestant, with Protestant domination almost complete in the skilled trade unions. Catholics were generally better represented in unions with a large unskilled membership, but an indicative exception was the National Union of General and Municipal Workers – representing the local authority labour force – which was believed to have about 90% Protestants among its branch secretaries. Investigators of this strange phenomenon were told "that this may reflect the discrimination by local authorities in Northern Ireland."²⁵

The Protestant class structure cohered with a sectionalised and discriminatory sectarian political economy. The Catholic class structure, in contrast, flattened segmentation and buttressed an oppositional psychology of insular community bonding. This latter reached its apotheosis, perhaps, in the August 1969 Battle of the Bogside. Shane Doherty, a Derry teenager who would go on to join the provisional IRA, recalled that "The experience of sitting in defiant pacifist gesture among thousands of Catholics singing 'We Shall Overcome', filled me with the belief that we were united in an almost mystical, religious unity and cause."²⁶ Raymond McClean, a Derry medical practitioner, remembered his experience behind the barricades, as the Derry working class battled the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). "How I had wanted so much to work amongst these people, and become part of this strange spirituality that was tangible in the streets! I was now at the very centre of the first real stirring of these hardy people... I was aware that these people had achieved something very important for themselves".²⁷

Despite the disjuncture between the class structures of the Protestant and Catholic communities, however, there had been a certain basis for Labour unity in the propitious circumstances of the late

²² Maurice Hayes, *Minority Verdict: Experiences of a Catholic Civil Servant* (Belfast, 1995), p.37.

²³ 'Affluence': John H. Goldthorpe et al, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge, 1969). 'Classic Slum': Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford life in the first quarter of the century* (London, 1973).

²⁴ Maurice Hayes, *Minority Verdict: Experiences of a Catholic Civil Servant* (Belfast, 1995), p. 95.

²⁵ Denis P. Barritt and Charles F. carter, *The Northern Ireland Problem: a study in Group Relations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1962, 1972), p. 141.

²⁶ Shane Doherty, *The Volunteer: A Former IRA man's True Story* (London, 1993), p. 42.

²⁷ Raymond McClean, *The Road to Bloody Sunday* (Derry, 1983), p. 81.

1950s and early 1960s. For socialists like Paddy Devlin, a “unified working class, ultimately asserting conventional right-left politics, would have helped to steer us away from the rocks of nationalism, with which we inevitably collided.”²⁸ in the aftermath of the inglorious failure of the IRA Border Campaign (1956-1962), opportunity appeared to knock. The 1960s “was a decade of great promise for the labor party in Northern Ireland. For the first time in forty years there was a spirit of compromise in the air.” In Protestant areas, the Northern Ireland Labour Party confronted a Unionist election machine, “supervised by little men in bowler hats, grey suits and waistcoats, from which gold chains and medals often hung” with their own election workers: bowler-hatted trade union conveners from the shipyard, members of the Orange order, and “geniuses at the organisation game.”²⁹ There appeared to be a split in the Protestant class coalition.

Charles Brett also felt that it was the failure of the IRA border campaign that gave an opening for the NILP. “There was a significant relaxation of sectarian tensions in the late ‘fifties and early ‘sixties, especially amongst the urban working class.”³⁰ certainly there was a real working class consciousness to build upon, often quite militant in its expression. Nonetheless, there was no agreement amongst Labour voters on who the real political enemy was. The Richard Rose survey found in 1968 that catholic NILP supporters saw the Unionists as their primary enemy, while Protestant NILP supporters identified Nationalist as their primary enemy. “Religion more than economics determines who the enemies of the workers are thought to be,” Rose concluded.³¹

The electoral rise of the NILP was based upon a tenuous cross-confessional coalition, itself predicated on the temporary eclipse of nationalist energy. It was sharply reversed by the Ulster Unionist Party under the leadership of Terence O’Neill, its Liberal leader, in 1965. For Charles Brett, this puts the onus of positive reform on O’Neill himself, and moreover gave him an advantageous position from which to build. Having seen off the NILP threat he could credibly have called a snap general election on a reform programme, and outmanoeuvred his own party’s right wing. “It seemed that, in the North, everything depended on Terence O’Neill”.³² O’Neill, however, failed to seize the opportunity, and Brett placed great significance on this failure:

I do not want to be uncharitable to an amiable man who behaved honourably according to his own lights, but I firmly believe that with stronger leadership, perhaps a better advice, O’Neill could have saved us all the bloodshed and turmoil in the years since 1969; and that is failure in leadership was the *causa causans* of our present Troubles, and of the troubles that must lie ahead for many years to come.”³³

In his own memoir, O’Neill did little to defend himself from accusations of ineptly managing his own side. In fact, he gloried in his own inability to identify with an Ulster Unionism which he evidently perceived as a pathological formation.

²⁸ Paddy Devlin, *Straight Left: An Autobiography* (Belfast, 1993), p. 69.

²⁹ Paddy Devlin, *Straight Left: An Autobiography* (Belfast, 1993), pp. 80-1.

³⁰ Charles Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 83.

³¹ Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (London, 1971), p. 284.

³² Charles Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 131.

³³ Charles Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977* (Edinburgh, 1978), pp. 132-3.

Formally speaking, O'Neill was an enthusiast for devolved government, but he clearly preferred the English to the Ulster people.³⁴ "Northern Ireland tends to be parochial in its approach to nearly everything," he wearily observed.³⁵ In his memoirs, shocking to Unionist sensibilities, O'Neill explicitly blamed one-party-rule for the difficulties he encountered in governing Northern Ireland:

Continuous one party rule in any country breeds all sorts of attendant evils. The knowledge that any splits or rows which develop will still leave the party in control of government, tends to encourage political boat rocking, in the hope that a new crew can clamber on the bridge. This is particularly true if a prime minister is trying to carry out long overdue reforms, in a country where any reform can be described as treachery.³⁶

O'Neill was certainly aware that he lacked much rapport with the Unionist rank-and-file, in contrast to his predecessor. But Lord Brookeborough, he sadly observed – who was a man of limited abilities, lazy and superficial, obsessed with trivialities – took "few courageous steps during twenty-five years of so-called power".³⁷ Brookeborough's advantage, however, was that he genuinely represented the psychology of inward-looking Ulster Unionism. His own party, O'Neill complained, provided no support for his attempt to reform the province. It was difficult, he complained, "when you have to initiate the change yourself and try to drag behind you a reactionary and reluctant party which has been in power since 1921."³⁸ O'Neill preferred to work, therefore, with civil servants. He was friendly with one senior civil servant, Ken Bloomfield because "while fully understanding the Ulster outlook, his English origins made possible for him to see things in a wider context."³⁹ Bloomfield, indeed, at least in retrospect recognised O'Neill's fundamental problem. "He had no great following in the country, no strong power base in the Orange Order, no exceptional command over Parliament by debating ability."⁴⁰ This could be perceived outside Unionist and government ranks. Ciaran McKeown, a moderate nationalist student at Queen's Belfast, was broadly sympathetic to O'Neillism, but saw an insuperable problem in the man himself:

This focus on O'Neill was extremely counter-productive. His English upper-crust manner grated more on middle-class Unionists, especially his political colleagues, than it ever did on Catholics, who generally expected top Unionists to sound English. His Cabinet members and others of close rank naturally resented the implication that they were all incurable backwoodsmen while O'Neill was the only 'white man' around. And the landed aristocracy, from whom O'Neill sprang, made little effort to conceal their contempt of the recently rich Unionist bourgeoisie, referring in particular to the brightest of the latter, Brian Faulkner, as 'the shirt maker'.⁴¹

Basil McIvor, who came into Unionist politics to support Terence O'Neill, thought that perhaps a more significant problem was the unwillingness of the Protestant middle-class to intrude in a Unionist establishment which curiously married the landed upper-crust with a working class

³⁴ Terence O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, 1972), pp. xi, 54.

³⁵ Terence O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, 1972), p. 37.

³⁶ Terence O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, 1972), p. xi.

³⁷ Terence O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, 1972), p. 85.

³⁸ Terence O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, 1972), p. 50.

³⁹ Terence O'Neill, *The Autobiography of Terence O'Neill* (London, 1972), p. 35.

⁴⁰ Ken Bloomfield, *Stormont in Crisis: a Memoir* (Belfast, 1994), p. 26.

⁴¹ Ciaran McKeown, *The Passion of Peace* (Belfast, 1984), p. 23.

Protestant democracy. "Most of us were part of a large section of the middle and upper class of Northern Ireland preferred to leave politics to the politicians."⁴²

Friction between the 'white man' and the 'shirt maker' hobbled the Unionist reform administration in the 1960s. Brian Faulkner had, entirely justifiably, the reputation of being a careerist manoeuver, determined to undermine his Party leader. In his memoirs, published posthumously, he therefore strove to present an image of himself as 'statesman' rather than politiker. Clearly he was ambitious for the premiership in 1963, when Terence passed him by to the leadership of the province, but he preferred to present himself as indifferent to merely climbing the greasy pole: "I had no pretensions to the Premiership; the idea had simply not entered my mind is an immediate possibility for consideration. At that time the Ministry of Home affairs absorbed all my activities and energies, as has always been the case with any department under my charge."⁴³ Faulkner knew that his reputation rested upon his administrative competence, and he played upon this.

Faulkner was outflanked again in 1966 when Terence O'Neill met with the southern Premier, Sean Lemass. Characteristically, he depicted as a triumph of style to the detriment of substance.

I welcomed the fact that this meeting was taking place; in fact I had put before the Cabinet a few days previously a proposal that I should go to Dublin to meet the Minister responsible for tourism... But these practical achievements had already been overshadowed and, in retrospect, somewhat undermined by the political upheaval over the surprise visit of Lemass to Belfast.⁴⁴

Faulkner skated over the attempt by much of the Unionist Parliamentary Party to overthrow Terence O'Neill in 1966. Had the coup succeeded, Faulkner would certainly have replaced O'Neill. O'Neill, he accurately observed, "fought back by representing all his critics as shell-backed reactionaries".⁴⁵ Faulkner was enraged that he was included in this category. In a rather obvious example of transference, he depicted O'Neill as undermining him. "Terence spent a lot of his time manoeuvring politically and one constantly felt the need to tread warily."⁴⁶

Faulkner did differentiate his position on Civil Rights from that of O'Neill. Once more, he presented his own position as favouring substantive reform, discreetly introduced and mindful of what the Unionist rank-and-file could accept. This was set against O'Neill's showy grandstanding, which resulted in the worst of both worlds:

There was not only the danger of causing frustrations in the Nationalist community, there was the risk of provoking fears and a reaction against change among Unionists. The latter had long regarded the Nationalist as a wrecking fifth column in league with a neighbouring state which is trying to take over our territory, and some still believed that they could not be trusted in positions of responsibility. Because of the overlap of political and religious differences, and

⁴² Basil Mclvor, *Hope Deferred: Experiences of an Irish Unionist* (Belfast, 1998), pp. 35-6.

⁴³ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), p. 28.

⁴⁴ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), p. 39.

⁴⁵ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), p. 40.

⁴⁶ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), p. 40.

because it was often more easy to identify someone's religion than his political views, this had led to some discrimination on a religious basis.⁴⁷

Faulkner favoured the government dragging its feet over Civil Rights reform. This was, he argued, because of the true nature of the Civil Rights Association. It "became for Nationalists and Republicans a new way of getting at the Unionists and discrediting the Stormont Government in the eyes of the outside world."⁴⁸

There was, indeed, a good deal of truth to this. The outside world, for Unionists, certainly included Great Britain, and they were paranoid that Irish immigrants had become an important constituency on that island. The result, they believed, was an "Irish Republican 'lobby'" of Labour MPs at Westminster – headed up by Harold Wilson himself – sympathetic to the subversive potential of the Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland.⁴⁹

Paranoia aside, Eamonn McCann provides a fine study, serio-comic form, of Civil Rights agitation as "a new way of getting at the Unionists". His priority, by the late 1960s, was to gather together a vanguard to act as a ferment. To this end he formed an "ad hoc alliance between the left of the Labour Party and the left of the Republican Club".⁵⁰ The activists' aim was to expose the inherent violence of the Unionist state. "By this time our conscious, if unspoken, strategy was to provoke the police into overreaction and thus spark off mass reaction against the authorities."⁵¹ This, as McCann wryly observed, quickly activated the violence inherent in the local population. He recollected a journalist's exchange with a local activist. "Mr Hinds, can you explain the background to these riots?" "Idle hands throw stones, kid".⁵²

The tone of McCann's account is the unexpectedness of events. Theory led him to believe that a small revolutionary organisation could trigger mass events which would dynamically spiral. But at some level, he implies, the activists never really believed this prognosis. While they took theoretical cognizance of the violence of the state, its reality was shocking. "We had indeed set out to make the police overreact," he said of the 5 October demonstration. "But we hadn't expected the criminal brutality of the RUC."⁵³ It was with a self-parodying amusement that they said to themselves, afterwards: "Well, that's it. Stormont is finished".⁵⁴ Stormont was ultimately finished, of course, but this had not really been genuinely anticipated. It was with a rather naïvely light heart that McCann and the activist cohort strove to burst the complacency of Northern Irish society. Little anticipating what they would achieve, they neglected to think through the likelihood that ideas of workers unity and socialism would be overwhelmed in the flood of communal mobilisation.

Paddy Doherty in recounting of Derry Civil Rights protest, drew a picture not of class polarisation within the Catholic community, but rather of class unity against the Protestant Unionist establishment:

⁴⁷ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), p. 44.

⁴⁸ Brian Faulkner, *Memoirs of a Statesman* (London, 1978), p. 48

⁴⁹ Unionist Research Department, *Northern Ireland: The Hidden Truth* (n.d., 1972?), p. 8.

⁵⁰ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 47.

⁵¹ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 35.

⁵² Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 38.

⁵³ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 43.

⁵⁴ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, 1974), p. 51.

Never before in its turbulent history had the city of Derry seen such a concourse of people, rich and poor, the radical and middle-of-the-road, young and old. Doctors with soft, immaculate hands, and dockers, their arms thick with labour, filled the ranks.... The women in well-tailored garments were outnumbered 100 to 1 by the mothers of large families in the practical best. Workers – and many who had never seen their fathers work and were doomed to the same soul-destroying inactivity – were in the throng. I counted farm labourers, lean and tough, with leathery skins tanned on the mountain homesteads of counties Derry and Donegal. Students, fired with a zeal for change, and more dignified-looking postgraduates were also on the march.... Wealth, poverty, class, political affiliations and social aspirations – none of these were important now.⁵⁵

The loyalist attack on Civil Rights marchers at Burntollet Bridge in January 1969, for Doherty, was a particular turning point. “The viciousness would blacken the reputation of Northern Protestants for a long time to come. And for years afterwards, Catholics studied blown-up photographs of the attackers hoping to identify targets for revenge.... Our hearts were filling with hatred of the extremists, and of the police... More violence was inevitable and we looked forward to it.... No one gave a damn about peace or marshals now.”⁵⁶ Bernadette Devlin, a young leader of the radical People’s Democracy Civil Rights group, whose election in April 1969 to Westminster seat of Mid-Ulster precipitated an escalation of tensions that led directly to O’Neill’s resignation, observed the rapid transition to a Catholic politics of territorial mobilisation. “The danger was that as the Catholic rights line developed, what had started out as a generous (though vague) protest on behalf of the oppressed, began turning into an all-class alliance of Catholics, happy if it achieved no more than Catholic control of predominantly Catholic areas.”⁵⁷ This danger was being realised she wrote.

For conscious Republicans, the Civil Rights movement had been a masterstroke. Seán MacStiofáin, the hard-line Provisional IRA Chief of Staff in the 1970s, certainly perceived it as an anti-unionist manoeuvre:

It was the beginning of a new strategy that the Unionists did not quite know how to cope with. The marchers had carried no sectarian symbols or political banners, and people of all denominations, and some of none at all, were among them... By their sectarian housing policies, the Unionists had finally overdone it and united many different shades of opinion against them in a demand for justice.⁵⁸

As early as the 5 October 1968 demonstration, he argued, the limitations of non-violent action had been exposed.⁵⁹ Terence O’Neill’s resignation in April 1969 was the denouement that made escalation inevitable. “The counter-revolutionary game was wide open now. It was the coup against O’Neill.... The right-wingers were trying to blow them out of office to make way for a Unionist strong man.”⁶⁰ O’Neill’s successor, James Chichester Clark, was an unlikely strongman, but it is certainly true that Catholics had good reason to feel that any genuine sympathisers for their plight in the top ranks of the Unionist Party had been side-lined. An overstretched police force felt the restraining

⁵⁵ Paddy Doherty, *Paddy Bogside*, ed. Peter Hegarty (Cork, 2000), p. 73.

⁵⁶ Paddy Doherty, *Paddy Bogside*, ed. Peter Hegarty (Cork, 2000), p. 88.

⁵⁷ Bernadette Devlin, *The Price of My Soul* (London, 1969), p. 155.

⁵⁸ Seán MacStiofáin, *Memoirs of a revolutionary* (London, 1975), p. 109.

⁵⁹ Seán MacStiofáin, *Memoirs of a revolutionary* (London, 1975), p. 111.

⁶⁰ Seán MacStiofáin, *Memoirs of a revolutionary* (London, 1975), p. 119.

hand lift off its shoulder. Aidan Corrigan, a thirty-six-year-old teacher of English at St Patrick's Academy in Dungannon, County Tyrone, wrote an account of RUC conduct at a protest on the time on 11 August 1969.

The Riot Squad is a branch of the RUC. They are a very discredited branch, because they are very brutal men. Mr William Craig, when he was Minister for Home Affairs, set them up to deal with crowd control, and they have been notorious over the past year for the savage baton charges.

They are armed with special batons. They wear steel helmets and carry metal shields, and when they charge they beat shields with their batons, and shout at top of their voices as they charge at demonstrators. Their favoured shout is: 'Fenian bastards' or 'Civil shites.'

The riot squad were entertained in the Orange Hall in Dungannon earlier that evening – an indication of the thinking behind their being in Dungannon at all on that occasion.⁶¹

At the same time, the catholic Bogside of very rose up in rebellion against police incursions, while the RUC – fearing an IRA rising – effectively led loyalist in attacks on Catholic streets in Belfast.

Conn McCluskey, who had supported his wife Patricia McCloskey in establishing in Dungannon the studiedly moderate Campaign for Social Justice in 1964 – an initiative to expose the issue of discrimination without any reference at all to nationalist 'shibboleths' – was in his memoirs quite clear that there existed a logical continuum between even this discreet agitation and the IRA insurgency which began organising in the aftermath of the August 1969 riots:

With the Unionist Government obstructing reforms and whole streets laid waste by the Paisleyites, the 'Provos' gradually became a strong fighting force.... NICRA [the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association] sponsored 'days of disruption' to try and bring life in the province to a halt by non-violent means. Unlike India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, these efforts were poorly supported. One is forced to conclude that a more violent approach had greater appeal to the Irish temperament.

Republican violence then really got into its stride. Mr Roy Bradford, Minister of Development before Britain was compelled by Unionist intransigence to suspend Stormont, on 28 April 1972 declared on television that 'the Republicans had abolished Stormont'. This was, to a great degree, correct.

Here was another watershed, but the Provisional Republicans did not realise that they should have them changed gear. They ought to have known that with the reforms at last beginning and being worthwhile, killing people would achieve nothing more. The minority had clearly begun to gain equal rights. From then on, the Republicans were fighting only for a United Ireland, which, generally speaking, the world thought should be a majority political decision.⁶²

In reality, nationalist did not look upon political violence in this instrumental manner, as simply a means of achieving Civil Rights reform. But nor was toleration for violence straightforwardly expressive of an absolutist desire for a united Ireland on the morrow. Rather, it was primarily an

⁶¹ Aidan Corrigan, *Eye-Witness in Northern Ireland* (n.d.), p. 9.

⁶² Conn McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees* (Republic of Ireland, 1989), pp. 159-60.

expression of a community radically alienated from the state, proud of its Irishness, and self-consciously identifying with a long tradition of righteous resistance to British rule and military might. It was, in a certain sense, a warrant of seriousness. Loyalist violence, which almost gloried in its violation of martial norms, upped the ante by demonstrating that the Union was worth even a descent into the moral abyss.

For the memoirists, looking back, the subsequent horror, if it did nothing else, demonstrated that their own 1960s fell into a category of undeniable historical significance. Charles Brett in his 1978 memoir wrote of the misery and – in a rare admission – the excitement of violence, even for the middle classes: “When the morning news bulletin reports no bombs, no fires, no murders, no riots, no hijackings, then it has been a quiet night, and it is that that seems extraordinary (and in a depressing way, a little flat).”⁶³ Memoirs of the 1960s were certainly, as we might expect, a re-fighting of old political controversies. But they also function, consciously or otherwise, as an attempt to render the extraordinary as safely sealed in the hermetic historical.

⁶³ Charles Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625-1977* (Edinburgh, 1978), p. 20.