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The Vicissitudes of Forgetting: military intervention and the memory of the Troubles in Britain

The Northern Ireland Troubles was Britain's longest and largest post-war conflict, involving the deployment of some 300,000 military personnel over a 35-year period. Curiously, however, while the formal ending of the conflict in 1998 has generated profuse memorialisation in Northern Ireland, remembrance of the conflict in Britain has been conspicuously muted. This article uses newspaper reportage, popular cartoons, official reports and the records of a public campaign to explore the origins of negative attitudes towards the Troubles in Britain, focusing especially on reactions to military intervention during the early years of the conflict. While the incorporation of 'Ulster' within the post-partition Anglo-British imaginary was an inherently ambivalent process, the advent of the modern Troubles stimulated reflection upon decolonisation, and in the process impaired the cultural work performed by the memory of World War 2 in negotiating imperial decline and replenishing dominant myths of the nation. As a result, it is argued, by 1972 NI it was routinely depicted as a foreign and dispensable appendage to the nation, marking the crystallisation of what would become a 'recurring majority' in favour of military withdrawal. Where mainstream histories of post-war Britain emphasise popular 'indifference' to the Troubles in Britain, the article thus suggests attitudes to Northern Ireland reflected popular aversion, transmuted into apathy over the longer term as a result of an active and state-managed process of forgetting.

Key words: Northern Ireland, the Troubles, British cultural memory, forgetting, military intervention, national identity

Apathy or Aversion? The Early Troubles in British cultural memory

The Northern Ireland Troubles was Britain's longest and largest post-war conflict, involving the deployment of some 300,000 military personnel over a 35-year period. Curiously, however, while the formal ending of the conflict in 1998 has generated profuse memorialisation in Northern Ireland, remembrance of the Troubles in Britain has been conspicuously muted. Where the public 'rallied around its returning troops from Iraq and Afghanistan', observe Jenkins and Woodward, the Troubles are 'often viewed as something vaguely embarrassing that the majority of British people would rather forget'.¹ And whilst the 'Irish Question' is recognised as a central controversy of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, contemporary

¹ Neil Jenkins and Rachel Woodward, 'Serving in troubled times: British military personnel's memories and accounts of service in Northern Ireland' in G. Dawson, J. Dover and S. Hopkins (eds), *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain* (Manchester, 2017), p.93-94

historians view the modern Troubles as marginal to British public life. As one authority has remarked, ‘to the English, Welsh and Scots’ Northern Ireland after 1969 was ‘a world apart’, impinging on them

only in incomprehensible and brutal bombings and assassinations in their cities, without warning and seemingly without purpose. The Ulster political culture and social mood were so utterly distinct from that in the rest of the United Kingdom that it hardly related to the governability or peaceableness of British life in general. A common reaction was boredom with the ritual killing of each other by Irishmen.²

This article adopts a cultural historical perspective to explore the popular sentiments underlying the public’s alleged ‘boredom’ with the Troubles. This boredom, it is suggested, is not a straightforward manifestation of apathy, as some scholars contend; apathy, rather, is symptomatic of an active process of cultural ‘forgetting’, rooted in the longer history of Anglo-Irish relations as well as more recent shifts in the post-imperial imagining of Britishness. In Paul Connerton’s terms, ‘forgetting’ here refers to ‘the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes’:

Forgetting then becomes part of the process by which newly shared memories are constructed because a new set of memories are frequently accompanied by a set of tacitly shared silences...Not to forget might in these cases provoke too much cognitive dissonance: better to consign some things to a shadow world. So pieces of knowledge that are not passed on come to have a negative significance by allowing other images of identity to come to the fore.³

Over the twentieth century, the remembrance of war has been centrally implicated in the construction and replenishment of dominant narratives of British identity.⁴ In order, however, for remembrance to support these functions, histories of conflict which prevent the ‘jigsaw puzzle from fitting together properly’ have frequently been consigned to a ‘shadow world’. This is manifest, not so much in the collective erasure of misfit military episodes, as in the development of habits of public self-reflection which work to preserve powerfully invested understandings of identity from disruptive and inassimilable versions of reality. Societies themselves, as Joanna Bourke reminds us, do not ‘repress’ traumatic experiences, but

² K.O. Morgan, *The People’s Peace. British History since 1945* (Oxford, 1999), p.374

³ Paul Connerton, ‘Seven types of forgetting’, *Memory Studies*, 1:1 (2008), p.63

⁴ For a recent overview see Jenny MacLeod, ‘Britishness and Commemoration: National Memorials to the First World War in Britain and Ireland’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48:4 (2013), pp.647-665, and L. Noakes and Juliette Patterson (eds) *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (London, 2014)

representations of events which destabilise the role dominant narratives play in constituting shared subjectivities engender points of dissonance and resistance between versions of the past.⁵ Where such tensions remain unresolved and mobilisable by social actors, they exert influence over collective self-representations, generating tendencies towards marginalisation and ‘forgetting’, as well as towards the formation of ‘sectional narratives’ and ‘counter-memories’ of the national past.⁶

In the historiography of post-war Britain, notions of forgetting have been employed to interpret the cultural legacies of imperial decline.⁷ As recent scholarship on Anglo-Irish relations contends, however, the period 1912-1921 likewise forms a moment of ‘trauma’ in the development of the British state, encompassing a bloody rebellion and ‘civil war’, and ending in the secession of one part of Ireland from the union and the partition of the island as a whole. In the aftermath, as Mo Moulton has argued, contemporaries engaged in a ‘kind of repression’, not only of ‘the trauma of the Anglo-Irish War’, but also of ‘the deeply complicated relationship between England and its Celtic other’.⁸ While Irishness remained ‘embedded in the very fabric of English life’ after 1921, this fact ‘had to be repeatedly forgotten’ in order to navigate the destabilising implications of unresolved political conflict and ethnic division.⁹ Interwar British ‘stability’, as both myth and reality, did not exist ‘outside the Irish frame of reference’, but was constructed in part ‘out of reaction to the potential impact of the Irish Question’.¹⁰ As a result, the popular narration of Britishness over the twentieth century has come to depend upon ongoing regulation of the memory of Anglo-Irish relations, so as to accommodate the enduring, and potentially disruptive, presence of Irish identities within the British state.

In all this, the new creation of ‘Ulster’ or ‘Northern Ireland’ posed especially intractable problems of self-representation. For although interwar English society evolved distinctive ways of ‘civilising’ Irishness, removing it from the realm of national politics to that of private

⁵ J. Bourke, ‘‘Remembering’ War’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39:4 (2004), p.473

⁶ For the concept of ‘counter-memory’ see T. Ashplant, G., Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, (eds) *Commemorating war: the politics of memory* (London, 2000), pp.20-22

⁷ Important interventions include S. Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, 2001); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (London, 2004); Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-65* (Oxford, 2005)

⁸ Mo Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in Interwar England* (Cambridge, 2014), p.3

⁹ Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish*, p.3

¹⁰ Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish*, p.4-5

life, 'Ulster' was both difficult to domesticate and impossible to disown. The problem was not merely that the legitimacy of the 'Irish border' was deeply contested, but that Ulster Britishness was constituted through such contestation: governed by a regime which relived the politics of partition obsessively, and which institutionalised those politics in the structure of the NI state, the religiously-divided and democratically-questionable new entity manifested the enduring legacies of Anglo-Irish conflict, bedevilling elites' efforts to control the boundaries of the political in British public life. Ultimately, 'Ulster' forced acknowledgment of Britain's failure to guarantee democratic rights within its own jurisdiction, and through this, returned the deeper entanglement of Irish and English history to public consciousness: 'Ulster' always threatened to disclose British society's own disavowed ethno-religious prejudices and the means by which they had been mobilised to relativize the meanings of democracy and challenge the authority of the state. The 'Britishness' of Ulster thus always endangered 'Britishness' more generally, complicating the narrative of national stability, rationality and democracy which, particularly as Britain shed its empire, came to define notions of Britishness in the second half of the twentieth century.

This article develops these ideas to further understanding of the problematic status of the Early Troubles within British cultural memory. Where the alleged 'apathy' of English people towards the conflict has been explained in terms of essential cultural differences, the article explores how Anglo-British perceptions of NI, particularly within the popular press, were powerfully mediated through 'multidirectional' shifts in the imagining of Britishness.¹¹ In particular, while the incorporation of 'Ulster' within the national imaginary was always highly ambivalent, the advent of the modern Troubles stimulated reflection upon decolonisation, and in the process impaired the cultural work performed by the memory of World War 2 in negotiating imperial decline and replenishing dominant myths of the nation. As a result, by 1972 NI it was routinely depicted as a foreign and dispensable appendage to the nation, marking the crystallisation of what would become a 'recurring majority' in favour of military withdrawal.¹² In response, in order to manage the contradiction between popular aversion and the emergent demands of the 'long war', a new regime of 'forgetting' was instituted, predicated on the conversion of

¹¹ For the concept of 'multidirectional memory' see Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation* (Stanford, 2009).

¹² B Hayes and I McAllister, 'British and Irish public opinion towards the Northern Ireland problem', *Irish Political Studies*, 11:1 (1996), pp. 61-82

aversion into *apathy*. The article concludes with some reflections upon the implications of this for the unresolved legacies of the Troubles within contemporary British society.

Civilizing ‘Ulster’? The Problem of Ulster-Britishness in the Anglo-British Imagination

In traditional nationalist accounts of the origins of the Northern Ireland Troubles the partition of Ireland in 1920-21 is often portrayed as a British ploy to re-establish rule on the island. In practice, however, while it was certainly true that unionists benefitted from conservative support within the post-war coalition government, the period 1914-21 marks a major shift in how political elites addressed the troublesome ‘Irish Question’ within British politics. Where the passage of the third Home Rule Bill through parliament had polarised the British electorate and raised the spectre of civil war, the collective memory of this episode, coupled with the experience of wartime coalition government, established the precedent of a bipartisan approach to Irish policy. This, as Ronan Fanning has shown, aimed not at the maintenance of the union through coercion, but more pragmatically, at the appeasement of American opinion via a democratic settlement.¹³ The Ulster Unionists had issued no demand for their own Home Rule parliament, but they would get one anyway, in part because this could be portrayed as consistent with the principle of national self-determination.

In the short term, this ‘settlement’ of the ‘Irish Question’ offered clear domestic advantages. If the union had become a source of tension within Anglo-American relations, by 1920 it was also regarded as an intolerable source of domestic instability. Partition, as George Boyce notes, ‘placed the Irish Question beyond the realm of domestic political controversy’, enabling ‘the management and containment of Irish issues by the British political elite’, who could now ‘disavow any direct responsibility for what went on in Ireland’.¹⁴ Accordingly, relations between Westminster and Belfast in the forty years following partition adhered to a strict pattern of non-intervention and domestic insulation: no Secretary of State was appointed to report on Northern Irish affairs; no committee was established to monitor Northern Irish policy;

¹³ Ronan Fanning, ‘Anglo-Irish Relations: partition and the British dimension in historical perspective’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, 2:1 (1985), pp. 1-20

¹⁴ D.G. Boyce, *The Irish Question and British Politics, 1868-1996* (London, 1996), p.9

and by 1923 parliament had adopted a ‘constitutional convention’ prohibiting the discussion of issues pertaining to Stormont and Northern Irish politics.¹⁵

From another perspective, however, political efforts to expel the ‘Irish Question’ from domestic consciousness had always to negotiate the reality that Irish people and culture remained an integral component of Anglo-British society. Contrary to conventional wisdom, partition did not in fact mark the disappearance of Irishness from English culture; instead, argues Mo Moulton, because Irishness was inextricably woven into ‘the very fabric English life’, so its meanings were ‘civilised’ through a more subtle form of splitting which rendered Irish political identities ‘foreign’ while domesticating Irish culture as an object for popular consumption. In this way, the symbolic threat which Irishness potentially posed to English self-perceptions was transformed rather than expelled, enabling accommodation and enjoyment: ‘the Irish Question was removed from the volatile realm of politics and reassigned to the rich interwar landscape of domestic and associational life, where Irishness could be safely reinterpreted as an enthusiasm, a heritage, or a leisure activity, rather than a public identity for which men and women would be prepared to die.’¹⁶

‘Ulster’ too, as a chief legacy of the ‘Irish Question’, was subject to comparable forms of reassignment. While Ulster’s ‘loyalty’ was occasionally appreciated, comparing favourably with Eire’s wartime neutrality for example, during periods of inactivity in Anglo-Irish political relations the English print media registered a marked tendency to forget the fact of partition, eliding the distinction between north and south.¹⁷ For such observers, ‘Ulster’ was metonymised as part of, and deriving from, an originary ‘Ireland’, whose Celtic charms rendered it a place of tranquilly, romance and escapism. If ‘Eire’ and ‘Ulster’ were ‘separate states’, wrote George Murray, journalist for the *Daily Mail*, they were nevertheless part of ‘the same small island’, ‘enjoying the same climate and natural condition’ and possessing ‘the same gently entrancing countryside and the identical Irish charm, kindness, courtesy, and

¹⁵ Michael Cunningham, *British Government Policy in Northern Ireland, 1969-2000* (Manchester, 2001), p.1-2

¹⁶ Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish*, p.4

¹⁷ ‘A loyal Ulster is vital’, *Daily Express*, 13 June 1945; ‘Ulster will send more’, *Daily Express*, 16 July 1945

hospitality'.¹⁸ Similarly, travel writer Robert Clyde depicted Northern Ireland as a magical rural 'paradise', replete with fairies, giants and whimsical, loquacious 'natives':

Driving into town you will see at the entrance to most rural homes the traditional sturdy circular stone gateposts with their conical tops. The natives will tell you they are built thus to prevent the wee folk sitting on the gatepost and hatching mischief against the owners of the property beyond.¹⁹

The difficulty with such depictions, of course, was that Ulster unionists were always liable to reject any such tendency to dissolve their identity into a generalised discourse of Irishness. Where many English observers clearly took comfort in a romantic and nostalgized 'Ireland', official Unionist mythology after partition narrated Ulster Britishness in terms of Ulster Protestants' long struggle to resist absorption into a unitary Irish Catholic state. As part of this, an Ulster British public identity was increasingly fashioned via a dual process of submerging its 'Irish' aspects while projecting its Protestant and British character, a process on display annually during the summer marching season, but also during Stormont elections. If some English journalists and travel writers were inclined to forget the border, others encountered a place of 'contradictions' difficult to reconcile with reassuring images of Celtic hospitality. According to one frequent visitor, while 'Ulster has a soft gentle climate' and 'sweet scenery painted in water colours', it was also 'the land of soldiers', populated by a 'tough unyielding people with their minds made up long ago':

Strange how a kindly and humane people rely on and enjoy such furious passions to keep them going. The Ulsterman not only looks back in anger, he looks around him in anger and looks forward in anger too.²⁰

The problem which 'Ulster' posed to the English imagination was thus not that of accommodating the persistence of Irish difference within post-partition domestic culture; it was, rather, how to interpret and frame the identity of an indeterminate new entity which refused to be Celticized in routine ways, and which was embedded within the boundaries of the British state. While unionist resistance to Home Rule had here engendered a distinctive stereotype of 'the Ulsterman', defined in terms self-reliance, steadfastness, industriousness and

¹⁸ 'It pays to be in the family', *Daily Mail*, 7 July 1956; 'Eire Fairy', *Daily Mail*, 15 October 1946.

¹⁹ 'The Green North Welcomes You', *Daily Mail*, 1 August 1958; 'On the Irish border', *The Manchester Guardian*, 8 Nov 1950.

²⁰ 'The Land of Conviction', *Daily Mirror*, 29 June 1959.

indomitability, the negotiation of this construct within the mainstream press was always highly ambivalent, reflecting enduring concerns around the province's contested status and hybrid cultural identity.²¹ Paradoxically, while unionism strove to differentiate itself from its Irish Catholic other, the pronounced militancy of Ulster Britishness always betrayed its origins in a problematic *Irish* history, the disavowal of which was constitutive of Britain's emerging post-imperial public identity as a secular bastion of consensus-based democracy. By vehemently asserting their Britishness, in public displays of militant Protestantism, imperial loyalty and patriotic fervour, Ulster Unionists tended to register their Irishness in English eyes, calling up the spectre of the unresolved 'Irish Question', and with it the disavowed divisiveness of Britain's historical development.

Such tensions within the evolution of twentieth-century Britishness were negotiated in conflicting ways within the popular press. At one end of the political spectrum, liberal and left-leaning commentators refurbished the moral rhetoric of Gladstonian liberalism, portraying Ulster as a democratic and humanitarian 'outrage' which, like the longer history of British involvement in Ireland, served as a mirror in which the British nation could survey its conscience.²² In 1934 the recently established National Council for Civil Liberties found their attention drawn to 'the state of affairs existing in the Province of Northern Ireland', and promptly dispatched a team of investigators to twenty Ulster towns to observe the workings of Northern Ireland's Special Powers Acts.²³ Such was the 'gravity' of the situation encountered, however, that an independent Commission of Inquiry was immediately established to consider the workings of the judicial and political system as whole. The Commission's report, which likened the state to a 'continental dictatorship', alleged that the Northern Ireland government had fundamentally abrogated 'the rule of law and liberty of the subject', and so had 'ravished the heritage for which generations of Britons had fought and suffered':²⁴

The fact that the NI government has adopted and put into practice the machinery of dictatorship...lends support to the widely voiced contention that the Executive has conducted public office not in the interests of the community but in those of a narrow circle of its

²¹ On the cultural imagining of an 'Ulster' identity see Ian McBride, 'Ulster and the British Problem' in R English and G Walker (eds) *Unionism in Modern Ireland. New Perspectives on Politics and Culture* (London, 1996), pp.1-18

²² On the importance of Irish nationalism in shaping the British liberal imagination see EF Biagini, *British Democracy and Irish Nationalism, 1879-1906* (Cambridge, 2007).

²³ *The National Council for Civil Liberties. The Special Powers Acts of Northern Ireland. Report of a Commission of Inquiry* (London, 1936), p.3 (HHC) U DCL/100/4

²⁴ *Report of a Commission of Inquiry*, p. 39 (HHC) U DCL/100/4

supporters, and that it has usurped its position and powers to aggravate and perpetuate sectarian disorders to this end...The existing conditions of rule cannot be described other than as totally un-British.²⁵

The Commission's findings, reported at a time when European fascism emerged as an important foil for the valorisation of British democracy, generated wide-ranging public debate over the 'deviant' character of Ulster politics, and so helped crystallise an image of the 'un-British' nature of the province that was periodically reactivated in the popular press right up to the 1960s and beyond.²⁶ Yet, while such commentators repeatedly appealed to the moral and democratic sentiments of the British public, momentary revulsion at the ugly visage of Ulster bigotry failed to materialise into sustained pressure for policy change. Ronald Kidd, secretary of the Council, found pamphlets summarising the Commission's findings difficult to shift, whilst members complained that 'Ireland seems no longer a matter of interest in this country'.²⁷ Indeed, the press largely ignored the Belfast riots of 1935, and when journalists did turn their attention to Ulster they usually chose to efface the troubling relationship between Northern Ireland's profound political divisions and Britain's own complicity in the design, creation and supervision of the state.

Where liberal constructions of Unionist bigotry worked to mobilise divisions within the discourse of Britishness, the wider press thus evolved ways of insulating the public from the difficult questions raised by Ulster's 'deviant' behaviour. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, sections of the right-wing press here endeavoured to naturalise the basis of partition, muting NI's anomalous features while mystifying its divisions and inequities. Thus, according to one feature article in the *Daily Mail*, while Stormont was a devolved administration, rendering it unusual within the UK state, this merely exemplified British eccentricity:

Only the British could have thought up anything so unlikely as the self-governing federal state of Northern Ireland. It is unique.²⁸

²⁵ *Report of a Commission of Inquiry*, pp.38-39 (HHC) U DCL/100/4

²⁶ 'Ulster in Grip of Fascism', *News Chronicle*, 19 Oct 1934; 'Dictatorship in Northern Ireland', *Yorkshire Telegraph*, 23 May 1936; 'Fascist Rule in Ulster Alleged', *Glasgow Evening News*, 22 May 1936; 'Dictatorship in Ireland', *Daily Worker*, 23 May 1936; 'Un-British Rule in Ulster', *Daily Record*, 23 May 1936; 'Dictatorship in Ulster', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 May 1936; 'Dictatorship in Ulster', *Spectator*, 29 May 1936.

²⁷ Ronald Kidd to Neil Lawson, 15 May 1939, HHC DCL/55/1; Judith Concoran to Kidd, 14/1/38, HHC DCL/55/1

²⁸ 'They Take Their Politics Seriously', *Daily Mail*, 1 August 1958.

And whilst ‘the Northern Irish’ were certainly distinct from ‘the English, the Scottish, and the Welsh’, they were also ‘more serious-minded and level-headed than the Southerners’:

Many of the Northern Irish are of Scottish or North of England descent, which makes them a people altogether different from the Southerners. In America they are known as the Scots Irish and have provided 14 presidents of the United States²⁹

Yet, if the ‘Northern Irish’ were ‘*more* serious-minded and level-headed than the Southerners’, then they were not ‘*altogether* different’; the difference was one of degree rather than kind. And if they were not ‘altogether different’, then racial descent formed an infirm basis on which separate north and south. In fact, as the article went on to acknowledge, the ‘Northern Irish’ were neither uniform in their self-defined origins nor their attitudes towards the border. While the writer claimed that ‘two thirds of the people of NI are more solidly British than the English, the Welsh and the Scots’, the ‘remaining third, all Catholic, profess to want union with Eire’, such that being ‘for or against partition’ formed the ‘vital issue’ in Northern Ireland elections. Nevertheless, despite being fundamentally divided over the issue of national allegiance, the ‘Northern Irish’, now re-defined as ‘the Irish of Ulster’, came together on the Twelfth of July to celebrate ‘*their* national holiday’, suggesting that the ultimate significance of the past was as a unifying leisure activity:

They all down tools on the twelfth of July and enjoy their national holiday...This is the day, 268 years ago, when William of Orange defeated James II at the Battle of the Boyne and established the Protestant monarchy throughout the United Kingdom. Despite that, it is now a great day for all the Irish in Ulster.³⁰

For other observers, however, the past was not so easily glossed, and at times evoked ‘the kind of fear normally attached to a dangerous infection’.³¹ While most commentators affirmed Northern Ireland’s population as ‘British people...living normal British lives’, the border, and Northern Ireland’s internal divisions more generally, were nevertheless sources of uncertainty, posing enduring problems of definition. One kind of response to this, manifest particularly in the popular press of the 1950s, was to mark differences between the ‘ordinary’ common people

²⁹ ‘They Take Their Politics Seriously’, *Daily Mail*, 1 August 1958.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ ‘Curfew Town, UK’, *Daily Mail*, 19 August 1957

and irresponsible elites, displacing attention onto self-serving politicians insufficiently committed to the post-war creeds of welfare, modernisation, and democratic citizenship. When the *Picture Post* covered Belfast as part of its 'British cities series' in 1954, they discovered a city where 'religion is a fire', the 'police carry guns', and 'loyalties battle'. Nevertheless, violent outbreaks of 'hate and hysteria' were

usually due to deliberate kindling by vote-catching politicians, who prefer to keep Ulster politics rooted in emotion rather than economics, and who cheapen the Union Jack to the status of a campaign flag. We did not find an enormously high regard among Belfast citizens for their elected representatives.³²

Similarly, mainstream coverage of the IRA's border campaign, conducted between 1956-62, frequently identified Northern Ireland's volatile passions with a small number of unrepresentative fanatics, who, possessed by a 'dark and atavistic mode of reasoning', carried on their illegitimate war against the democratic wishes of the majorities in both north and south.³³ In this account of the unresolved politics of partition, identification between the subject and object of perception was sustained by distinguishing between the rationality and consensus-mindedness of the majority and the irrational emotionalism of an irreconcilable minority.³⁴ Reporting on the funeral of Aloysious Hand, a Fianna Uladh volunteer shot by the RUC in July 1958, the *Daily Mirror* claimed 'the poor boy was a dupe':

He died in a shooting war against England that practically nobody in Ireland really wants. For the plain fact is that the dear little shamrock still drips blood not because of splendid idealists fighting for a cause, but mainly because of a tiny handful of thugs who should be behind bars.³⁵

Although 'the whole problem of Ireland' was undoubtedly 'terribly complex', and stemmed from the fact of a 'divided' population, violence was abhorred by the majority; Northern Ireland's minority nationalist population

do not go chucking bombs about to emphasise their point. They hold their opinions peacefully, as do the majority who are happy to maintain the link with Britain. The men responsible for

³² 'Belfast', *Picture Post*, 8, 20 Feb 1954, p.35

³³ 'The Boys with the Guns', *The Observer*, 30 Jan 1955

³⁴ 'Gossip along the border is not about guns: common interests of country folk', *The Guardian*, 19 October 1959.

³⁵ 'Blood on the Shamrock', *Daily Mirror*, 10 July 1958

the present programme of outrage and bloody murder are reasonless fanatics who would go on with the criminal assaults even if Ireland were united and there was no 'cause' left.³⁶

Richard Weight has suggested that 'the Northern Irish were welcomed as fellow, if peripheral, Britons' in the decades after partition.³⁷ What closer attention to the peripheralisation of Ulster Britishness discloses, however, is the conditional and divided nature of any such hospitality. The inclusion of Ulster within the national imaginary was always dependent upon the effacement of aspects of its past and present which conflicted with the dominant account of Britain's democratic development and national character. Where this effacement proved difficult to sustain, the underlying ambivalence of Anglo-British perceptions re-emerged, and the Britishness of Ulster was liable to be called into question.

Return of the Other: negotiating the spectre of civil violence in Ulster

During the period 1968-74 popular representations of Ulster within the English press underwent two conspicuous changes. Firstly, where Ulster appeared as a theme only sporadically in the decades after partition, the confrontation between civil rights marchers and the RUC in Derry on 5th October 1968 disrupted established patterns of forgetting, stimulating a new public appetite for coverage of developments in the province. As Simon Prince has pointed out, while altercations between protestors and the RUC had many precedents in the history of the Northern Ireland state, the events of October captured public attention because they were filmed and broadcast by national news networks at a time when leftist violence was erupting in other European and American cities.³⁸ Thenceforth, up until the collapse of Sunningdale and the 'Ulsterisation' of the conflict, this new journalistic interest only intensified as the province descended into open political violence.

Secondly, where press coverage of Ulster had always been highly ambivalent, representations of the deepening 'crisis' increasingly reflected Britain's experience of post-war decolonisation. While commentators frequently insisted the situation was 'different' from other post-war

³⁶ 'Blood on the Shamrock', *Daily Mirror*, 10 July 1958

³⁷ Richard Weight, *Patriots. National Identity in Britain 1940-2000* (Basingstoke and Oxford, 2003), p.5, 147

³⁸ Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland's '68. Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of the Troubles* (Newbridge, 2007), p.5

colonial insurgencies, not least because ‘the majority have made it clear they are against separation from Britain’, such efforts to domesticate the conflict existed in tension with, and were implicitly inscribed within, a wider proclivity to read the escalating violence through the lens of colonial retreat.³⁹ This revealed itself, not only in a tendency to elaborate the unfolding situation via analogy with previous campaigns in Palestine, Cyprus and Aden, but in an ever-increasing tendency to re-imagine Ulster as alien, tribal and Irish, to be reformed, disciplined or, once these options were exhausted, excised from the national body.

Initially, mainstream press coverage resonated broadly with the reformism of the Wilson government. While some reports echoed a unionist perspective, attributing events in Derry to leftist and republican agitation, efforts to explain Ulster politics to English readers indicted ‘a community which refused to forget its stormy and bloodstained past’.⁴⁰ In one iteration of this, informed by liberal interpretations of partition, such prejudice found its most iniquitous and unpalatable expression in the discriminatory practices of the unionist regime: the image, circulated throughout the print and broadcast media, of baton-wielding RUC men clubbing cowering civil rights protestors was here read as a metaphor for the systematic mistreatment of the Catholic minority by a supremacist Protestant state.⁴¹ English readers were thus invited to condemn Protestant bigotry and identify with the legitimate aspirations of Catholics for British standards of justice. In this way, Ulster’s ‘centuries-old feud’ would be resolved through British moral leadership, defined in terms of the democratic values for which Britons had given their lives in WW2.

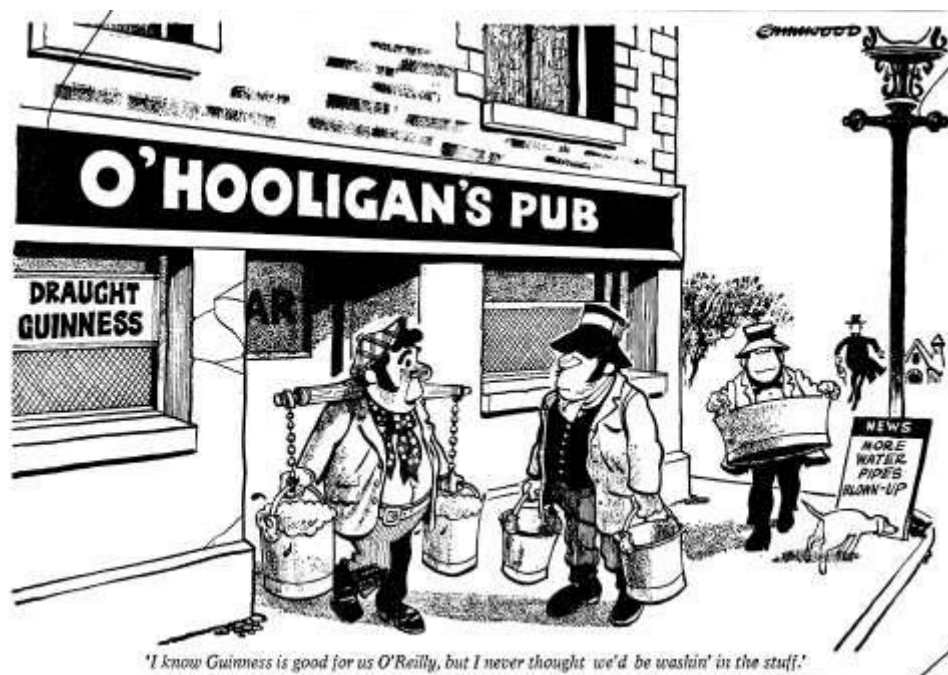
Even as this narrative of democratic reform was in circulation, however, the historical narrative it relied upon to account for civil conflict was already being inflected in competing ways to interpret Britain’s historical responsibility. In one version of the past, apparent in the *Guardian*, *Times* and *New Statesman*, Britain’s role in the development of Irish history was foregrounded to suggest its’ implication in creating the communal antagonisms now apparently exploding into violence. In this construction, historical reflection was mediated through the Gladstonian

³⁹ ‘The Reply to Murderers’, *The Guardian*, 12 March 1971

⁴⁰ ‘How Ulster refuses to forget its past’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 Oct 1968; ‘Ulster: the seeds of revolt’, *The Observer*, 13 Oct 1968; ‘Religious background to Ulster riots’, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 Oct 1968.

⁴¹ ‘Tough tactics in Londonderry’, *Guardian*, 7 Oct 1968; ‘The ills behind the Ulster trouble’, *Guardian*, 7 Oct 1968; ‘No change for the Roman Catholics’, *Guardian*, 8 Oct 1968; ‘One man, one vote – but not if you’re living in Ulster...’, *Daily Express*, 10 October 1968

paradigm, underscoring Britain's historical role in creating 'the Irish' as a 'tragic' people characterised by 'religion, love of country and a reluctance to compromise'.⁴² More commonly, however, the past was mobilised to displace the origins of conflict into uniquely *Irish* circumstances and propensities, offering readers a reassuring image of historical continuity in relation to which the stability of the British character could be set off. In this widely disseminated version of events, where the reader was identified with modernity, order, and rationality, the Irish were locked in a different phase of history, manifest in their enduring incapacity for self-regulation and restraint. This state of affairs could be viewed as 'tragic', inciting sympathy for a 'tragic people', but it also evoked parody and ridicule. English cartoonists, replenishing the habits of an earlier generation of artists, here recycled the rhetoric of Victorian caricature to re-popularise a construction of Irish masculinity defined in terms of stupidity, violence and drunkenness.



Emmwood, "I know Guinness is good for us O'Reilly, but I never thought we'd be washing in the stuff!", *Daily Mail*, 26 April 1969, BCA/15150

As in Emmwoods' parody of the bombing of the Silent Valley Reservoir in April 1969, published in the *Daily Mail*, such conventions worked to displace readers' attention away from the underlying politics of communal violence, reminding them instead of the comedic excesses of the Irish national character. As this implies, while such displacement was intended to

⁴² 'In Search of the Irish', *The Observer*, 24 August 1969

reinforce popular habits of forgetting, it nevertheless depended upon an established matrix of historical associations which referred the reader back to a longer and more unsettling history of English-Irish antagonism. Paradoxically, while caricature presented a highly simplified perspective, designed to contain the play of associations, the reversion to reductive racial tropes betrayed deeper sensitivities about the meaning of the unfolding conflict and its capacity to disrupt powerfully invested understandings of British democracy. Accordingly, as the ‘civil disturbance’ escalated and the situation appeared to spin beyond English control, such representations evolved from parody through satire to horror. Where Emmwood had initially depicted Irish excesses as comedic, by June 1970, following another round of intense inter-communal rioting in Belfast, these innate propensities were refigured as monstrous, threatening and dangerous in his nightmarish ‘In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost’.



Emmwood, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost", *Daily Mail*, 30 June 1970, BCA/18326

These competing impulses towards self-affirmation, self-reproach, and renunciation of the other came into increasingly sharp focus from August 1969 when, following a week of inter-communal rioting across the province, British troops were finally deployed to Belfast and

Derry to shore up the exhausted RUC. Deployed at the request of Stormont as ‘an aide to the civil power’, at this stage in what would become a 35-year campaign the army was widely portrayed as a ‘beacon of hope’, offering journalists an opportunity to re-ventilate a popular mythology of the British Tommy.⁴³ In Belfast, claimed the *Express*, the Tommy mounted ‘an impressive display of force and discipline in a city which has lost all sense of discipline and at the moment can only be saved from self-destruction by a show of force’.⁴⁴ Similarly, the arrival of rugged Yorkshiremen in Derry had rescued law and order in a city poised on the cusp of anarchy, offering readers a nostalgia-tinged image of British authority:

the ‘dreaded’ British Army is no longer dreaded by anyone here except the utterly bigoted...It is only after 24 hours that one can appreciate the impact that the arrival of 350 cheerful (but highly professional) Yorkshiremen with soft brogues from the Dales and Moors, a fund of good stories from the Leeds and Huddersfield public houses, but a skill at arms stretching back through Aden, Cyprus, Malaya, and the Greek insurrection, made on a town that really was beginning to twitch with fear.⁴⁵

Yet, while many journalists portrayed the Tommy as the civilised guardian of law and order, other commentators were much less ‘certain’ about the temporary nature of the army’s deployment or the durability of harmonious relations between soldiers on the ground and the local population.⁴⁶ This precariousness became increasingly obvious over the course of 1970-72 as the IRA re-emerged as an insurrectionary force within the wider context of deepening inter-communal violence. Whilst militant republicans had found themselves under-prepared to defend catholic communities against loyalist violence during the rioting of August 1969, from that point onwards both radical and traditionalist Republicans began to reorganise for military action with the intention, not only of protecting such communities, but of mobilising them in ‘armed struggle’ against the British state.⁴⁷ Following an internal split in December, this was pursued via a phased process of escalation, evolving from communal defence, through staged confrontation between soldiers and civilians, to offensive guerrilla warfare. By resetting the relationship between Catholic neighbourhoods and the British military on an adversarial

⁴³ ‘What hope for peace in Ulster?’, *The Observer*, 24 Aug 1969. On the historical construction of the soldier as an icon of British national identity see G. Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Manchester, 1994); M. Paris, *Warrior Nation; Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London, 2000)

⁴⁴ ‘3am: Troops firebombed’, *Daily Express*, 16 Aug 1969

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 16 August 1969

⁴⁶ ‘How to curb the B-specials’, *The Guardian*, 29 August 1969; ‘The way out in Ulster?’, *The Guardian*, 16 August 1969; ‘Ulster: must the troops stay twenty years?’, *The Sunday Times*, 24 August 1969.

⁴⁷ Richard English, *Armed Struggle. The History of the IRA* (London), pp. 81-108

footing, and by exploiting this tension to kill as many soldiers as possible, the PIRA hoped to force British withdrawal, paving the way for eventual unification.⁴⁸

As assessments of the British army's performance during the Early Troubles contend, these escalatory tactics achieved a significant degree of success, and in this the British military response frequently aided rather than hindered the realisation of republican goals. Due to the 'harshness' of their treatment of civilians, and their selective deployment of 'inappropriate colonial tactics' against Catholic communities, the army's aggressive and partisan approach helped to 'intensify and extend the very subversion against which it was supposedly employed'.⁴⁹ In turn, by fostering the emergence of an oppositional relationship between working-class catholic communities and 'British state forces', the army helped legitimize republican anti-imperialism whilst stimulating reflection upon previous 'terrorist' campaigns in the British press, thus destabilising official constructions of the army's 'peacekeeping' role.

On the one hand, as soldiers were murdered and the 'British death toll' mounted, backbench conservatives and hawkish commentators called for 'tougher measures', reinscribing the 'peacekeeping operation' in a bellicose language of 'war' that mirrored Republican rhetoric. 'When the bullet and bomb speak louder than reason', argued the *Daily Mirror*, reporting the murder of three off-duty Highland Fusiliers in March 1971, 'it means full scale terrorist war, just as it did in Palestine, just as it did in Cyprus, just as it did in Aden'.⁵⁰ In this context of escalating attacks, claimed the *Guardian*, 'the army and police must regain control':

The struggle in Ulster has long ceased to be about civil rights. For some rioters a deep hatred of Northern Ireland's British connection may seem cause enough. Constant rioting, they believe, is the best way to bring about constitutional change against the will of the majority. They must be shown this is not a real option...So although this battle is a difficult one, the army must win it.⁵¹

⁴⁸ 'Belfast at War', *An Phoblacht*, Feb. 1971.

⁴⁹ English, *Armed Struggle*, p.137; Caroline Kennedy-Pipe & Colin McInnes, 'The British Army in Northern Ireland 1969-72: From policing to counter-terror', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 20, 2 (1997), p.14; Edward Burke, 'Counter-Insurgency against 'Kith and Kin'? The British Army in Northern Ireland, 1970-76', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 43, 4 (2015), pp.660-61

⁵⁰ 'The bullets talk now', *Daily Mirror*, 12 March 1971.

⁵¹ 'The army must win in Belfast', *Guardian*, 7 Feb 1971.

On the other hand, even as many commentators condemned the savagery of the PIRA, they also discerned ‘an evil purpose’ behind the violence, namely to create, as in Cyprus, Aden and Palestine, a ‘situation which can no longer be controlled by civilised means’: ‘unlike British soldiers, fanatical gunmen know no pity or remorse’.⁵² The concern here, as such commentators implicitly recognized, was that a ‘massive punitive operation’ was likely to generate press coverage which undermined the capacity of the British Tommy to serve as an exemplar of national virtues.⁵³ The British army was a revered national institution, its hallowed post-war reputation intimately associated with victory over European fascism, and in this regard its public valorisation after 1945 underscores the importance of the memory of WW2 in replenishing an increasingly fragile narrative of Britishness. But its involvement in an intensely-mediated guerrilla conflict within the borders of the UK state confronted the British public with a disfigured counter-image of British militarism, in which soldiers could appear as brutalising oppressors rather than defenders of liberty and democracy. Growing public aversion to the Troubles thus also reflected the increasing influence of transnational human rights discourse in reshaping popular attitudes towards notions of just war, the legitimate use of violence, and the rights of both civilians and combatants.⁵⁴

One kind of response to this disfigurement was defensive projection, predicated on the mobilisation of increasingly aggressive racial tropes which conflated the victims of army aggression with the PIRA and the wider population of ‘Irish’ people. When soldiers were accused of torturing detainees interned as part of Operation Demetrius in autumn 1971, the establishment of a public inquiry into the allegations provoked cynicism and outrage, well captured in cartoons such as Michael Cummings’ ‘In our next riot boys...’.⁵⁵ In these depictions the Irish, portrayed as both cunning and barbaric, appear as the real ‘guilty parties’, with the British Tommy positioned as victim of both terrorist violence and traitorous public criticism.⁵⁶

⁵² ‘Ulster: the evil purpose’, *Daily Mirror*, 12 March 1971

⁵³ ‘The Reply to Murders’, *Guardian*, 12 March 1971

⁵⁴ For an overview of changing attitudes during the twentieth century see H. McCartney, ‘The military covenant and the civil-military contact in Britain’, *International Affairs*, 86, 2 (2010), pp.411-428

⁵⁵ ‘In our next riot boys...’, *Daily Express*, 27 Oct 1971, BCA/21199

⁵⁶ See for example ‘I wonder how the British press will distort this’, *Evening Standard*, 26 Oct 1971, BCA/21194; ‘If I’m caught Patrick...’, *Daily Telegraph*, 27 Oct 1971, BCA/21199; ‘Torturer!’, *Daily Express*, 12 November 1971, BCA/21426; ‘Halt! Who goes there – friend or foe?’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 22 August 1971, BCA/20981; ‘Now all we have to worry about...’, *Daily Mail*, 17 Nov 1971, BCA/21471



A different kind of response, however, registered moral discomfiture in relaying the findings of the *Compton Inquiry*, which concluded that, although there had been no ‘physical brutality’, detainees had experienced ‘ill-treatment’ due to the application of ‘in-depth’ interrogation methods including hooding, prolonged standing, food and sleep deprivation, and the use of ‘white noise’.⁵⁷ In the aftermath, the *Daily Mirror* asked: ‘In a situation of violent conflict against a vicious foe, what methods are *justifiable* to extract information that might shorten the shooting and save lives?’⁵⁸ For the *Express* and *Daily Mail*, *Compton* vindicated the British military and the nation more generally: the army’s methods were ‘nothing to be ashamed of’ and the commissioning of the report said ‘much for the British way of life’:⁵⁹

No army in the world could have emerged so well from an enquiry as the British army does from the Compton investigation. And no nation, other than our own, would have established such a tribunal to examine its own actions. The IRA can thank its lucky stars it is not engaged against the Russians or the Chinese.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ *Report of the Enquiry into allegations against the Security Forces of Physical Brutality in Northern Ireland arising out of events on 9th August, 1971* Cmnd 4823 (The Compton Report) (HMSO, London, 1971).

⁵⁸ ‘Ulster: how far should the interrogators go?’, *Daily Mirror*, 17 November 1971.

⁵⁹ ‘Nothing to be ashamed of’, *Daily Mail*, 17 November 1971.

⁶⁰ ‘Results – with restraint’, *Daily Express*, 17 November 1971; ‘Well done, Troops!’, *Daily Express*, 14 November 1971.

By contrast, while the *Guardian*, *Mirror* and the *New Statesman* also read the report as a judgment on the moral character of the nation, they saw its findings as ‘deeply worrying’.⁶¹ ‘A civilised nation’, claimed the *Mirror*, ‘must set limits to the methods used’ and ‘it must not conceal infringements’.⁶² Yet, on both counts *Compton* raised cause for concern: detainees had clearly been subject to ‘unacceptable’ and ‘inhumane’ treatment; and both the closed nature of the inquiry and the limited number of testimonies used as evidence raised difficult questions about its rigour and transparency.⁶³ As Peter Jenkins claimed, what was at stake was not only the rights of terrorist suspects detained in Northern Ireland, but the wider extension of a process by which techniques used in ‘the colonies’ would be applied in ‘Brum’, thus degrading British democracy:

The next stage is to declare that society is at war with the criminal and issue police stations with black hoods and electronic noise machines. The poison of the Northern Ireland emergency will have done its work if the overriding need for intelligence there results in the general application of war methods to civilian disorders.⁶⁴

Such sensitivities impacted upon Britain’s military campaign in contradictory ways. On the one hand, the popularisation of a negative counter-image of British violence inevitably engendered political embarrassment, exacerbating official concerns about the damaging impact of the conflict upon Britain’s international reputation. Political leaders, therefore, sought to ensure that future reportage of military operations was as benign as possible. This was pursued, not only through the application of increasing political pressure upon media outlets, but through the maintenance of a policy of minimum and reactive force.⁶⁵ On the other hand, of course, while restrictive rules of engagement may have helped safeguard the army’s public image, it did little to inhibit the PIRA from killing soldiers. On the contrary, following the introduction of Internment in August 1971 and Bloody Sunday in January 1972, military deaths rose dramatically as the PIRA mobilised public outrage to escalate their offensive. In this context, domestic support for Britain’s military presence in Northern Ireland was liable to be

⁶¹ ‘The dreadful dilemma’, *The Guardian*, 17 November 1971

⁶² ‘Ulster: how far should the interrogators go?’, *Daily Mirror*, 17 November 1971.

⁶³ ‘Compton: semantics of ill-treatment’, *The Guardian*, 19 November 1971; ‘Where Compton went wrong’, *The Observer*, 21 November 1971; ‘Six grains of truth and a bucket of whitewash’, *The Observer*, 21 November 1971.

⁶⁴ ‘Aden or Brum?’, *The Guardian*, 17 November 1971.

⁶⁵ For details of the rules of engagement see D. Hamill, *Pig in the Middle. The Army in Northern Ireland 1969-84* (London, 1985), pp.49-50, 97-98; Edward Burke, *An Army of Tribes. British Army Cohesion, Deviancy and Murder in Northern Ireland* (Liverpool, 2018), pp.67-68

undermined as the army, constrained under civil law and criticised in the media, appeared impotent in the face of a ruthless adversary.

Consequently, therefore, military intervention came to be interpreted through an imagery of emasculation which reflected, and served as a signifier for, the larger post-war mythology of national 'decline'.⁶⁶ Where the British Tommy's arrival in Northern Ireland was initially mobilised to elevate the national mood, reminding readers of Britain's heroic defence of democracy during WW2, his apparent impotence now supplied yet another example of Britain's inability to manage its affairs in the post-war world. In the early 70s Northern Ireland thus became implicated in a backward-glancing habit of national caricature which, exemplified in Nicholas Garland's 1972 cartoon 'Actually it might be quite a good idea to switch off the floodlighting', reflected satirically upon the pompous verities of British 'character' and the wider unravelling of the post-war settlement.⁶⁷



⁶⁶ On the wide-ranging functions of declinism in post-war Britain see J. Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: understanding post-war Britain* (London, 2017).

⁶⁷ Garland, 'Actually it might be quite a good idea to switch off the floodlighting for a bit!', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Feb 1972, BCA/21972. See also Garland, untitled, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Aug 1971, BCA/20896; Paul Rigby, Untitled, *News of the World*, 2 Jan 1972, BCA/21716; Emmwood, "Now then - our next job is to do something about cleaning up that lot - at a stroke!", *Daily Mail*, 24 Jan 1972, BCA/21864

Excising the Other? Withdrawal and the crisis of British identity during the Early Troubles

There is a moral here, not just a line
 -I had the same in Palestine
 For all the aid and friendship we give
 Bring our boys back and let them live⁶⁸

As with other unpopular post-war counter-insurgencies, a conspicuous outworking of these processes was the emergence of a popular desire to split-off the anxiety-inducing object. As early as 1970 journalists across the political spectrum had begun to question Britain's role in NI, and by 1971 opinion polls revealed a clear majority for military withdrawal.⁶⁹ Most significantly, as Paul Dixon has documented, army relatives launched a 'Bring Back the Boys from Ulster' campaign in May 1973. Established at a time when army recruitment figures were plummeting, and coinciding with the onset of the PIRA's bombing campaign in England, the campaign secured 119,939 signatories to a petition within a year, contributing to significant 'political wavering' on Northern Ireland's constitutional future within both major parties.⁷⁰

As letters sent to the organisers show, support for the campaign resonated closely with wider public sentiment, expressing aversion towards the degrading and 'unworthy' nature the conflict, as well as the treacherous character of 'the Irish' as 'a race that has nothing to offer the other three countries making up the United Kingdom'.⁷¹ Yet, while such sentiments were pervasive by 1974 and influenced policymakers' calculations, withdrawal from the conflict was never a feasible option for either the Labour or Conservative governments, both of which regarded full-blown civil war as the likely outcome.⁷² As such, by the early 70s a contradiction existed between the state's need to prolong military involvement in NI and intense aversion to the conflict amongst a large section of the public.

⁶⁸ 'Soldiers in Ireland', *Evening Post*, 6 July 1973

⁶⁹ Hayes et. al, 'British and Irish public opinion towards the Northern Ireland problem', p.65-66

⁷⁰ Paul Dixon, "'A real stirring in the nation': military families, British public opinion and withdrawal from Northern Ireland" in Dawson et. al. p.93-94

⁷¹ Mr & Mrs Chaston to Dr Vaughan, MP, 1/3/1974, (IWM) CP/114/3; SM Lowe to Mr & Mrs Chaston, 6/6/74, (IWM) CP/114/3

⁷² Anthony Craig, *Crisis of Confidence. Anglo-Irish Relations in the Early Troubles* (2019, Dublin), p.46

As Dixon suggests, one way this was negotiated was by reducing soldiers' exposure to lethal violence, achieved via the implementation of 'Ulsterisation' from the mid-70s. Simultaneously, however, managing perceptions of the conflict also involved closer regulation of the terms of public discourse in an effort to counter the effects of republican propaganda and inhibit the political mobilisation of popular aversion. Republican tactics here aimed not only at consolidating anti-state support within catholic neighbourhoods in Belfast and Derry, but at convincing British public opinion to view the conflict as a British-Irish 'war', in which there were two basic options: victory over a national enemy, or withdrawal.⁷³ Since military escalation would have intensified the polarisation republicans sought to create, in order to counter this logic official British framing of the conflict needed to remove it from the semantic field of 'war', yet assuage popular discontent over its seemingly inglorious and futile character.

As well as instances of direct censorship of the media, this was pursued via the promulgation of an official narrative which emphasised Britain's 'third party' role whilst attempting to reconcile this with popular constructions of British military identity. This counter-narrative did not emphasise territorial imperatives or NI's membership of the 'British family', but referred instead to Britain's 'duty' to 'keep the peace' between warring sectarian communities in what 'is *a part* of the UK'. The Troubles was thus not a conventional 'war', but by acting as impartial mediators in the service of democracy, justice and 'peace' soldiers were nevertheless serving heroically in the defence of British ideals. Letters of reply sent to the BBBU campaign from MPs spoke not of the union but of the heroism inherent in discharging 'unenviable' but morally necessary 'responsibilities':⁷⁴

The army was called to act in aid of the civil power in Northern Ireland in 1969. Ever since then the troops have acted with skill, determination, bravery and impartiality in protecting the innocent majority of what is part of the United Kingdom from savage and indiscriminate attacks of terrorists; in doing so they have often encountered great danger and provocation. The manner in which the troops have carried out their difficult task has earned them the gratitude of the whole nation and the admiration of millions of people at home and abroad.⁷⁵

⁷³ 'Belfast at War', *An Phoblacht*, Feb. 1971.

⁷⁴ M. Neubert, MP, to Miss Packam, 26/3/74, (IWM) CP/114/1

⁷⁵ S Wright, on behalf of the Prime Minister, to Mr & Mrs Chaston, 10/7/73, (IWM) CP/114/1

This strategy of containment achieved its core aim: British military involvement continued and a political settlement was reached without major populist disruption to domestic British politics. A by-product, however, of securing public acquiescence in this way was that Britain's 'impartial' and 'disinterested' role in the Troubles itself became irrevocably politicised. By insisting upon Britain's external relationship to the conflict, a position reproduced in official narratives of the 'peace process', official strategies of representation ensured the interpretation of combatants' agency formed a key ideological battleground in both the 'propaganda war' and the post-conflict memory politics that has developed since 1998.⁷⁶ So while externalisation of the British role forms an important condition of the current forgetting of the Troubles in Britain, the same issue forms a chief locus of antagonism within contemporary Northern Ireland, where the rival political agendas of unionists and republicans derive legitimacy from opposing interpretations of state responsibility for the conflict.

This represents a major source of instability within the peace process, not least because Britain's role as impartial 'guarantor' is under constant ideological attack, but it also tends to reinforce NI's marginal and problematic status within British public life since any reference to the Troubles inevitably raises unresolved questions about Britain's role. As a result, the forgetting of the Troubles in contemporary Britain encompasses not only the contested memory of state violence, but extends to the wider reciprocal effects of the conflict upon British people, society and culture. Above all, reluctance to reflect upon the conflict in Britain inhibits public recognition of the crimes, sacrifices, sufferings and achievements of its largest combatant. Soldiers and their relatives form a crucial 'third community' within the Troubles, and so they 'shared the traumas of republican and loyalists communities and paramilitaries'.⁷⁷ Yet both the official narrative of the conflict and the republican counter-narrative obliterate this reality: soldiers' personal voices are largely absent from histories of the Troubles and do not feature within the ongoing struggles over 'dealing with the past'. What remains to be seen is the impact these private accounts will have if and when they are returned to the evolving public memory of the Troubles.

⁷⁶ See Dawson and Hopkins, 'Introduction: The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain'

⁷⁷ Jenkins and Woodward, 'Serving in troubles times', p.101

