

Introduction

On Christmas Day 1971, Cardinal William Conway, the head of Ireland's Catholic Church, addressed Raidió Teleifís Éireann (RTE) television viewers. In sombre tones he told them that

there is only one subject I can speak about, because it is in the forefront of my mind and, I've no doubt, many of yours. I refer to the tragic situation in the North which is already having repercussions throughout the whole of Ireland ... I sometimes wonder if you realise how serious this situation could be – even for you. You know, time and again over the past three years when I have been in the Republic, the same thought has kept coming back to my mind again and again. I have been walking down O'Connell Street perhaps, colourful and crowded with people, the cars and the buses moving slowly along – 'life flowing by' – and time and again the thought has occurred to me: I wonder if these good people going in and out of the shops realise that all this busy normal life, which looks so natural and ordinary, is resting only on a crust and that underneath that crust there is a boiling volcano of potential violence: I wonder if they realise how thin that crust is and that when it breaks, and the lava of violence begins to flow on the streets, it's almost impossible to stop.¹

Conway was not alone in his fears. Warnings of civil war were voiced regularly by trade unionists, journalists and politicians throughout the winter of 1971.² These worries were aroused in response to events north of the border. Ultimately, of course, war did not come, but the Northern conflict remained a central part of southern Irish life for the next 25 years.

During the early 1970s, my family lived in Laytown, near Drogheda. My father, along with his workmates, contributed weekly from their wages to the families of those interned in the North. My parents went to see groups like

The Barleycorn, whose hit ‘The Men Behind The Wire’, was hugely popular during the winter of 1971. But a few years later, living in Limerick, the North was not just more physically distant, but no longer worthy of as much sympathy. The violence there remained a constant feature of television and radio news, but often seemed inexplicable. I heard terms like ‘Herrema’, ‘the Miami’ and ‘Heavy Gang’ but did not understand what they meant. When the IRA were mentioned it was invariably stressed that they were not connected to the ‘old IRA’ of the War of Independence. But one morning I found a copy of *An Phoblacht/Republican News* on our kitchen table. Its headline ‘IRA: Make Britain Pay’ was shocking, referring as it did to the recent killing of Lord Mountbatten and 18 British soldiers, events which had brought the conflict back to the centre of everyday discussion. My mother had bought the paper the previous night from a local republican. So the IRA, whom I had only thought of in terms of the North, were obviously also somewhere closer to home. In general, however, my parents, like most of their contemporaries, only mentioned these events in the North in terms of exasperation or sadness. Nevertheless, to me it seemed the conflict was there, all the time.

Basing a book on distant childhood impressions is obviously problematic, especially since many Irish historians stress how *little* impact there was. Joseph Lee has claimed that what he tellingly refers to as ‘the Northern virus’ inevitably ‘infected the Southern body politic’ but the ‘wonder is that it infected it so little for so long’.³ John A. Murphy asserted as early as 1975 that ‘the Northern troubles had amazingly little impact on the South’ and that ‘by and large, there was no popular involvement, if we except the emotional outburst and the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin after Bloody Sunday in Derry’.⁴ Almost a decade later, Ronan Fanning wrote that it was remarkable ‘not how much but how little the high drama of events in Northern Ireland since 1968 have impinged upon politics and society in the Republic’.⁵ I have tried to examine the numerous occasions when the war produced popular mobilization across the southern state, when thousands of people were motivated to march, strike or protest at events in Northern Ireland. The conflict divided trade union branches, county council meetings, sporting events and religious congregations. Rival views produced intense and long-lasting fissures. Most dramatically, almost 100 people were killed and hundreds more injured as a result of the violence. Millions were spent on state security and armed soldiers became a common sight in towns across the country. For those living in border areas, the conflict was part of daily life. Politicians blamed the violence for encouraging crime, scaring off tourists, causing unemployment and damaging the economy. But it was also possible to live, as one Garda stationed in Galway recalled, where the atmosphere ‘was so far removed from the troubles that ... it was though the troubles didn’t exist, other than what you heard on the radio or television’.⁶ Everyday responses could be influenced by class and regional identity or by religion. Proximity to the border, experience of life in Northern Ireland or

Britain and memories of the War of Independence and Civil War could all affect attitudes.

In attempting to understand these views, it is as well to recognize that there are huge difficulties in reconstructing what people felt or thought. Eamonn McCann has argued that

great issues don't loom large in our minds most of the time. The events and concerns which dominate public discourse – war and peace, poverty and plenty, cruel oppressions and contending moralities – we crowd these things into a corner of our consciousness. They may be the standard stuff of public pronouncements but they don't define us at all in the way we get through life. Most of our pleasure and almost all our pain has its source in our personal relationships. Nothing that happens in the headlines can send a shard of agony so deep into our being as the loss of someone that's loved or given us the holiday in our hearts that comes from the co-mingling of unrestrained affection. The papers don't provide a snapshot of life as we live and feel it.⁷

Any study dependent on state archives, newspaper reports and memoirs will be limited. It will inevitably, given the balance of society at the time, contain more men's voices than women's, more of those of elites and the middle class than the working class, and more of the politically active than those less involved.

Unlike political activists, most people have no problem holding contradictory opinions. They could march in solidarity with the victims of Bloody Sunday in early 1972 and be appalled by the Aldershot bombing a few weeks later. It might often have seemed, as one republican activist claimed about Dublin in the 1970s, that 'not too many gave a fuck ... nobody cared', but that would be too simplistic an analysis.⁸ People who expressed little day-to-day interest in the North would still respond emotionally to events that connected with them. That is why, for example, the Miami Showband massacre could have a bigger impact than dozens of other incidents north of the border and indeed more than some of the killings in the Republic itself. I have tried to gauge attitudes from sources that have been relatively underused by scholars: the best-selling *Sunday World* (probably the most anti-establishment voice in the media), the local press (read by thousands in the 1970s), Sinn Féin's *An Phoblacht* and private letters to politicians.⁹ The British Embassy were also perceptive, if sometimes patronizing, observers of southern Irish attitudes to the North, while the *Irish Press* vocalized popular republican views. But, unfortunately, the picture cannot be more than partial.

Any study of the Republic during the 1970s must reflect the fact that it was a period of uncertainty following the optimism of the 1960s. That decade was widely regarded as the 'most successful' in the 'recorded economic history of Ireland'.¹⁰ But in early 1972, unemployment stood at 76,454 – the worst figure for 12 years.¹¹ Five years later, British diplomats noted that 'in terms of

inflation, unemployment, investment and public debt, Ireland is worse off than any country in Western Europe'.¹² Along with economic trauma and industrial strife, the rise of all types of crime produced a sense of fear. Though the Northern conflict always lagged behind these issues in terms of electoral concern, there was a prevailing sense that it had interrupted an otherwise inevitable rise to prosperity. Indeed, many feared that it was the North and its troubles that was dragging the Republic backwards.¹³

Divisions between north and south were not new. In 1922, the Sinn Féin TD Seán Milroy complained that 'there is as little appreciation in Dublin and the South of the state of mind, and habit of thinking, and the point of view of the people in the North, as there is in the North of the people of the South'.¹⁴ Similar views were heard on both sides of the Treaty split. Yet, until the 1970s, nobody in public life in the Republic of Ireland argued that partition was justified.¹⁵ It was routinely denounced both as a crime against the nation's territorial integrity *and* 'our people' in the Six Counties. Sympathy with northern Catholics and hostility to Ulster Unionists was a given. Emotionally and politically the south claimed to want a united Ireland. Yet, faced with the reality of war, the Republic seemed to recoil. This further alienated Northern nationalists, who already felt they had been abandoned for the previous 50 years. These responses continue to inspire controversy today, even if some of the partisans in these debates have jettisoned their former positions. I hope to provide a context for some of these arguments as well as illustrating what was being said at the time.

In contrast to the historians quoted earlier, scholars are increasingly acknowledging the conflict's impact. Tom Dunne has admitted that the war 'was to overshadow all our lives, and to influence profoundly the kind of history my generation would write'.¹⁶ John M. Regan has argued persuasively that the conflict deeply influenced Irish history writing.¹⁷ Recent books by Eamonn Sweeney and Diarmaid Ferriter have included substantial appraisals of how the 'Troubles' affected the Republic.¹⁸ Indeed, Ferriter suggests that the conflict 'defined the island of Ireland in the 1970s'.¹⁹ I have tried to convey a sense of this, though I am conscious of many gaps in the narrative. I would hope that in-depth studies of how the trade unions, movements such as Irish feminism, organizations like the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and institutions such as RTE were affected will emerge.²⁰

Chapters 1 and 2 trace the reaction to events after October 1968 until the autumn of 1972, examining the impact of August 1969, the aftermath of internment and the response to Bloody Sunday. Chapter 3 looks at violence south of the border, particularly bombings and shootings and their human cost. Chapters 4 and 5 examine state security, censorship and the popular protests associated with these issues. Chapter 6 looks at changing attitudes to refugees and northern nationalists more generally. Chapter 7 describes the impact of the conflict on southern Protestants. Chapter 8 outlines the controversies

concerning the IRA and their activities. In Chapter 9 I look at the question of revisionism and how debates about history were played out not just in academia but also at a popular level. Chapter 10 is an examination of a variety of social and cultural responses to the conflict, including attitudes to Britain and northern Unionists. The book begins with the aftermath of the civil rights march in Derry in October 1968 and concludes in 1979 when the prospect of an end to the conflict seemed dim. While there had been a euphoric reception in the south for Pope John Paul II, there was disappointment that his calls for peace were rejected. The election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and the appointment of Charles Haughey as Taoiseach seemed to signal a new and more hostile phase in the relationship between the Republic and the United Kingdom.

While researching this book I have greatly benefitted from reading the work of Patrick Mulroe, Gerard Madden, Pdraig McGuill, Dan Finn and Olan Long.²¹ The analysis, conclusions (and mistakes) in this book, however, are all my own.

Notes

- 1 *Irish Times*, 25 Dec. 1971.
- 2 See Chapter 1.
- 3 J.J. Lee, *Modern Ireland, 1912–1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989) p. 458.
- 4 J.A. Murphy, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 1975) p. 171.
- 5 R. Fanning, *Independent Ireland* (Dublin, 1983) p. 212.
- 6 Joe Lynch transcript, INCORE, www.green-and-blue.org.
- 7 *Hot Press*, 20 Oct. 1987.
- 8 J. Noonan, *What Do I Do Now?* (Dublin, 2005) p. 103.
- 9 Sixty-one percent of those who bought a national daily also read at least one local paper. C. Morash, *A History of the Media in Ireland* (Cambridge, 2010) p. 185.
- 10 T.J. Baker and J. Durkan, *Quarterly Economic Commentary* (ESRI, Dec. 1969). Quoted in C. McCarthy, *The Decade of Upheaval: Irish Trade Unions in the Nineteen Sixties* (Dublin, 1973) p. 25.
- 11 *Sunday Press*, 9 Jan. 1972.
- 12 Republic of Ireland Annual Review, 1 Jan. 1977, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) 87/603 National Archives United Kingdom (NAUK).
- 13 R. Perry, *Revisionist Scholarship and Modern Irish Politics* (London, 2013) p. 2.
- 14 M. Hopkinson, *Green against Green: The Irish Civil War* (Dublin, 1988) p. 88.
- 15 M. Daly, *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society, 1957–63* (Cambridge, 2016) p. 376.
- 16 T. Dunne, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798* (Dublin, 2004) p. 55.
- 17 J.M. Regan, *Myth and the Irish State* (Dublin, 2013).
- 18 D. Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (London, 2012). E. Sweeney, *Down, Down, Deeper and Down: Ireland in the 70s and 80s* (Dublin, 2010).
- 19 Ferriter, *Ambiguous*, p. 2.
- 20 For the Women's movement, see L. Connolly and T. O'Toole, *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave* (Dublin, 2005) pp. 25–45. For the GAA, see M. Reynolds, 'The Gaelic Athletic Association and the 1981 H-Block hunger strike', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34 (June, 2017) pp. 1–20.

6 *The impact of the Troubles 1968–79*

- 21 O. Long, 'The Land That Made Them Refugees: North-South Population Movements at the Outset of the Political Troubles, 1969–72' (MA: UCC, 2008). D. Finn, 'Challengers to Provisional Republicanism: The Official Republican Movement, People's Democracy and the Irish Republican Socialist Party, 1968–1998' (PhD: UCC, 2013). G. Madden, 'Political Change in Northern Ireland and its Impact on the West of Ireland, 1968–1982' (MA: NUI Galway, 2013). P. McGuill, 'Political Violence in the Republic of Ireland 1969–1997' (MA: UCD, 1998). P. Mulroe, 'The Gardaí, Violence and the Border: Irish Border Security Policy 1969–1978' (PhD: UU, 2015).