

Introduction

For nearly thirty years, Northern Ireland's highly polarised society descended into open conflict between two ideologically religious factions. The Troubles –a term used for the Irish War of Independence in the 1920's, but in relation to the focus of this dissertation for the violence in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the end of last century– effectively marked the last modern conflict to be fought in Western Europe.

The Troubles threatened to destabilise the European Union, casting a shadow over the process of European enlargement and integration, with a core Member State, the United Kingdom (which had joined in 1973) having to deal with violence and instability on home soil. Consequently, European media coverage of the Troubles was wide, although the reality –or rather complexity– of the ongoing situation still tended to elude the great majority of European citizens, including the British themselves. Of course, the situation in Ulster, the most northerly of the Irish provinces, was multi-layered and complex, its roots deep within a history of division that was, by turns, colonial, post-colonial, ethnic, religious, ideological and, of course, military. The result was an inflammatory cocktail of failed diplomacy, tribalism, bigotry and sectarianism that, in the most recent phase of the Troubles, began with the rise of the Civil Rights and People's Democracy movements in 1968 and came to a stuttering, although incomplete, halt with the signing of the Good Friday –or Belfast Agreement– in April 1998. The long road to peace had led to the death of approximately 3500 people. To put this in terms of comparative population size (as a guide to impact on the population), it would be the equivalent of over 90,000 deaths in Spain during the same period.

This dissertation asks why. It begins by interrogating how the history of Ireland before and after partition has shaped the present and how the Troubles are deeply rooted in the past. A central research question emerges from this: how has the past been interpreted and used as a narrative and, linked to this, how might the different narratives that emerge from the past not only help us to understand confrontation between two communities, but more recently, during the peace process, how do they explain how the shared experience of a divided history served as a basis for reconciliation? Accordingly, Chapter One provides a necessary but brief account of Irish history, not in any attempt to be comprehensive or judgemental of the truth, but to set out the story of the past that each community tells itself. To begin to understand the conflict, and what we can learn from it, we need to focus on the roots of a historical divide that was, in general terms, to reshape modern diplomacy and, in particular, provide an international model for peace negotiation.

History could be described as a way of telling a story that helps us make sense of the world and our place in it. We cannot interiorise the events of the past through personal experience, so we are taught about it by historians. But history is conditioned by who writes it. No matter how scholarly and detailed historiographical writing is, people will choose to interpret it. In that way, no one has access to the ultimate truth. As the eminent English philosopher of history R G Collingwood implied, when he wrote that “the historian's picture of the past is ... in every detail an imaginary picture”. the past seems to become more real when it is interpreted rather than when it is objectively recorded. This is especially true in the history of conflicts, where two opposing sides believe they are in the right about the truth of history. This is why chapters Two and Three examine the fault-lines that two conflicting

¹ Explanatory Note: Ulster is a term often used by Unionists in reference to Northern Ireland, but it is also part of one of the four provinces of the island of Ireland, which is composed by: Connacht, Munster, Leinster and Ulster. Many Republicans may also use this word, but it is more common to hear them talk about the “North of Ireland” or simply “the North” rather than Ulster of Northern Ireland.

² CAIN Web Service, University of Ulster “Malcom Sutton: An Index of Deaths from the Conflict in Ireland” [S.D] [Online] [Available at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/tables/Status.html>] Accessed on the 1st of June, 2017. The population at the last census had risen to just over 1.8 million, 2017 - which is an important indicator of inward economic migration as a key stabilising element within the new Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency “Census Population Tables (2011)” 2011 [Online] [Available at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/2011-census-results-population-estimates-summary-tables-25-september-2014.pdf>] Accessed on the 1st of June, 2017.

interpretations of history generated in Northern Ireland, and the resulting failure of hope from those who felt that the possibility of change would never arrive due to the weight of history on Northern Irish society. Corroborating this part of the dissertation is the question: how and why do we allow ourselves to become prisoners of the past?

The discussion then goes on to consider the peace process itself, its success highlighted by the way it seems to have broken the mould of the past. The questions to which the remaining chapters in the dissertation respond are, therefore, more outward looking: how did civic society in Northern Ireland distance itself from history in order to begin to find peace? To what extent did the international context play a role in breaking the mould of the past? And finally, what are the lessons to be learnt from the Northern Irish peace process? Can they only be understood and applied within this particular conflict, given the specificities of its historical context, or can other countries where there is internal conflict, like Spain or Colombia, benefit from an analysis of the Northern Irish experience? In terms of this final question, given the constraints of space in this dissertation, the discussion will be limited to the Basque question, but it is the view of the writer that certain similarities can be found in both cases.

1. The Roots of the conflict: Colonialism, Religion and Ethnicity

In contrast to its geographical size, a mere 5,459 square miles. Northern Ireland has occupied a great amount of space in the global press. In itself this is an indication both of the complex international implications of the issues that underlay the conflict, and of the deep roots of a history of colonialism and divided ethnicity that reflected the experience of many other countries. It is a history of colonial division that translates itself not only into external perceptions of the conflict as a fundamentalist divide reminiscent of Reformation Europe where Catholics are set against Protestants, but that also reflects the lived experience of many within Northern Ireland's two major communities. Nevertheless, the issue has its roots less in theology and more in colonial policy. Put simply, while Protestants, in their vast majority, see themselves as British citizens within the United Kingdom (UK), the majority of Catholics have a deep emotional, cultural and political attachment to the aspiration of a united Ireland. For that reason, Protestants tend to group under labels such as "loyalist" (in the case of working –class Protestants) or "unionist" (reflecting the two main pro-British parties, the larger Democratic Unionist Party [DUP] and the less– influential Ulster Unionist Party [UUP]) while Catholics associate themselves with labels such as "republican" or "nationalist" (reflecting an aspiration towards emancipation from the British Crown and re-unification with the Republic of Ireland).

In that sense, Northern Ireland continues to embody today a division inherited from a colonial past, the conflictive relationship between Ireland and its powerful island neighbour to the east. At the heart of this division stand two different narratives of history, two different ways of imagining the politics of a common land. The DUP, as we have mentioned Northern Ireland's main Protestant/Loyalist political group, refer only to Northern Ireland and its relationship with the rest of the UK on their website. On the other hand, Sinn Féin, the main republican party, operating in both the North and the Republic of Ireland, mentions Northern Ireland on very limited occasions on their website but does mention Ireland, an island that Sinn Féin casts in historical terms as "as a single national unit" before the English economic and military presence made itself felt there. These two different narratives seem to appeal to realities that are historically questionable (the republican

³ Collingwood, R.G, *The Idea of history* [1946] Revised edition with lectures 1926- 1928. (Jan van Der Dussen, Ed.) Oxford: Clarendon Press. Accessed on the 2nd of June, 2017.

sense of a pre-colonial and united nation and the unionist depiction of an ethnically –defined Protestant Ulster)– have, and still do, created fierce loyalties that all too often appear to be more embedded in tribal instinct than political analysis.

1.2. A brief history: Ireland before and during the Middle Ages

Before the Norman invasion of Ireland, which took place in various stages throughout the late twelfth century, clear political and social structures were in place on the island, in part confirming Sinn Féin’s account, although it is also true that these structures were spread across a number of smaller kingdoms, or fiefdoms, that grouped themselves into the four provinces that survive today as Ulster, Munster, Leinster and Connaught. These four provinces fought continual territorial wars so that, apart from periods of unity against external enemies, for example, during the Viking invasion from the 9th to the 11th centuries. internal conflict was a constant of the island’s history.

The arrival of the Normans, however, drew England into Irish geopolitics. And it was precisely one of the kings of the province of Leinster, Dermot McMorraugh, who lured them into Ireland in the year 1170 so that they could help him settle his territorial disputes. While this occurred, King Henry II, fearful of the possible rise of a rival Norman kingdom in Ireland, decided to claim what he considered his territorial right as Lord of Ireland. His resulting invasion in 1171 was authorised by Pope Adrian (the only ever English-born Pontiff), in response to stories of abuse and forbidden practices (such as simony) within the Irish Church, which had forced him to issue the papal letter known as “Laudabiliter” sixteen years earlier. It was this bull, granting rights in Ireland to the English crown, which convinced Henry of the legitimacy of his action. Effectively, also, it ushered in the colonial phase of Irish history, as lands were possessed and re-distributed to loyal Norman barons and those Irish kings who swore allegiance. At the heart of this process of colonisation was a distinct procedure of acculturation through political and marital alliances, whose effects were to change the cultural face of Ireland, a change whose impact has been significant throughout the whole of Irish history.

While the Normans adopted Irish culture, it was also the Irish who fell under English influence, in terms of law, language, customs, dress and administration. Ulster, however, the most northerly province and therefore the most geographically distant from London, remained resistant and resolutely Gaelic in its identity. Even with the creation of an Irish Parliament, in 1297, Ulster remained a thorn in the English side. This essentially ecclesiastical and culturally Norman Parliament condemned any type of integration with the Irish, including intermarriage, the wearing of Irish costume or the raising of children in Irish ways or language. Leading historians today, such as Richard Finnegan and Edward McCarron, describe this maintenance of difference in terms of “signalling the somewhat insecure status of the Anglo-Norman elite in Ireland”. But with the ongoing separation of Ulster, there was no unified movement to expel the Norman-English, so that increasingly the north of Ireland became identified in the mind of the colonisers as a source of resistance and potential rebellion.

⁴ Barrow, Mandy “Facts and figures about Northern Ireland” Project Britain [S.D] [Online] [Available at http://projectbritain.com/northern_ireland.html] Accessed on the 20th of February, 2017.

⁵ Explanatory Note: Sin Féinn is a Nationalist/Republican party that represents all 32 counties of Ireland-26 in the South and 6 in the North. The party was formed in 1905, and the name means “Ourselves alone” in Irish.

⁶ Sinn Féin “History of the conflict” Sinn Féin [S.D] [Online] [Available at <http://www.sinnFéin.ie/history>] Accessed on the 20th of February, 2017.