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Trip to the Republic and to divided, though peaceful, Belfast

When I went up north, I got a little lost in a unionist area. After I stopped to ask someone for directions, they kind of showed me the way to exit [the country]. He must've seen my license plate, which like other plates in the Republic, have the name of the county that you're from on them – so he must've seen that and decided that he'd show me the quickest way out.

AN IRISH ACQUAINTANCE told me at Devlin's bar in Dublin, just south of the city centre.

He had a keen, rather profound understanding of Ireland's history and historical struggle against Great Britain, as did others I spoke to in the country.

Towards the end of the night, he, my now wife and I went upstairs where a dozen or so musicians sat around a long wooden table playing a traditional folk open mic. While none of the musicians had rehearsed together, they sounded as though they had. For each song, one of the dozen musicians would begin playing and the rest would join in, often one by one, unless it was an acapella song. A couple songs were vocal-only, in which an elderly man sang of land struggles and fighting British injustices. For these acapella songs, one could hear a pin drop, due to the respectful silence that permeated the room.

The historical knowledge and emotional weight of the past within the Irish of the Republic is rewarded – in part – by a free nation that is no longer under the oppressive thumb of British colonial power; it is a nation that has pushed forth quite well into to relative prosperity and sovereignty. However, the Irish Catholics of the North – who seem to have similar understandings of centuries-long struggles against British injustice – remain subjects of Great Britain. And these struggles did not end in the early 1920s with the partitioning of Ireland by the British Empire, but continued through the late 1990s. During this time, Catholics had limited rights and then became immersed in sectarian violence with Protestant unionist militias and the British army. Only after the 1998 Good Friday Agreement were Catholics granted fuller rights and more adequate power-sharing representation at Stormont.

The omnipresence of Irish flags, Sinn Fein signs, Irish language street and store signs in the Falls Road neighborhood of Belfast and murals of national liberation (depicting Nelson Mandela, Frederick Douglas, Bobby Sands and the Easter Rising) on the neighborhood's Peace Wall and International Wall – all this is indicative Irish Catholics' desire for national sovereignty. It reminded me of the ubiquity of Palestinian flags and photographs of Palestinian prisoners throughout Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem that had I visited a couple years prior. But, despite subtle ongoing efforts to acculturate Northern Irish Catholics into British citizens, as seen through British television program and advertisements, it seems that Northern Catholics' firm ties to their Irish national and cultural identities remain vital.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

The day I arrived in Belfast, I walked through the Falls neighborhood alone after getting a little lost trying to find my hotel near Queens University. The following day I took the highly recommended Black Cab Taxi tour, run by a Protestant (he says that he employs both Protestants and Catholics) who grew up in the Protestant Shankill neighborhood during the Troubles. For 18 years following the Good Friday Accords, he has run these tours. He offered a brief overview of the Troubles and said religion was not really a factor in the conflict but rather a group marker. I couldn't have agreed more.

For someone from Shankill Road that had experience the sectarian violence of the Troubles, he seemed rather objective; yet his biases in favor of Protestants and unionism remained subtle, though evident. For instance, he insisted that 30-40 percent of Catholics in the North wanted to remain part of Great Britain for economic reasons. As he mentioned this, I remained quiet and wondered where he acquired this information.

After a pause, I asked him, "Didn't the Protestant leader Paisley die recently?"

"Yeah, Ian Paisley. He was a controversial figure...He had said he would never negotiate with terrorists, but then he did." The tour owner responded.

Left unmentioned was the fact that Paisley was connected to the violence carried out by Protestant militant groups as much as Gerry Adams was affiliated with the violence perpetrated by the IRA. However, the tour guide implied that Paisley, albeit controversial, had not supported violence, unlike the "terrorists" on the other side.

He went on to say, "Politicians used the conflict for the own ends."

I nodded, muttering "True!"

Despite his subtle biases, the tour guide seemed to want peace and Catholic-Protestant integration. In an abysmal tone, he commented, "Only 20 percent of Belfast has neighborhoods that are unsegregated... And the schools are also segregated."

"Are they private schools?" I inquired.

"No, they're state schools," he responded.

"Why doesn't the state try to desegregate them?" I asked.

"They [the government] don't think that people are ready for that yet – and they might be right!" He paused and looked to me, "I grew up in the Protestant Shankill neighborhood and even today I would never step foot in the Catholic Falls neighborhood – not because they would notice that I was a Protestant, we all look the same – but because I would feel extremely uncomfortable there. If I want to get a drink with a Catholic acquaintance, we go to the city centre: that's where people mix and...it's really the hope of the future."

We drove by the Peace and International walls. He mentioned, "This was built as a response to the violence during the Troubles."

"Do people like it there or is it a hindrance to movement?" I wondered aloud.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

"It helped prevent the IRA and the UDA from committing violence in each other's neighborhoods...If it wasn't built, I probably wouldn't be here today!" He exclaimed with serious, sullen eyes. I glanced out the window at the chain-link fence atop of the concrete wall that must have been at least 100-feet high.

We then drove into the Protestant Shankill neighborhood. Referring to the murals, the guide gestured, "These used to depict more violent imagery, but they were forced to change them."

This contrasts with the Easter Rising, Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglas, Mandela and Bobby Sands images on the Catholic side that represent hope, sovereignty, equality and national liberation.

"At least peace has finally arrived...for the most part?" I observed, questioningly.

"Yeah, it has basically held...but there's always the occasional violence and the fear remains that it could get out of control again. Just a couple weeks ago the 'real' IRA killed a policeman," he grimly noted.

We drove underneath the gate from the Protestant Shankill neighborhood into the Catholic Falls Road neighborhood. It still closes at dark, separating the neighborhoods from one another. During the Troubles, British soldiers had checkpoints there, among several other places throughout the city.

I have heard some mention of the Northern Ireland peace plan as a model for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, it is important to remember that though the North may have peace, it is an uneasy one. The restiveness evinces in the rampant segregation in schools and neighborhoods, sporadic sectarian violence, blocked-off, ghettoized neighborhoods with gates between them that shut after dusk and an older generation that stills holds deep grudges. Can this really be a model for peace?

On one hand, it is better than high levels of sectarian violence, a British occupation army guarding checkpoints and the lack of Catholic rights. Also, it is impossible for post-conflict areas to suddenly change into integrated lands of mirth and integration overnight. Time, healer of all wounds, plays a key role in post-conflict peacebuilding: older generations are replaced by younger generations, who are not usually as psychologically burdened with the memory of sectarian strife. This helps detach them from residual animosity and allows for fuller participation in a more inclusive society.

However, there are remain concerns: if desegregation begins too early, it could smolder into a Promethean fire from which communal violence could recur. If integration comes too late, attitudes of younger generations may be hardened by sectarianism and be predisposed to perpetual separation, laying the rudiments for future conflict.

I'm reminded again of Black Taxi tour guide's meeting his Catholic acquaintances for drinks in Belfast centre. This neutral area, along with the neighborhoods around Queens University, are where Catholics and Protestants mix and develop relationships – if only these areas could extend to all of Belfast and Northern Ireland. As the guide noted, these are areas of hope. Another question is: what would Catholic/Protestant integra-

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

tion in Northern Ireland mean for historical and cultural knowledge that the Irish hold so dear? Would it lead to the diminishing of Irish culture in the North? Would they abandon the Irish language in a more integrated British society? Also, what of the long-held hope for a political unification of the Irish island? In a cohesive, unitary Northern Ireland, would this century-old hope disappear? Or is it now time for quieting of nationalist sentiment to allow for the realization of full social and political rights in a conflict-free nation? And then, of course, there is the question of how the impact of Brexit affects the still unresolved post-conflict dynamics in Northern Ireland.

But that is a question for the next trip.