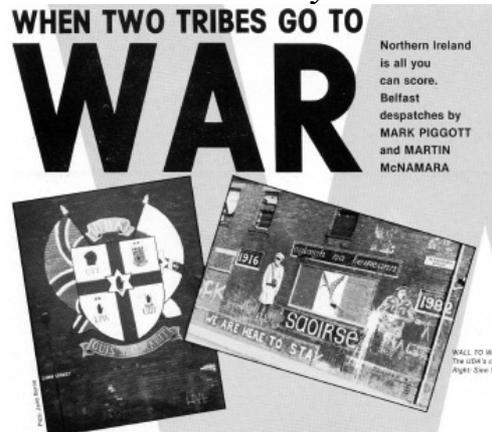


“When Two Tribes go to War” / FSM Magazine / 1987

*When two tribes go to war...
Northern Ireland is all you can score.*



Belfast despatches by MARK PIGGOTT and MARTIN McNAMARA

The Background

Sinn Fein and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) represent the two extreme views in Northern Ireland. They are both legal organisations which condone violence to achieve their ends. Sinn Fein, as nationalists, will accept nothing less than the occupied Six Counties being part of United Ireland. The UDA, as loyalists, will accept nothing less than Ulster remaining part of the United Kingdom. There can be no compromises, no sell-out, no surrender.

To many people in Britain the problems in Northern Ireland are too complex and the situation too hopeless to understand or care about. Northern Ireland is a frustrating, unsolvable and basically Irish problem. The troubles are a nightmare civil war fought between two species of religious fanatic, a war that bears no more relation to British life than the wars in Beirut and Nicaragua. The two sides are divided but it is not a religious conflict. It is about economics, it is about international politics, it is about power; mostly it is about history.

Since the English first occupied Ireland some 800 years ago the Irish have never accepted England's attempts to rule them. From the 12th century onwards Ireland was carved up into large estates which were rewarded to English noblemen. The Irish were denied the right to own land, to speak Gaelic, to be educated, vote or hold any office. After England was converted to the Protestant faith the Irish defiantly held to their suppressed Catholic beliefs. The present-day Protestant majority in Ulster are mostly descended from Scottish communities planted by England 300 years ago. Their arrival followed a Catholic rebellion led by James II, against the Protestant landowners. The Catholic army was defeated and the uprising finally crushed, a year later, at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

For the Catholic Irish the desire for an independent Ireland has grown stronger over the centuries. The bitterness and anger that events such as the famine in the 1850s, where hundreds of thousands of Irish people died and many more were forced to leave for America and England, cannot be forgotten. It is a national memory. The history of the Irish people has been one of poverty at home and a continuous stream of exiles in search of work and a better way of life. This exodus has been the most effective contraceptive in keeping the Irish population down.

By the 1900s Irish Nationalism had a strong political voice in Parliament. In 1912 the Liberal government tried to introduce the Home Rule Bill for Ireland. The Ulster Unionists were

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opposed to an independent Ireland for two main reasons; economic and religious. The north, which contained much of the country’s industries, was more prosperous than the agricultural South, and in independent Ireland they saw that wealth being diluted. And secondly, 200 years in a Catholic country had done nothing to weaken their strong Protestant doctrine, and they feared a government in Dublin where the majority would always be Catholic. While they were part of Great Britain they felt secure, protected by the Protestant monarchy and its armies. Perhaps because of the insecurity of being separated by water from mainland Britain, they felt the need to constantly prove their allegiance and their pride by being more vehement in their “Britishness”.

They marched every summer (and still do) to celebrate the Battle of the Boyne, celebrating their past victories over the Catholics. They feared a Catholic horde gathering again outside the walls of their city, but this time there could be no reinforcements arriving from England. Because of the strong Unionist opposition to the Home Rule Bill, it was amended to keep six counties of Ulster as part of Britain.



Many Republicans reacted angrily to this, feeling the dividing of the country was a betrayal. The 1916 Easter Rising and the ensuing civil war which tore Ireland apart changed little; the Irish Free State and the separated province of Ulster came into being in 1923.

After the 1923 partition there was little change in Ulster; the two communities remained separate and distinct. Catholics made up one third of the population. They were often discriminated against in jobs and housing. There was a large movement among Protestants to deny them any kind of political status.

When the civil rights movements swept the western world in the late 1960s Catholics in Northern Ireland took to the streets in marches and peaceful demonstrations over social and political inequalities. The authorities met the protest with violence.

Soon the marches descended into street battles, petrol bombings and no-go areas and the cause had grown from civil rights to Irish Nationalism. The Protestants formed vigilante groups and Ulster was plunged into a cycle of street warfare and random sectarian killings. In 1969 the British army was called onto the streets as a temporary measure. They are still there. The British government has realised that the problems in Northern Ireland can never be solved by the military. Political attempts to find a solution have failed. The latest, the Hillsborough Agreement, sought to give the Irish Government a limited say in the running of affairs of Northern Ireland. This attempt to appease the Republican feelings and fears of Ulster Catholics has been met with anger from both Republican and Loyalist extremists.

The Place

Belfast looks like most other British cities. The problems of housing and unemployment are much the same, but have been worsened by terrorism and by the image of violence Northern

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Ireland projects to the outside world. Contrary to popular belief the people of Belfast do not spend their whole lives dodging bullets and bombs; the ‘troubles’ are noticeable in subtler ways.

The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) uniforms have discreet holstered handguns, the pub windows are covered by grilles to deflect petrol bombs and there are barricades around the city centre. The sectarian areas are identified by murals and graffiti, the many derelict buildings around the city are as likely to be the result of bombing campaigns as of incompetent inner-city planning. In the central business district the two communities mix, to the outsider at least, freely and openly. Outside the centre, trouble is usually avoided by the communities knowing the safe and no-go areas.



The Six Counties

Sinn Fein is the political wing of the Irish Republican Army. It is a political organisation with a long history. It was resurrected in its present form in the mid-1970s to provide a political and public platform stating the IRA’s aims and objectives. Its best election result was in 1981, when Bobby Sands and others went on an emotive hunger strike. Sands was elected as MP for Fermanagh, South Tyrone; he and the nine other hunger strikers died in 1981. Sinn Fein’s political support has dwindled since the hunger strike, but they still have a strong following in Catholic areas. They have always maintained a policy of not taking seats to which they are elected in Westminster.

Sinn Fein’s base in West Belfast is Connelly House, an imposing looking building in the staunchly Republican Falls Road. It is heavily fortified, surrounded by barbed wire fencing with anti-bomb casements over the windows. A tri-colour flies defiantly from the roof. The only means of entry is through a complex system of electronically operated iron gates and doors.

Inside Gerry Hodgins meets us. He is a bearded and amiable press officer; Seamus Boyle and Theresa McLoughlan, two fresh-faced youth officers in their late teens, accompany him. The atmosphere inside Connelly House is one of friendly and relaxed chaos, contrasting vividly with the intimidating exterior. During the course of the interview Gerry dominates the conversation. The youth officers are nervous and let him answer most of the questions. Sinn Fein’s basic aims are a British withdrawal from Ireland and the setting up of a socialist republic with civil rights like divorce, abortion and contraception for everyone. Yet the backbone of their support comes from the Catholic community. But Hodgins is clear that this contradiction can be resolved.

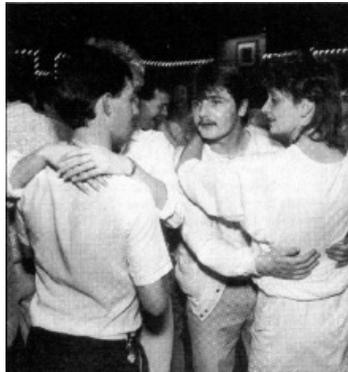
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“We want to set up a state where the church doesn’t have any say in politics, social or otherwise. We are opposed to the whole Catholic ethos which permeates the 26 counties (Eire).

“We have said to the Protestant population on numerous occasions that we don’t want them to become second class citizens in a United Ireland. We don’t (!) want a secular state. We are as against the Catholic church bringing religion into our politics as we are against Ian Paisley trying to bring his particular brand of religion into his politics”.

Yet to most people the war in Northern Ireland is seen as a religious war, Catholic against Protestant. Hodgins feels that this is wrong.

“We are not sectarian; it’s not a sectarian war. The fundamental issue is Britain’s occupation. Due to the legacy of history, Northern Ireland has a conflict between Catholic and Protestant”. He goes on to explain why the troubles are often misconstrued as being one religion against another.



“15 civilians have been assassinated by Loyalist death-squads since the signing of the Hillsborough Accord and once you get in a situation like that people get a bit angry and say ‘What are you gonna do about it?’, and they want to get revenge. It’s a heat of the moment thing; someone gets shot, and people say it’s a sectarian killing”.

Hillsborough has angered both Loyalists and Republicans, and brought about an increase in violence from both extremes, but especially from Loyalists, which is hardly encouraging for future peace talks.

“When the Loyalists perceive any kind of a move towards a United Ireland their immediate reaction is to hit out at Catholics. They’re opposed to Dublin having any input in the running of the six counties. Their disagreement is with Margaret Thatcher and the British Government, but they attack the easiest targets, which are mainly Catholics living in isolated communities”.

Sinn Fein and the IRA are opposed to the Hillsborough Agreement because they don’t see it as a move towards a United Ireland, they see it as a strengthening of the border and an attack on the IRA.

“The only tangible manifestations we’ve had so far is that the Free State (Eire) has increased its repression of the Nationalist movement; it has made it easier to extradite Republicans back to the six counties”.

Sinn Fein have offered at every election to form an alliance with the Socialist Democratic Labour Party (SDLP), who wholly reject violence to achieve a United Ireland. But the SDLP refuse to have any contact with Sinn Fein. Hodgins attacks this passive stance. “John Hulme (the leader of the SDLP) said ‘The cause of Irish Nationalism is not worth the spilling of one drop of blood’. Well, since the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement (which the SDLP

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support), there have been assassinations and a thousand people have been forced out of their homes. It's caused God-knows how much pain and suffering to Republicans.”

Given the current state of affairs of Northern Ireland, Hodgins cannot see a Sinn Fein that does not support the actions of the IRA. “If you reject IRA violence, you've got to reject the violence of the state.” He believes that a lot of Sinn Fein's support is actually IRA support, and that there can be no split between the two. “Our objectives are the same; we do the political stuff, the IRA do the vigilante stuff.”



Sinn Fein sees the only way to end the stalemate in Northern Ireland is for the British Government to issue a declaration of intent to leave by a certain time. They feel that only then can Republicans sit down and talk to Loyalists, and work out the best deal for both communities. But many Protestants fear they would be discriminated against in a United Ireland. “This isn't true,” says Hodgins. “In Southern Ireland there are three per cent Protestants, whereas we would agree that the Catholic ethos of the state discriminates against them in contraception, divorce, abortion, things like that. We want to change that, but at the same time they control about 30 per cent of the wealth of the country, so they're hardly an oppressed minority.”

A lot of the flare-ups between the two communities are a result of the Loyalist marches commemorating the Siege of Derry and the Battle of the Boyne, which are seen as Protestant victories over the Catholics. “Even with the anniversaries, a lot of people don't understand what they're marching for. Take the Battle of the Boyne - Protestants celebrate it every July. Sinn Fein wouldn't ban the marches though, they're very colourful things to watch. It's just a terrible pity that it revolves around bigotry. We'd march with them if they got rid of the bigotry.”



Youth Sinn Fein try to politicise young people. Seamus and Theresa explained how. “We hold regular conferences both in the six counties and the 26 counties, to have a greater flow of contact, to discuss problems. We also organise discos and do most of the murals.” They

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both strongly deny that Young Sinn Fein is a recruitment agency for the IRA. “Sinn Fein is a distinct organisation under the umbrella of the Republican movement. The IRA have no problems recruiting around here.”

The only way he sees America wanting a United Ireland is if it can be under a secure, stable right-of-centre government. As for IRA links with Libya, “Sometimes Gadafi says he supports the IRA. Well, we’ll accept support from anybody, but I think that’s as far as it goes with Libya.”

All three seem optimistic about the future for the Republican movement. They believe their cause has progressed a lot over the last twenty years. “We’ve sorted out the social issues, there’s a new maturity there. You learn from your mistakes and seize your opportunities. You need an overall strategy and I believe we’ve got that now.”

“We’re open to negotiation,” claims Hodgins. “It’s just we don’t believe there’s any more ‘give’ over the issue of British withdrawal.”

Ulster

The Ulster Defence Association (UDA) was formed in 1971 as an umbrella organisation for the many Protestant vigilante groups that had sprung up in the preceding years. It is the largest Protestant paramilitary organisation in the Province. Although it is a legal organisation many of its supporters have been convicted of terrorist acts. They see themselves as a back-up for the RUC and the army in the fight against the Republican forces. Its motto, Law before Violence, is not something that they have always subscribed to.

The UDA headquarters is just off Newtownards Road, a Protestant stronghold in East Belfast. The house is identified by large Loyalist murals on the walls and anti-terrorist casements over the windows and doors. John McMichael is a confident, well-built man in his early forties, business-like in his appearance and manner. He is the leader and main spokesman for the UDA.

The Protestants in Northern Ireland have a tradition of banding together to defend themselves. John McMichael sees the UDA as a necessary and natural reaction to the Republican threat. “It started when people would go out after dark and they would patrol the streets. Their aim was to protect themselves and their families, and the street or area that they lived in. As the problem increased, so the vigilante groups grew larger and they eventually joined together to become the Ulster Defence Association. It all grew from the grass roots, an instinctive feeling and need for people to band together for defence. That has always been the governing motivation of Loyalists, especially over the last 20 years.”

In the early 1970s some members of the UDA and similar organisations went into Catholic areas and committed random killing. But McMichael feels that the Loyalists have been misrepresented by the world’s media. He maintains that they are only defending themselves. “There was a time when there was a large attack from the Protestants on Catholic West Belfast, on the Falls Road. But there was a lot of trouble going on in Londonderry at the time between the Catholics in the Bogside and the police and the Loyalists. So the Republicans organised the Falls Road to attack the Shankill Road to take pressure off Londonderry. Then the Shankill retaliated and attacked the Falls Road. But it only ever came out as the Loyalists attacking Catholics, whereas they were just retaliating.”

Many members of the UDA are in jail, convicted of acts of violence. Does the UDA support this violence?

“Well there are two answers to that. I don’t believe in the use of violence to bring about

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political ends, but I’ve quite a number of friends in prison and I certainly wouldn’t condemn them or try to judge them or say they were wrong for what they did. They did acts that they believed were for the greater good. They did things that they wouldn’t do in a normal society. If they were living in Exeter or Cambridge, the same situation wouldn’t arise.”

McMichael believes there is a civil war going on in Northern Ireland and that most people try to deny that.

“The trouble is that people try to pretend Northern Ireland isn’t at war, that there’s something strange about Northern Ireland, that we’re all just loonies that kill each other for absolutely no reason, or that we’re just sectarian bigots. But it’s an intercommunity war and as tension rises to a peak and there’s a constitutional crisis people are prepared to take up arms, to defend what they believe. That’s very difficult for people who are not involved in the conflict to understand.

“What I will say is in the 1970s most of the civilians who were killed or injured, not all, but most, just happened to be the wrong religion in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were in somebody else’s territory.”

Politics in Northern Ireland is about the existence of the country, not how it is governed. The Unionist parties have always voted with the Conservatives, with the exception of the Hillsborough Agreement, even though they are a staunchly working class party. The Loyalists have to always defend the constitution and they don’t feel that they can trust the Liberal or Labour parties.

“People, especially the Left-wing types, can’t understand the Protestants. We’re supposed to be part of the great working class of the world, so we should be against imperialism, against Britain’s occupation of Northern Ireland. If this was the north of England it would be a vast Labour constituency. It isn’t though because of the defensive thinking among Unionists that keeps us all geared towards keeping Northern Ireland here,” he says.



The constitutional issue overrides all other considerations, even Northern Ireland’s massive problems in unemployment and housing. “The problem in Northern Ireland is if you’re a socialist, what do you wanna be? An Irish socialist or a British socialist? It’s a siege mentality, and this siege mentality has to be broken when Catholics in Northern Ireland can convince Protestants that they are not fifth columnists, that they can be trusted.”

The Unionist parties have split with the Tories over the Hillsborough Agreement. Loyalists see the deal as the first step towards a United Ireland, that it almost legitimises the South’s claim on Ulster. Since the agreement was signed Loyalist violence has risen dramatically.

“What the Anglo-Irish agreement has shown is that Northern Ireland is a divided society and we’re gonna have to bridge that divide. We had to get over the dominating theme of Irish Nationalism and the dominating theme of British Nationalism of the Ulster people. Then we

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really become an Ulster people and remain part of the UK.”

The UDA have recently released a document outlining the basis for a power-sharing agreement between the two communities. This would attempt to give Catholics a real say in the running of Northern Ireland. McMichael believes that only then will politics in Northern Ireland become class politics, as they are in Britain.

“It’ll cease to be a head count on the border. People in the Unionist parties and in the SDLP will find they’re drifting towards Labour or Tory or Liberal. Politics will become political.” McMichael thinks it is vital to bring the SDLP into power-sharing. Sinn Fein he believes will debar themselves from the political process. “Sinn Fein have no real politics at all. There’s nothing to them. Their policy is a United Ireland or nothing and they couldn’t give a shit about a settlement between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. All they want to do is set up some big socialist all-Ireland Republic.”

He does think however Sinn Fein have done much to win popular support.

“What I do agree with is that there was a great vacuum generally in the Catholic areas, particularly the urban areas. The SDLP are sort of middle of the road, respectable middle class type party. Sinn Fein have done a great deal to get in with the Catholic communities with youth centres and advice offices for the people in their areas, as the UDA does for its own people.”



McMichael is convinced that Sinn Fein have lost much of their political support since the hunger strikes of 1981. He believes that the desire for a United Ireland is an impractical dream in the Catholic mind. “The interesting thing is Southern Ireland doesn’t actually want a United Ireland. They can’t afford it. They couldn’t cope with it. It’s just a mythological thing. And most Catholics in Northern Ireland don’t want a United Ireland. It’s like winning the pools, you always wish it but you never expect it to happen. People assume a United Ireland is the natural thing, but for some reason or other we object to it. The question that should be asked is why should we be in a United Ireland? Exactly what is there in Eire that Catholics in Northern Ireland would want?”

McMichael believes that the Protestants would be swallowed up in a United Ireland: “In 1926, 11 per cent of the 26 counties of Eire were Protestant. In 1981 less than three per cent of the population were Protestant. Now that’s a hell of a decline.”

Since Hillsborough, over a thousand Catholic families have been forced out of Protestant areas, but McMichael is adamant that it is not a sectarian fight between the two religions. “Northern Ireland can’t simply be seen in terms of Catholic and Protestant. Because if you look at it that way you totally misunderstand what’s going on. Mainly it’s Irish Nationalist-Unionist battle for territory. Down near the border people are getting killed who are the sole owners of a farm or the sons are getting killed who are the sole heir to a farm and the next

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thing is the farm’s bought by Catholics. Gradually the Protestants are getting moved in. If anyone took the time to study it they’d find that Protestants have been moved out of more houses and more farms and land in Northern Ireland. Every piece lost is a territorial gain for Irish Nationalists, and then every once and again the loyalists hit back.”

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As we walked back towards the centre of Belfast after our interview with John McMichael, we found that the streets had been cordoned off. The army, fire service and police were out in force in the early evening darkness. Shoppers walked through broken glass. Windows around the City Hall has been blown in. A series of small incendiary bombs had gone off.

We walked into a pub and saw the same scenes of chaos and burning outside being flashed on the television screen. The majority of people live within the violence, but they are not a part of it. They are tired of the bloodshed, and can see neither side resolving the problems. They know there is no easy, immediate solution. The current weave of violence has lasted for twenty years; it is as long ago as young people in Northern Ireland can remember. Many have left; others stubbornly refuse to leave their beloved country, whichever they believe it to be. The regulars in the bar showed only mild interest in the events on the television. It was just like any other pub on a Friday night.

Ends

