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Conservation at the crossroads in Northern Ireland: Terence O'Neill and the growing concern for architectural heritage 1956–1969

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ABSTRACT

Terence O'Neill maintained a keen interest in conservation and architectural heritage, but his record on these issues in government in Northern Ireland is largely unexamined. This article addresses this deficit through a comprehensive review of the existing literature reinforced by archival material, revealing the familial and other connections that O'Neill had with the conservation world and civil society organisations, including his sometimes behind-the-scenes interventions on conservation policy. The momentous impact on the existing built environment from his drive to 'transform the face of Ulster' is ultimately foregrounded, particularly the contemporary philosophy underpinning the 'balanced approach' to development that was initially favoured by progressive opinion in the early 1960s, and the effect that the destruction of familiar places had on the creation of new heritage values. However, the failure of O'Neill to introduce town and country planning legalisation akin to that existing in Great Britain frustrated the efforts of conservationists who grew increasingly vociferous in their calls for action. As in other contested areas of public policy in the 1960s in Northern Ireland, the destructive forces unleashed in the built environment threatened architectural heritage and essentially remained unchecked in the absence of timely reforms prior to Direct Rule from Westminster.

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Introduction

The record (and rhetoric) of the former Northern Ireland Prime Minister, Captain Terence O'Neill, concerning the conservation of architectural heritage is largely unexamined. This is surprising given that many other critical aspects of his public policies in the 1960s have been interrogated at length in numerous other studies, including initiatives in relation to cross-border cooperation, community relations in Northern Ireland and electoral battles with the

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Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP).¹ His signature political project to ‘literally transform the face of Ulster’ through the planned modernisation of the economy and the built environment is another aspect of his tenure as Prime Minister explored in detail elsewhere (cited in Mulholland, 2013: 29).² Set against issues that were implicated to varying degrees in the communal tensions leading up to the outbreak of the Troubles, the conservation of architectural heritage undoubtedly appears a rather marginal subject-matter for further investigation. However, O’Neill (1972: 46) explicitly stated his desire ‘to stop some of the old buildings in our provincial towns from being pulled down’, while a government official and close confidant relayed how the ‘natural and built heritage meant a great deal to him [O’Neill]’ whilst in power (Bloomfield, 1994: 24). The implications for the existing built environment arising from the government-sponsored drive for reconstruction in the 1960s, of course, was potentially dramatic in nature and threatened the destruction of older buildings and familiar streetscapes. How these seemingly competing priorities could be reconciled proved a difficult conundrum in many places across the world, but this is especially so in the contested political landscape of Northern Ireland where other considerations were often to the fore in public policy-making.

This article examines the precarious position of architectural heritage in the reconfiguration of the built environment that O’Neill sought to encourage through his simultaneous interest in ‘creation and conservation’.³ Sightlines are offered into his decision-making record on conservation whilst in government, both as Minister of Finance from 1956, and subsequently as Prime Minister in the period 1963–1969. Although the narrative is alive to the governing complexities of Northern Ireland, it also addresses the contemporary Modernist-influenced philosophies framing conservation practice in Great Britain and further afield, which helped shape the positions espoused by the various protagonists discussed. Furthermore, the familial and professional connections that O’Neill had with civil society organisations in the conservation world are outlined, including the associated interactions between influential advisers to government and political opponents of the ruling Unionist Party (UP), brought together by a shared interest in architectural heritage and planning. Ultimately, significant ironies and tensions resulting from the modernisation of the built environment, and the significant temporal shifts in what society considered worthy of conservation at the time, are explored (Negussie, 2004). How these shifting value-sets were manifest in the actions of individuals and civil society organisations, including O’Neill, are illuminated, thereby adding to our understanding of state-civil society relations in a very different, but no less contested, policy arena in the 1960s in Northern Ireland.

This article is structured into three principal sections. The first briefly introduces the legislative and administrative history of conservation in Northern

Ireland up to the early 1970s, necessarily setting this within the wider UK context and referencing the pre-Partition era in Ireland. The second section principally addresses O'Neill's time as Minister of Finance, particularly in relation to the resourcing of various conservation-related initiatives and his personal and professional connections with the Northern Ireland Committee of the National Trust. The final section deals at greater length with the period of O'Neill's Premiership from 1963, which was characterised by an increasingly interventionist approach to infrastructural and physical developments in the built environment, complemented by legislative efforts focused on creating a comprehensive land-use planning system. However, these had far-reaching consequences for older buildings and the reaction of conservationists to threatened change represented another dimension of the contestation faced by the Stormont authorities in the late 1960s. In illuminating this history, the narrative is informed by an extensive review of the secondary literature, reinforced by archival research undertaken in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). Access was also afforded to the so-called B-files of the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Finance's Works Division, most recently held under the custodianship of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).⁴

Conservation in Northern Ireland

The conservation of architectural heritage as a State-sponsored activity in the UK and Ireland essentially evolved from a legislative concern for ancient monuments. In pre-Partition Ireland, the first conservation legislation dates to the Irish Church Act of 1869, which, although principally dealing with the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, facilitated the vesting and preservation of disused churches and other ecclesiastical structures as 'national monuments' by the Commissioners of Public Works (Fry, 2003). The important precedent set by this latter Act in legislating for heritage for the first time in the UK and Ireland is often overlooked, and the 1882 Ancient Monuments Protection Act is more typically asserted to be the first UK-wide (including Ireland) conservation legislation.⁵ This latter Act sought to facilitate the voluntary purchase or 'guardianship' by government of a limited number of pre-identified ancient monuments, but offered little by way of protection to architectural heritage (Delafons, 1997: 25). Further ancient monuments acts followed in Ireland and Great Britain. However, the likelihood of impending Home Rule is argued to have excluded Ireland from the establishment of the Royal Commissions on Ancient and Historical Monuments in 1908 – England, Scotland and Wales each benefitted from the creation of separate commissions – and coverage under the 1913 Ancient Monuments Consolidation and Amendment Act (Fry, 2003). The absence of the former in particular impacted

significantly on the progress of architectural heritage conservation later in the twentieth century (Evans, 1980).

The delineation in legislative protection that emerged in the twentieth century between ancient monuments and architectural heritage predominantly resulted from questions concerning use and age. In short, a division was understood to exist between 'dead' monuments (ancient monuments) and 'living' monuments (architectural heritage), with ancient monument legislation in Great Britain initially acting to prevent the protection of those structures deemed in use (Breeze, 2001). In terms of age, ancient monuments tended to date from before 1700, which was the inventorying cut-off point initially established when the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of England was created in 1908 (Delafons, 1997: 30). Acknowledging these distinctions partially explains the legislative divergence that occurred from the mid-twentieth century, with the statutory protection of what became known as 'listed buildings' in Great Britain stemming from the Town and Country Planning Acts of 1944 and 1947. As a consequence, architectural heritage conservation was firmly embedded within the newly emergent land-use planning system, with the government required for the first time to produce 'lists' of buildings of architectural and historic interest (Pendlebury & Strange, 2011). The conservation-planning system eventually extended to embrace the designation of conservation areas following the Civic Amenities Act of 1967, by which stage an increasing number of more recent buildings were also being individually protected, including those constructed in the twentieth century (Harwood, 2010). Thus, what initially began as an antiquarian interest in ancient monuments had progressed by the late twentieth century to embrace what Choay (2001: 4) dubbed the 'triple extension – typological, chronological and geographical – of the patrimonial legacy'. As in other public policy arenas, however, Northern Ireland was somewhat of a 'place apart', as demonstrated in comparisons with England of the legislative and institutional development in conservation and planning (McClelland, 2014).

The trajectory of conservation legislation and institutional developments in Northern Ireland from the early-mid-twentieth century is, therefore, markedly different from Great Britain, albeit the system eventually created was largely imitative of British practices (Hendry, 1977; McClelland, 2014). From the introduction of Partition in the early 1920s, conservation was a local matter for the devolved Stormont administration and was first legislated for with the introduction of the 1926 Ancient Monuments Act. The functioning of the administrative apparatus subsequently established via the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Finance, is well documented by Fry (2003, 2005, 2006, 2007), and will not be reiterated here in great detail.⁶ In essence, the principal provisions of the 1926 Act were copied from the 1913 Ancient Monument Consolidation and Amendment Act in Great Britain, providing for the

setting up of an Ancient Monuments Advisory Council (AMAC), and conferring the Ministry of Finance with powers to schedule privately-owned monuments and acquire others for State Care subject to compensation. In practice, ancient monuments remained under-resourced by the Ministry and the most notable initiatives occurred thanks to the voluntary input and expertise of AMAC members and the Deputy Keeper of Records.⁷ Indeed, it was not until 1950 that the first professional staff solely tasked with recording monuments were employed following the creation of the Northern Ireland Archaeological Survey (O'Neill, 2010). Notwithstanding minor amendments constituted under the Ancient Monuments Act of 1937, the provisions of the 1926 Act remained in operation in Northern Ireland until eventually superseded in 1971 by the Historic Monuments Act.

The potential application of the Ancient Monuments Act to architectural heritage in Northern Ireland in the 1960s was problematic. In spite of the lack of 'chronological ring-fencing' in the age of monuments that could be protected, this definitional flexibility was only utilised in a handful of cases (Fry, 2003: 173). The available policy instruments for architectural heritage conservation, therefore, would inevitably remain weak in the continued absence of planning legislation, which was needed to provide, in the words of Hobson (2004: 59), 'the means and muscle previously lacking to prevent the last late lamented demolition of a valuable historic feature'. For instance, a notable 'test case' relating to the proposed scheduling of a former linen warehouse at 9–15 Bedford Street, Belfast in 1970 ultimately ended in its demolition due to the reluctance of the Ministry of Finance to follow through with the serving of a 'preservation order' (McClelland, 2014). Fears over potentially inflated compensation claims by the owner under the terms of the Ancient Monuments Act, exacerbated by the fact that the warehouse was a 'living' building rather than a 'dead' monument, were central to the Ministry's decision (McClelland, 2014). This, together with other contemporary instances, not only confirmed the impotence and worst fears of conservationists about their inability to immediately protect older buildings under threat, but exposed further concerns over the institutional commitment of local and national government towards the conservation of architectural heritage.

The enacting of legislation akin to the Town and County Planning Acts in Northern Ireland was essentially precluded by the antipathy of the UP towards planning in the 1940s and 1950s. As noted above, such legislation would have simultaneously introduced parity with Great Britain in terms of the conservation of architectural heritage, making it a statutory requirement for government to prepare lists of buildings of historic and architectural interest, amongst other things. The very differing attitude of O'Neill from his predecessor, Lord Brookeborough, when he was elevated to Prime Minister in 1963, offered some hope to proponents of conservation and planning.

Nonetheless, as will be discussed later, the constrained reality of local politics ensured that events unfolded in often unforeseen and unfortunate ways, conspiring to frustrate the efforts of conservationists seeking parity of treatment. As Patterson and Kaufmann (2007: 67) discuss, Unionists in the west of Northern Ireland were particularly concerned about the constitutional and other implications arising from O'Neill's modernisation strategy, and a resolution was passed at the 1965 Ulster Unionist Council condemning his 'dictatorial manner'. Indeed, it is necessary to fast-forward to the post-O'Neill era to inform of the eventual introduction of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 as an Order-in-Council at Westminster, albeit it was progressed by the Stormont authorities prior to the acrimonious collapse of devolution (Ministry of Development, 1972). Even with this legislative breakthrough, however, the first listed buildings and conservation areas in Northern Ireland were not designated until 1974, by which time many older buildings were lost through redevelopment and the Troubles. The subsequent discussion will address in more detail the related action(s) and inaction on planning and architectural heritage that occurred during the O'Neill era in government, and this broad overview is merely intended to briefly set the scene for the next sections of the paper.

This article is predominantly interested in the developing concern for architectural heritage in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, but is alive to wider contemporary debates about the nature of 'heritage'. The concept of 'authenticity' and the privileging of the 'inherent superiority of original fabric' historically governed architectural heritage conservation practices in the UK (Miele, 2005: 1). Indeed, the emphasis placed on the 'intrinsic' significance of material fabric has broadly underpinned the Western account of heritage (Smith, 2006: 3). However, contemporary interpretations of heritage stress that it is less about material fabric and rather concerns 'the meaning placed upon [material artefacts] and the representations which are created from [them]' (Graham & Howard, 2008: 1). Heritage is a values-based cultural process 'about re/creating, negotiating and transmitting certain values [...] that society or sections of a society wish to preserve and "pass" on' to the future (Smith, 2009: 33). As a 'selective' activity, typically culminating in the creation of an 'official heritage' recognised by the state (Harrison, 2013: 14), it is inherently 'dissonant', whether on social, economic or other grounds (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Thus, the multiple potential 'uses' of heritage, for instance, with the power to socially exclude (Waterton *et al.*, 2006), gives rise to questions over 'who decides what is heritage, and whose heritage is it' (Graham *et al.*, 2000: 24). 'What gets conserved and why' are, in turn, deemed 'political questions rooted in multiscaled negotiation [...] played out in the context of changing fashions, the legal-administrative framework for statutory protection, and the lobbying role of conservation champions' (While, 2006: 2402). In the Northern Irish context these considerations invariably give rise to

contestation over the protection of structures such as the former Maze/Long Kesh Prison (Flynn, 2011), and the symbolism of civic buildings such as Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Neill, 1999). Although the existence of such conflicts is acknowledged, they are not foregrounded within this article, which instead focuses on O'Neill's relationship with architectural heritage in the context of his strategy for economic and physical modernisation.

Minister of Finance, 1956–1963

The Ministry of Finance was the most senior department within the Northern Ireland administration after the Prime Minister's Office and essentially acted as the Treasury of Stormont (Glendinning & Muthesius, 1994: 291). The location of ancient monument functions under the remit of the Ministry of Finance afforded O'Neill decision-making authority over conservation from 1956, and not only in relation to ancient monuments. However, before discussing the Ministry's record of protection in this period, two other initiatives which it supported are referenced. The first concerns the creation of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the idea for which was progressed by O'Neill's predecessor as Minister of Finance, Brian Maginess, and was advanced by a 1954 report prepared by a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Roland Nugent (Seaby, 1955). O'Neill (1972: 37) took up the post in September 1956, and his biography indicates that his 'first effort lay in the direction of a folk museum', which was soon enacted for under the Ulster Folk Museum Act 1958. A site at Belfast Castle was initially earmarked for the museum, but its eventual location at Cultra, County Down opened to the public for the first time in July 1964. The official purpose of the museum – extended in 1967 to include a transport section – was to illustrate 'the way of life, past and present, and the traditions of the people of Northern Ireland' (Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 1965: 3). For Hendry (1977), its successful work in painstakingly reassembling various vernacular buildings from their original locations throughout Northern Ireland, while also conserving related folk traditions, greatly complemented the work of other conservation agencies. Indeed, authoritative publications such as Alan Gailey's (1984) *Rural Houses of the North of Ireland* resulted from the methodical recording activities of museum experts over several decades. Perhaps most interestingly from the point of view of the later discussion, the museum was also intended to fulfil another function of a metaphorical nature, in that it would provide an appropriate 'yardstick of progress' for the state of modern society in Northern Ireland (Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, 1965: 5). This overarching theme of progress, tempered by a certain respect for the past, resonates with O'Neill's rhetoric from 1963 concerning change in the built environment, and is implicated in wider theoretical debates over the nature of modernity.

The second initiative relates to the work of the Northern Ireland Committee of the National Trust, established in 1936 to deal with the local affairs of the Trust, and which subsequently benefited from the outworking of the Ulster Land Fund Act (Northern Ireland) 1949. In particular, the Ulster Land Fund supported the work of a number of organisations in the acquisition of land and buildings and their conservation for wider public benefit. As Minister of Finance, O'Neill was said to have been 'a generous friend to the National Trust' (Brett, 1978: 132), and a perusal of the most detailed account of the Trust's history locally indicates the substantial amount of property that came into its possession backed by the Ulster Land Fund over several decades (Gallagher & Rogers, 1986).⁸ This included the acquisition of Springhill House, which was officially opened by O'Neill in April 1960, in addition to the Trust's most famous tourist attraction, the Giant's Causeway, opened by O'Neill in June 1963 – by which time he was Prime Minister.⁹ At O'Neill's behest, the Trust acquiesced in becoming managing agent for several cottages associated with former US Presidents that were purchased by the government as tourist attractions (Gallagher & Rogers, 1986). Thus, for a while at least, the ancestral homesteads of President Woodrow Wilson, President Chester Arthur and President Andrew Mellon were administered by the National Trust from the mid-1960s. In common with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the support provided to the Trust through the Ulster Land Fund was essentially aimed at protecting the natural and built environment, but with the added instrumental benefit of providing recreational facilities for foreign tourists and for the emergent leisured and managerial classes in the new economy under creation.

In addition to the instrumental benefits accruing from the financial support provided by the Ministry of Finance and the occasional social gathering, O'Neill's connections with the National Trust extended further. Firstly, his wife Jean was involved in the restoration and management of the gardens at Rowallane from the mid-1950s, and was for many years the chairman of the Trust's Gardens Committee in Northern Ireland (Gallagher & Rogers, 1986).¹⁰ Indeed, it was under this pretence that O'Neill accompanied a National Trust party to Rathlin Island approximately one year after becoming Prime Minister, which apparently served a dual-purpose as his first 'inclusive' meet-the-people visit to a principally Catholic community (Mulholland, 2000: 62). Furthermore, the editor-in-chief of the *Belfast Telegraph* newspaper, Jack Sayers, was also a member of the Trust's Northern Ireland Committee, and used his position on occasions to promote its varied initiatives (McClelland, 2014: 128). More pertinently, however, Sayers was a keen supporter of O'Neill's reformist agenda and an enthusiastic advocate of planning in the aftermath of the publication of the *Matthew Plan* in 1963.¹¹ According to Gailey (1995: 102), O'Neill regularly met with Sayers in the Ulster Club and frequently used him as a 'sounding board for ... ideas and not merely as the

instrument of their communication'. This is consistent with Mulholland's (2000: 203) observation that O'Neill listened most intently to trusted civil servants, British politicians, his gentry peer group and 'press friends' such as Sayers. The fact that representatives from several of these categories coincided with the workings of the National Trust must have elevated its status in the mind of O'Neill, melding the personal with the professional, and providing a meeting point for like-minded and influential individuals from largely non-political backgrounds.

Perhaps in contrast to these broadly agreeable personal connections, another prominent member of the Northern Ireland Committee of the National Trust was Charles Brett, a Belfast-based solicitor who spearheaded publicity campaigns and compiled several notable pamphlets and marketing guides after joining the committee in 1956.¹² Later in the 1960s, Brett was a founder-chairman of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society (UAHS), and, as a prolific author on local architectural history, would subsequently become 'the greatest influence on historic buildings in the province' (Patton, 1998: 6). However, he was also actively engaged in Labour politics from the 1950s, as the 'main strategist' and 'leading theoretician' of the NILP, holding the position of chairman in the period 1962–1969, and responsible for drafting numerous policy statements and election manifestos (Brett, 1978; Prince, 2008: 41). Prior to their involvement in the National Trust, Brett will already have been familiar with Sayers, as they regularly debated political issues on the popular BBC 'Your Questions' radio programme (Gailey, 1995: 64). Away from his interest in conservation, Brett (1978: 133) recounts putting 'oblique pressures on Terence O'Neill, by private meetings, or through the Labour government that came to power in Westminster in October 1964', and was otherwise a vocal critic both during and after O'Neill's abrupt departure from politics in 1970.¹³ For his part, O'Neill's success as Prime Minister 'depended on driving the NILP to the edge of political extinction', particularly in light of the party's worrying electoral successes in the early 1960s in working-class Protestant areas of Belfast (Prince, 2008: 27). The associations of both with the National Trust undoubtedly provided ample opportunity for interesting discussions on conservation and wider political developments, especially as their differing perspectives on the 'uses' of heritage were clearly articulated on several occasions.¹⁴

Returning to the functional responsibility of the Ministry of Finance for the protection of ancient monuments, its record during this period was modest to say the least. Indeed, only thirteen structures were scheduled under the Ancient Monuments Act between 1953 and 1970, albeit a marginally greater number were protected via State Care acquisition (Fry, 2006). The burgeoning interest in industrial archaeology, the emergence of which was influential in the revalorisation of Victorian architecture in Belfast, failed to elicit the hoped-for response from the Ministry. For example, the Manchester-

based academic, Rodney Green,¹⁵ was a key advocate of industrial archaeology at the time and chaired an AMAC sub-committee that recommended the scheduling of a range of transport-related structures such as bridges, canal and railway buildings.¹⁶ However, as Evans (1980: xxxiii) informs, these suggestions were relayed to O'Neill in 1960, but the Ministry only agreed to support the 'preservation of one example ... of each category of industrial monument'. The Ministry was reluctant to protect more than a token number of structures due to the possible compensation implications. As Minister of Finance, O'Neill was associated with 'minimalist approach' of the government, and it is evident from these examples that such 'penny-pinching' also extended to conservation and ancient monuments (Mulholland, 2000: 19). To its credit, the Ministry agreed to sponsor a Northern Ireland-wide survey of industrial archaeology from 1962, which remained for many years the 'most comprehensive regional survey of industrial archaeology' in the UK (McCutcheon, 1983: 161). Nonetheless, as development pressures mounted, the failure to radically intervene led to the emergence of a more vociferous brand of opposition from the late 1960s as civil society demanded action on local cases of threatened destruction and wider legislative reform on architectural heritage to bring Northern Ireland into line with Great Britain.

Prime Minister, 1963–1969

Planning may have previously been a 'dirty word' in the UP under the Brookeborough administration, but O'Neill embraced it enthusiastically upon assuming the top position in 1963, although the timing was somewhat fortuitous given the publication of the *Matthew Plan* immediately prior to his elevation (O'Neill, 1972: 50).¹⁷ The employment of the eminent Scottish architect-planner, Robert Matthew, to prepare a regional plan for the Belfast area was at the instigation of senior civil servants. However, in spite of minimal political input into its creation, as Mulholland (2000: 23) concludes, O'Neill was sufficiently astute to recognise the political potential of the *Matthew Plan* and 'seized the opportunity to become its champion'. The *Wilson Report* of 1965 concerning the local economy, in tandem with Matthew's earlier report, essentially provided the 'blue-print of the government's regional, physical and economic policy for the 1960s' (Murray, 1991: 105).¹⁸ The adoption of such regional economic planning was fashionable at the time and O'Neill is known to have kept up-to-date with liberal ideas and progressive opinion in Great Britain through personal contacts and avidly reading the press (Mulholland, 2000). Many of Matthew's recommendations for Northern Ireland, of course, amounted to little more than catching up with long-established practice elsewhere, including in relation to architectural heritage, which both Matthew and Wilson positively referenced in their respective reports. Nonetheless, O'Neill was able to claim the reformist mantle in planning and

economic modernisation and, in so doing, is said to have 'stolen the NILP's thunder' (Prince, 2008: 26). This was arguably only a pyrrhic victory, however, as many aspects of his planning agenda would soon become dogged with political controversy.

The *Matthew Plan* implied far-reaching change in the built environment, in the creation of new motorways, housing, factories and a 'New City' in County Armagh, as well as the redevelopment of existing places for modern office and shopping developments in city and town centres. These did not necessarily represent irreconcilable objectives for conservationists, whether in government or civil society, as many then favoured a 'balanced approach' to development that was accommodative of both the 'preservation' of important buildings coupled with comprehensive reconstruction. For instance, Robert Matthew is known to have drawn constantly on 'Geddes's formula of modern "conservative surgery" in schemes such as his Edinburgh University redevelopment' (Glendinning, 2003: 371). Many cities in Great Britain in the early-mid-1960s were pursuing similarly interventionist approaches that had not yet drawn the wrath of conservationists (Pendlebury, 2001; Gunn, 2010). Progressive opinion within prominent civil society organisations in Northern Ireland was also favourably disposed towards a balanced approach to the built environment, including the Urban Renewal Belfast Society (URBS).¹⁹ Indeed, the close relationship between advocates of conservation, planning and redevelopment in Belfast is evidenced by the fact that Brett, Desmond Hodges and Shane Belford were council members of the URBS in 1963–1964, and subsequently formed part of the provisional committee of the UAHS – Hodges as Honorary Secretary, Belford as Honorary Treasurer and Brett as Chairman.²⁰ The rhetoric of O'Neill appears to have chimed with contemporary conservation thinking on preserving the best of the old in tandem with significant new development. In a speech to the Royal Society of Ulster Architects in 1968, he stated his concern for creation and conservation, and this position was further reinforced in private correspondence with several of his ministerial colleagues.

The apparent consensus on a balanced approach to development in the early-mid-1960s was underlain with emergent tensions, however, particularly as architectural heritage came under increasing threat of demolition. For instance, coinciding with publication of the *Matthew Plan* in 1963, the National Trust released *The Future of Ulster's Past*, in which it argued that 'the change in the face of Northern Ireland is proceeding at such a pace that action ought to be taken' to bring legislation into line with Great Britain.²¹ Furthermore, the AMAC sought the creation of Belfast Survey to document and make recommendations on the protection of important older buildings within the city. The looming threat to architectural heritage from the ever-quickening pace of change in Belfast was clearly outlined by Green in a memorandum to the AMAC in October 1963, as was the

growing awareness of the merits of Victorian architecture.²² Maintaining a broadly positive disposition towards planning and redevelopment was clearly one thing, but the absence of corresponding statutory protection for valued elements of the built environment, created a degree of uncertainty for conservationists that would fester as the decade progressed. Although O'Neill as Prime Minister had pressed 'the accelerator down' on legislative and institutional reforms, a critical missing piece of the jigsaw concerned town and country planning legislation, the introduction of which was effectively hostage to intra-Unionist wrangling (Glendinning, 2008: 335). As Murie (1973: 34) records, such legislation required 'a fundamental reorganisation of local government', which was 'opposed by the traditional supporters of the Northern Ireland Government' due to the potential loss of Unionist hegemony at the local level. Therefore, with the Ministry of Finance unable (or unwilling) to embrace the protection of architectural heritage under the Ancient Monuments Act, and the newly-created Ministry of Development not yet possessing the powers to list buildings of architectural and historic interest, the stage was set for greater confrontation between the government and civil society from the late 1960s.

The UAHS emerged as an 'all-purpose pressure group' in late 1967 with Brett as founder-chairman (Brett, 1985: xiv).²³ The new organisation swiftly attracted media attention to its conservationist cause, which did not go unnoticed by senior civil servants within the Ministries of Finance and Development.²⁴ The early impact of the organisation undoubtedly owed much to the high-profile chair and supporting cast of committee members consisting of well-known, and respected, academics, architects, former civil servants, solicitors and members of the landed gentry.²⁵ Furthermore, the fact that Robert Matthew presided over the inaugural meeting and became the first Vice-President, must have furnished the organisation with early political capital, particularly as he was still employed as a consultant by the Northern Ireland Government.²⁶ The UAHS also succeeded at injecting a greater sense of urgency into the debate as evidenced by the assertive and 'dramatising' language used in the four-page pamphlet *What's Left of Ulster? A Plea for New Legislation at Stormont* (UAHS, 1968). The pamphlet's production preceded a UAHS meeting with the Minister of Development, William Fitzsimmons, in December 1968, and its preparation was referenced on several occasions in internal correspondence between senior government officials.²⁷ However, the various demands elaborated by the UAHS were backed up by its prolific range of activities, particularly the publication of a series of 'lists' covering the architectural heritage of numerous places throughout Northern Ireland and further afield. By 1972, it had published eighteen surveys, two monographs, two leaflets and a catalogue *raisonnée* (UAHS, 1972), with Latimer (2003: 354) suggesting that these 'formed the basis for the early official lists' in Northern Ireland. The arena of recording and publishing arguably

provided conservationists with the greatest scope for autonomous action as they were able to set the agenda more forcibly than on the legislative front (McClelland, 2014). As elsewhere, the range of structures deemed worthy of attention by the UAHS and others was relatively modest at this early stage, but the interest of conservationists over subsequent decades would embrace a broader spectrum of building types, ages and styles.

The UAHS pressed for the introduction of planning legislation having realised that 'it was hopeless to campaign for the conservation of individual buildings in the absence of proper legislation and of statutory lists' (Hendry, 1977: 379). The fact that two previous attempts at bringing in such legislation in 1964 and 1966 failed due to strong political opposition, meant that its arrival must have seemed a distant prospect in 1967, in spite of the good intentions of O'Neill and his officials.²⁸ The clamour for action was only likely to grow more urgent, with, for example, the AMAC passing the following strongly-worded resolution in October 1968:

The AMAC, concerned at the destruction of older buildings involved in the building and the road construction programmes throughout Northern Ireland, desires that representations be made to the Ministry of Development regarding the urgent need for the enactment in Northern Ireland of legislative powers, similar to those in Great Britain, to provide for the listing and preservation of buildings or groups of buildings of special architectural or historical merit.²⁹

However, O'Neill had already written to Fitzsimmons, in March 1968, stressing the need to retain 'the best features of our man-made environment' and underlining that 'our enthusiasm for modernity ... should not destroy everything which makes Ulster distinctive' so as not to 'diminish our attractiveness for tourists and other visitors'.³⁰ The primary purpose of his intervention was to request that the Ministry of Development review measures for the protection of architectural heritage as a matter of urgency, and the letter precipitated a series of written and face-to-face communications between ministers and officials in the upper echelons of the respective government ministries (McClelland, 2014). As a result, in December 1968, Fitzsimmons, who would soon depart from the Ministry of Development, indicated to UAHS representatives that staff would be employed to undertake a preliminary listing of buildings in advance of planning legislation, which was optimistically promised by the Minister within a 12 month period.³¹ Although two 'listers' would not officially appear until later in 1969, this represented the first time that the Ministry of Development dedicated significant human and financial resources towards the recording of architectural heritage, however tokenistic it may have seemed to civil society at the time. By seeming coincidence, one of the two listers subsequently employed, Charles Munro, knew O'Neill from his time as Chief Architect in the Ministry of Finance, and visited him in a professional capacity within the first few

weeks of his premiership to discuss restoration work at Stormont Castle (O'Neill, 1972: 46). Munro's transfer to this new position within months of O'Neill's resignation as Prime Minister, therefore, represents a symmetry of sorts to his six-year term in office, resulting as both episodes did from the latter's positive inclinations towards architectural heritage and his behind-the-scenes intervention with ministerial colleagues.

It is ironic that just as things were falling apart in Northern Ireland due to spiralling community tensions inexorably impacting on O'Neill's political authority, outside and within the UP, the balanced approach to development that he espoused (or appropriated) was itself breaking down elsewhere in the UK. Indeed, while the start of the Troubles has been precisely located to 5 October 1968 (Prince, 2012), for Gunn (2010), the explosion at Ronan Point tower block in London in May 1968 effectively signalled the end of urban modernism in Great Britain, under which the balanced approach to development was reconciled with conservationist impulses. As Pendlebury (2001: 115, 137) emphasises, 'by the end of the decade [1960s] the writing was on the wall' for modernist planning, and, in Newcastle upon Tyne, what seemed a 'progressive and enlightened approach in 1961' to conservation and planning, appeared by the early 1970s to be 'insensitive, brutal and even philistine'. The public mood had changed radically, and not simply as a reaction against the loss of older buildings or due to dissatisfaction with the architecture constructed to replace them, albeit these were evidently important factors. Rather, there was also a broader pushback against the power of 'experts' and 'bureaucrats' and a concomitant desire for greater public engagement in decision-making processes.³² The 'Grand Old Men of modern architecture and planning', such as Robert Matthew, increasingly modified their views in the face of societal shifts and further adopted 'conservation values' (Glendinning, 2013: 325). In Northern Ireland, the *Belfast Urban Area Plan 1969* represented the last UK example of a 'complex technical physical development plans that exemplified the optimism of the 1960s' (Hendry, 1992: 81), while inner-city redevelopment in the city did not go according to plan 'due to resistance from local populations' (Curtis, 2008: 401). Partially because of the distorting effects of the Troubles, both physically and institutionally, the subsequent history of (re)development and conservation in Northern Ireland would play out rather differently to elsewhere.

O'Neill's intervention was significant for two principal reasons. Firstly, given the centrality of the 'inventory' to the conservation of architectural heritage as a state-sponsored activity, the employment of two officials to prepare the provisional statutory 'list' signalled that the introduction of legislation was only a matter of time. Secondly, it helped overcome departmental wrangling between the Departments of Finance and Development in relation to the functional and financial responsibility for architectural heritage conservation. As McClelland (2014) discusses, the Ministry of Finance was reluctant to

extend protection to architectural heritage under the terms of the Ancient Monuments Act, while the Ministry of Development was wary of taking on additional conservation-related tasks in advance of planning legislation specifically mandating it with such responsibilities. In essence, the latter was hypothetically responsible for inventorying and other powers as they applied to architectural heritage under proposed future legislation, whereas the former was already functionally responsible for the conservation of ancient monuments. However, in contrast to the political problems preventing the early adoption of the necessary planning legislation, the financial liabilities potentially arising from the burgeoning demands for action on architectural heritage in the interim dominated internal discussions amongst officials from both government departments (McClelland, 2014). Thus, the first foray of the Ministry of Development into the inventorying of architectural heritage was prompted by O'Neill's intervention with his ministerial colleagues, representing an activity critical to the heritage creation process that could partially offset the criticisms of conservationists.

The fragmentary activities of O'Neill discussed above in relation to architectural heritage conservation do not give the impression of a sustained focus on this issue, and it is relatively easy to pigeonhole his personal interest in conservation and record in government as an interesting aside. However, the 'Forgotten Revolution' of modern reconstruction that he oversaw, as this period is characterised by Glendinning (2010), had momentous consequences for the existing built environment and society in general in Northern Ireland. For instance, the radical reconstruction drive pursued by Stormont from the mid-1960s may have contributed to the outbreak of conflict through the 'reformist "dis-embedding" of traditional community patterns and prejudices' (Glendinning, 2010: 622), a point that has similarly been raised by others.³³ As discussed above, the moves towards modernisation of the economy in Northern Ireland also threatened the destruction of the built environment, prompting a reaction culminating in shifting value-sets and the ascription of heritage values by conservationists to many older buildings and places that were previously overlooked. Destruction and conservation are, after all, closely intertwined concepts in the social construction of architectural heritage (McClelland *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, it is ironic that O'Neill and others were initially advocates of the balanced approach to development that was then fashionable in Great Britain, including erstwhile political opponents within civil society organisations. The critical problem in Northern Ireland, of course, was the fact that O'Neill was unable to resolve the political blockage impacting on the introduction of planning legislation, meaning that the various destructive forces set in motion in the built environment by his policy decisions were effectively unchecked by corresponding statutory conservation mechanisms. In short, for architectural heritage, 'planning was both the problem and the solution'

(Pendlebury, cited in Glendinning, 2013: 320). In a further irony, O'Neill's 'arch-rival' within the UP, Brian Faulkner, MP for East Down, was appointed Minister of Development by the former's successor as PM, James Chichester-Clark, in May 1969. Not only was Faulkner lobbied by conservationists, but, in a political turn-around, it also fell to him to justify the proposed reforms of local government to 'an often obdurate and angry [Unionist] grassroots' (Patterson & Kaufmann, 2007: 91).³⁴ Of course, Faulkner would subsequently become the last Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

Terence O'Neill's tenure as Minister of Finance and Prime Minister in the devolved Northern Ireland administration coincided with a burgeoning interest in architectural heritage as previously ignored elements of the built environment were increasingly revalorised in the face of redevelopment and economic change. The policies that O'Neill supported from the early-mid-1960s created the context for the ascription of heritage values to aspects of the built environment, prompting what Miller (2002: 29) terms a 'crisis moment' for conservationists, while also manifesting more tangibly (and immediately) in the destruction of older buildings and areas (McClelland, 2014). In such moments, Miller (2002: 29) expands, something is firstly 'perceived to be at risk or threatened', and, as a consequence, the 'values, beliefs and ideas invested in that thing are made explicit'. The 'ambiguity and duality' of the time in relation to modernist planning and conservation (Rodwell, 2010: 2), is encapsulated in Northern Ireland by the advocacy of O'Neill, Matthew and others, both supporters, and opponents, of the Northern Ireland Government, for a balanced approach to development. Although O'Neill may have 'stolen the NILP's thunder', his inability to push through legislation on land-use planning ultimately frustrated the efforts of conservationists. The rather sedate world of National Trust property openings and familial connections was increasingly confronted by concerns over a legislative and institutional apparatus that was unable to cope with the increasing demands as the 1960s progressed. Figures such as Charles Brett would emerge as driving forces arguing for parity in a range of public policy issues, including conservation. However, just as order was breaking down in Northern Ireland, so too was the apparent consensus between modernist planning and conservation in Great Britain. The quickening pace of change, increasingly factious debates over the extent of conservation in the built environment, and lingering anger over the loss of cherished buildings, were central concerns for conservationists, exacerbated by raised expectations by O'Neill that were ultimately frustrated. The parallels with other areas of public policy in Northern Ireland at the time are striking.

Notes

1. See, for example, Mulholland (2000), Warner (2005), Edwards (2008) and McCann (2015).
2. See, for example, Glendinning & Muthesius (1994), Glendinning (2010) and McCleery (2012).
3. PRONI, PM/5/67/1, Northern Ireland Information Service Press Release, 29 March 1968.
4. The B-files were accessed in the Monuments and Buildings Record, Hill Street, Belfast in 2013.
5. The few scholars outside Northern Ireland that identify the Irish Church Act include Hunter *et al.* (1993) and Glendinning (2013). As Hamlin (1993) notes, the 1869 Act was cited in later parliamentary debates over the introduction of the UK-wide 1882 Act.
6. 'To all intents and purposes', in the period 1924–1948, David Chart, the Deputy Keeper of the Records, was the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Finance (Fry, 2005: 161). The Deputy Keeper's main responsibility was running the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. The Minister of Finance was officially known as the Keeper of the Records.
7. Work towards publication of *A Preliminary Survey of the Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland in 1940*, under the editorship of Chart, was largely undertaken through the voluntary effort of AMAC members over a six-year period (Chart, 1949). For Fry (2005: 161), the *Preliminary Survey* has never been superseded as a 'Northern Ireland-wide summary inventory in the public domain'.
8. The first property to be acquired under the Land Fund was Castlecoole, County Fermanagh in 1951 (Fedden, 1968: 55).
9. The Northern Ireland Government invited the US President, John F. Kennedy, to officially open the Giant's Causeway during his visit to Ireland. However, as Prince (2008: 25) notes, this request was 'politely but firmly refused'.
10. Rowallane House is the headquarters of the National Trust in Northern Ireland.
11. Glendinning (2008: 331) cites a letter that Sayers wrote to Matthew in which he hailed 'the great vision of [Matthew's] work', and underlined that Northern Ireland 'has needed a call to planning for a long time'.
12. For instance, he helped organise a Belfast lecture by the poet John Betjeman in 1959 (25 March), which apparently led 75 members of the audience to join the Trust 'on the spot' (Gallagher and Rogers, 1986: 142).
13. For instance, Brett (cited in Mulholland, 2000: 133), in the aftermath of the well-known Caledon squatting incident in June 1968, publically stated the following: 'Captain O'Neill seeks participation by people in public life. In Caledon he has got it – and no wonder'. See also Brett (1970).
14. Somewhat amusingly, Brett (1978: 132) reflected on O'Neill's 'disconcerting ineptitude' at the opening of Springhill House, where he was interpreted in his speech as having praised the Trust 'as a reactionary body devoted to preserving the traditions of landed property and feudalism'.
15. Green attended the first UK conference on industrial archaeology in 1959 and was subsequently a prominent member of the Council for British Archaeology's research committee on the subject (Green, 1960). He later became general editor of the 'pioneering' publication *The Industrial Archaeology of the British Isles* (Palmer, 2010: 13).

16. NIEA, Ministry of Finance B-files (FIN), B842/1959, AMAC Meeting Minutes, 9 November 1960.
17. See Matthew (1964).
18. See Wilson (1965).
19. The URBS (1964: 2) sought to 'encourage public interest in the need for the planned improvement and renewal of Belfast', 'to emphasize the urgent need for a comprehensive three-dimensional long-term City plan', and 'to agitate for improved planning legislation'.
20. Sayers was a Patron of the URBS.
21. As McClelland (2014) informs, the report was largely based on a comparative survey of legislation undertaken by Brett, and the minutes of the National Trust indicate it was sent to all local members, the government Ministers concerned, professionals such as planning officers, in addition to Northern Ireland MPs and Senators. See PRONI, D3727/H/4/1, National Trust Minutes, 19 March 1963.
22. PRONI, FIN/17/1F/20/2, AMAC Meeting Minutes, 16 October 1963.
23. Brett's 'ground-breaking *Buildings of Belfast*' was also published that same year (Patton, 1998: 6).
24. For instance, the likelihood of increasing pressure from the UAHS, National Trust and others was anticipated by the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance in April 1968. See NIEA, FIN B164/1968, C J Bateman to W F Stout, 2 April 1968. Positive newspaper headlines in advance of the inaugural meeting of the UAHS, in November 1967, are evident in the *Irish News* (9 October 1967) and the *Belfast Telegraph* (9 October 1967).
25. The first committee included the Chair of Architecture at Queen's University Belfast, Alexander Potter; an architectural historian then at Edinburgh University, Alastair Rowan; the Secretary of the Northern Ireland Committee of the National Trust, John Lewis-Crosby; and, Harold Meek, who formerly worked in the Ancient Monuments Branch of the Ministry of Finance. See UAHS (1967).
26. Estyn Evans, then Head of the Department of Geography and later the first Director of the Institute of Irish Studies at QUB, was the first President of the UAHS.
27. For instance, 'An advance copy of their [UAHS] leaflet' was sent to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, who noted to a colleague 'the pressure which we are both likely to come under from the AMAC and the UAHS'. See NIEA, FIN B164/1968, letter from C. J. Bateman to W. F. Stout, 7 October 1968.
28. The Ministry of Health and Local Government published a White Paper on *Town and Country Planning* in 1964 while the Ministry of Development circulated a memorandum of proposals for town and country planning in 1966. A White Paper on *The Reshaping of Local Government* was published in 1967.
29. NIEA, FIN B77/1970, AMAC Meeting Minutes, 9 October 1968.
30. This letter was also copied to the Minister of Finance, Herbert Kirk, due to his 'interest in the subject from the Ancient Monuments and financial aspects'. In the letter, O'Neill refers to Matthew, the Folk Museum, the work of the National Trust, the growing interest in Belfast's buildings and the stronger powers then existing in England 'to prevent developers from despoiling historic cities and towns'. See NIEA, FIN B164/1968, letter from T. O'Neill to W. K. Fitzsimmons, 12 March 1968.
31. PRONI, COM/100/10, Meeting Minutes, 17 December 1968.
32. For instance, the *Skeffington Report* by the Committee on Public Participation in Planning was published in 1969.
33. See, for example, Mulholland (2000: 11); Brett (1986: 33–34).

34. For instance, the UAHS pressed Faulkner in late 1969 to consider introducing, as an interim measure, various provisions from the English Town and Country Planning Act 1968 (NIEA, FIN B717/1969, Aide-memoire for meeting, 1 December 1969). Faulkner had previously opposed many of the reforms proposed by O'Neill and resigned as Minister of Commerce in January 1969, putting pressure on O'Neill in what would turn out to be the final months of his Premiership.

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