



Northern Ireland's Lost Opportunity: The Frustrated Promise of Political Loyalism: The End of Ulster Loyalism?

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While many would base their approach on public records or focus alternately on newspapers, Patterson manages to condense both. He clarifies that part of the motor for his research generated from the way scholarly literature on the Troubles has almost ‘completely ignored the significance of the border for understanding the conflict’ (p. 2), noting that the only writing to address the brutalities of border violence was Eugene McCabe’s *Victims* trilogy of plays (broadcast by RTÉ in 1976) and novels such as Patrick McCabe’s *Carn*. While Colm Tóibín’s journalism on the subject is aired briefly, it is a shame given that Patterson has explored it in previous articles that we are not shown how these writers – who engaged with border duress when academics did not – depicted the dynamics and timorousness of border life. Perhaps this is for another book.

Where *Ireland’s Violent Frontier* transcends the average academic text is in its central, dispassionate reading that there was a campaign along the border which could safely be described as ‘ethnic cleansing’. The term, as Patterson reminds us, derived from the Balkans but ‘had an emotional truth for border Protestants as the continuing attacks and killings struck at their community’s morale and sense of security’ (p. 194), particularly with the elimination of the eldest sons of each family targeted. Thus when the Provisional IRA declared their major ceasefire of August 1994 it was not on account of the failure of border violence, which could, on the contrary, be considered ‘a brutal, sectarian success’ (p. 197). Those most in need of the state’s protection waited as successive Taoisigh and prime ministers justified their differences and bartered for political concessions. Apart from being his most stylistically impressive book, *Ireland’s Violent Frontier* immediately takes its place alongside *The Politics of Illusion* (1989) and *Ireland Since 1939* (2006) as one of Patterson’s key works.

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Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity: The Frustrated Promise of Political Loyalism

Tony Novosel

Pluto Press, 2013, (pb) 274pp., ISBN 9780745333090, £17.99

The End of Ulster Loyalism?

Peter Shirlow

Manchester University Press, 2012, (pb) 230pp., ISBN 9780719084768, £16.99

Almost 20 years after the original paramilitary ceasefires, the peace process in Northern Ireland continues to chart a tortuous and, at times, perilous course. There are few moments in recent years that have evinced more starkly the actual fragility of the current political settlement in the region than the furious response that

greeted the decision in December 2012 to limit the flying of the Union flag over Belfast City Hall. The months of violence and disruption that followed evidently gave vent to a wider sense of grievance among working-class Protestants that the long-promised ‘peace dividend’ has never actually materialised in their neighbourhoods. The advent of the ‘flag protests’ served to highlight that the cause of political stability in Northern Ireland demands that the gnawing alienation within Loyalist communities be acknowledged and addressed. In this particular context, the publication of two new major studies of the politics of Loyalism would appear especially timely and welcome.

In *Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity*, the Pittsburgh-based historian Tony Novosel sets out to challenge the dominant assumption that all Loyalists are simply mindless political reactionaries. The principal focus of his research falls upon the various political groupings that have been associated over the years with the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Red Hand Commando (RHC), the most significant of which is, of course, the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP). There is, Novosel argues, a long tradition of progressive political thought within this particular strand of Loyalism, but this ‘inconvenient truth’ is ‘missing in the narrative’ of the Northern Irish peace process. The historian traces the origins of this political radicalism to the experiences of the first wave of paramilitaries imprisoned in the early 1970s. Those Loyalists who were incarcerated prior to the disastrous era of ‘Criminalisation’ were able to engage in discussion not only among themselves but also with Republican inmates, and these exchanges altered the views of many. The principal expression of this process of political education was the creation of a sequence of policy documents advocating measures – ceasefires, consociational government, prisoner amnesties, integrated education, cross-border cooperation – that were deemed heretical within mainstream Unionism. Novosel charts these developments from the ‘Proposals for the Assembly’ produced by the RHC in 1973 through to the ‘Sharing Responsibility’ programme that the PUP published in 1985 and brought to the stillborn Unionist Task Force that reported two years later. While the principal thinkers within Loyalism produced a sustained stream of seemingly radical political proposals, they were never able to secure a receptive audience for their ideas. In some of the stronger segments of the book, Novosel documents how the political development of Loyalism was frustrated at every turn by the indifference of Republicans, the manipulation of ‘big house Unionism’, the machinations of British military intelligence and the subservience of the Protestant working class. It was this unholy alliance of interests arranged in opposition, he seems to suggest, that consigned the struggle of Loyalists to find a progressive political voice to the status of ‘lost story’ amid the more familiar renditions of the Northern Irish peace process.

In a brief but telling autobiographical aside early in the book, Novosel discloses that he arrived in Northern Ireland sharing the conventional view of Loyalism as the domain of political Neanderthals, only to be persuaded otherwise when he came to meet Loyalist activists. The author certainly writes with all the zeal of the convert and this is perhaps the main problem with *Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity*. The

admiration that Novosel clearly has for certain figures within Loyalism clouds his critical faculties and deprives the book of necessary balance. Loyalist thinkers are time and again depicted as the source of ‘sophisticated’ and ‘visionary’ ideas that would have brought the Troubles to an end 20 years earlier if only other political actors had found the foresight to embrace them. The problem with this, often hagiographic, reading is that it tends towards absolving Loyalists of responsibility for the political circumstances in which they found themselves. One of the principal reasons that the Troubles did not in fact end 20 years earlier was, it is worth remembering, that Loyalists paramilitaries engaged in a sustained and indiscriminate campaign of violence directed almost exclusively at Catholic civilians. While Novosel does acknowledge that the intellectual rumination upon which he focuses was almost always accompanied by sectarian murder, he does not seem to appreciate fully the way that the potential of the former was obliterated by the actuality of the latter. In *Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity*, the inability of Loyalists to secure an audience or influence is invariably portrayed not as their responsibility but as that of more or less everyone else – that malign constellation of other political forces unable to grasp the opportunities for peace. This distinctly tendentious reading unfortunately proves emblematic of a rather wider lack of balance and judgement that ultimately detracts from what is otherwise an interesting and valuable book.

Many of the themes that Tony Novosel addresses find echoes in Peter Shirlow’s new book, *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* While Shirlow also expresses an ambition to challenge existing stereotypes of the Loyalist community, he seeks to do so with an altogether sharper sense of balance and through a rather more ambitious frame of reference. The scope of the book covers all of the main Loyalist paramilitary organisations and takes us from the outbreak of the Troubles right through to the present day. At the heart of *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* is a remarkably rich body of research involving no fewer than 340 interviews conducted between 1998 and 2011. While the rationale of the book is to examine that which is progressive about Loyalism in the present, Shirlow chooses, appropriately, to foreground that which was so reactionary about its past. In an early chapter, we are introduced to a range of data that sets out in vivid detail the ‘pernicious, destructive and at times whole-heartedly malicious’ violence of Loyalist paramilitaries during the Troubles. Between 1969 and 2005, Loyalists were responsible for the deaths of 996 people, the overwhelming majority of whom (712) were Catholic civilians. More than half of those civilian casualties were murdered in the narrow ground of North and West Belfast alone.

Against this particular, miserable backdrop, Shirlow begins to profile a more progressive, even ‘transformative’, Loyalism that has emerged in recent years but which remains ‘virtually unknown in public discourse’. Some of those who served time for scheduled offences emerge as particularly influential in redefining the nature of Loyalist discourse and action. In an exhaustive account, Shirlow documents the pivotal role that former prisoners in working-class Protestant communities have played in creating restorative justice schemes, preventing interface violence,

combating sectarian attitudes among the young and finding alternatives to punishment beatings and shootings. While there are various optimistic stories recounted in the book, these, inevitably, coexist with a host of more harrowing tales. The most compelling facet of *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* is, undoubtedly, the body of first-person narratives gathered from interviews, and these are used to particularly good effect in what is perhaps the most striking chapter in the book, the penultimate one dealing with the range of physical, emotional and mental illness that afflicts former prisoners. In a series of vivid commentaries, various Loyalists relate to the author the multiple ways in which they are haunted by their crimes. One does not have to obliterate all sense of the horror of what these people have done to find strangely haunting the testimony of the former prisoner tormented by the shame he had brought upon his mother who was a 'decent woman' or the unease of his associate who feared he would embarrass his daughter if he turned up to her graduation. While *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* features a great deal of dark material like this, the book does ultimately close on an optimistic note. The eventual fate of Loyalism, Shirlow seems to suggest, will be to prepare the ground of its own dissolution by nurturing a political sensibility that encourages working-class Protestants to elevate their 'social interests' over their 'national identity'. Now that, for once, would be a flag worth rallying around.

In sum, these two complementary texts represent substantial contributions to our understanding of the recent troubled history of Northern Ireland and will no doubt attract a great deal of attention and perhaps even controversy. Tony Novosel has provided a timely reminder of a version of Loyalist politics that, although not quite as unknown as he would have us believe, certainly deserves higher billing in the accounts of how the region has slowly edged away from the nightmare of the Troubles. Peter Shirlow, moreover, has drawn upon a remarkable wealth of research to write what may well be the most significant account of Loyalism to date. The sizeable band of scholars interested in the arcane world of Loyalist politics will find both of these volumes worthy additions to their already groaning bookshelves.

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Every Day Life after the Irish Conflict: The Impact of Devolution and Cross-border Co-operation

Cillian McGrattan and Elizabeth Meehan (Eds)

Manchester University Press, 2012, (hb) 208pp., ISBN 978-0-7190-8728-8, £65.00

This book is a timely contribution to examining Northern Irish politics, arriving just before the fifteenth anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. It provides an