

# Ideas

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**From Hanover Street to the Garvaghey Road:  
Growing Up in Portadown**

*by George Watson*



Mourne Country, County Down. (Courtesy of Brian Hughes © 2000 Brian Hughes Photography [bhphotography.com])

# From Hanover Street to the Garvaghey Road: Growing Up in Portadown

*George Watson*

Portadown is, in Irish terms, especially those of fifty years ago, a medium-sized town and was also comparatively industrial. The town in which I was born and grew up had a population of about seventeen thousand, nine factories making carpets and linen, and other factories making boxes and products connected to the apple industry of County Armagh, “the orchard of Erin’s green Land,” as the local ballad had it, along with the news that “the girls are so gay and so hearty.” (Wade’s, where my eldest sister worked briefly as a typist, made those small glass animals—deer, squirrels, and chipmunks—that were so popular once upon a time). It had three cinemas and was an important rail junction, with lines from Belfast to Dublin, to Cavan and to south Derry, all going through its four-platform Victorian station. The station was much beloved of Sir John Betjeman, who ran a campaign to preserve it, but to no avail. The rather fine building was pulled down in the nineteen-sixties, along with much else, including many of the factories.

Portadown was also where, in a nearby townland called Loughgall, the Orange Order was created in 1795, after a particularly fierce encounter between the Catholic Defenders and the Protestant Peep O’ Day Boys, at the Battle of the Diamond. Ever since then, Portadown has been seen as the Orange Citadel of Northern Ireland, a byword for loyalty, sectarianism, and intransigence. In Catholic areas of the six counties, it is usually referred to, confusingly, as “Black Portadown.” Though a superior, more middle-class branch of the Order wore black, rather than orange, sashes, the description

pointed more, I think, to a metaphysical or spiritual perception of things than to a color. “Portadown on a wet Sunday” was a phrase frequently used in Northern Ireland to suggest the ultimate in Beckettian *tristia*.

In her 1999 book about the Orange Order, *The Faithful Tribe*, the Dublin-born writer Ruth Dudley Edwards refers to a Northern Irish Catholic friend, apparently very liberal on all other counts, who said he would never speak to her again if she wrote a book in defense of the Orange Order. She writes, “‘But they are much less bad than they seem,’ I protested. ‘In fact, lots of them are good.’ What I had forgotten was that George came from Portadown, which is regarded as the most sectarian place in Northern Ireland.”

I did speak to her again, but only to say that she had done what I knew she would do, which was to apply her high intelligence to demonstrate that Orangeism is in fact a fruit of the Enlightenment, that it believes in “civil and religious liberty.” She takes the Order at its ostensibly tolerant word, that it “will not admit into its brotherhood persons whom an intolerant spirit leads to persecute, injure or upbraid any man on account of his religious opinions.” This, as Henry Fielding said, in *Tom Jones*, in a different context, is a very wholesome and comfortable formulation, to

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George Watson was an Andrew W. Mellon Fellow at the National Humanities Center in 2000–01. He teaches in the Department of English at the University of Aberdeen, where he is also Associate Director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies. This article was originally given as a lecture at Princeton University, in March 2001, and was presented to the Life-Writing Issues Discussion Group of the Center, in May 2001.

which we have but one objection, namely, it is not true. The same may be said of *The Faithful Tribe*. At the mercy of her own bright civil service rationalism, Dudley Edwards completely misrepresents the malign part played by the Orange Order in the sorry history of the North of Ireland, presenting it as a kind of Mozartian Masonic Club, when it has functioned rather more frequently like the Ku Klux Klan. Its baneful effects have been especially evident in very recent years, where for the last four Julys, the Order's determination to march through the nationalist Garvaghey Road in Portadown has brought the peace process to its knees and the attention of the world's press to the town and its little townland of Drumcree.

The title of this essay is intended to suggest the polarities inside which I was raised, as a Catholic in that town in the nineteen-forties and fifties. The Garvaghey Road stands for the Catholic/nationalist ethos (though, in truth, when I was a boy, Garvaghey Road was an insignificant locus of the Catholic population: the Catholic ghetto then was in a place known universally as the Tunnel, because a dip in the road took you under the main railway lines to—literally—the wrong, or Catholic, side of the tracks). Hanover Street stands for the dominant ethos. I was born around the corner in Thomas Street, but Hanover Street was where we played all those games that children no longer play on any street. I walked to school in a loyalist crescendo of nomenclature, past Hanover, Coronation, Queen, and Union Streets. At the bottom of Thomas Street, the railway line to Dublin ran over a bridge bearing the huge painted legend “Remember 1690: No Surrender.” (1690 is the date of the Battle

of the Boyne, when King William of Orange defeated the Catholic James II, and thereby ensured the supremacy of Protestantism in the British Isles.) There was little danger of ever forgetting 1690 in Portadown, or 1688 (the Siege of Derry), or 1691 (the Battle of Aughrim).

When my family moved from Newtownhamilton in nationalist South Armagh to Portadown three years before I was born, one of my older brothers had been playing in Hanover Street on the day of the arrival for about twenty minutes before he came in to ask my mother, “Mammy, what’s a Fenian bastard?” When we moved house in Portadown later—I was nine—the caretaker of the adjoining school ostentatiously hoisted the Union Jack, to greet our arrival, and asked my younger brother Richard and me, “Why the hell don’t youse get back to Cork, or wherever the hell youse Taigs come from?” Taigs (a corruption of the Irish name *Tadg*), Micks, Fenians, and Papishes were our common designations,

spiced with plenty of good Anglo-Saxon four-letter words. Our first elementary school, which I attended with my younger brother Richard between the ages of four and eight, was in the Convent of the Presentation Sisters, where we were taught by nuns. To get to and from school, though, we had to encounter the Protestant kids from the nearby Thomas Street school, and with these we had to fight pretty often, usually in denial of the assertion that the nuns wore their wimples because underneath they were all baldies or in contestation of the doctrine that St. Patrick was a Protestant. The second school, St. Columba’s Boys’ Primary, was in Carleton Street, right opposite the Orange Hall. More fights.

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Catholic mural in remembrance of 1916 uprising, Belfast. (© Josef Corso, 2001/corsophotos.com.)

Richard and I played in Hanover Street with two Protestant lads called Bobby and Hadden Todd, but never on Sunday, when our punting of a ball outside their house, after Mass, in the hope that they might join us, was rebuked by their angry granny, who would raise a net-curtained window to tell us, “Away in out of that with your papish ball, and read your Bibles!” The sheer tedium of a Portadown Sunday is a vivid memory yet. In a wonderfully named and fiercely regimented place of recreation beside the Bann River, called The People’s Pleasure Gardens, all the swings and roundabouts were firmly padlocked. All cinemas and shops were shut, and even cigarette smoking in public was eschewed in Presbyterian rectitude.

The Papishes were always seen by Orangemen as seeking to subvert the state and turn it over to “Old Redsocks in Rome,” as the Reverend Paisley calls the Pope. Our most frightening encounter with the state came on the Twelfth of July in 1954, when two Royal Ulster Constabulary policemen called at the house to charge us with contravening the Flags and Emblems Act. Richard and I, with

another boy called Patrick Pearse Lawlor (a heroic, if suicidal, name in that town), who lived beside the railway lines, had chalked a crude Irish Tricolor on a large piece of cardboard and waved it from trackside at the enraged occupants of the numerous special trains taking the Brethren from Portadown for their annual county Orange parade, which that year was held in a small town south of us, called Bessbrook. Unfortunately, Bessbrook also had telephones. It was forbidden to display the Irish flag, even in cardboard; my father had to do a lot of talking before the RUC left. Then he belted us for the risk we had taken and the closeness of the shave.

The quotidian nature of the sectarianism is what I chiefly remember—how alert at all times we were about what streets and areas to avoid, how in the summer holidays boys were always in groups in the parks or the soccer pitches, circling each other warily like packs of strange dogs, marking out the territory. In those days, there were frequent encounters between Catholics and Protestants that were not violent, of course, but there was always that wariness and the possibility of trouble. It



Catholic boy playing with a toy gun, Belfast. (© Josef Corso, 2001/corsophotos.com.)

was always there in short, and when the political temperature rose in the sixties with the onset of the Troubles, the polarities widened swiftly. It was no surprise to anyone from that town that those boys would metamorphose into hardline thugs, on both sides, but more spectacularly on the Orange side, that Portadown should be at the heart of what became known as the Murder Triangle and that it should spawn the notorious loyalist killer Billy Wright, a.k.a. King Rat, the annual confrontation between Orangemen and the residents of the Garvaghey Road, the police and the British Army, and rioting and mayhem all over the North.

My purpose here, however, is not to tell you in the words of Paul Muldoon's comic Pancho Villa of "guns and drums" and "how it happened here," but to try to put the tensions of Northern Ireland in a more personal context, not in autobiographical arrogance, certainly not in any pretense that I have an answer, less still the answer. If anything, I aim to make it even more complicated.

**I**n the first place, then, I would have to say that, despite the realities of what I called quotidian sectarianism there, being a boy in Portadown in the forties and fifties was not like being Anne Frank's brother in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, and one of the things that everyone from Northern Ireland needs to guard against is the tendency to self-dramatization lurking in phrases like "the oppressed minority" or in glamorizing for the international audience one's walking down those mean streets.

I have been thinking a lot about an essay by Pierre Nora, the French historiographer, called "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*." Nora says that "memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear to be in fundamental opposition.... Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past.... History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it."

He is pointing to the reductivism inherent in the historical method and distinguishes

between what we may call sites of history and what he calls the *milieux de memoire*, the real environments of memory. In my own words (and this is an adaptation of Nora rather than a paraphrase), he suggests that process whereby a whole environment is shrunk to a point of single significance, as for example when the little market town of Omagh, with its fairs and markets and river and town square and the Loreto Convent where my sisters went to school, becomes in one sudden moment, in August 1998, a place of atrocity and death. And this will now be for always what “Omagh” will recall, will even be. This is perhaps an extreme example, and in any case history must function by selection. But something very important is lost. I put beside Nora’s essay a passage from Emmanuel Levinas, who writes in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, “Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death that do not derive their meaning from history. Interiority constitutes an order different from historical time, in which totality is constituted, an order where everything is pending, where what is no longer possible historically remains always possible.”

Denis Donoghue, who cites this in *Warrenpoint*, his memoir about growing up in Northern Ireland, glosses it imaginatively thus: “By ‘history,’ I presume [Levinas] means: that which produces the future. Something comes into history by playing a part in the production of the future. If it doesn’t do that, it merely enhances the moment in which it is entertained. But Levinas is tender toward such experiences. The historian has no time for them, since they didn’t come into historical time. Levinas recovers the dignity of the inner life, so that such experiences regain their self-respect. History is only one way of being significant. Memory gives the unofficial sense of history.”

So, for me the Orange Citadel, the capital of the Murder Triangle, will also and always be a *milieu de memoire*, a place of unofficial history. I cannot quite say with Wordsworth

that “fair seed time had my soul, fostered alike by beauty and by fear,” but it wasn’t bad. There was the Carnegie Library in Edward Street, presided over by the forbidding Miss Windsor, who not only had the Queen’s family name but even looked a bit like the Queen, though the Queen on a diet of prunes and battery acid. When you borrowed a book (*Biggles in the Gobi*), it was wrapped up in the library’s blue dustjackets with adverts on them for local firms such as Bustard Brothers, Fleshers and Poulterers, and the Easiphit Shoe Store—“Let your feet breathe with Easiphit!”—and with a list of don’ts to stop the spread of tuberculosis. Apart from the library, I will never forget my favorite cinema, The Savoy, near that library and our home. It was always called “The Catch,” because of the local legend that nobody could go there without catching its fleas. It had murals of the big Hollywood stars, Joan Crawford all red lips and metallic hair, Jane Russell all big bosom and cowgirl shirt, Humphrey Bogart eyes narrowed against the curl of his smoking cigarette, Victor Mature all slobbery mouth and soulfulness, and, of course, John Wayne in that expression that ran the gamut of emotions from A to B. The Catch had only one record, which was played relentlessly before the show started and at all points during the show when there was any kind of break. It was Slim Whitman singing “China Doll,” and the swooping guitar, and that nasal whine, and the disconcerting yodel or falsetto that lurked in every phrase, waiting for release, recalls hundreds of Saturday matinees. “Her eyes are blooo -er, her lips are trooOOer, mah China doll.” We went swimming where the Bann met the Cusher, at a place called the point, on Sharkey’s bog; and although Portadown will never feature in Tourist Board brochures, being flat and ugly in a “here-be-the-slums-of-Manchester” red-brick sort of way, it had, because of its flatness in the Bann valley, a stunning view of the Mountains of Mourne, which rose like a line of blue Alps about twenty-five miles away.

**T**hese may be just the private memories that all of us have of their childhood places, and therefore of no larger significance. These things happened, however; they went on; they took more of people's daily interest than the doctrine of transubstantiation, or the Republic's claim to the whole territory of Ireland. Even the sectarian background requires the nuances of individualized memory rather than the flattening categorizations of history. There were four Watson brothers, and we were all very keen on football (soccer), which we played regularly on a local pitch called the Fair Green. My two older brothers knew a group of Protestant lads, who often joined us. One had the resplendently Protestant name of Bothwell Vennard. Bothwell was in the notorious B Specials, much feared by all Catholics who saw the "B"s with some justice as particularly bigoted Orangemen, the more threatening because armed and in uniform. Yet Bothwell was a good-natured and simple big soul. At this time, in the nineteen-fifties, he was "in the front-line defending Ulster," as the Portadown News had it, or at least guarding the railway bridge over the River Bann at Portadown station against the possibility of attack from the Irish Republican Army, which was then waging a sporadic campaign. Given the rock-solid Orangeism of Portadown, and the relative incompetence of the IRA of that time, this could be described as an easy posting. My brother Gerry asked him one day after one of our kickabouts what he was paid, and what it was like being in the B Specials. Bothwell smiled. "Ten shillings a night." Then after a pause, and beatifically, he said, "By God, it's

money from America." Years later, he was shot dead by a more efficient IRA just outside Portadown.

What stays with me most of all as a positive memory is the vigor of the local speech. I stress this for two reasons, one being that the Northerners are generally described as dour and unforthcoming, stingily Presbyterian and reflecting the Scottish inheritance in their thin dole of speech. Even Northern Catholics are seen as dour of speech, compared to

people from, say, Cork. Our local speech, Catholic and Protestant, was, in fact, wonderfully rich, but I have only limited space to illustrate how well stocked, so I shall do so by taking the category of derogatory terms (at the risk of reinforcing the stereotype of the Northerner as vicious in all things, even speech). An irritating child could be a wee *blirt*, a wee *scut*, a wee *nyaff*, or a wee *nyerp*; a whiner or moaner would be a wee *nyark*. If you were stupid, you were a *stumer*, and if you combined stupidity with oafishness, you were a *hallion* or, best of all, a *gulin*. You might say of a woman overdressed that "she was done up like a circus horse" or that "she

stood there like a mutton dummy." A woman who left her house without coat or hat before high summer would be sniffed at: "Would you look at the cut of thon one, away out in her figure." If somebody entered house or pub really soaked on a night when it was lashing it down or bucketing, you might say, "he came in looking like a traveling rat." Physical misfortunes were never overlooked—"he had a belly on him like a poisoned pup." "He had a

I will never forget  
my favorite cinema,  
The Savoy, near  
[the] library and  
our home.  
It was always called  
"The Catch," because  
of the local legend  
that nobody could  
go there without  
catching its fleas.

hump on him like a dog shitting razor blades.” There was the wonderfully suggestive and very common phrase “He looked like somebody let out”—of a mental asylum? A prison? A hospital? And I have heard an infant school teacher say of an educationally challenged youngster, “Sure the poor lad couldn’t spell shite without putting a Q in it.” That energetic gusto did much to compensate for the austerities of the Presbyterian Sundays, and the pervasive sense of low-level threat.

Was this, then, a perfectly normal Northern Irish Catholic boyhood, oppressed and hounded by Orangemen, the RUC and the B Specials, cut off from my natural home in the Republic under the curse of partition, cut off from the Gaelic world which was my natural birthright but pluckily making the most of my cultural deprivations? Not really. And here, as they say, the plot thickens.

I was sent to school in St. Patrick’s College in Armagh, ten miles from Portadown, which did not, of course, have a Catholic secondary school. Armagh was a Catholic, nationalist town, and since the school was the seminary for the archdiocese of Armagh, it took in boys from that very large archdiocese—boys from South Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh, and even from towns such as Dunleer and Ardee in County Louth, across the border. For the first time, I remember feeling that *we* were outnumbered, that it was our Ireland; however, and most ironically, I felt more uncomfortable in that school than on the streets of Portadown. The discomfort originated in responses to my name, and to my unavailing efforts to disguise from my peers what my father did.

My father, also George, was born in Kilkenny in 1898, and my mother in the Connacht Gaeltacht in 1900. Her first language was Irish, but my father had no Irish, so our home speech was English with a few basic phrases and expressions we picked up from our mother. Both parents were, of course, Catholic. Both believed in Home Rule. Like many another southern Irishman, my

father saw no incompatibility between wanting Home Rule for Ireland and enlisting as an infantry private in the British Army in the second year of the Great War—that is, if he thought about it at all, since he had been unhappy at home in Johnstown, County Kilkenny, and ran away. So he was in France from early 1916 until 1918, where somehow he survived the carnage of the Western Front.

When he came back to Ireland, because his education was limited and he knew only soldiering, he joined the Royal Irish Constabulary. The Ireland he came back to, though, was a different place. In the aftermath of the Rising of 1916 and the executions of its leaders, Ireland had largely embraced the republican policies of Sinn Fein, and the IRA had adopted a policy of harassment, intimidation, and indeed shooting of members of the RIC, as they were representatives of British Crown forces in the island. His family’s house in Kilkenny was burned down, and many of his comrades were shot.

Coincidentally, my mother’s home in Oughterard was also burned down, because her father—who was basically a big placid fisherman—was also a member of the RIC. When the treaty that partitioned Ireland was signed in 1921, and knowing nothing of the North, they decided that they would have a better life under British justice than in a new potentially violent Republican twenty-six counties. Following his trade, my father joined the RUC in 1924. His seven children were all born in the North, in the various places where he was stationed, from Toome Bridge and Randalstown to Newtonhamilton, and eventually Portadown, where the last two, myself and my younger brother, entered this strange world. He hated the job and was invalided out in 1953, with severe stomach ulcers. No wonder. The RUC was a pretty sectarian police force, with few Catholics, who were rarely promoted and who were distrusted by their fellows because of the automatic assumption that all Catholics were disloyal to the state of Northern Ireland and who were

distrusted by their coreligionists precisely because they were in the police.

In terms of what we might call my street cred, or school cred at St. Patrick's, having an RUC father was not good, and it was compounded by my name and by my place of origin. Whereas in Portadown I encountered Protestant hostility, I now felt the sting of Catholic exclusivism, which in my experience was more uncomfortable. That is to say that I was never in any doubt in Portadown what I was—a Fenian bastard, a Mick, a Taig, a Papish—but in Armagh, questions of identity became more complex.

Northern Ireland is a place where names are major signifiers. As Seamus Heaney writes in one of his poems, "Whatever You Say Say Nothing,"

Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared  
with us:

Manoeuvrings to find out name and school,  
Subtle discriminations by addresses  
With hardly an exception to the rule

That Norman, Ken and Sidney signalled  
Prod  
And Seamus (call me Sean) was sure-fire  
Pape,  
O land of password, handgrip, wink and  
nod,  
Of open minds as open as a trap...

I was a boarder in St. Patrick's, and it was the custom of the older boys to check up on the new arrivals, with a special view to estimating potential as Gaelic football players. I did not have an easy passage. "What's your name?" George. "What sort of a name is that? What's your second name?" Watson. "What? Where are you from?" Portadown. "Are you sure you're in the right school?" In Heaney's terms, George Watson from Portadown signaled sure-fire Prod, or, if not, somebody whose blood did not flow the pure green, white, and gold of the Republic. In the context of boys with names like Brendan Quinn,

Eamonn Kelly, and Seamus McConville, from Aughnacloy and Ballygawley, and Dundalk, I quickly learned the realities of the conjugation "Irish — Irisher — Irishest." I was already very low down in the food chain, on name and place alone; the discovery of what my father did put me, in terms of Irishness, with the bottom feeders and invertebrates. (How we came by our surname is easily told: a Scottish Presbyterian great-grandfather came over in the nineteenth century from Ayrshire to Fermanagh to farm but met and married a Donegal woman, a Catholic called Bridget O'Donnell, and "turned." Thus, the Protestant name came down through the Catholic family. As for "George," there just is no excuse. My father said he was running out of names by the time I was born.)

**I** had a more general problem, one going beyond names and naming. Ireland in the nineteen-fifties was still a very depressed society, disillusioned with the apparently paltry returns from independence, suffering greatly from poverty, emigration, and tuberculosis. (This was the era when TB was endemic in Ireland. One of my sisters had it, so I read those blue dustjackets very carefully; an Ireland where the most popular radio program was called "Hospital Requests," and where the requests themselves had a stunningly lengthy roll-call: "And now, John Mc Cormack to sing *Panis Angelicus*; for John, Kevin, Brian, Nora, Philomena, Teresa, Madge, Gerry, Oliver, and Seamus, all in the Peamount Sanatorium, hoping to see you back home before the New Year, from all your friends in Cashel"). Ireland suffered also from a lack of confidence, a kind of colonial hangover or national inferiority complex. This was compensated for by an aggressive cultural protectionism, under the codes of which all things Gaelic and Catholic were good and to be cherished and anything else was English, foreign, modern, and godless. The Gaelic Athletic Association did not

merely encourage the playing of Gaelic football and hurling and camogie. If you played other games (tennis, rugby, soccer, golf or— heaven forfend—the peculiarly English game of cricket), you were automatically banned from playing Gaelic games at any kind of representative (school or county) level. This official GAA ban on foreign games was not rescinded until the nineteen-seventies and has still not been rescinded for anyone who is in the RUC or the British Army. In the fifties, sporting protectionism was very strong. In my second year at St. Patrick's, I was called to the office of the president, Father Sheridan (known as "Brassjaws," for his sonorous voice), and was solemnly told that, because I had started a little five-a-side soccer league, I was "corrupting the Gaelic morale of the school." I was amazed. Portadown was, as might be expected, absolutely suffused with what might be called the reference points of British popular culture, and I had grown up on Stanley Matthews and Manchester United and cricket and Wimbledon. That did not stop me being a Fenian bastard in Hanover Street, but it apparently did stop me being truly Irish in Armagh.

I found the same exclusivist attitudes, alas, in relation to the Irish language. In the nineteenth century, "Ireland for the Irish" had been the politicians' promise, made of course in the English language, which was and is the liturgical language of Irish nationalism. "Irishness for the Irish," to be achieved primarily through the restoration of the Irish language as the first language of the country, was the promise of the Gaelic League. The Gaelic League was founded in 1893, after a famous lecture by Dr. Douglas Hyde, "On the Necessity of De-Anglicising Ireland." Irishness for the Irish was a more seductive, more all-encompassing, and ultimately more damaging promise. The idea of a language revival was of course intensely and pleasingly idealistic, but it was asking the Irish people to change their language for the second time in a few centuries. This was always going to be dif-

ficult; in fact it proved impossible. Yeats spoke for most Irish people when he said that "Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue." The fruits of the policy of compulsory Gaelic in the new Free State were unpalatable. Most obviously, there was the hypocrisy of government ministers in the new Free State, who themselves had no Irish, making Gaelic compulsory in schools and for all government jobs. What R. A. Breatnach, professor of Irish in University College Cork, called "the tyranny of gaelicisation" blighted the promotion prospects and soured the lives of a generation, leaving "a heritage of resentment and hostility to the language that only time will obliterate."

**M**ore pervasively damaging was a kind of cultural protectionism. The Irish language became fetishized as a symbol of an essential Irishness that defined itself not only by opposition to England but to the modern world in general. Further, the new Free State was one in which the Catholic Church had a special position, and it promoted the language as a barrier to what it saw as the immorality of the English popular press and cheap literature. The Catholic Truth Society and the Legion of Mary lined up with the linguistic authoritarians. Father Donncha O'Floinn, for example, professor of Irish at Maynooth College, wrote in 1949 that, "if the Irish language disappears, the Irish Christian culture which has been inherited through 1500 years will be very seriously thinned out," and it was he who saw the Legion of Mary as the most effective means of spreading his message. In the North, though Irish was not compulsory, it was even more important: it was a patriotic duty to study it in the midst of the Orange state, which actively discouraged its Protestant children from studying Irish. It was not the fault of the language, but certainly in my time in Armagh, Irish became associated in my mind with an authoritarian nexus of nationalism, cultural morality, and racial purity, which was

extremely conservative and very hostile to any vision of Ireland not based on the rural Gaeltachts of the western seaboard. In a lecture called “Nationality and Language,” delivered in Maynooth in 1946, Desmond O’Donoghue conveys the characteristic and authentic tone that I remember, when he writes, “Irish is the expression of a purely Catholic culture...even if the revival is not successful, the exercise will stem the flow of foreign influences and guard the foundations of the Catholic faith.”

In a famous passage in his *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*, Daniel Corkery bemoans the experience of an Irish boy forced to a diet of English reading, which alienates him from his own experience: “What happens in the neighborhood of an Irish boy’s home—the fair, the hurling match, the land grabbing, the priesting, the mission, the Mass—he never comes on in literature, that is, in such literature as he is told to respect and learn. Evidently what happens in his own fields is not stuff for the Muses!” One sympathizes; but what this Irish boy found in the Irish books I had to read during my six years study was just as alienating as the educational experiences of Corkery’s hypothetical boy stuck with English books. We read and learned by heart *Scealta Johnny Sheimisin*, versions of the stories told by a famous shanachie in the Donegal Gaeltacht; we read Pierre Loti’s *Pecheur d’Islande*, translated from the French as *lascaire Inse Tuile*; we read a dreadful, lugubrious novel called *Eadarbhaile*, about famine, poor land, and the sounds of water under your feet in wet fields. Incidentally, it too was a translation, this time from English. It was not so much that in the middle of the twentieth century that the Irish syllabus deemed that the century had not begun, though it was partly that. In Irish, towns did not exist, let alone trains or jet planes or World War I or II, or Little Mo Connolly or the Busby babes or Paris in the springtime.

I was, however, no fanatic for topicality. Indeed, by some mystery, no doubt to do with

the Northern Ireland Ministry of Education’s desire to stifle any Fenian fires in our young breasts, the crucial English syllabus for entry to higher education was the literature of the Augustan Age. So we read for our Senior Examination Pope’s *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, *The Essay on Man*, *The Rape of the Lock*; Johnson’s *Rasselas* and his *Letter to Lord Chesterfield*, Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, and Gibbon’s *The Age of the Antonines*. We had a wonderful teacher, Jerry Hicks, but I cannot remember anything that he said to us about the literature. He just let it work on us. For me, the sheer and total foreignness of it all not only inculcated a powerful sense of the otherness of the past but shocked me into a realization of the strangeness of language. “The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed today / Had he thy reason, would he skip and play?” It took me months when I was sixteen to figure out that when Pope used that word “riot,” in *The Essay on Man*, he was not talking about the Twelfth of July in Portadown.

Why did I not get the same pleasurable sense of otherness and strangeness from Irish? Because the dread ethos of political correctness hung over it all. This was the real stuff, here was the true, the only—if hidden—Ireland. To read it, to speak it, was to serve your country and your God and keep at bay all those alien influences that might corrupt the Gaelic morale of the school, the county, the country. The really sad thing about the impact of the Irish language in my time is that, in the constricted and sectarian circumstances of the North, it functioned not to open but to narrow the cultural arteries.

So where did all this leave me? A perfect specimen of the success of colonization is one good answer. Well, if I am colonized, there is not much I could or can do about it, and I feel pretty bobbish about it, except for a deep regret that, though I really liked languages (Latin, French, English), Irish was just a politically correct labor and not a labor of love. I did feel upset in Armagh and other nationalist venues at the Watson? George?

*Portadown??* treatment. Later I could even play my own games with it.

As I got older, I saw that my experience of uncertain identity and confused loyalties is not aberrant and that the world where it is healthy is healthily hybridized. There is much talk in Northern Ireland to this day about identity, and there is a real paradox at work in the ceaseless use of the word by politicians and cultural pundits. Normally, when one speaks of “a sense of identity,” one might seem to be pointing to the sheer individuality of experience, its unique particularity. In Northern Ireland (though not just in Northern Ireland—one thinks of the coverage of the Balkans), alas, the phrase is employed almost always to emphasize the *common* nature of experiences and to provide these experiences with significance and meaning already mapped out in cultural or historical terms.

I have come to feel that it is a good thing to be loose or loosened from identity politics and that, in some ways, I was lucky to get the loosening early. Jeremy Popkin, a colleague at the National Humanities Center, has spoken of the memoirs of the Holocaust written by those—a large number of them professional historians—who had had their whole lives disrupted by Hitler and the Nazi regime. A common element in all their very different stories, whether they now live in Jerusalem or Manhattan, is a rejection of, a real distaste for, the reduction of their identity to the single word, Jew. That, after all, is what Hitler was all about.

Some years ago I came across a letter that I find both amusing and consoling in all my thinking of these issues. It was written by that great spokesman for tradition, stability, and continuity, T. S. Eliot, in 1928, on St. George’s Day (Eliot’s own inscription) to the art critic Herbert Read:

I want to write an essay about the point of view of an American who wasn’t an American, because he was born in the

South and went to school in New England as a small boy with a nigger drawl, but who wasn’t a southerner in the South because his people were northerners in a border state and looked down on all southerners and Virginians, and who so was never anything anywhere and who therefore felt himself to be more a Frenchman than an American and more an Englishman than a Frenchman and yet felt that the USA up to a hundred years ago was a family extension. It is almost too difficult even for Henry James, who for that matter wasn’t an American at all, in that sense.

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