



THE BORDER AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

Britain's gradual retreat from empire to commonwealth was characterised not by one generic model of partition, but by measures designed to meet economic and political expediencies and the priorities of successive governments. Burma, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Gold Coast (Ghana), Iraq, Malaya, Nigeria and Sudan were all ripe for partition or repartition but were deemed, rightly or wrongly, to possess the conditions for independence and unity. At the same time, it is difficult to avoid the obvious parallels between Ireland and the problematic legacies of partition in Cyprus, India and Palestine, all of which bear the thumbprints of Britain's response to decolonisation. These demarcated borders have proved inherently unstable and have failed to address the ethno-national divisions pertaining in the respective regions. The persistence of inter-communal violence has led to the establishment of heavily militarised buffer zones, while political tensions have placed limitations on the potential for economic cooperation and integration. Moreover, the creeping annexation of Palestinian territories by Israel has rendered a two-state solution virtually unworkable without a radical redrawing of borders or a population exchange. By contrast, the Irish border is no longer militarised and the vast majority of people on the island have accepted its relative permanence, at least in the short to medium term. Yet the partition of Ireland endowed problems of a similar nature, if not on a similar scale, to those witnessed in Cyprus, India and Palestine.

Sectarianism and violence along the border

In the early nineteenth century, a virulent sectarianism infused social relations in rural Ulster and contributed to the patterns of polarisation – already in existence as a result of the Plantation of Ulster and Cromwellian settlements – that would come to define life in many border areas of post-partition Ireland. Following the 1798 United Irish rebellion, Orange societies spread rapidly throughout the northern counties. Social relations were hitherto defined primarily in terms of mutual hostility between predominantly Protestant landlords and their tenants. However, the migration of Protestant sons and daughters to work in town shops and town houses respectively stoked up a fear in landlords that they would be left with an all-Catholic tenantry. During this prolonged period of increasing land hunger, Orange lodges united landlords and precarious Protestant tenant farmers against the local Catholic

population. Consequently, Catholics were confined to the mountainous areas of the Ulster countryside while Protestants retained control of the fertile terrain of the lowlands. By the mid-twentieth century, this condition of insularity persisted, and the two communities interacted as little as they had done one hundred years previously (Clark & Donnelly, 1988; Mogeey, 1957).

Identity construction and sectarianism in the border counties can be partially understood, then, with reference to Protestants' relative position of privilege, threatened by changes in the demographic composition of the countryside, and by Catholics' strong feelings of grievance around a sense of historical injustice. Since the inception of the state of Northern Ireland, Protestant farmers have employed various means to make life difficult for their Catholic neighbours. This included preventing Protestant land and houses being sold to Catholics. In 1938 the Orange Order in Fermanagh developed a Land Trust to purchase land for Protestants – a scheme that was soon replicated in the other border counties. These measures were reinforced by informal community sanctions ranging from 'friendly advice' to direct threats, as well as the establishment of a gatekeeper system to ensure that Protestant property passed only into Protestant hands (Kaufmann, 2011: 371-372).

The enduring significance of the land question in the border counties cannot be overstated. Research conducted in recent years reveals that, as the twentieth century progressed, natural changes in demographics combined with a relaxation of planning legislation to bring about a higher concentration of Catholics in the region. In areas such as south and mid-Armagh, community relations came to be defined by a limited exchange of land and the institutionalisation of the sectarian gatekeeper system that grew up during the Troubles. Small farmers work closely on a day-to-day basis, but the prevailing system of separate auctioneers, lawyers and estate agents along Catholic-Protestant lines serves to inhibit moves toward greater integration (Murtagh, 1996). Thus while not all rural dwellers are farmers, and although the Ulster countryside is not marked by the same physical separation barriers ('peace walls') that dominate the landscape in Belfast, social relations on the land help us to understand the different geographical and mental worlds inhabited by large sections of Ulster's rural population. The tenuous conclusion that one can draw from this is that the chill

factors associated with demographic changes and fixed notions of territoriality allow only limited labour mobility within and across these localities.

Having played a significant role in mobilising opposition to Home Rule, the Protestants of south and west Ulster regarded Carson and Craig's acceptance of a six-county northern state as the ultimate betrayal. During the Home Rule crisis, recruitment into the UVF had been higher in the counties of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan than in Antrim, Down or the city of Belfast, while the Orange Order continued to provide an outlet for communal solidarity against the perceived threat of Catholics and the IRA (Patterson, 2013: 4). Throughout and subsequent to the War of Independence, in the context of intense sectarian violence and political uncertainty around the border, the fears of Protestants in the three abandoned counties manifested itself in the growth of Orange and Masonic lodges and the private armies sustained by these institutions (Fitzpatrick, 2002: 52-57). Trapped in a conservative Catholic state and faced with social, demographic and political pressures that showed no sign of abating, border Protestants in the South retreated further into their communities and adopted a siege mentality that would last for generations.

Conversely, although Catholics made up roughly one-third of the northern state's population, their fears of Unionist misrule were soon vindicated. After the local council elections of 1920, nationalists controlled 338 of the island's 393 local authorities, including twenty-five in the northern border counties. The local bodies in Derry, which along with those in parts of Tyrone, Armagh and south Down had voted their allegiance to Dáil Éireann, provided the starkest example of northern nationalists' political preferences. However, within a few years of the state's creation, the Unionist government had abolished proportional representation for local government elections and gerrymandered local election boundaries to ensure Unionist minority rule over nationalist majorities, most notably in Derry and Fermanagh. Discrimination in employment and housing allocation, real and perceived, would also feed Catholic discontent with the state until Stormont's prorogation in 1972 (Farrell, 1980: 82-87; Patterson, 2013: 15). Adding to the cultural and material ties of ethno-national identity were the experiences of border Catholics and Protestants in the early years of partition, which heightened a pre-existing affinity with states other than those

of their inherited citizenship. It was inevitable that the border would become a contested space and a flashpoint for violence.

Reorganised, numerically strengthened and ideologically recalibrated, the northern IRA escalated its activities in the border regions in the aftermath of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, particularly when it became apparent that large numbers of nationalists would be left to the mercy of Ulster Unionism. The IRA launched a border offensive involving mass raids on police barracks, a series of arson attacks and kidnappings directed at Unionist establishment figures, and an intensification of hostilities with Crown forces and the B Specials. On occasion, this IRA violence descended into blatantly sectarian intimidation, expulsions and killings. In return the B Specials, feared and despised by local Catholics, unleashed a series of reprisals. A number of scholars have chronicled this border campaign in harrowing detail (Farrell, 1983; Lawlor, 2011; Lynch, 2006). Often despite the republican leadership's intentions, inflamed sectarian tensions would be a recurring feature and/or upshot of the IRA's armed assaults on the border in the decades subsequent to partition and throughout the Troubles.

The IRA's ill-conceived and ultimately unsuccessful border campaign, 1956-1962, adopted War of Independence guerrilla tactics, involving flying columns launched from the South against police barracks and vastly superior British security forces in the North. In an effort to avoid inflaming sectarian tensions, the republican leadership decided not to target the locally recruited B Specials. This reflected an understanding that attacks on the B Specials were often interpreted as an attack on the wider Protestant community, but also demonstrated a failure to grasp the Specials' central role in state responses to IRA activity. Codenamed Operation Harvest, the campaign took the form of a series of abortive operations, most notably on RUC barracks in Fermanagh, and eventually petered out in the early months of 1962. The IRA and RUC both suffered a small number of fatalities (several more were injured) and hundreds of republicans were interned in both states. Failing to upset the constitutional status quo or pose a serious threat to Unionist hegemony, the border campaign had the principal effect of provoking a realignment in republican thinking

towards political participation and greater engagement with social and economic concerns (Hanley & Millar, 2009: 12-39; Patterson, 1997: 89-94).

General histories of the Troubles have tended to concentrate mainly on events in Belfast and Derry, the urban epicentres of violence. For this reason, research conducted by Newry & Mourne Cooperative and Enterprise Agency, on disadvantage, exclusion and sustainable economics, is a welcome addition to the literature. The research report makes a number of important points regarding the legacy of the Troubles in a Catholic majority where sectarian divisions are not traditionally considered a serious problem. Not only has the conflict sharpened the isolation of Protestants in Newry and its surrounding areas, leading to the establishment of 'deep' green and orange areas and placing severe limits on cross-community interaction, but has also exacerbated existing levels of social exclusion, poverty, benefit dependency and physical dereliction. As a result, there is an onus on 'those charged with drawing up socio-economic development strategies to ensure that the two largely separate communities which live in the region feel equal ownership of those strategies, enjoy the same opportunities to benefit from the improvements which they hope to achieve, and that ultimately both traditions can combine their talents in pursuit of a set of mutually beneficial aims and objectives'. The alternative is social discord, civil unrest and the entrenchment of divisions for generations to come (1997: 30).

To date, the most serious academic study of violence in the border counties is Henry Patterson's aptly titled *Ireland's Violent Frontier*. Patterson laments the fact that academics and journalists have by and large 'ignored the significance of the border for understanding the conflict', and claims that Eugene McCabe's *Victim's* trilogy and Patrick McCabe's *Carn* stand out for 'evok[ing] the impact of the early Troubles on relations between Protestants and Catholics in the Monaghan/Fermanagh border lands' (2013: 2). Not surprisingly, *Ireland's Violent Frontier* shifts the focus from the urban epicentres of conflict to rural Ulster and in doing so opens up the thorny issues of cross-border security, collusion, Anglo-Irish relations and sectarianism. Significantly, the concluding section of the book addresses the vexed question of whether the IRA conducted what might be termed 'ethnic cleansing' in the border areas. Patterson concedes that use of the term in the Northern Ireland context is

‘sensationalist’, particularly as it has its origins in the Balkans conflict, but argues that it nonetheless ‘had an emotional truth for border Protestants as the continuing attacks and killings struck at their community’s morale and sense of security’ (ibid: 194). The legitimacy and morality of targeting part-time and off-duty members of the RUC and UDR continues to be a matter of debate (Patterson, 2010). But the recollections, experiences and perceptions of border Protestants lead one to believe that descriptions of the IRA campaign as ‘a brutal, sectarian success’ do contain a grain of truth (Patterson, 2013: 197).

Until very recently, Protestants living areas such as south Armagh have been reluctant to speak openly about their experiences of the Troubles. The reasons for this are many and varied. A large proportion of respondents to one study (Donnan & Simpson, 2007) recalled that fears of intimidation and concerns about the involvement of Catholic neighbours in acts of republican violence were among the factors preventing them from telling their stories. A number of border Protestants have remained silent because of feelings of self-recrimination and guilt; others found it too painful to recount the details of what were of brutal attacks and killings on their loved ones; and still others explained that for years they found a quiet dignity in silent suffering. For many this silence has proved necessary – and indeed constructive – in the face of a conflict situation. However, the peace process has ushered in a new era of openness, characterised by a collective appetite for truth and reflection. Encouraged by the state, civil society actors and researchers of the academic and journalistic varieties, border Protestants have begun to record their testimonies as a counter to what they perceive as republicans’ monopoly of victimhood. This new dispensation has seen the initiation of a series of projects aimed at transforming personal experiences into public memory, not just in Armagh but also in parts of Tyrone, Fermanagh and the various border areas affected by the conflict (Gardiner, 2008). It will be some time before research on this subject reaches the point of saturation.

So strong are these feelings of victimhood about what happened in the past that they are irrevocably tied to notions of identity and attachment to place, whether a field, farm building or country lane (Donnan, 2005). Moreover, the locational problems faced by border Protestants – specifically, their growing feelings of isolation,

vulnerability and powerlessness – are shared by small communities living in interface situations. These feelings stem from the real and perceived threat of violence and have had a detrimental effect on community relations and politics across generations. Young people are in some cases reticent about socialising locally, choosing instead to venture to towns and cities further afield. The same communities and their politicians are increasingly suspicious of British government interventions in the peace process and are therefore inclined to search for signs of a Trojan horse in each agreement or political measure facilitated by such interventions. Compounding these difficulties is the internal threat posed by demographic pressures and the rise of Sinn Féin. Shrinking Protestant minorities along the border and in interface areas view the forward march of republicanism from a position of disadvantage, and the zero-sum nature of politics in the North ensures that measures designed to achieve parity of esteem, such as restrictions on parades or the flying of flags, frequently evoke an acute sense of loss. Protestant alienation therefore takes on political, cultural and geographical forms, often in combination (Southern, 2007).

One of the starkest examples of cultural alienation relates the restrictions placed on Orange parades, which are interpreted as an attempt to erode the most visible expression of Protestant cultural identity (Jarman, 2003). Parades Commission determinations against Orange marches at Drumcree and Twaddell Avenue, for example, have led to watershed moments in post-ceasefire Irish politics. Numerically and politically the Orange Order is in gradual decline, but at crucial junctures it has come to represent a potent symbol of identity. This is especially true in rural parts of the North, where the Order is sustained by intergenerational support and a strong sense of communal solidarity (McAuley & Tonge, 2007: 34-35). Significantly, membership is most dense in rural districts with substantial Catholic populations, i.e. North Antrim, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh (Kaufmann, 2011: 380). In light of the real pressures exerting themselves on Protestants in the border counties, the role of the Orangeism is perhaps best understood as a ‘formidable juxtaposition’: ‘the immobility and the dynamism of the Protestant culture, the mingling of resolution and hysteria’ (Lyons, 1979: 145).

Of course, Catholics in the southern parts of Ulster were not immune to the worst violence of the Troubles. To the contrary, the loyalist bombings of Dublin and Monaghan in 1974 claimed the lives of thirty-three civilians and injured approximately 258 people, the greatest loss of life in a single day of the conflict (Bell, 1996). These attacks are the subject of much speculation and have been investigated by a series of independent inquiries, most notably those led by Irish Supreme Court Justice Henry Barron. Although no one has been convicted of the killings, they have repeatedly been attributed to loose alliance of loyalist groups known collectively as the ‘Glenanne gang’, which is believed to be responsible for about 120 sectarian killings in the area of Armagh and Tyrone dubbed the ‘murder triangle’ (Tiernan, 2000). In a recent publication based on painstaking research for the Pat Finucane Centre, Anne Cadwallader pieces together the evidence of collusion in these killings, concluding that they were carried out ‘with tacit assistance from members of government forces’, specifically the RUC and UDR (2013: 16). The profound issues raised by Cadwallader are fundamental to an understanding of chill factors in the border counties and of border Catholics’ difficult relationship with the Unionist state.

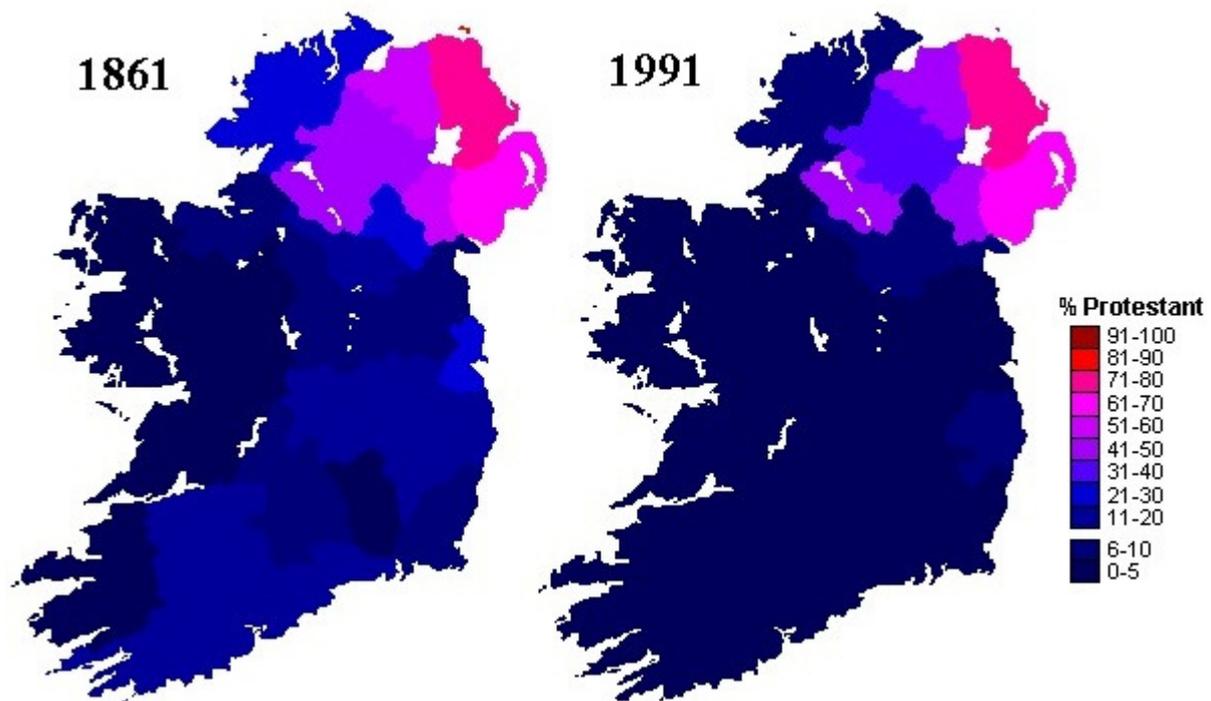
A final note on the role of victims’ groups is necessary because their prevalence and their organisation along essentially confessional lines are symbolic of the distance some communities have yet to travel on the road to meaningful peace and reconciliation. Although large NGOs such as WAVE exist to provide care and practical support to all people bereaved, injured or traumatised by the Troubles, many more organisations campaign for truth and/or justice on behalf of select groups of victims. In the border counties, there are a plethora of funded bodies advocating and addressing the needs of former security personnel and their families. These include Tyrone East Phoenix Group and the South East Fermanagh Foundation, which work on behalf of RUC and UDR members affected by republican violence. Relatives for Justice, the Pat Finucane Centre and the organisation Justice for the Forgotten, on the other hand, represent the bulk of bereaved victims and survivors of loyalist and state violence in border areas. This is partly reflective of a division of labour that occurs within insular communities. Significantly, though, this division of labour is also ideological: the disparate roles performed by victims’ groups correspond with their

differing interpretations of what constitutes a ‘victim’ and with their preferences for justice, truth recovery or a combination of both. Of all the groups founded in recent years, only the Omagh Support & Self Help Group, launched in the aftermath of the 1998 Omagh bomb, appears to have transcended denominational and political divisions. Until comprehensive mechanisms for dealing with the past are established to the satisfaction of all victims’ groups, there will continue to exist barriers to cross-community interaction in border areas affected by the conflict.

The ‘greening’ of the border: migration, demographic change and ethnic politics

That there has been a marked relative decline in the Protestant population of the border counties, and of Ireland more generally, is indisputable. This long-term trend is evident from the available quantitative census data, which we Irish have become particularly adept at analysing – some might say overanalysing – within an ethno-national framework.

Figure 1. The distribution of Protestants in Ireland, 1861 & 1991 (Source: [Wesley Johnston](#))



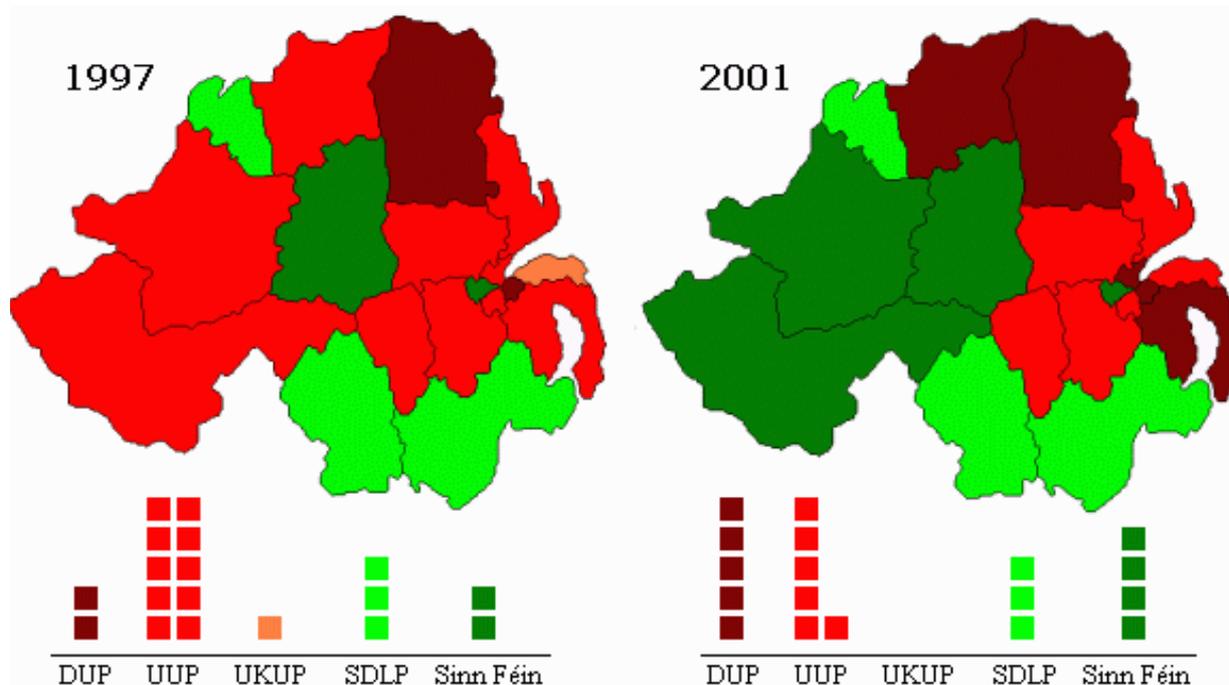
Following a sharp drop during the Home Rule crisis and in the early years of partition, the Protestant population of Ireland has fallen steadily since 1926. As Figure 1 above

demonstrates, the border counties have proven no exception to this pattern of demographic change. Recent research indicates that Catholics are beginning to predominate in the western and peripheral counties of the North, while the distribution of Protestants is quite the reverse in almost every important respect (Compton, 1995; Doherty, 1993). This, by anyone's definition, constitutes a 'greening' of the Irish border over the past century.

A political transformation has accompanied these radical changes in religious demographics along the border. One obvious explanation for this is that high birth rates and the relative increase in the Catholic population have created a large pool of young Catholics who are available for recruitment into the SDLP and Sinn Féin. Gerry Adams' strategy for convincing grassroots republicans to support the movement's reorientation towards the 'Armalite and ballot box' involved recourse to demographics and the apparent inevitability of achieving a united Ireland by democratic means. In this respect, he has been partially vindicated. Sinn Féin has enjoyed remarkable success in mobilising nationalist youth and making significant electoral inroads (Bean, 2007; McAllister, 2004). Attempting to build a new republic on the foundation of crude religious-determinist nationalism may be akin to painting a house with a Pot Noodle – a messy endeavour in which one quickly runs out of substance. But there is no doubt that Sinn Féin's position of absolute dominance along the Irish border holds great significance, not least because it supports the party's claim to all-island status and bodes well for cross-border cooperation between elected representatives and local authorities.

For the purposes of illuminating Sinn Féin's meteoric rise since the IRA ceasefires and the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, it is instructive to examine its performance in recent elections. Since 1997/98, the overall pattern has been one of islandwide growth for the party, marked by an increased concentration of support in the rural hinterlands of Ulster.

Figure 2. The ‘greening’ of the West: Northern Assembly elections, 1997 & 2001
 (Source: Ireland Story)



Following Caoimhghín O Caoláin’s breakthrough in Cavan-Monaghan in 1997, which gave Sinn Féin its first Dáil seat since 1957, the party has made a concerted effort to increase its representation at all levels. An improved share of the vote in the 2003, 2007 and 2011 Assembly elections saw the party supplant the SDLP as the dominant voice of northern nationalism. This has been complemented by unprecedented victories in the Dáil constituencies of Louth, Donegal North-East and Donegal South-West, where Pearse Doherty won a by-election in 2010 before topping the poll in the 2011 general election that followed. In the North, Sinn Féin increased its number of Westminster seats from two in 1997 to five in 2005, retaining these five seats in the 2010 general elections. Conor Murphy won the Newry & Armagh seat from the SDLP in 2005, and was one of four Sinn Féin MPs that increased their majorities in 2010.

The 2014 local and European elections saw Sinn Féin consolidate in the North and make considerable gains in the South. In addition to three European Parliament seats, the party won a total of 264 local council seats across the island. Table 1 presents a breakdown of Sinn Féin’s performance in border constituencies.

Table 1. Sinn Féin local election performance in the border counties, 2014 (* six seats remain to be filled)

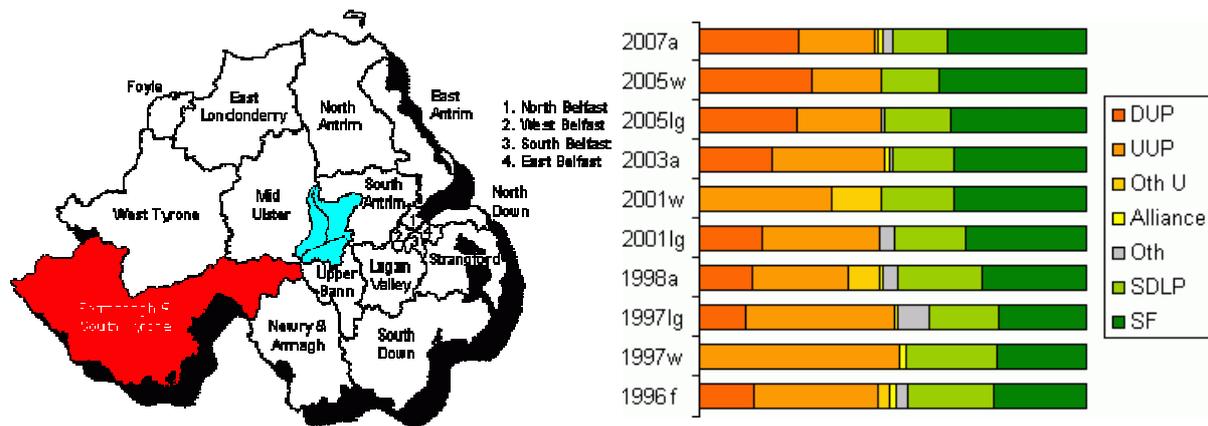
Constituency	Sinn Féin seats/Total seats	1 st pref vote
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	8/41	21%
Derry City and Strabane	16/40	36.1%
Fermanagh and Omagh	17/40	40.1%
Mid Ulster	18/40	41%
Newry City, Mourne and Down	14/41	37.1%
Cavan	4/18	18.2%
Donegal	9/37	19.6%
Leitrim	4/18	19.2%
Louth	10/29	31.4%
Monaghan*	5/12	38%

The strength of Sinn Féin’s position is evident from its representation on every council along the border. It comes as no surprise that the party is strongest in areas where the IRA was most active. Even where it does not hold particular influence at a local level, as in Donegal and Cavan, the party has managed to secure the Dáil seats in those constituencies. According to the latest opinion polls, Sinn Féin is on course to make further gains in the 2016 Irish general elections and progress towards relative political dominance in the border counties.

It would be careless to overstate the connection between demographics and electoral performance. Attitudes towards cultural and constitutional questions, not to mention social and economic issues, cannot be neatly mapped onto distinct ethnic groups. Nor can religious affiliation for that matter. And yet in Sinn Féin’s victories in the parliamentary constituencies of West Tyrone and Fermanagh & South Tyrone, at the expense of the UUP, we find sectarian dynamics in operation. In the latter case, where religious demographics are finely balanced in the favour of nationalists and

where the conflict has left an enduring legacy of polarisation and enmity, it is no surprise that the rise of Sinn Féin (Figure 3) has prompted the retreat of local Protestants into an Orange populist bloc.

Figure 3. Electoral performance of the main parties in Fermanagh & South Tyrone (Source: [Ark, Northern Ireland Elections](#))



This explains in part the fact that Michelle Gildernew was the only Sinn Féin MP not to retain her Westminster seat in 2010 with an increased majority. In this instance, local Protestant fear of and hostility to Sinn Féin translated into an electoral pact between the main Unionist parties. Even Phil Flanagan, a Sinn Féin MLA in Fermanagh & South Tyrone, concedes that the election was fought on sectarian lines:

From a republican perspective, the election was fought in terms of the Unionists coming together and Sinn Féin responding to that by encouraging nationalists to unite behind Michelle. There were some attempts to make it a policy-based election. We tried to highlight Rodney Connor's association with the Tories and his support for cutting the EU budget, which would have had a detrimental impact on the farming community. But ultimately it came down to a sectarian headcount, if you want to use that phrase.¹

That the election was mired in controversy and allegations of underhand tactics, and that Gildernew kept her seat by a narrow margin of four votes, would suggest that sectarian headcounts will continue to operate in tandem with political calculations in the region, at least in the short to medium term.

¹ Interview with the author, 10 April 2014.

This examination of Fermanagh & South Tyrone leads us to consider the vexed question of whether there is a direct link between migration and demographic change, on the one hand, and identity and ethnic conflict, on the other. The causes of Protestants' so-called 'exodus' from the South during the Irish War of Independence and Civil War are not easily discerned or explained. Although it is generally accepted that the real and perceived threat of violence throughout the revolutionary period had some bearing on the decline of the Protestant population, there is no consensus in the historiography as to the extent of its impact. Drawing on extant and ongoing research, by Martin Maguire (1993) for example, Bielenberg (2013) argues that the effect of revolutionary violence on the Protestant minority of the twenty-six counties must be weighed against the wider social and economic forces at work. It is important to account for such factors as economic and voluntary emigration, natural increases in the Catholic population (a consequence of mixed marriages and higher birth rates), British withdrawal of predominantly Protestant soldiers and government officials, and First World War deaths. David Fitzpatrick goes further still on the basis of a sophisticated exploration of census data and underutilised statistical evidence, rejecting almost entirely 'ethnic cleansing' and migration explanations for the decline of southern Protestantism between 1911 and 1926. He suggests that

the main source of the Protestant malaise in the nascent Irish Free State was not excess migration but failure to enrol new members, presumably as a consequence of already low fertility and nuptiality, exacerbated by losses through mixed marriage and conversion. If any campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' was attempted, its demographic impact was fairly minor (2013: 659).

In the interest of historical accuracy, it is crucial that the full range of factors and sources are accounted for, even (or especially) if they threaten to dispel deeply held shibboleths around the nature and scale of migration and demographic change in early twentieth century Ireland.

As noted above, the publication of Patterson's *Ireland's Violent Frontier* has thrown some light on the violence that occurred along the border during the Troubles as well as generating an impressionistic understanding of how this violence affected the shrinking Protestant population in those areas. Steve Bruce explains how social

relations on the land serve to exacerbate the cumulative effect of one attack or killing on long-term demographic trends in the border counties:

The IRA murdering a Loyalist in Glencairn does not lead to sectarian geography being re-drawn; the murder of a Protestant young farmer in south Armagh often means the removal of a whole family and further territory passing into Nationalist hands (1999: 130).

The intervention of Unionist politicians and newspapers on the issue of 'ethnic cleansing' has undoubtedly served to polarise opinion. Nevertheless, an impartial reading of demographic changes and Sinn Féin's rise to dominance in conjunction with narratives of victimhood and minority life (Crawley, 2002, Curtin & Wilson, 1989; Gardiner, 2008; Hamilton, 2004) leads to the inexorable conclusion that violence and the perceived threat of violence has contributed to the relative decline the Protestant population of the border counties. To argue otherwise would be naïve. What is up for debate, however, is the level of importance we attach to sectarianism, violent and otherwise.

As a case in point, Southern (2005: 171-174) draws a useful parallel between the experiences of Protestants in the Fermanagh and Tyrone border areas and the Cityside of Derry. In both instances, the empirical fact of a significant decline in the Protestant population is indisputable, though the causal factors behind this decline are less obvious. The disturbing reality of regular threats and attacks on the residents of the Fountain estate, the last Protestant enclave on the Cityside, renders it difficult to explain the long-term trend of population shifts and segregation without reference to sectarianism. At the same time, some of the submissions to the Opsahl Commission downplayed the effect of sectarianism and pointed to suburbanisation as a partial explanation. Examining the exit of ethnic groups from specific areas, Poole and Doherty (1996) contend that Protestants adjust to the threatened implications of increased residential mixing or 'Catholicisation' of their area 'by moving house just enough to ensure that they continue to live in the same kind of local environment as before ... the average Protestant is trying to maintain the same degree of isolation as he or she enjoyed previously'. These major adjustments have seen a significant movement of Protestants from the western and peripheral counties, thus exacerbating

the 'greening' of the border and the extent of segregation at a micro-level in those areas.

Scholars attempting to generalise the *reasons* for migration and patterns of religious distribution, not to mention the rise or decline of specific identities, must also take cognisance of the limitations of census data and empiricism as a *measure* of such changes. These include: the problem of distinguishing between natural increases and migration; the consistently high rates of non-response to the voluntary question on religion; the effect of boundary changes; the fact that social trends and events of political significance do not coincide at ten year intervals; and the assumptions made to compensate for the absence of supplementary data. A number of studies have identified a particular problem in the tendency to equate Catholic with nationalist and Protestant as Unionist. This approach fails to account for those who, in the context of Ireland's gradual secularisation and shift towards multiculturalism, reject labels based on religious denomination. Researchers and commentators, who are duty-bound to eschew fixed notions of identity, have too often been responsible for their reproduction. Fortunately, limited evidence of the emergence of multiple, hybrid and non-ethnic identities has forced a rethink, a willingness to embrace complexity in narratives of our recent past (Anderson & Shuttleworth, 1998; Doherty & Poole, 2002). This turn towards complexity is crucial if we are to achieve a fuller understanding of the dynamics of personal and group relationships along the border.

Moving away from the assumptions that have hitherto informed much research on, and media representations of, demographic change and the conflict will necessarily involve a greater focus on non-sectarian mobilisations around issues of class, gender and the environment. There is a growing body of literature addressing these previously neglected areas of scholarly enquiry, which in turn can be employed towards localised studies of the border counties. As Kaufmann (2011) has discovered in his original yet somewhat essentialist examination of demographic change as a *cause* of ethnic conflict in the North, reconciling the quantitative and qualitative evidence

can be a highly onerous task. To this end, ongoing research by Maguire (1993),² Bielenberg (2013) and Fitzpatrick (2013) provide alternative methodological templates that can be adapted to produce fuller, multi-dimensional explorations of sectarian and non-sectarian relations in the southern and western parts of Ulster during the Troubles. In a pertinent review of the literature on Protestant experiences of emigration, McAuley underlines the importance of developing this area of scholarly enquiry in the context of peacebuilding and efforts towards social justice:

The experiences of Protestant emigrants, past and present, must be made more relevant to contemporary Irish politics and society. This is required, if only to confirm ... that the social and political identity of those from the Unionist tradition may not be as fixed as some would suggest (1996: 63).

More studies of the kind described here would represent a major advance towards complexity in a debate all too frequently tainted by simplistic narratives and political polemicism.

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² Martin Maguire, Dundalk Institute of Technology, delivered a talk at the 25th Féile an Phobail (August 2013) entitled 'What happened to Protestants in the South after partition?' in which he indicated that there is great scope for extending this type of research to the peripheral counties of Ulster.

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