

The real lessons of Ulster

by Dean Godson

The Northern Ireland conflict is now fought over the lessons of the Troubles. One apparent lesson is that only extremists can make deals stick. But perhaps the real conclusion is that the late-colonial British did not properly study their own history

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Why should anyone still care about the Ulster Unionist party, the Orange Order or, for that matter, Northern Ireland itself? The UUP, the ruling party for the first half century of Northern Ireland's existence, from 1921 to 1972, is about as healthy as Ariel Sharon--nominally alive but, to all intents and purposes, a goner. The Orange Order seems destined to enter one of its extended periods of quiescence, such as it went through in the 19th century. Even the novelty of Ian Paisley's danse macabre with Martin McGuinness has attracted less attention in Britain than might have been expected.

The reasons for this apparent indifference to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact by the Lagan aren't hard to fathom. Northern Ireland isn't news any more because the second IRA ceasefire is now a decade old. And many in Northern Ireland believed all along that mainland opinion only ever cared about the ending of full-scale violence. With vast amounts of British taxpayer and EU money still flooding into the place, Ulster seems to have reverted into its complacent, parochial, pre-Troubles self.

And yet, like the proverbial tar baby, Northern Ireland won't let go. In their own peculiar way, the Troubles and their aftermath became the defining national security experience for the postwar generation in Britain--much as the first world war was for Eden and Macmillan, or the second world war for Heath and Callaghan. Of course, most of the dramatis personae this time round never donned a uniform. But this squalid little war, conducted over the constitutional status and governance of the most cussedly unfashionable part of the Kingdom--and which seemed utterly sui generis for much of the time after the start of the Troubles in 1969--has suddenly become a trendy template for conflict resolution across the world. There is now something of an "international ideology of Northern Ireland."

One could have drawn many lessons from the Troubles, but what has come down now, after nearly four decades, is that the moderates in such conflicts haven't got the "credibility" to "deliver." Only the extremes can make agreements stick. And to do that, you need to suck them into negotiations and make them an integral part of new arrangements. That means offering generous inducements--often to pretty nasty people. The extremes thus win, but in the process apparently cease to be quite so extreme.

Many British politicians are at this game now: Peter Hain, Paul Murphy, Michael Ancram, to name a few, seek to tell the people of benighted trouble spots about the "lessons of Ulster." And then there is the narrative of years of Northern Irish peacemaking which Tony Blair will no doubt bring to the table in his new capacity as a middle east envoy.

Even General David Petraeus, the American commander in Iraq, told an audience at the Royal United Services Institute in September that his British military counterparts had exerted a big influence on his thinking in how to handle the Sunni tribes in Anbar province. One general, in particular, told Petraeus how he had learned from his time in Northern Ireland that he had to sit "across the table from individuals whose lads had been thumping his men with pipes two years earlier." Yet for all the Americans' alleged shortcomings in counterinsurgency, a senior British military source now acknowledges that they are "streets ahead" of our army in this department. Rather, the British military believe that their real "value-added" is to be found in the para-political realm of negotiating with adversaries.

Closer to home, the Northern Ireland experience is constantly invoked by "security experts" whenever there is a discussion about new counterterrorism legislation against violent Islamist radicals. For example, the option of internment (imprisonment without charge or trial) is invariably ruled out on the grounds that it was tried in the early 1970s in Northern Ireland and didn't work, alienating the nationalist minority. Patrick Mercer MP, a former lieutenant-colonel of the Sherwood Foresters who served in Northern Ireland, repeated this view in late July 2007 upon the termination of Operation Banner (the army's deployment in support of civil power in the province that began in 1969). In fact, in the right circumstances, internment can work: for example, it was introduced most efficaciously on both sides of the Irish border during the second world war and the IRA campaign of 1956-61.

I have yet to meet a single politician, mandarin, policeman, soldier or spook who has examined in any depth why internment failed once on the island of Ireland in the 20th century, in 1971, but succeeded there at least three other times--and what the reasons for those differing outcomes might be. It is now taken as axiomatic that it can't be done, and perhaps the conventional wisdom is right, especially in the era of the Human Rights Act. But the issue is surely serious enough to merit deeper investigation--considering that the British state is confronting a new kind of terrorist threat that is far more lethal than anything the Provisionals threw at it over 30 years.

Kenneth Bloomfield, perhaps the ablest of the local Northern Ireland civil servants during the Troubles, casts valuable light on the internment debate of 1970-71 in his second volume of memoirs *A Tragedy of Errors: The Government and Misgovernment of Northern Ireland* (Liverpool University Press). First, he reminds us of the context of internment: had it not been introduced in the face of the Provisionals' burgeoning campaign, there would have been an explosion of retaliatory loyalist violence. He also notes that when such action was being contemplated, the Heath government failed to ask the proper questions of the old unionist-dominated Northern Ireland government. What efforts were being made to secure the co-operation of the republic? What was being done to ensure that the measure was directed against terrorists on both sides, so that it was at least seen to be equitable? And what was the quality of their intelligence?

The issue of intelligence is of particular significance. The work of the historian Henry Patterson has shown that the Royal

Ulster Constabulary special branch of the mid-1960s was very acute in its assessment of the stirrings of a revived republicanism in Belfast at the time of the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter uprising. Likewise, Paul Bew, historical adviser to the Bloody Sunday tribunal, has noted that the records show that the RUC divisional commander in Londonderry correctly anticipated what might happen on that day if troops were deployed. How can the RUC have got it so right in respect of those events, but not internment? Or did they get it that wrong? Did the sceptical but rather slicker army bureaucrats subsequently manage to pass the bulk of the blame for that failure on to the dour provincials of the RUC and the Stormont government of the time? And did this then become part of the convenient folklore of the British state?

British officialdom certainly has its own primitive folk memories--every bit as much as the Shankill and the Falls. The army's recent official history, *Operation Banner: Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland*, makes a large number of sweeping political and historical assertions. These folk memories seem to have been moulded by, among other things, misperceptions of Britain's historical guilt in the affairs of Ireland, before and after partition. The fashionable writings of the 1970s by authors such as Robert Kee and Michael Farrell played a key part in this. Even when they were superseded by the more substantial works of historians such as RF Foster, JJ Lee, David Fitzpatrick, Paul Bew and Henry Patterson, the simplistic narratives about "bad Brits" retained their hold.

Indeed, in my experience, one of the most fascinating qualities of the British mandarin is the banality of its historical and intellectual analysis--combined with a superlative practical tradecraft. Such skills were honed for particular purposes during multiple late imperial retreats. The present marquess of Salisbury--who served on the cabinet's Northern Ireland committee under John Major--describes this mindset as "the ruthless use of residual power to relinquish that very power altogether."

In a sense, therefore, the Pat Finucane Centre (founded in memory of the murdered republican solicitor), is right to criticise the army's history of Operation Banner as signifying an imperialist mentality. The British did behave like colonialists--but, critically, like late colonialists rather than high imperialists. They superimposed on Northern Ireland a model of self-extrication that was appropriate for colonies, where the white settlers amounted to no more than 10 per cent of the population: the army would hold the ring till the politicians cobbled together something that would enable impoverished postwar Britain to pull out in a dignified fashion. All the movement was always in one direction, towards a diminution of a British role. Whether this model was appropriate for a part of Britain where around 70 per cent of the population was pro-British (at least at the start of the Troubles, when pro-union Catholics are included) is open to question.

Few of these British panjandrums had much affection for the Provisionals as people, and certainly none of them had any liking for republican violence. But most subscribed fairly uncritically to the notion of "50 years of unionist misrule" from 1921-72. In their eyes--as revealed by the unclassified sections of Operation Banner--"bigotry" was deemed largely to have been a Protestant phenomenon; and the desire to remain part of Britain, shared by many Catholics, Alliance party members and power-sharing unionists such as Brian Faulkner and David Trimble, is portrayed as evidence of unyielding rigidity (even though it was specifically upheld in the Good Friday agreement). These officials, whether in or out of uniform, adhered to this analysis even after they came to the conclusion at some point in the mid-1970s that withdrawal was not an option--if only because the Irish Republic could not absorb the place.

Yet even now, the army history crudely reiterates old nationalist-friendly narratives about institutionalised discrimination and deprivation--in which Catholics are invariably sole victims. For example, it states--quite inaccurately--of the post-partition era up to 1969 that "all important posts were held by Protestants," blithely unaware that the first lord chief justice, the permanent secretary at the crucial ministry of education and many senior RUC officers from 1921-72 were Catholics (including Chief Superintendent Frank Lagan, who warned what might happen on Bloody Sunday). The account of Catholic poverty in Londonderry, describing the Creggan as a Victorian slum, is rubbish: it was a new large housing estate built by the unionist government. Likewise the Rossville Flats, whence petrol bombs rained down on the RUC, were new builds. Such developments are quite rightly abhorred now, but they were monstrosities perpetrated against the entire working classes of these islands, and not merely against the Northern nationalist portion of the proletariat.

Operation Banner portrays deprivation in Belfast and Londonderry as appalling, but without any sense of context: again, it was also appalling in many mainland towns and cities, and rows of Victorian housing were to be found in deprived Protestant areas too. As for the Dickensian description of children aged five being forced to get out of bed at 2am to roam the streets in order make way for siblings who otherwise wouldn't get a night's sleep--well, I have never seen that even in Sinn Fein accounts of unionist misrule. One would never guess from all this that every citizen of Northern Ireland benefited from 1945 on from the British welfare state--a parity for which unionist governments fought very hard (and the effects of which were often uncongenial to the Loyal Orders). As the late Monsignor Denis Faul, long-time principal of St Patrick's Academy in Dungannon, Co Tyrone, would often observe, there should be a statue of RA Butler erected in every Catholic area. Why? For piloting the 1944 Education Act, which secured Ulster's excellent Catholic grammar schools and thus emancipated far more people than Adams and McGuinness ever did.

Most oddly, the army study asserts that "except for a few relatively isolated exceptions the [IRA] ceasefire has held." In fact, the IRA broke their 1994 ceasefire in 1996 with the South Quay bomb at Canary Wharf, murdering two newsagents, injuring 100 and blowing scores of local employees like myself out of their seats. The IRA ceasefire had to be restored the next year, and at a rather high political price. Many years hence, the state papers may well reveal that this price included intimations from the newly elected Labour government that republicans would be granted the Bloody Sunday inquiry, which has upset so many in the army.

I am not militarily literate, so I cannot make any assessment of tactical lessons about rural patrolling, urban observation posts or the role of naval and air support in the Troubles as described in Operation Banner. But the study does confirm that the historical understanding upon which the army based its analysis of the Troubles was seriously flawed. The army, like so many "Brits," succumbed to the charms of what the historian Liam Kennedy mockingly called the MOPE--"most oppressed people ever." Indeed, JJ Lee--scarcely a revisionist historian--once came across a glorious quote from an editorial in the Irish Press, the semi-official Dublin government newspaper, in 1943: "There is no kind of oppression visited on any minority in Europe which the six county nationalists have not also endured." Yet on any global scale, the Stormont regime bore no resemblance to French Algeria, the American deep south, apartheid South Africa, let alone Nazism (Bernard Levin actually made this last comparison). The genius of northern nationalists after 1969 was to sell the story that something terrible was going on in Ulster--which was causing huge collateral damage to the reputation of right-thinking Englishmen. Many British soldiers and officials believed that the Prods, at some level, had it coming to them--and this conditioned their response to republican violence.

Two outstanding new books--*The Orange Order: a Contemporary Northern Irish History* by Canadian academic Eric Kaufmann (Oxford University Press), and *Unionism and Orangeism in Northern Ireland Since 1945: The Decline of the Loyal Family*, co-written by Kaufmann and Henry Patterson (Manchester University Press)--provide a corrective to all of this. These books do not tell the story of liberal unionists or fashionable power-sharers such as Faulkner, Trimble or (briefly) William Craig. Rather, they tell of conservative, often small town or rural worthies, with granite-like countenances, rejoicing in Scots-Irish names like Sam Campbell, Samuel Colhoun and Joseph Cunningham, marching stiffly with tightly rolled-up umbrellas in ancient parades that mainlanders could scarcely fathom. But they were also staunch opponents of Paisley's brand of religion and politics, denying his fringe sect, the Free Presbyterians, the right to become chaplains in the Orange Order--even at the height of the violence. Despite the murder of 500 Orangemen, these unfashionable but respectable provincials laboured mightily to prevent their brethren joining the loyalist terrorists and instead to sign up to the security forces. They gave short shrift to potential leaders who did call for insurrection, such as Ernie Baird.

In *Unionism and Orangeism in Northern Ireland since 1945*, Patterson and Kaufmann, relying upon the minutes of grand lodges and county grand lodges, brilliantly convey the atmosphere of hot, heavy, musty Orange halls. They certainly do not make light of the prejudices, fears and provincial mean-spiritedness of pre-Troubles loyalism: the often irrational terror of "Taigs" taking good jobs while Protestant Ulstermen were supposedly away at war; the allegedly pro-Catholic bias of the unionist-created Housing Trust in allocating council homes; or the fear that Protestants in rural areas might sell to the highest bidder (often a Catholic) and thus alter the demography and character of a locality forever. But the authors place these prejudices in proportion. Indeed, one of the most fascinating sections concerns the difficulties which Captain Henderson, the proprietor of the *News Letter* (the main pro-unionist morning paper in Belfast), had with his Orange brethren for attending the funeral of his Catholic commanding officer from the war. The order was rightly condemned for this, but the broader question is rarely asked: how many Dixiecrats were led into battle by American blacks? How many members of the Broederbond served under black officers?

There is another reason why the old Stormont wasn't like the old Pretoria. No matter how prejudiced it may have been, the old unionist establishment was obliged to maintain a relationship with the British state--if only to keep the subsidies flowing. The story of the old Stormont is of the UUP leadership's attempt to steer a course between the populist pressures from the grassroots and the insistence of the Whitehall-oriented Northern Ireland civil service (NICS) that mainland money meant mainland standards. These unimaginative provincials came to depend heavily on men like Ken Bloomfield in the NICS and were lost without them when Edward Heath prorogued Stormont in 1972. Although they had a sense of the damage that Paisley's surges of holy writ were inflicting upon the image of unionism as a whole, they still had little idea of how to promote their cause when left to their own devices. Indeed, as Paul Bew has observed, even when unionist politicians had a story to tell, they failed to do so. Contrast, he says, the respective images among right-thinking opinion on the mainland of Gerry Adams and long-time UUP leader James Molyneaux. One is often lauded as a hard man who saw the light; the other is dismissed as a reactionary provincial. Yet Adams's father, who was interned in the second world war, was part of a republican movement that rooted for a German victory--and his son has never repudiated any part of that record. Molyneaux, the unimaginative, sash-wearing NCO, did his patriotic duty in the struggle against Nazism, even helping to liberate Bergen-Belsen. Imagine what would have been said had the roles been reversed.

Kaufmann and Patterson record one gloriously emblematic moment at a UUP executive meeting in 1980, when the brilliant Edgar Graham--later murdered at the age of 29 by the Provisionals--inquired of his elders why unionist MPs were not making

more statements to the media. Molyneaux was dismissive: "Most important news re Northern Ireland broke after party headquarters closed for the day," noted the minutes. "The media was only interested in sensationalist news." What a weirdly inadequate bunch Ulster's unionists were, and are. But that does not necessarily put them in the wrong.

We return to the opening question: why care about any of this now? Because he who controls the past sets the terms of trade for the next round of the contest. The republican movement is, among other things, now arguing for the legitimacy of its use of violence during the Troubles. Republicans have a wonderful, if selective, long-term memory; the modern Brits don't even have one for the short term. And in Ireland, that can have profoundly practical implications. One example from the mid-1990s is enough to make the point. After the first IRA ceasefire of 1994, the republican leadership complained bitterly that they had been gulled into calling a cessation of hostilities by the Brits, who then proceeded to "inject preconditions" into the process, namely decommissioning of weapons prior to entry into all-party talks. Nationalist Ireland, along with the Clinton administration and much of the media, believed the republican narrative. The Major government failed to make its own case; indeed, until Paul Bew dug up the relevant quotes, the Northern Ireland office (NIO) seemed to have forgotten that Adams had been complaining for months before the 1994 ceasefire that the British had been demanding that very act of decommissioning! Nonetheless, the republican leaders still called the ceasefire and then succeeded in persuading national and international opinion that their bold risk for peace had been undermined by perfidious Albion. This explains why nationalist Ireland did not place Adams beyond the pale when the Provisionals broke their ceasefire in February 1996.

The British failure to contest the historical record had made the republican return to violence a relatively cost-free venture. Similarly, when the Irish famine started being taught as an act of genocide--on a par with the Holocaust--in New York state schools in the 1990s, I asked one senior NIO official what the British government was going to do about this. After all, if even only one in a thousand young Irish-Americans come to believe this nonsense, they could constitute a dangerous cadre of "radicalised" youths--who might well give powerful support to dissident republicanism in the years to come. The mandarin told me that rebutting such narratives was no business of the modern British state.

So how will the British state do this time around--against Islamist narratives of victimhood and western perfidy? The importance which Gordon Brown seems to attach to cultural and ideological conflict in defence of the democratic way of life--after the fashion of the cold war--suggests that the new government has a better sense of what is required than the military and civilian mandarins did in Northern Ireland. For during the Troubles, the British state envisaged itself merely as a neutral facilitator of the democratic will. In the eyes of the state, the IRA's crime was not its desire to seek the dismemberment of that polity. Rather, its crime was to seek to do that by violent methods. And to stop the IRA employing those nasty means, the state was prepared, in the end, to pay a rather high price. The IRA did not drive the British out--neither in the sense of defeating the army militarily, nor kicking out the British population. But it did succeed in altering utterly the terms on which the place was governed.

Tony Blair and others have noted that we could negotiate with the IRA because it had concrete political objectives; no such negotiation is possible with al Qaeda and its dreams of a caliphate. But what if the bin Ladens and the Zawahiris are shunted aside by younger "pragmatists," much as Ivor Bell et al were purged by Gerry Adams in the 1980s? What if home-grown jihadis downgraded their aspirations for their co-religionists here--to something closer to the segmental autonomy "achieved"

within Northern Ireland by Sinn Fein leaders on behalf of Ulster's nationalists?

One of the most amazing aspects of the Troubles is that this record remains such a source of pride to the British state. After all, Northern Ireland is about the last place where we still are a superpower. Consider what cards we held: the largest single deployment of British troops, the most professional regular army in Europe, amounting to 30,000 men at the height of the violence; the Ulster Defence Regiment/Royal Irish Regiment, a 6,000-strong local militia, described by General Michael Jackson as among the best troops he came across in his career; 13,500 officers in the RUC, one of the finest gendarmerie forces in the world, whose alumni now train policemen for counter-insurgencies the world over; big MI5 and, in the early years, MI6 stations; GCHQ expertise; total air and naval dominance; control of the public expenditure pursestrings for the staples of daily life, including all welfare payments; and the support of a substantial majority of the local population. Despite all of these advantages, the Troubles were a score draw: it's a bit like the Manchester United board deriving pleasure from the fact that Crewe Alexandra came to Old Trafford and didn't actually win. In this case, we didn't win in Northern Ireland because we didn't want to win--not least because we didn't know our own history.

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