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FORTNIGHT@51

POLITICS, ARTS & CULTURE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

What are we voting for?

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DUP election gamble by Alison Grundle
The quandary for nationalism by David McCann
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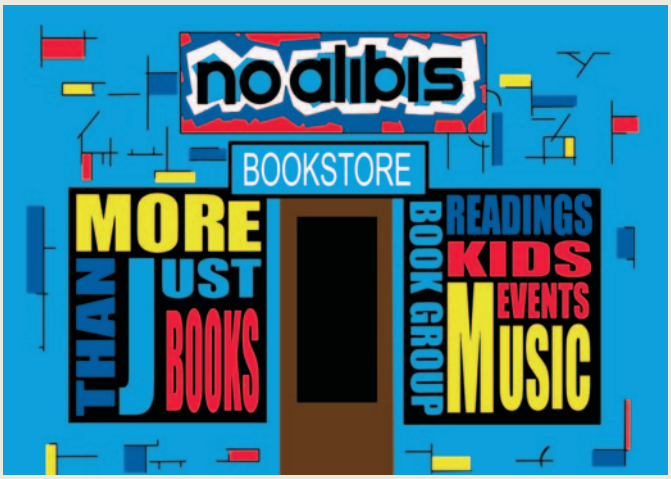

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What are we voting for?

This issue focuses on two different ways of thinking about the election.

One is the party political contest for supremacy between unionism and nationalism: who wins the top jobs and whether we will actually have a working Assembly and Executive after May 5th. The contributions by Aaron Edwards, Alison Grundle and David McCann highlight the importance to many voters of the outcome on this level and in particular who gets to be First and Deputy First Minister.

The contributions by Paddy Hillyard, Ciara Fitzpatrick and Stephen Donnan Dalzell are about what the Assembly and Executive should be doing to address and alleviate the problems resulting from the cost of living crisis, the increasing levels of poverty, the delays and shortcomings in health and social care and the increasing divide between the relatively well off and those in greatest need.

It is as always disappointing to have to separate these two approaches. The Good Friday Agreement was supposed to assist in combining them. But some of its provisions have actually exacerbated the division between them and may need to be amended. That will of course take a lot of time and will not be easy to achieve.

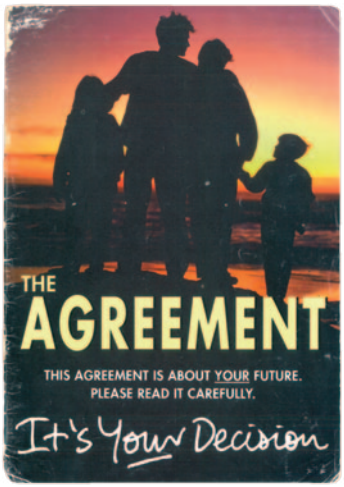
If the outcome of the election leads to a renewed suspension of locally based decision-making and the re-imposition of Direct Rule or moves to greater Joint British/Irish Authority it is hard to see how either the British or Irish governments will be prepared to adopt and pay for the kind of financial and administrative reforms that are needed. They have their own cost of living problems and little sympathy for continuing political stalemate in such a small place as Northern Ireland. Nor is it likely that they will want to adopt a Bill of Rights here that is so much more generous than what they already have – or wish to abandon.

So the choice, as was posed in 1998, is ours.

The battle for the soul of Unionism

Aaron Edwards

Aaron Edwards is a writer and academic. He is currently completing a book on Unionism in Northern Ireland for Merrion Press.



It is almost a quarter of a century since the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement on 10th April 1998. At the time it was celebrated as a watershed moment in ending an armed conflict that had persisted for over 25 years.

As the parties reached a negotiated settlement, the dominant Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) led by David Trimble fractured in its support for the deal. Its 9 Westminster MPs were reported to be in 'open rebellion', starkly illustrated when one MP, Jeffery Donaldson, walked away before the Agreement was announced to the public.

At the time, the *Times* saw Donaldson as 'the young pretender' who would not countenance sitting in a power-sharing assembly with Sinn Féin without IRA decommissioning. As the newspaper noted, Trimble faced a 'battle for the soul of Unionism.'

It was a battle Trimble did not shirk from entering, but he had to contend with opponents on two fronts.

On the one hand, his attempts to sell the deal to the Unionist community lacked weight in the face of the Provisional IRA's refusal to decommission. On the other hand, the UUP received diminishing electoral returns and were soon eclipsed by the Anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), led by firebrand MP Ian Paisley.

Although the Agreement was endorsed in an historic referendum in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, the overwhelming majorities in favour masked deep divisions within the unionist community. It was estimated that a little over half of unionists voted 'yes' in the referendum; the same poll reported an endorsement by 99% of the nationalist community.

Unionists split into two rival camps, with Trimble's UUP and the loyalist paramilitary linked PUP and UDP remaining in favour of the Agreement and Paisley's DUP and other minor Unionist parties setting themselves against it.

This was reflected in loyalist paramilitary groups too. Acting under the umbrella of the Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) the UVF, UDA and Red Hand Commando (RHC) ordered their members to support the emerging process.

However, a smaller number of members resisted. In a bid to enforce total compliance, the CLMC resorted to issuing death threats to the UVF's Mid Ulster commander Billy Wright and the UDA's Alex Kerr. Other loyalists – like Belfast UVF commander Tommy Stewart and RHC member Frankie Curry – were executed by their respective organisations.

While Wright's Mid Ulster UVF carried out a number of murders before being stood down by the UVF's Belfast leadership in 1997, the group proved unwilling to sanction other units in North Belfast and South East Antrim who had engaged in similar

Jeffrey Donaldson

violent acts. Although pro-Agreement loyalists in the PUP and UDP tended to label these rogue elements as "drug dealers", the reality was that the only difference between them and 'mainstream' paramilitaries was in the latter's support for the peace process.

Unionists and loyalists, therefore, had contrasting views on the peace process that would shape their political, strategic and tactical decisions in the two decades after the Agreement.

According to Lee Reynolds, a political activist who left the UUP for the DUP in 2003, 'There are two types of peace agreement – instrumental and constitutive. In constitutive you agree everything, and everyone knows what they have to do, when, and where and how. And if anything goes wrong then everybody knows who to blame. And then you've instrumental, which is basically where you have 50 things you don't agree about. We've agreed on 20. We'll make a start on those, and we'll try and deal with those as we go along. The Belfast Agreement was sold to Unionism as a constitutive agreement when it was an instrumental agreement.'

The Belfast Agreement was hailed ... as a mechanism by which unionists and nationalists could ... move forward ... where relationships would be based on trust and mutual respect.

The Belfast Agreement was hailed by its supporters as a mechanism by which unionists and nationalists could finally bury the hatchet and move forward into a new political dispensation where relationships would be based on trust and mutual respect. It was an accord born out of the euphoria of the 1990s when conflicts based on ethnicity ran like a soundtrack to world events. Amidst the horror of Bosnia and Rwanda, a certain optimism took hold in Northern Ireland that it was possible to awaken from such ethnic nightmares.

Some of us shared that liberal optimism and would personally go on to facilitate Track Two informal diplomacy aimed, specifically, at building confidence within and between communities. The neo-liberal peace process template indicated that it was possible to put the past behind us and move forward together.

It was an honourable cause to pursue, even if recent years have felt like a return to the armed ethnic conflict by other means. Sadly, as we know from the other places we looked to in hope, in the absence of genuine reconciliation and the eradication of inequalities, fear and mistrust continues to breed intolerance.

The imperfections in the peace process demand a return to the arguments put forward by those who have consistently rejected it.

Clifford Peeples, a loyalist activist from Belfast, had orchestrated a four-year information campaign against those who supported the peace process in its early, heady days. Reflecting on these years, he observed how he 'gave people information about the background of individuals who were now… leading loyalists towards surrender… We informed people… about the [Provisional IRA's] Tactical Use of Armed Struggle. Told them that the British government and the Irish government would promise anything. They would bring loyalists in. They would destroy the RUC. They would destroy the UDR. They would destroy loyalists' will to resist. And anyone who was willing to make a stand against that would be blackmailed, would be taken out. And everything we said came to pass.'

Peeples' argument that the two governments pumped huge resources into the referendum campaign to manufacture consent in favour of the Agreement is an interesting one. It suggests that Ulster unionism could have derailed the entire peace process because of its lukewarm feelings about the deal.

Grassroots loyalists remained perpetually disappointed by their Unionist leaders in the years that followed. Despite the DUP and Sinn Féin agreeing on modifications to the Agreement at St Andrews in 2006, rejectionist feelings around the Agreement persisted, even after the return of power-sharing in 2007.

This disaffection grew steadily until it exploded in violent protests on the streets in 2012. The so-called 'flag protests' – when Belfast city councillors voted in favour of restricting the number of days the Union Flag could be flown aloft council premises – were the most serious signs of a popular resurgence of rejectionist sentiment.

Jamie Bryson, who came to prominence at this time, recalled how he believed 'the flag protest was the tipping point in so far as that was a symbolic moment. And I remember that first night at City Hall and I seen the people and heard the anger in the days that followed and I just remember thinking, "everything's changed. And it just spread like wildfire. And it was just, it was like the last straw. It was taking the scales off people's eyes and, finally, people could see, "wow – what's going on?" From being Anti-Agreement was heresy almost to – all of a sudden – it was becoming more pronounced.'

Bryson saw this as part of a broader "deceptive snare" to push Northern Ireland out of the Union with Great Britain.

His views were not universally shared.

Julie-Anne Corr-Johnston had also been drawn to the flag protests, though more out of an explicit intention to address social injustice in her community. She subsequently joined the PUP along with an estimated 250 new members. 'Billy [Hutchinson] really ignited a fire in my belly that was to do with local politics that was to do with the bread-and-butter issues, he made me feel empowered that I could actually bring some sort of change to the areas that the party was rooted in,' she recalled.

Hutchinson believed those engaging in street protests might be persuaded to take up the mantle of the PUP's brand of "progressive loyalism".

Yet, within a few short years the PUP had lurched to the right.

"COMMUNICATING LOYALISM, ENABLING CHANGE"

LET'S TALK LOYALISM

'It was the sentiment, the ethos, everything that we had set out to achieve changed. And the goals were different,' said Corr-Johnston.

The PUP's transformation was partly attributable to the swing in unionist voters in favour of Brexit and the emergence of a fundamentalist reading of sovereignty. A feeling that working class loyalists had lost out in the peace process only increased after the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement between the EU and UK and a customs border in the Irish Sea.

The decision by loyalist paramilitaries in the UDA, UVF and RHC to reject the Agreement was quickly followed with the PUP's decision to commit itself to a volte-face on the peace process.

Ironically, loyalism has now come full circle to accept the rejectionist arguments advanced by those who were derided, intimidated and even murdered for their hard-line views on the peace process.

It is not yet certain if this form of rejectionist unionism will win the argument within the wider unionist community.

Doug Beattie's revamped UUP is moving into an election advocating a more positive and inclusive form of unionism.

In contrast, Jeffery Donaldson, now leading the DUP, told a rally in March 2022 that his party would not return to power-sharing until the Northern Ireland Protocol had been removed.

As we approach the Assembly elections, it seems that the battle for the soul of Unionism is far from over.

DUP election gamble

Alison Grundle

Alison Grundle is head of member services in the Law Society of Northern Ireland

Plus, ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Another NI Assembly election is almost here in a world fundamentally changed since we last went to the polls. We're facing potential food shortages for the third time in just over two years, first with Brexit, then with the Covid and now with the war in Ukraine. This seems scarcely believable to most of us born into the era of post-war abundance.

Yet, in many ways it also feels like we are waking up from a five year dream to find everything exactly as we left it. As Northern Ireland enters this election campaign, just like the last one, we are without a functioning Executive. Last time it was the disastrous Renewable Heat Incentive scheme that led to the collapse. This time it's Brexit and the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol. What both issues have in common is the DUP's almost comedic mishandling.

Two leadership changes later and another Assembly election is now upon us with DUP bracing itself for what might come. In an unusual outbreak of consensus, almost all commentators agree that this is the election in which the DUP will likely lose its position as largest party. Thanks to changes insisted upon by the party itself, unionism could lose the position of First Minister for the first time since the Assembly was created in 1998.

The irony is that this is partly self-inflicted. The DUP's insistence on changes at St Andrews, designed to protect itself as largest party at the expense of other unionist parties, has spectacularly backfired. Under the Agreement, the First and deputy First Minister were elected by a cross community vote. Since St Andrew's, the two largest parties from the largest designation nominate their candidates.

The DUP has lauded itself with the title of First Minister for years. Sinn Féin has repeatedly pointed out that it is joint first office and this is true. The First Minister can't so much as send out a letter without the agreement of the Deputy First Minister. None this matters as the DUP bangs the drum of fear and increasingly, desperately, tries to rally the unionist vote.

The DUP must be bracing itself for a difficult campaign with challenges emerging across several fronts. The three years without an Assembly and the challenges this caused are still fresh in the minds of voters. Ironically, put there by the DUP itself. The irony of the DUP collapsing the Assembly when it criticised Sinn Féin most vociferously for doing the same is not lost on voters.

For Sinn Féin, it views this election as the most important in its recent history. Over the next few

years, the party could have a First Minister in Northern Ireland and a Taoiseach in Dublin. The public still haven't forgiven the party for collapsing the institutions a few years ago, but they will blame the DUP for this latest stunt. The prospect of a nationalist largest party and consequent First Minister will rally Sinn Féin's base and motivate voters across Northern Ireland.

The issue that created this latest collapse, the 'Protocol' is, according to recent opinion polls, not a priority for most unionist voters. The Protocol is a complicated issue that is difficult to simplify. Most people don't understand the consequences of this island being the frontier between the UK and EU. Thanks to grace periods, the negative aspects of the Protocol are not yet being felt on the ground. However, the Protocol also offers an opportunity for Northern Ireland as the only place in the world where firms can trade both in the EU and outside of it. For the DUP to focus its campaign on this issue is a risky election strategy.

Many expected Jeffrey Donaldson's appointment as leader to signal the change to a softer DUP one more aligned with its electorate. Despite being a party whose views reflect an evangelical Christian ethos, the party has managed consistently to secure votes far beyond its natural support base. However, over time society has shifted and the young voters that the DUP now needs to attract to maintain its position are alienated by its illiberal views. Now that the major 'progressive' issues around equal marriage, reproductive rights and the Irish language are close to being resolved, the DUP has an opportunity to let these slip into the background. However, new problems have emerged on which Jeffrey Donaldson will have to focus his mind: a revived UUP.

2022

In the same way that the EU referendum came about because David Cameron tried to rid himself of the threat of UKIP, the DUP now finds its own feet held to the fire by harder line unionists and Brexiteers. The emergence of a refreshed Ulster Unionist Party cast in the more moderate image of its new leader Doug Beattie, is offering voters a pro-union alternative that wants to make Northern Ireland work economically and is also socially progressive. Caught between these two diametrically opposed visions of unionism sits the DUP.

Gambling this election on the Protocol may be the biggest risk of the DUP's political life. The world is emerging weakened from the pandemic, Europe is staring war in the face, people are unable to heat their homes or put fuel in their cars, mortgage interest rates are rising and an increase in food prices is all but guaranteed. For the DUP, in a bind entirely of its own making, to focus demand on unrealistic changes to the Protocol may, for the first time, become a step too far for voters.

Gambling on the Protocal may be the biggest risk of the DUP's political life.

So, what would it mean if the DUP fails to return as the largest party and Sinn Féin takes that position? Psychologically there will undoubtedly be an impact for unionism to lose its largest party dominance but, practically, nothing will change. The Executive office is a joint office in which the distinction between the two ministers is in name only. Of more interest is what will happen to the other parties, particularly Alliance and Ulster Unionists. If they can each secure more seats the next Executive could be one which focuses on resolving real issues. Of course, before that can happen there is the small hurdle to get over of actually forming an Executive. Everything changes but everything stays the same.

If, following the election the DUP refuses to nominate a First or Deputy First Minister, then another period without an Assembly will follow. Undoubtedly this will lead to talks and inevitably to further changes to the Good Friday Agreement. Whether these changes will benefit the people of Northern Ireland or the political parties in Stormont remains to be seen.

We're on the one road

The battle within Nationalism for AE22

David McCann

David McCann is a lecturer, political commentator and blogger

We have all been transfixed on turmoil taking place within Unionism for the past year that has turned the electoral map on its head and thrown into question just how many seats could change hands at the next Assembly Election. We are all focusing on Jeffrey Donaldson, Jim Allister and Doug Beattie and the battle for the heart and soul of Unionism. Yet, an important part of any election is the contest going on within Nationalism and it is worth paying attention to.

For Sinn Féin, their campaign is a tale of two cities. The party is consistently ahead in poll after poll which shows them on track to become the largest party. After a terrible year for the DUP, the party looks like a 'strong and stable' alternative compared to their leading Unionist partner in government. Michelle O'Neill is already being viewed as the most likely person to become First Minister after May 5th. Yet, there are other issues at play that Sinn Fein cannot afford to ignore. Whilst every poll shows them on track to become the largest party, it also shows Sinn Féin losing around three to five seats. The story of being ahead has to be tempered by some thought into why in some places the party is slipping back from its strong 2017 result.

> The group that is making hay whilst the sun shines is ... namely Alliance and the Greens.

On the other side of the nationalist fence, the SDLP has similar polling woes. Consistently hovering around the 10–12% will give some in the party pause for thought. The SDLP hasn't had a bad couple of years in terms of new recruits to their assembly team. Yet this is not being picked up in the polls like it is for other parties. The party will be asking itself, why? Why are people not connecting and flocking towards the SDLP?

But these are questions for nationalism in general.

We have had Brexit, Unionism in the centenary year in Northern Ireland engulfed in a political civil war and an unpopular British government.

Yet Nationalism is set to fall backwards on May 5th, rather than advance forward. The group that is making hay whilst the sun shines is the 'none of the above' parties, namely Alliance and the Greens.

Of all the target seats that Alliance has at this election, around half are seats held by Sinn Féin and the SDLP. Likewise, whilst they aren't seriously threatening nationalist seats now, the Greens are wanting to build for the local elections next year and overtime put some of those Assembly seats into play.

Nationalism cannot afford to pretend that this election has no electoral challenges or no need for a fundamental re-think. The chaos within Unionism has masked some of the problems and the electoral ceilings that the pro-unification forces are hitting.

Polls are polls. They are snapshots in time. Public sentiment is also something that can be moved. Furthermore, many of those who are voting Alliance and for the Greens can be persuaded to support Irish unity.

I don't write this to spoil the party or to rain on Sinn Féin's potential parade of becoming the largest party. But, many activists and supporters will be voting Sinn Fein on May 5th in the expectation that their potential chance of becoming the largest party could end up with a border poll.

My argument is, that if Sinn Féin and the SDLP, slip backwards that argument becomes harder after May 5th, not easier. The tide is coming in for the parties who are not focusing on the constitution and will provoke both Unionism and Nationalism to re-examine their strategies for success.

If there is ever going to be a border poll, it is going to need to happen with pro-unification parties making inroads electorally and those who are indifferent coming around to the idea of holding a vote to test public sentiment.

May 5th could indeed be a historic election but not for who becomes the largest party, but for the strategic rethinking that it could provoke from both major campaigns. Nationalism cannot afford to believe it will not be impacted by this shift. Recognising the change and adapting quickly is the way for success.

Nationalists may be on the road to Irish unity, but it is going to have to bring friends to help it reach its end destination.

The story of the Bill of Rights continues

Colin Harvey

Colin Harvey is a professor of human rights law at Queen's and a former member of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

When the language of a 'new beginning' and a 'fresh start' is used, expectations are raised. The hope is that guarantees emerge that will promote better outcomes for people. That goes beyond the absence of war, as welcome as that is, to include progress on matters such as equality, rights and social justice.

Why? Because the aim is to ensure non-recurrence and ground protections that will make a practical difference to the lives of those most affected by conflict. The Bill of Rights might be viewed within that framework, and although many aspects are specific to Northern Ireland, the themes are familiar to any society considering constitutional reform in the circumstances of ethno-national division. Northern Ireland is in a position where, evidence suggests, most want access to a full range of human rights, but political institutions designed to shield this region from the negative repercussions of majoritarianism can form a roadblock. A theme that may become more prominent after the Assembly election.

The story of the Bill of Rights runs on, as another chapter ends without resolution. The Good Friday Agreement provided the starting point for the current version of this discussion and, more than two decades after the process was launched, legislative enactment does not appear imminent.

At heart the tale of the Bill of Rights is about what it means to protect human rights in a region like this. The conversation predates the Agreement, but the commitments may frame what has followed. The British Government agreed to incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights, and the Agreement does list a range of specific rights, but a more expansive human rights instrument was not adopted. Instead, the task of consulting and advising on a Bill of Rights was given to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The meaning of the formulation adopted remains subject to disagreement, but the parameters reflect long-standing political and interpretative disputes. One strand reads the Agreement in dynamic terms, with a focus on the purpose of the provisions. This interpretation concludes that an ambitious approach is required, with implications for the guarantees to be included. This is occasionally portrayed as 'maximalist', but that language is misleading, particularly if your view is that the Agreement prescribes this outcome. In practice, for advocates of interpretative generosity, the result flows from a good faith take on what the Agreement requires.

An alternative reading – often cited as in the minds of prominent drafters – is that the Agreement really only mandates a few additional rights, and it is a mistake to press this further. It is an argument that can end in an odd place. By, for example, blaming human rights activists for the absence of progress, rather than the refusal of the Government to legislate. A modern version of the cry of conservatives everywhere: 'things would be fine if those troublemakers had not sought equality and rights'.

Final advice criticised

When the Commission submitted its advice in December 2008 the primary critical accusation was that it had gone too far, even though the document included careful justifications and was widely welcomed (I was a Commissioner at the time and supported then, as I do now, the final advice). The Commission itself was divided, with two Commissioners dissenting. The main unionist parties were also unimpressed. The British Government reacted dismissively to much, but not all, of the advice, and successive governments have highlighted the absence of political agreement as the main impediment to progress. That position means that the process was never going to advance and was, for all practical purposes, stalled until around 2018 when movement was detected. This emerged in a leaked document which showed that the parties had been discussing a mechanism to advance this work, a reality that was formally confirmed in *New Decade, New Approach*.

... successive governments have highlighted the absence of political agreement as the main impediment to progress

The result of the above was the creation of an Ad Hoc Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly in February 2020. The Committee published its report in February 2022, once again indicating where the major political blockage to progress resides, but also clarifying the scale of support for reform. The five-person expert panel, envisaged in *New Decade, New Approach*, was never appointed by the Executive (for widely reported reasons) and this failure, as well as the final position adopted by the DUP, meant that the Committee was unable to reach a definite conclusion. Its report is explicit in identifying the difficulties, which were further outlined in the Assembly debate.

The Agreement is clear that the Bill of Rights must supplement the European Convention on Human Rights and should be enacted at Westminster. The outcome of this latest episode underlines the point. It is further evidence of how power-sharing institutions can be used to impede positive legal change, even when it would be beneficial to everyone in Northern Ireland.

Although there is often intense interest in our 'particular circumstances', little about the Bill of Rights debate is novel to this jurisdiction. Many of the arguments are familiar to constitutional and human rights lawyers anywhere, interventions on the intention of the drafters, the respective roles of different institutions, and the implications of giving legal effect to, for example, economic, social and cultural rights are well rehearsed. Polling evidence also suggests this is not a 'nationalist-unionist' divide, because there is quite clearly cross-community support in wider society.

Yes, it is plain that the most 'rights-sceptical' parties have tended to be unionist (for example, the DUP) but that is often not reflective of what most people in fact want. There are good reasons to conclude that there is sufficient consensus in Northern Ireland for Westminster to proceed with enacting a Bill of Rights that respects and reflects

the Commission's advice from 2008 as well as progressive developments since then.

The UK-wide Human Rights Act 1998

There are complications; one is familiar. The Human Rights Act 1998 applies UK-wide. In fact – whisper it – it is a bit of a 'unionist' success story, given the support it enjoys and the way it has become absorbed and used around the UK. But the Conservative Party remains keen to review and even to replace it with a 'British Bill of Rights'. The Bill of Rights Commission it established with its then coalition partner (the Liberal Democrats) reported in 2012 and could not reach agreement. But that project was never abandoned, and even though initially couched in the language of 'updating' the Human Rights Act, the implications are now clear and worrying. The Independent Review of the legislation published its report in December 2021, and a consultation was launched by the Ministry of Justice in the same month. There is deep unease among rights advocates about what might happen next, and it will be worth watching closely how this evolving process addresses Northern Ireland.

Rights and equality and Brexit

Brexit is another major factor and exacerbates worries. Leaving the EU always appeared part of a larger agenda, one that is resistant to meaningful cultures of equality and rights. Not necessarily because people think rights and equality are bad things, but because they can appear to get in the way of the deregulated society that Brexiteers dream about. The new post-Brexit architecture is likely to be a source of much contestation, as the practical implications unfold. The Protocol contains a rights and equality provision, but you would be forgiven for not knowing. Article 2 is a 'no diminution guarantee' that weaves parts of the Good Friday Agreement and EU equality law into the orbit of the Protocol. The boundaries will be explored in depth – in courtrooms – as will other elements of the Withdrawal Agreement and the Trade and Co-operation Agreement. Litigation, some of it strategic, may well be a significant feature of public life for the foreseeable future as judges, lawyers and others figure out the legal meaning and practical implications.

There is no Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. But there are human rights guarantees in the Human Rights Act 1998, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in Article 2 of the Protocol. There is a Human Rights Commission and there are vibrant civil society organisations. The process of debating a Bill of Rights has had an impact that can seem intangible but is there, including in the effectiveness of activist cultures working towards change. Connections forged are not forgotten and chains of civic solidarity remain as courageous and determined as ever. Evident in things that do not happen, as much as those that do. Whether the opportunity for comprehensive reform of the human rights framework will ever be realised is open to question. It is therefore unsurprising that many wonder whether the ongoing work in anticipation of a referendum on reunification or union will provide the way to take this conversation forward. Is it too much to hope that both sides in this debate will build rights and equality proposals into their arguments? If the attempt is to reassure people worried about an uncertain future, then it certainly seems wise to do so.

There is no Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.

Whatever happens on those questions, there is a tragic note to living in a region where social change is wanted but impeded by forces carrying disproportionate weight in the public sphere. It is a story of complexity and nuance still waiting to be told fully, in a place where the most marginalised and vulnerable do not have the luxury of waiting for imagined futures.

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The new invisible Irish border

Paul Nolan

Paul Nolan is an independent political researcher based in Belfast

The Irish border is set for a re-appearance thanks to the Nationality and Borders Bill now making its way through the parliamentary process.

There won't be any physical structure or any police presence on the border itself, but any attempt by unauthorised persons to enter the UK will be a criminal offence. That is the whole point of the legislation: to use the penal system to deter asylum-seekers hoping to get into the country. A robust amendment exempting Northern Ireland was passed in the Lords but rejected in the Commons, with all DUP members voting in support of the government.

The practical problems that will result are immediately apparent, or at least immediately apparent to everyone except Brandon Lewis. He has airily dismissed all expressions of concern with reassurances about the absence of any hard border on the island of Ireland. But an invisible border is a border nonetheless. It won't apply to UK or Irish nationals, who will still retain the freedom of movement allowed under the Common Travel Act. Instead, it will apply to all other nationalities. In Ireland, that amounts to a considerable number of people: the Irish government estimates there are approximately 645,000 non-nationals living in the state, equivalent to 13% of the population. The tide of Ukrainian refugees now entering the country will swell those numbers considerably. None of these people will be prohibited from crossing the border, but in order to do so they will have to first apply online for a visa waiver, or an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA), which is described as being like the ESTA scheme used for entry to the United States. An Egyptian doctor at Altnagelvin will need an ETA to travel to work if he or she lives across the border in Donegal. The same requirement will apply to Dutch or Lithuanian residents of Dundalk if they wish to go shopping in Newry. The completion of the ETA form may not be onerous, but it is a reminder that the person lacks citizenship in the UK. And even a small barrier may be enough to deter tourists. After the bill comes law a coach can only take visitors from Dublin up to the north if all those on board are in possession of an ETA. This is seriously bad news for tourism north and south, and will mean the end of marketing the island of Ireland as a single destination.

All of these are collateral damage in the creation of a measure really designed to punish refugees. How will it work? Immigration officials will be present at ports and airports, but also on buses and trains. I think of an incident from my own experience. I was on the Enterprise train when officials walked down the train and took two men off for questioning. Both had dark skin. It's hard to imagine that this scene won't be repeated many times over when officials come looking for those who, at first sight, appear to be neither British nor Irish. It is why human rights organisations have named it the Anti-Refugee Bill.

Its introduction has created a new crisis in British / Irish relations. A grim-faced Simon Coveney stood beside Brandon Lewis at a press conference on 23 March, and using his most polite diplomatic language said that he held out hope that Irish concerns might still be heeded, adding; "I think it is important to say that this is not legislation that is finalised yet". That is the case, as further discussions have to take place with the Lords, but the substantive issues have been settled, and to Brandon Lewis's satisfaction. From here on in the Irish government is likely to face what Irish historian Ronan Fanning described as "the perpetual problem of commanding British attention".

We need to talk about social class

Paddy Hillyard

Paddy Hillyard is Professor of Sociology at Queen's University, Belfast. His research focuses on social order and control in modern welfare states, with particular attention to violence, criminality, poverty, and inequality

When I studied sociology there were interminable discussions about social class and how to measure it. We were all familiar with the classic sketch with the tall John Cleese as upper class, Ronnie Baker as middle class, and diminutive Ronnie Corbett as lower class, expressing his constant refrain: "I know my place".

Let us begin with the resignation of the First Minister, Paul Givan, and the collapse of the Executive – a decision which will impact disproportionally on the poor and working class.

The draft budget cannot now be brought before the Executive and the proposed 10% increase in health spending is stalled. Moreover, a staggering £300 million must be returned to the Treasury and a further half a billion for renewable heat may have to be returned as the Department for the Economy has failed to develop plans on how to spend it. In addition, it is reported that the voluntary sector which provides vital support to the neediest in our society may have to cut thousands of jobs because of the failure to agree co-funding for EU programmes. The collapse of Stormont could not have occurred at a worst time. The pandemic, which impacted disproportionally on the lower socio-economic groups, is not yet over. Energy costs have recently doubled, the cost of food and other essential items are rising, and inflation has reached the highest level since the 1990s – all factors which will have the greatest consequences on the least well off. The war in Ukraine can only make matters worse.

In 2019–2020 – the latest figures available – already some 19% of the population in Northern Ireland were living in poverty. In stark terms, this meant that some 350,000 people – roughly equivalent to the population of Belfast – were living in households with an income of 60% below the average.

Just under a quarter, or 107,000, were children – the equivalent to the populations of Armagh and Derry combined. These shameful figures are only likely to increase, and more and more people will be forced to use food banks and the Executive will not be able to assist.

After more than sixteen years of active devolved government, there is still no comprehensive anti-poverty strategy in place. In December 2020, an expert advisory panel published "Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy", but over a year later work on the development of an anti-poverty strategy continues. The much-needed welfare mitigations as well as the living wage requirement for companies bidding for public contacts are, however, positive steps in the right direction.

Over the years, Stormont has been able to maintain, or introduce, several policies which have benefited the middle classes. Take rates. Households in Northern Ireland pay on average one third less

rates than households in Great Britain under the equivalent council tax with the middle classes benefiting the most.

For example, a crude comparison between the cities of Belfast and Liverpool, shows that while households in lower valued properties in Belfast pay on average roughly £1000 less annually, those living in higher valued properties are more than £1500 better off.

In October 2008, Nigel Dodds, provided further help to the better off in Northern Ireland and introduced a cap on the rating value at £400,000 on the grounds that high-value homes were not overly penalised when their owner's incomes may not have kept up with rising property prices.

The failure of Stormont to introduce water charges provides another example. In 2007/2008, I chaired the Independent Water Review Panel which recommended the introduction of domestic water charges, supported by a generous affordability scheme to prevent water poverty.

Our proposals would have helped address class inequalities in two ways. First, as we proposed that charges should be based on the capital value of properties, rather than the expensive option of metering, the middle classes living in higher valued properties would have had to pay more.

Second, the Barnett formula – the mechanism for allocating funds to Northern Ireland, from the Treasury – does not cover water charges. As a consequence, £3.7 billion – yes, £3.7 billion – has been taken from the health, education and other budgets since our recommendations exacerbating the existing class inequalities in these areas.

Despite the abolition of the 11 plus, selection remains, privileging middle-class children whose parents often pay for tutoring before selection and then pay fees for all sorts of activities to enhance the resources of the grammar school sector. The consequences are stark. Over 90% of grammar school children can be guaranteed to achieve at least 5 GCSEs Grades A*–C. At the other end, less than half of children on Free School Meals obtained these grades. Moreover, since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, over 20,000 children left Northern Ireland schools either without any GSEs or no qualifications at all.

ALBERT BRIDGE CREATIVE COMMONS

Similar class inequalities are seen in health. In 2017, a person living in one fifth of the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland could be expected to die 7 years earlier than a person living in one fifth of the least deprived areas.

The underfunding of health over many years has led to long waiting lists with increasing numbers in the middle classes taking out private health insurance and going private – an option not available to the less well off.

The abolition of prescription charges for everyone was another Stormont policy which principally benefited the middle classes as most of those who could not afford to pay were already eligible to free prescriptions. It is a subsidy to the middle classes costing about £8 million a year.

Class inequalities in Northern Ireland are perhaps being increased most by housing market dynamics. The introduction by banks of buy-to-let mortgages in the mid-1990s coupled with tax breaks for landlords has been a major factor in wealth accumulation of the middle classes. The private rented sector has expanded rapidly and now forms some 14% of the housing stock. It has been an excellent investment for those who could afford to buy houses to rent as house prices have increased by 2.5% annually when adjusted for inflation.

Moreover, the sector has been supported by housing benefit payments to tenants to enable them to afford to rent, which cost over £200 million in 2018–2019 – an indirect welfare subsidy to private landlords. To further help the landlord class, Stormont allows 10% reduction in rates for landlords who make lump sum payments for several properties at the same time – a subsidy of estimated to be £13 million!

The Independent Fiscal Commission, which Conor Murphy established in March last year, provides the potential to develop more redistributive policies. One can only hope that our politicians use it to develop a comprehensive set of tax and spend policies to develop a fairer society in Northern Ireland.

The health crisis: a slowly, rising river?

Stephen Donnan Dalzell

Stephen Donnan Dalzell is a non-binary writer and activist from East Belfast. They have written for *The Guardian*, Slugger O'Toole and *The Independent*.

For most of my adult life I have always been confident of at least two things: taxes, and my death by suicide. I know that may be difficult for many of you to read, particularly for those who are close to me, but I can't put it any other way.

When I would hear people talk about so and so's 50th or 60th birthday I would always think "It would be nice to live to that age, but I can't see it happening for me," and give it no more than a moment's notice and move on with my day. I can't tell you where that overarching pessimism (which I would classify as realism) comes from, but needless to say that's been the pervading narrative within my own head for as long as I can remember, probably since the age of nineteen or thereabouts.

I say all this as someone who is a qualified counsellor, having graduated just as the pandemic started in February of 2020. I took a year out of my placement and studies because the creeping demon of my own mental ill-health decided to rear its ugly head in a vicious fashion, and I was declared unfit to practise for the time being. You can't exude a presence of non-judgement, congruence and empathy for your clients when your capacity for those things doesn't extend to yourself. It was a humiliating, humbling and devastating moment in my professional life. I felt like I had fallen at the final hurdle when chasing my dreams, and I haven't practised as a counsellor to this day.

I have always struggled with my mental health. I live every day with depression, anxiety, and a personality disorder. Alone they are their own milestones to carry, but together they can turn even the most joyous of days into memories I'd rather forget. In October of last year I hit a breaking point, and I can now admit to myself that I had a mental breakdown. Sitting in work that same day I overheard one of the service users in my workplace express a desire to end their life, and I found myself silently agreeing with the prospect that it was a good idea. I immediately snapped myself back to reality, called my GP and spoke to my manager. I knew instantly that I was not in a position to keep myself safe, or to be around vulnerable adults in crisis as I was already deep within one myself. Those mental health episodes can creep up on you like a slowly rising river, and it isn't until the water is coming through your front door that you realise you should have invested in sand bags. They can also hit you out of nowhere like an airstrike, completely upending you and sending the debris that was your mental health in every direction.

My GP was excellent, making an emergency referral for me to the Mental Health Assessment Team at the Royal Victoria Hospital. That was around 1pm that day, and I wasn't assessed until almost 2am the following morning. It was incredibly exhausting, and by the time it had rolled around all I wanted to do was go to bed and try and sleep to give myself some reprieve from the incessant, dangerous voices in my own head telling me to kill myself. I was assessed by two male mental health nurses who, whilst well meaning, were clearly

overworked and under-resourced. They found it difficult to navigate some of the things I was telling them. I wasn't high risk enough for them to be concerned about my immediate well-being despite the fact that at that very moment there was a never-ending monologue in my own mind telling me that I would be better off dead; I was conversely high risk enough for them to deem me worthy of an emergency assessment.

Talking to the nurses, I explained to them that I was experiencing issues relating to my own self-worth, self-esteem and my gender identity as a non-binary person. They didn't know what being non-binary meant, and asked me several times if I wanted to be a "man or a woman" and if I wanted "surgery" or "hormones" to be an option for me. It was an exhausting and rather degrading affair to try and educate them on what being non-binary was, and why it was causing me pain, but I still don't think they got it. It's not their fault – they are a product of the system and structures that have trained, employed, and trusted them to help people and they are genuinely doing the best with what they have, which is incredibly little.

Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of mental illness in the UK, with psychiatric morbidity in Northern Ireland 25% higher than in the UK. Our mental health crisis is now compounded by the crisis in the health service. In August 2021, it was reported that 53% of patients are waiting to see a consultant. Our waiting list figures are the highest in the UK.

As I discovered firsthand, the crisis is having a direct impact on the delivery of mental health services. The nurses I spoke to were most likely under an extreme amount of pressure, trying to plug the gap between crisis intervention services and community mental health support. I was referred to the Belfast Community Mental Health Team who called me about two weeks later to reassess me and see what would be useful for me. The man at the other end of the phone also sounded stressed and overworked and, as kindly as possible, told me that there wasn't much they could offer me. He said they would push through a referral for counselling.

Things didn't get any better after that. The Mental Health Team tried to call me twice more but each time I was at work and unable to answer. They left no messages. I received a letter last week (March 2022) to tell me that my key worker had left post some time ago and that I would be contacted soon by whoever replaced them. I didn't even know I had a key worker up until I opened that letter. That counselling referral manifested as another phone call in January to be assessed again, answering the same questions over again, and to be told that I would be put on their waiting list with a view to start clinical therapy sometime in July.

That would be a full nine months since my mental health crisis. This is the best that can be offered by a mental health system that has been completely decimated by cuts to services by successive Executive administrations and Health Ministers who have consistently failed to invest, or take seriously, the rising rates of suicide, self-harm, addiction, and poor mental health in Northern Ireland.

The current status quo is unacceptable. The Health Minister has pledged millions to tackle waiting lists and service issues but it could be years before patients feel any impact. We don't know if the money is enough to tackle structural issues inside the NHS. People going through a mental health crisis don't have years. They need help now.

I am doing much better today, and as I write this I can admit that I obviously still have my bad days, but I am working on shoring up my own resilience, and my own capacity to help myself. I am one of the lucky ones who knows how to access the system, but God help anyone who doesn't.

The cost of living crisis: slipping into darkness

Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick

Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick is a lecturer at the School of Law and Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University. Her interests and areas of activism are social security law, social justice, poverty and destitution.

What does destitution mean? A widely agreed academic definition outlines that it's living without the means to afford to eat, stay warm and dry and to maintain basic hygiene. Yet, these words don't adequately capture the suffering destitution causes. I've seen destitution. I've spoken to those going through it. Life becomes a cycle of survival. There is no solace, there is no peace of mind. There is only stress and crippling anxiety.

Let me give you an idea of what it looks like – what it feels like. It's becoming suicidal because you don't have the money to buy a loaf of bread and milk to ensure your growing teenagers have something in their stomach before school. It's living in a bleak flat without floor and wall coverings with a fridge you can't afford to fix. It's leaving prison without the means to buy clothes and a pair of shoes. It's sitting in the dark and cold for three days because you don't have the money for heat or power. It's moving into a flat after being homeless for years and spreading a coat on the floor to sleep on. It's not being able to send your child to school because you can't afford the transport. It's watering down baby formula as you need it to stretch. It's going without food because your child needed a new coat. It's borrowing a tenner to get your daughter a balloon and banner for her birthday. It's texting a relative stranger for cash as you have no one else to ask for money.

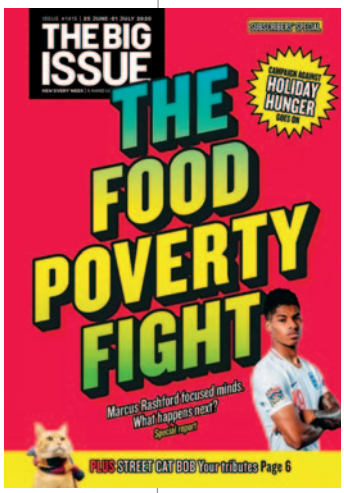
Bearing witness to the effects of extreme poverty has cut through to the very core of my being. It has shaped an overwhelming and frankly dogged urge to fight against the policies that have effectively escalated a spiral into the darkness of destitution. This fight has quite suddenly become more urgent as inflation is forecast to rise to between 7 and 8%. The cost of goods and services will become more unattainable for many. The cost of gas and electricity has risen by astronomical proportions.

Price hikes have been compounded by the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Russia is the second biggest producer of crude oil. The ongoing conflict is likely to cause shortages across the world. It's also worth mentioning that the government is planning to go ahead with its plan to increase national insurance contributions to fund the NHS and tackle growing pandemic related backlogs. All these measures will hit those on the lowest incomes hardest. As Torston Bell, Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation commented, *"we can't prevent Britain becoming poorer, but we have choices about how the pain is shared. Benefits are set for a £10bn real term cut in 2022–23 and that will mean destitution for thousands of families unless something changes urgently."*

Recent research from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research suggests that the cost-of-living crisis will hit different areas of the UK with varying verocity. Northern Ireland will suffer most, with destitution estimated to rise by 67% - twice the rate of other areas. This equates to around

25,000 more households being unable to meet their most basic needs. This research doesn't account for another nauseating wave of political crisis in Northern Ireland.

On 3 February the DUP decided to withdraw Paul Givan as First Minister, collapsing the NI Executive over outstanding issues linked to the Northern Ireland Protocol. Just before the institutions fell, the Executive managed to pass a scheme devised by Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey (SF), to provide around 280,000 people in low-income households with a £200 grant. This is a start; however, such is the rapidity of the increasing cost of fuel and electricity that real value of the £200 has vastly decreased. 300 litres of oil have rocked from around £200 to more than £500.



The British Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has provided the devolved nations with around £300m of funds to respond to the escalating cost of living crisis. However, Finance Minister Conor Murphy has underlined that legal advice received from the NI Attorney General and others dictates that allocating this money in the absence of an Executive will not be possible under s.64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This has led to a unified call from all other political parties for the DUP to get back around the table to swiftly sign off measures to get support to those who need it, immediately. I have echoed this call. I strongly believe that the lack of political leadership is causing – and will continue to cause – untold levels of suffering right across our society.

And yet, the DUP has remained steadfast in its decision to paralyse government here. Rather than utilising the available cash, the DUP has suggested lowering domestic rates. But it won't help those people who are teetering on the edge of destitution. People who will fall easily into darkness. I find it unforgivable that one political party should use those in poverty as political pawns. Precious time and energy is being wasted considering complicated workarounds. This will involve emergency legislation that requires intervention from Westminster. I'm finding it difficult to contain my frustration at such a clumsy approach to policy making, particularly when you look at what Scotland has been able to achieve on a tighter budget. Our devolved settlement is increasingly looking untenable.

I've considered retorts from keyboard commentators who have pointed to Sinn Fein's protracted absence from government (and, yes, we all felt that pain too) but it fundamentally overlooks the scale and urgency of the present crisis that is falling upon every low-income household in Northern Ireland. Now is not the time for finger pointing. Now is the time for a united response and good governance for the benefit of all people across communities who are increasingly concerned about how they will cope with the onslaught of inflation.

I believe the DUP's refusal to return to the Executive (even for one day, as suggested by the Alliance Leader, Naomi Long) is politically futile, as EU focus shifts to the developing war in Ukraine. Irish Prime Minister, Micheál Martin, interviewed on the BBC programme, Sunday Morning, suggested that negotiations on the NI protocol would now take a backseat. In addition, the current British Government have time and again shown its lack of reverence for the 1998 agreement. Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief negotiator said "they just don't seem to care" following the resignation of Brexit Minister, Lord Frost.

The other parties are not blameless in this precipice. The Northern Ireland Executive has for far too long failed to implement an anti-poverty framework – a long-range plan to tackle poverty and social deprivation. A plan which should be at the heart of healing our societies wounds. In 2015, following a judicial review challenge from the Committee on Administration on Justice (CAJ), the High Court ruled that the NI Executive had failed

BIG ISSUE

in its duty to adopt a strategy under the Northern Ireland (St Andrews agreement) Act 2006. Since then, there has been a growing catalogue of research, consultations and expert panel reports but, without implementation, these reports are simply a painful reminder of more wasted time and shattered visions of a better future. Growing poverty has been compounded by over a decade of Conservative austerity, which has ripped through the social security system. A new benefit, Universal Credit, was created by politicians who believed they knew what was 'fair' for claimants and in the process have caused huge hardship and whole host of legal challenges.

The lesson of the last two years is that social security policy can rapidly increase quality of life for the poor. The £20 increase to Universal Credit protected thousands of people from massive economic shock brought forth by the pandemic. The decision to cut it was a political one. UK charities and left/right wing economists are now calling on the Chancellor to raise benefits by at least 7% rather than the planned 3.1%. While this may seem dramatic to some, the £20 rise in Universal Credit for a single man at 25 equated to a 27% rise.

We need to see implementation of the long-awaited anti-poverty strategy.

What is the answer to the current crisis in the absence of a Northern Ireland Executive? This is a question that all political parties are struggling with. As purdah swiftly approaches, the quickest route is to provide additional support is through existing schemes and mechanisms. Politicians could grant a further £200 from the energy payment support scheme in April to those entitled to qualifying benefits. In addition, they could seek to extend and improve the 'Emergency Fuel Scheme' administered by Bryson Charitable Group from the end of March to at least the end of April. They could ensure that more money is provided to the scheme along with additional administrative support (potentially via Discretionary Support). This would ensure maximum accessibility for those on a low income who are not eligible to receive the £200 energy support payment, such as those on Working/Child Tax Credit. They could also change the amount available from the Emergency Fuel Scheme from £100 to £300 to reflect the rising cost of living, and to provide a better avenue of support for low-income households who are not entitled to qualifying benefits.

Improvements and extra financial resource for the Discretionary Support system would also be beneficial, as it is not limited to benefit eligibility and can support low-income individuals who find themselves in financial crisis due to the rising cost of living. I was part of an expert panel, chaired by Professor Gráinne McKeever, appointed to review Discretionary Support. We had hoped the review would be published and any recommendations translated into legislation to improve the system – but that has not yet happened. We still hope the review will be published this side of the elections, but any implementation will fall to a new Executive, a new Minister for Communities and a new Assembly. It is vital this system of critical support is improved so it is as good as it can be. But relying on cash limited schemes in crisis situations symbolises a move away from a rights based social security system.

Finally, with the upcoming summer holidays in view, politicians could ensure funding is released to direct free school meal payments to those families entitled through the school holidays and encourage all families to have their eligibility assessed to ensure maximum uptake. I agree that this scheme should continue to run as planned until 2025.

In terms of tackling poverty, the above measures are yet another sticking plaster. They might prevent some households teetering on the edge of the destitution from falling in, but they won't provide the long-term hope that is so desperately required. Ultimately, we need to see implementation of the long-awaited anti-poverty strategy. More importantly, the voices and participation of those who have felt the suffering and trauma associated with living on the breadline should play a key role. Northern Ireland needs a society security policy is that is fit for all. People need this system now. All of us will need it in the future.

MALACHI O'DOHERTY

Memoirs – the wonderful everyday

Maureen Boyle

Maureen Boyle is a memoir and a poetry mentor for the Irish Writers' Centre.
Her second full collection, *The Last Spring of the World*, is published this month with Arlen House.

When the invitation came to guest arts edit this edition of Fortnight, I knew I would like to make it a Memoir special since I wanted to reflect the changes in and interest in the form and especially the fact that many writers of other genres are now writing in it. The selection includes two such writers approaching the writing of memoir for the first time. One is novelist Sheena Wilkinson, whose piece opens with the response of many people when faced with the prospect of writing their own story – that it would be pretentious, that their life is insufficiently heroic. Wilkinson marvels at the surprise of finding herself writing something she never thought she would and for the best possible reason – to create the book she would have liked to find when she found herself falling in love with a widower after a contented single existence. So too poet Sinead Morrissey, who was reared a 'red-nappy' baby to borrow David Aaronovitch's phrase for the children of communists, writes of wanting to write of her experience of growing up in a communist home but thinking she could never write a memoir, interestingly because she believed she lacked the imagination required to do it. Sinead has already written what I would think of as memoir poems about the birth of her children and her travels, but this longer form she had always thought of as inherently 'bad-mannered' like taking up too much conversation at a dinner party! And there are poems here too – Raine Geoghegan's beautiful prose poem 'The Greenhouse' speaking of the ancestral spirits of her Romany past through the personal memory of her grandfather and Una Mannion's 'Gingko Rain' – a story she had tried in prose form and published but now paired back and published here as a moving poem. Máiría Cahill, more normally a political columnist, writes of a childhood accident set very much in the vivid streets of Troubles Belfast and Helen Mc Clements, herself a blogger and radio contributor, tells the amazing story of attempts to proselytise her, at her most vulnerable after a terrible accident that took the life of her boyfriend while climbing in New Zealand. And short story writer Peter Holywood remembers a special night when Belfast belonged to Allen Ginsberg just days before the Shankill bomb and Greysteel.

What is it that has changed? Is it that we have become much more used to sharing the details of our lives via social media? This so-often-maligned medium creates mini-narratives of real lives that can be utterly compelling. Can it also be about loss of hierarchies – a repositioning of ideas of power and ownership – especially in relation to women's lives? We have new ideas of heroism. For a long time only certain people were deemed worthy to tell their stories but we now realise the value in the 'wonderful everyday' to borrow from IKEA, and that such stories have important things to say about the times in which the life is being lived, something of particular importance here. I hope you enjoy them as much as I have.

Me? Write a *Memoir?*

Sheena Wilkinson

Sheena Wilkinson is an award-winning novelist and short story writer living in Mid-Ulster. She is learning how not to make up stories.

'You can't *say* that, Sheena.' How often was nine-year-old or sixteen-year-old me told off for tactlessness? As a novelist I've tried to channel it into expressing uncomfortable but hopefully powerful truths. But these truths are expressed by made-up people in imagined landscapes. Now I'm writing a memoir and that censure isn't so easy to dismiss with a tossed head and a stubborn, 'I'll say what I like!'

ALISON MOORE

Hold on. *Writing a memoir*? About *real* things? Me? I suppose I must be, now that I have admitted it in print. But it feels so – *pretentious*. Who the hell do I think *I* am, that people might be interested in reading about my actual life? I haven't survived trauma or achieved amazing feats or started a revolution. I'm just a middle-aged writer who was single for twenty years and then fell in love with an old friend an indecently short time after his wife's death.

But it started a revolution in me. It's the first time that, after years of making stuff up, I've had a more compelling story to tell – my own. And I want to tell it for the oldest reason – that it's a story I could have done with reading myself when I first fell in love with a widower. And other than *Rebecca,* which hardly inspired confidence, there didn't seem to be much out there from the point of view of the second wife. It's the story of the happiest and most testing time in my life. It's the story of spending lockdown in a shrine with the ghost of the perfect dead wife, of dealing with legacy in-laws and left-behind shoes. It's the story of becoming stepmother to a teenager when I never wanted kids. The story of walking down the aisle with a HRT patch under my wedding dress, of rediscovering sex and nakedness some years after embracing the full brief.

It's the story of leaving my beloved mountain home because we can't uproot a bereaved teenager. About learning the gentler contours of an alien landscape and the even more alien experience of living with said teenager. It's about being at the heart of another person's life for the first time ever, and having another human at the heart of mine.

RAPHAEL MASON

Sheena on her wedding day

A story of realising how tough and simple single life had been, when keeping loneliness at bay was hard work but nobody made emotional demands. Of accepting that my spinsterhood might weigh as much as the more conventional baggage of dead wife and child. It's the story of one minute feeling the most profound love I've ever experienced, and the next screaming, *It's that bloody wallpaper or me*. Because I hate everything Irene loved – except her husband.

It's my story. I enjoy telling it to people. They use words like *heart-warming* and *romantic* and *adorable* and I am seduced by this approbation that has always eluded me. I feel that society has finally embraced me – and I recognise how wrong that is, that single women are still made to feel marginalised. I intend to interrogate that in my memoir. Falling in love at fifty has given me a new perspective on the single life I thought was a permanent state. But I don't want to present this as a 'happy ever after' with the lonely spinster getting her man in the end – I want to write *against* that tradition. Especially because I am old enough to know how fragile life is, that this might not be a happy-ever-after.

I know it's a good story. So why does it feel so conceited to *write* it? I'm a professional writer. I've never doubted my right or ability to express myself in words. Surely, after eight novels, I shouldn't feel imposter syndrome about writing my *own* story?

Partly, and every memoirist stumbles on this unless they're a hermit, it's because it's not *only* my story. Yes, I can tell *my* truth, I can 'say what I like', but there are other people involved. My husband is an adult with a fair idea about the splinter of ice in my writerly heart, but my stepson is sixteen. Everything from the pace of our courtship to where we live has been dictated by his needs. And I'm selfish, and unused to considering a child, and, even though I'm fond of him, I've struggled to accept that. That's not his fault. It's still part of my story, though, so am I failing to tell the truth if I don't engage fully with it? I don't know.

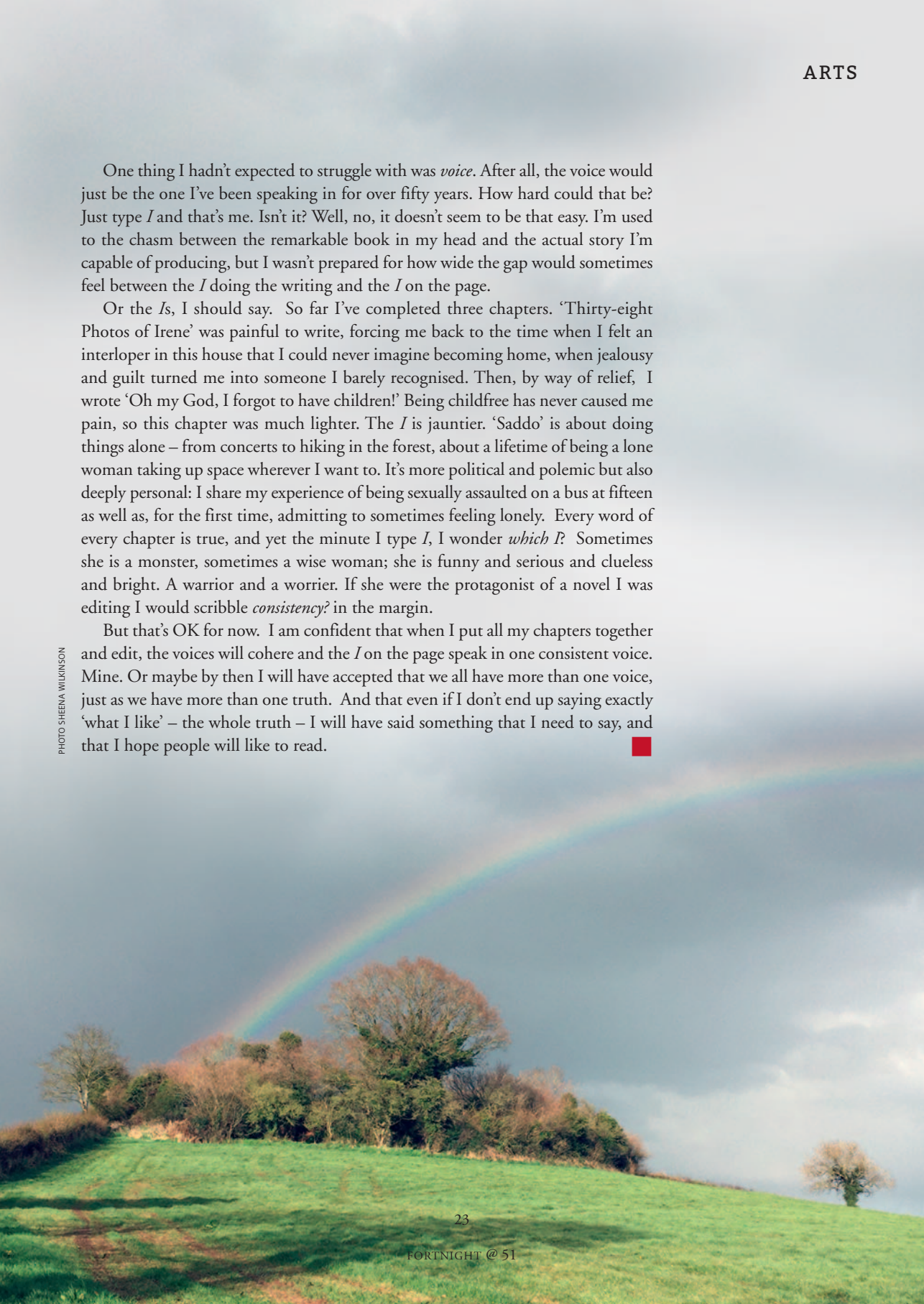
I always guessed it would be harder than fiction. I'm well into the first draft, and my own life – or this written version – is proving much tougher to wrestle into shape than any story. Even leaving aside for now the issue of other people's privacy, I'm still not sure how open I want to be about *me*. All very well to plan a chapter about falling in love and becoming sexually active again at the same time as going through the menopause. I'm happy to write, amusingly I hope, about my adoption and then rejection of the large comfortable brief, but how much about my hot flushes and mega-periods and murderous mood swings do I want to reveal? I once bought a vibrator in Ann Summers while at a book conference in England and then posted it home because I was scared of Ryanair opening my bag in front of other passengers. This could be a hilarious episode in a novel but if I write it about *me*, will it be simply embarrassing? When does refreshing frankness become morbid oversharing?

One thing I hadn't expected to struggle with was *voice*. After all, the voice would just be the one I've been speaking in for over fifty years. How hard could that be? Just type *I* and that's me. Isn't it? Well, no, it doesn't seem to be that easy. I'm used to the chasm between the remarkable book in my head and the actual story I'm capable of producing, but I wasn't prepared for how wide the gap would sometimes feel between the *I* doing the writing and the *I* on the page.

Or the *I*s, I should say. So far I've completed three chapters. 'Thirty-eight Photos of Irene' was painful to write, forcing me back to the time when I felt an interloper in this house that I could never imagine becoming home, when jealousy and guilt turned me into someone I barely recognised. Then, by way of relief, I wrote 'Oh my God, I forgot to have children!' Being childfree has never caused me pain, so this chapter was much lighter. The *I* is jauntier. 'Saddo' is about doing things alone – from concerts to hiking in the forest, about a lifetime of being a lone woman taking up space wherever I want to. It's more political and polemic but also deeply personal: I share my experience of being sexually assaulted on a bus at fifteen as well as, for the first time, admitting to sometimes feeling lonely. Every word of every chapter is true, and yet the minute I type *I*, I wonder *which I*? Sometimes she is a monster, sometimes a wise woman; she is funny and serious and clueless and bright. A warrior and a worrier. If she were the protagonist of a novel I was editing I would scribble *consistency?* in the margin.

But that's OK for now. I am confident that when I put all my chapters together and edit, the voices will cohere and the *I* on the page speak in one consistent voice. Mine. Or maybe by then I will have accepted that we all have more than one voice, just as we have more than one truth. And that even if I don't end up saying exactly 'what I like' – the whole truth – I will have said something that I need to say, and that I hope people will like to read.

PHOTO SHEENA WILKINSON



Saved

Helen McClements

Helen McClements is an English teacher and writer from Belfast. She is a contributor to *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio Ulster, Tenx9 and she has a poem in *Washing Windows Too*, a newly-published anthology of women writers, by Arlen House.

STEVEY GARLAND

This is an excerpt from a memoir she is writing about a trip she took with her boyfriend, Dr Donal Deery. In January 2005 they had reached New Zealand where Donal intended taking up a post in Christchurch Hospital. On the 12th January 2005 they were hiking in Mount Aspiring National Park when Helen slipped and, in jumping to save her, Donal died at the scene. Helen was taken by helicopter to Dunedin Hospital, where she was treated for multiple injuries. This part of the memoir is about her journey back home to Northern Ireland, two weeks after the accident.

A helicopter transported Erin, (the nurse who would accompany me back to Belfast) and me to a small airfield, where a tiny plane with the words 'Christian Airways' emblazoned on the side was waiting. An elderly-looking gentleman in a suit, looking like a most congenial grandfather, welcomed me on board with warm words and a packed lunch, made by his wife. In it there were sandwiches, an apple and a slab of homemade fruit cake. There were only three of us on board, and Erin tucked a tartan blanket around my knees and poured me a cup of tea from a flask provided by the pilot's wife. It felt rather like being in a kind aunt's house, except we were in a small, juddering aeroplane, several thousand feet up. We seemed to hardly be in the air at all until the plane started to rattle and make alarming noises. The pilot's voice breezily chimed through the tannoy to say that we'd have to make an emergency landing at the next convenient spot. 'No worries! We'll be on the go again in no time!' he said, as though we were in a Ford Sierra, pulling into a petrol station. I shrugged and looked at Erin, who was trying to maintain her composure for my sake. 'I'm sure it will be ok,' I said.

In truth, I had no notion whether it would be alright or not. Donal and I had missed the Tsunami in South East Asia by a month, only for me to slip on a patch of grass wearing firm hiking boots, where only the day before we had seen the two

climbers sprinting up and down in their trainers. It seemed entirely probable that this aircraft, looking every bit like the 'Fisher Price My First Plane', would come crashing out of the air, just as I was washing down my cake with a drink of tea from the little flask. However, with remarkable speed and efficacy, our pilot swung the plane onto an airstrip and a few men tinkered with the engine. With a relaxed, 'We're off again,' from the pilot, and a wave from the men below, we began our journey up to Auckland.

As we made the journey north, I told Erin about the 'miracle' of being able to get home for the funeral and the fact that I could still actually walk, despite the broken bones in my back, neck and pelvis. Hearing the word 'miracle' she must have assumed that I was of a religious bent.

This was to prove unfortunate on the flight from Auckland to Los Angeles. As I sat in a first class reclining seat, a stewardess handed me a glass of champagne. 'Are you sure you can't have one too?' I asked Erin, but she shook her head and said no, that sadly it would have breached her contract. I sipped my glass alone, but it didn't taste like champagne as I remembered; this was sour and astringent and made me pucker my lips. I handed it back. 'My first and only time I'll ever travel first class and I can't even taste the champagne,' I remarked wryly.

Later I was offered a glass of red with in-flight meal. It tasted funny too. 'Oh God,' I said to Erin. 'I'm not even going to be able to drink myself through this hell.' I sent it back with a deep sigh. 'It's the morphine,' explained my Erin. It makes things taste peculiar.'

'Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?' asked the stewardess, who was hovering; ostensibly to help, but clearly wanting to know what had happened to me. It was possibly the first time she'd had to tend to a passenger with a metal frame drilled into her head to stabilise her fractured neck.

Planes are a bad place to open up. The thing about opening up on a plane is that people may wish to open up back, and there aren't many places to escape when you're cruising at 35 000 feet in a Boeing 747.

'I had an accident,' I told the stewardess. 'I broke my back and my neck.'

She nodded, urging me to go on. 'I should have died,' I said, 'But I didn't. I think someone was looking after me.'

'They were,' she nodded. 'Jesus was looking after you. He looked after me too.'

I smiled back, warily. As a former evangelical Christian, my antennae was up. I believed, but I knew already that I didn't believe in her version of God. But it was too late. She had a captive audience- literally, as my head and torso were encased in steel, which was in turn encased in a bigger steel can, in a macabre meta fashion.

'Jesus saved me, from being raped,' she said, grabbing my hand. 'A man followed me into an underground carpark,' she went on. 'I knew what he wanted, and he held a knife to my throat. I screamed, and he said he would kill me. Then I shouted, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, I command you to stop!"

Erin looked nervously at me. This was clearly a first for both of us.

'And he looked at me, and he dropped the knife, and he turned and ran.'

We exhaled, relieved for her, that this was how it had ended.

'But you,' she said, bringing her face as close to mine as my frame would allow. 'Are you saved?'

'Well,' I stuttered, 'I mean… I believe…'

'You MUST receive him, KNOW him as your Lord and Saviour,' she said. Her voice had climbed several octaves higher.

After spending my formative years within the confines of a church and my university years distancing myself, I was no longer comfortable with this terminology.

I could feel her spit land on my cheeks as her fervour increased. 'After this, how can you not believe?'

I didn't know what to do – but I started to shake uncontrollably. The muscles in my legs started to flicker and twitch as they always did when I got nervous, making my pelvis ache. 'Get her away from me,' I hissed to Erin.

'I think Helen's tired now,' Erin told the woman who left.

Another steward quickly appeared at my elbow. Tall, bald with large statement

glasses, he had reminded me of a celebrity chef when he presented my food with a flourish. As Erin opened her mouth to speak, he put out his hand. 'She's been at it again, hasn't she?' he said, shaking his head as a look of pure fury crossed his face. 'Don't worry. I'm sending her to economy and that's where she's staying.'

Having spent so much time with Robyn, the chaplain in the hospital, I had started to find some solace in my faith although it had been dormant for so long. But this encounter, in all its brutal fervour, made me wonder if I could ever make peace with Christianity again.

Poem

Raine Geoghegan

ANDREA GELLATLY

Raine Geoghegan, M.A. is a Romany poet, born in the Welsh valleys with Irish and English ancestry. The following poem is from her first full collection, *The Talking Stick: O Pookering Kosh* forthcoming from Salmon Poetry.

The Greenhouse

Mourners spill out into the alleyway. Amidst the black are flashes of purple and red of women's scarves and men's ties.

My uncle, a staff sergeant in the army and just back from Germany is dressed in his uniform. He leans against the kitchen wall, having a smoke. We drink tea laced with whiskey. My aunts dry their tears on freshly pressed white handkerchiefs.

I go into the sitting room and see my sister sitting on a stool, her hands clasped tightly on her lap. The coffin is open. Grandfather is in his best suit. His pocket watch hangs from his top pocket. A family photograph is tucked into his waistcoat, close to his heart. His old hip flask lies at his side, no doubt there will be a little whiskey in there. He still wears his gold ring. He looks as if he's resting, as if he'll sit up at any moment. I place my hand gently on his ...

Grandfather and I are walking down the path to the green house. I am six years old. It's a hot day. I'm wearing my shorts. Weeds and wildflowers tickle my ankles. He pushes the door open, ushers me in, points upwards. 'What d'ya think of the grapes my gal?' Tilting my head back I see huge bunches, deep red, ready to be plucked. He reaches up, pulls a few down, rinses them in a bowl of water then places them in my hand. I bite one and the juice runs down my chin. I eat two more. 'They're lovely Grandfather.' He smiles, opens a can of beer, takes a mouthful and says. 'Do ya see these grapes? Do ya know why they're so tasty?' I shake my head. 'Well, it's because the Mulo watches over 'em.' He laughs, I laugh but I'm not sure who the Mulo is.

I finish my cup of tea and tell Granny that I am going down to the greenhouse. The door is slightly ajar, the white paint faded, flaking. I push the door hard, go in and smell sawdust, stale beer and decay. There is an open can of pale ale on the shelf, alongside three broken brown pots. An old knife with a blue handle, its blade stuck in the wood. It's the one he used to carve the wagons with. I bend down; pull an old crate out and in front of me the unfinished wagon. Taking a tissue from my pocket I wipe the dust off. It's painted red, green and yellow. Tiny faded net curtains hang limply against the small windows. The front door has minute horseshoes attached to it. All the Romanies believe them to bring good luck. I would love to have this wagon. Before I leave I look up to where the grapes used to grow in abundance. All that is left is a dried, tangled vine hanging loosely from the roof.

Mulo – Romani for spirit of the ancestors

The Middle Finger

Máiría Cahill

Máiría Cahill is a columnist for *The Sunday Independent*.
A former Senator and Councillor, she is a mother-of-one.

Máiría as a young girl

The day was crisp and clear. My cheeks were burning from the cold, the same cold that led to shouts of, "your nose is tripping you!" from adults, prompting a big sniff from a child and a swipe of snot with a sleeve. I was four and enjoying the company of my older cousin. He wasn't a blood relation, but was brought up as one, and I looked up to him. The sky was grey, with clouds that threatened rain – sweeping a blanket of claustrophobia over the chewing-gum-littered uneven concrete. I remember the day well; in later years I wondered to myself how I could ever possibly forget it.

We played 'chasies', and hide-and-seek, and later we sent Joe up the lamppost to put a rope at the top of it for us to swing on. Health and safety risk assessments were not a thing then – the boys just spat on their hands, which they rubbed on their bare feet to make them stick to cold metal, and then scampered up the lamppost like monkeys to tie the rope at the top. Sometimes a dog would grab the other end of it and try to pull it in the opposite direction, while cherry- coloured-faced children would scream and try to shoo it away by swiping at it with the cushion one of the adults had provided so our bums wouldn't get sore when sitting on the rope. You had to watch your head when swinging, in case you whacked it off the metal in a misjudged movement, but the feeling of leaning your head back while looking at a spinning sky, feet out straight to stop your knees suffering the same fate as a head-knock, was exhilarating. We were not great at 'chancies and pieces' – whoever had their bum on the seat didn't want to give it up, and whoever

was next in line wasn't passing on their chance to the next person either. The only thing that stopped the fun, usually, was the roar from the adults to come in for lunch, or dinner – and when that happened, you wolfed your food down as quick as you could to get back out first to grab the rope and claim it.

There were too many children waiting on their turn that day, so Jim (not his real name) and I decided to swing on granny's gate instead. You could put your feet inside the iron bars and launch yourself back and forward and still get a little spontaneous movement. It wasn't the same whooshy feeling as the lamppost, but it wasn't far off either. It made a squeaking noise, and when it stopped at the point where it met the pavement, it would grind on the gravel and jolt you from your toes to your brain. Only one person could fit at a time, so Jim went first while I stood with my little chubby left hand leaning on the brick at the side of the hinge. It didn't occur to any of us that this might have been dangerous, we were too busy laughing and completely immersed in the moment. Jim launched himself, and the gate swung forward – and then it all appeared to happen in slow motion. I felt an initial nip, then my hand went hot, and my head light, and I could hear the other kids screaming. Jim put his arms around me and kept shouting, "Are you ok? Are you ok?" He was a few years older than me and I loved him. I looked down at my hand at the same time as the adults came spilling out of the brown door of my granny's house, and my finger was flapping; "hanging by a thread", I remember someone saying later. Blood was pooling on the pavement, and my dad held my arm in the air above my head while someone ran to get tissues and his car keys. It was quicker for him to drive me to the hospital, so he leapt into his brown Chrysler Alpine car and my uncle Dan lifted me and half-bounced into the back, held my head to his chest under his armpit, and did his best to hold my hanging- off- finger-tip to the rest of my digit, under a great big wad of rapidly- turning- red kitchen roll.

What happened when we arrived is a bit of a blur, though the memory of a doctor pushing a big rubber black mask over my face, and his weight on my chest while I struggled to breathe in the gas that would soon knock me out, never leaves me. I thought I was suffocating – scary for anyone, terrifying for a young child. My father recalls that when we arrived, they had a brief conversation with him about whether they could save my finger. Circulation was a concern, as was the fact that aside from it being almost severed completely, the inside of the tip was crushed. By sheer luck, the hospital had a microsurgeon there who had arrived from England, and they agreed a slot to operate on me immediately. I woke up with my arm heavily bandaged in a sling that was suspended from silver bars above the bed – the Royal Hospital's version of a four-poster. I was alone – the sister on the ward had told my parents that I wouldn't be awake for hours and shooed them off into a side room. A nice nurse came to the bedside and told me it was important not to move my arm, which stayed in a state of suspension for days.

There was a young boy next to me who became my buddy over the next while – neither of us were allowed out of bed to go to the playroom, and so, in an era of pre-internet, pre-hospital television, and pre-mobile devices, there was a lot of staring at the ceiling. Our ability to talk non-stop to each other was a good

distraction. I couldn't move, and he had a tube running into a bag at the side of the bed which rendered him immobile. Pamela, my next door neighbour came to visit. "What happened to you?" she asked the boy in the next bed. "It's my wee man," he replied without a hint of embarrassment, in the way that only children can.

When I eventually got out, my mother took responsibility for changing dressings and cleaning my wounds. The hospital thought any chance of my nail growing back was remote. By this stage it was changing colour – horrific for an outsider to look at, but fascinating to me as I marvelled at its ability to turn blue, green and brown. The entire nail fell off one day when my mother was standing outside chatting to another woman, and I lost it running around on the green bank in front of the Andersonstown Credit Union.

It's funny how people perceive injuries, and what children pick up on at that age. Lots of women sympathised with me at the fact that it was the middle finger on my 'wedding hand', and would ruin the photos when I got older. It didn't occur to me that I wouldn't get married then, until I became an adult and saw no reason to, though that had nothing to do with my wonky finger. The older boys thought it was neat – a war wound that allowed me to show it off – and give people the middle finger, without being shouted at.

I was very lucky. The finger is noticeable, yet nobody notices its deformity, unless it is pointed out. It is fully usable, though the nail is a funny shape at the top, and the top of the finger itself is lopsided. There are scars inside the nail bed, and a big one running across half of the tip. It wasn't the only accident I had – I had broken my collarbone in a car crash prior to that, and later stood on a knife which went straight through my foot – but it is the one I cannot remember to this day without wincing.

It wasn't long before I was horsing around again, taking my turn at lamppost spinning, or almost leapfrogging over British soldiers in the front yard of granny's in my haste to partake in the next game on the street. A few years later, my younger cousin did exactly the same thing on the gate with her finger, and my Granda, enraged, took the gate off at the hinges after and threw it onto the street. So ended 'Ballymurphygate', and though I would never swing on a gate again, I can still feel the enjoyable whoosh in my belly that the squeaky old thing used to bring.

SAORLAITH NÍ CHATHAIL

Poem

Una Mannion

Una Mannion is a teacher and writer living in County Sligo. Her debut novel *A Crooked Tree* was published by Faber in 2021 and has just won the Kate O'Brien Award 2022.

RÓISÍN LOUGHREY

Ginkgo rain

My father gives me his eye and his teeth.
He looks scooped out, like a mask with cut out hollows
where the eye and mouth should be.
I hold them during his treatment.
His eye is painted on a piece of soft plastic.
It is blue, like mine.
On a plastic orange chair in the waiting room,
I hold these parts of him laid out in my palm like an offering.

He goes through chemotherapy and radiation.
He tells me that radiation to the head is like the moment in a car accident
when the glass crashes in
except over and over again.

I work with him at his job landscaping,
and we take breaks under a ginkgo tree.
He says when Hiroshima was bombed
the only living things to survive the radiation blast
were six ginkgo trees,
green buds pushed
through the skin of scalded bark and ash.

By autumn, he is dying
there is a bruise on his forehead and a sore on his lip.
He has stopped swallowing.
It is time for me to leave.
I go into him and he has dressed for our goodbye,
sitting upright on the edge of the bed.
He makes it formal, wearing his good shirt, his teeth and his eye.

One afternoon, years ago, at the house with the ginkgo
my father told me to come to the tree.
Thousands of blazing leaves fell all at once,
the ginkgo rain.
We stood in their downpour
and lifted our faces to their bright touch.
In half an hour the tree was bare.

‘Encore Applause Encore: It’s almost like being there’

From Memoir – and back again

Sinéad Morrissey

Sinéad Morrissey is the author of six collections of poetry. She is currently writing a memoir of her Communist childhood in Belfast during the Troubles, *Seeing Red*.

“I was born in Portadown in a white box,” writes Paul Muldoon. I was too, in the same nursing home as it happens, The Carlton, in April 1972, the Troubles’ bloodiest year. But our backgrounds couldn’t have been more different.

Sean and Catherine Morrissey in the Soviet Union, 1964

My paternal grandfather, Sean Morrissey, a member of the IRA, was interned during World War II, initially on board the prison ship *Al Rawdah,* later in Crumlin Road Gaol. Whilst in prison, he ‘converted’ to Communism (though he didn’t end up joining the Party until 1956, *after* the Soviet invasion of Hungary). My father, raised in the Communist faith, joined the Young Workers’ League in 1962 (later to become the Young Communist League of Northern Ireland) and was duly expelled from St Malachy’s for his radical political views. He represented Ireland at an International Komsomol Conference in Moscow in 1969. That same year, he met my mother, a Communist from Derbyshire, at a Communist Party Meeting in North Belfast. Weeks later, the Troubles ignited. My mother stayed in Northern Ireland, the couple married and had two children, and so I was raised a ‘red-nappy baby’ (to quote David Aaronovitch) in a sea of violently-clashing orange and green. A rich and peculiar inheritance, for sure, and one to which I will always be grateful, if also fundamentally perplexed by.

One of the bequests of my childhood (and there are many) was a feeling of being radically unmoored from where I came from. Whose side was I on in the Troubles? I had no idea. My parents refused to send me to Catholic schools, assuming the religious indoctrination there would be systemic, and possibly overwhelming (though there was an awful lot of religion in State schools too). With my Irish father, English mother, Irish name and Protestant schooling, inside my own head, and to people who met me, the usual signifiers of

Northern Irish identity fused to a meaningless blur. As a consequence, I ignored the Troubles completely. Whose side was I on in the Cold War? Easy peasy. Reagan and Thatcher, hellbent on blowing up the planet for the purposes of their own psycho-sexual gratification (which had something to do with Capitalism, though I wasn't sure what) were the Cold War's nefarious aggressors. I brought a pen in the shape of a long grey nail into primary school, *Another Nail in Thatcher's Coffin* etched jauntily on its side. My teacher's eyes widened as she read it, but I hadn't even noticed.

And then the Soviet Bloc collapsed in 1989, and that was that. I was 17. I watched the fall of the Berlin Wall on television and wondered what I'd been told. My parents got divorced. The family house was sold. If everyone's childhood ends eventually, mine was amputated. I entered adulthood in a world in which the Soviet Union didn't exist anymore. Though the socio-political edifice of Communism was ethically questionable (to say the least), though I'd never fully believed in it, even at the time, I still couldn't shake the feeling that something fundamentally important and precious and sustaining had been lost.

I've wanted to write a book about my Communist childhood for thirty years, but I've never wanted to write a memoir. I couldn't bear to be in my own company for that long. Me, for a whole book. The idea struck me as interminable, but also somehow bad-mannered, like being the overtalkative guest at a dinner party. I also knew I lacked the requisite imagination to write a memoir. I didn't know much about any kind of writing other than poetry, but I knew enough to know that accessing memory isn't as simple as accessing what happened, or the truth. As Milan Kundera puts it in *Life is Elsewhere*: "Do you think that the past, because it has already occurred, is finished and unchangeable? Oh no, it is clothed in mutable taffeta, and whenever we look back at it we see it in another colour." For like the work of history, the work of memory is an *imaginative* act. And the requirement to be imaginative makes me sweat.

Years ago, chatting to Conor O'Callaghan, I agreed we poets can find consecutive prose an awful slog. For every character you put in a room, you've got to manoeuvre them out again. Worse, you've got to equip them with a reason to be in the room in the first place. And then you've got to make the room up as well. By whatever means – the colour of the lampshade, the smell of the furniture polish – you've got to make that linguistic space inhabitable. Which takes *a lot* of words.

It's exhausting.

You don't need to do any of that in a poem. You can. But you don't have to.

Poems are spectacularly suspended entities, liberated from all kinds of expectations. From linearity for one thing. Or from – that word again – truth. From historical or socio-political or personal accuracy. Or from the need to go all the way to the end of the page, which is another way of saying from the need to *keep talking.* In a poem, you can *stop talking* whenever you like. You can play and then not play. You can be maverick and unexpected and rogue. Switching from poetry to prose made me feel unexpectedly tethered, tugged down out of the upper atmosphere to a denser and more accountable realm. It made me experience my own body weight differently.

Discussing her book of personal essays, *Constellations*, during an event at Newcastle University, Sinéad Gleeson spoke of how "memoir" can sometimes be used as a reductive term, especially when used to describe women's writing. It's a question of authority; of power. Of what you get to own. Yes, I thought. How true. "The personal essay", akin to her personal essays, seemed closer to what I wanted to write. It seemed a roomier term. Because if I was going to be made accountable, I didn't want to be accountable to just me, or to what happened to just me. I wanted to be accountable to bigger, more tangible things. Things that mattered, or that mattered more. I wanted to write about history and books and plays and prisons and photographs and yes poems too (for there will always be poems) in addition to (if I really had to) myself. I thought such extended discursive passages would function like oxygen. Like opening the door to a greener and more reliable world than the stuffy little sitting room inside.

And so I talk about Chernobyl and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* as a film about Chernobyl (shot years before Reactor #4 was even built).

I talk about Raymond Briggs' *When the Wind Blows.*

I talk about Bertolt Brecht's mad Stalinist cantata*, The Measures Taken.*

About Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* and Patrick Kavanagh's "The Hospital" and Philip Larkin's "Home is so Sad" and Orlando Figes's *A People's Tragedy.*

I talk about the World War Two Prison Ship, the *Al Rawdah,* moored off Killyleagh in the waters of Strangford Lough, a bullseye to German bombers.

I talk about Matthias Rust, a slightly unhinged resident of Hamburg, who in 1987 breached 'impenetrable' Soviet airspace and landed his Cessna light aircraft on Red Square.

I talk about all these things because I really, really want to. In between, I also talk about me, though I clearly want to do this less. I talk about my teeth and my clothes and my catastrophic piano lessons. I talk about what my classmates ate for lunch in Whiteabbey Primary School. I talk about the conversations we had about Communism on family holidays and the posters on my bedroom wall. A little bit. Enough. Or so I thought.

Everyone who's read my book so far has said the same thing.

Can we have more of you?

"History is a debt the living repay to the dead," pronounces Orlando Figes, loftily, in *The Telegraph.* "We don't write history to draw attention to ourselves." This as part of his excoriating review of Martin Amis's book about Stalin, *Koba The*

Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million. Koba the Dread is a problematic book. But somewhere at the back of the general furore against this novelist's take on history (for Figes is far from alone) lies the belief that you should stick to what you're known for – a discomfited reaction to trespass.

Rather reluctantly, as I brace myself for a second draft, I have come to accept that I shall have to talk more about me (the fact that the written me is bound to be fictionalised notwithstanding). I do not possess the authority to discuss the abrupt collapse of the Soviet Bloc or the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or even the inner machinations of the Communist Party in Belfast during the 1980s, except as they happened to me. That they all happened to me in unpredictable, funny, present-absent ways is part of the story.

But I'm not giving anything up either.

If I'm going to conjure up the "lost world of Belfast Communism" (to adapt a title of Raphael Samuel's) so convincingly readers can inhabit it for themselves, they'll need a consciousness, a perspective to see it with. As long as that perspective is consistent, and sustained, I still hope to show them whatever I like.

A Beat Belfast

Peter Hollywood

Peter Hollywood is the author of five books, with a sixth in the offing and is the current Royal Literary Fund Writing Fellow, based in the Seamus Heaney Centre, QUB.

Allen Ginsberg didn't do a reading at the Crescent Arts Centre, University Road, Belfast on the 20th October 1993. He did two! The same evening. This detail has a significance. A desolation angel had come to a city of much desolation. And, it being a Beat writer, the event held a particular significance for me.

Peter Hollywood

For one, Beat literature had helped me stay safe, growing up in Newry, during the Troubles. I can clearly remember my first encounter with Kerouac (the centenary of whose birth occurred in March this year). It was not, as you would think, with a copy of the iconic *On the Road.* Rather, sitting in a smoky bedroom with a group of friends, we were being introduced to *Cortez the Killer* by a slightly older compadre. Later, some of us left with a Tim Pat Coogan, others with a copy of *The War of the Flea* or The Little Red Notebook. I left with a copy of *Desolation Angels.* And lo! The Cooley Peninsula, Slieve Foy and the Flagstaff, became Desolation Peak in the North Cascade Mountains of Washington State, where Kerouac spent a summer as a fire look-out. Sadly, there was no shortage of fires back then in Newry. *On the Road* eventually got me on the road and out of there, away from that heady cocktail of fear, excitement and adrenalin that can be distilled from troubled times.

The Crescent Arts Centre was a smallish venue in 1993. When it turned out that tickets for the reading had swiftly sold out, the angelic Allen insisted on doing a second one, that very same evening. The circumstance of this second reading finishing late meant that Ginsberg had to interrupt his finale to allow some members of the audience to run and get the last bus. Whether he knew it intuitively or whether it had been pointed out to him by the organisers: Belfast was still a dark and dangerous place and he wanted to ensure the safety of people getting home.

He didn't let us all out though.

In any case, I managed to get a ticket for this second performance. I had contacts; you see. When I eventually returned from my travels, my first full-time job was as bookseller in the University Bookshop at Queen's (the 'word-hoard' as Heaney once described it, at a launch). Working there, with a colleague, in almost Quixotic fashion, we began to stock Beat Literature, from the well-known to the more obscure. For example, we were stocking John Fantes, published by Black Sparrow Press, and Diane de Palmas, long before the mainstream, UK publishers jumped on any Beat bandwagon. Bukowski was only available then from Star Books, with their soft porn covers and lurid blurbs.

With two friends, we arrived early at the venue, me bearing a City Lights Pocket Poet Series edition of *Reality Sandwiches* and Conor with a copy of *Howl.* I chose *Reality Sandwiches* in some small part because I imagined the poet might be sick and tired of seeing or signing copies of *Howl* – the way some musicians bemoan 'greatest hits' requests – but really because the poem *The Green Automobile* meant something to me. This prompted my enquiring, when I finally got up to Ginsburg, where he was signing at a small table, if he missed Neil [Cassidy]. He looked up at me for a moment and then said, 'Miss him? But he's still here.' Signing Conor's book, he encouraged him, 'We must all howl!' In both our books, below his signature and date, he had also written: 'AH'. Thankfully, I resisted the temptation to ask him what it meant – assuming it some gnomic and arcane acronym. My friend, however, was not so timid, duly and directly demanding its meaning. Ginsberg considered him a moment. Then, in almost comic, but totally un-ironic, response, Ginsberg sat back in the seat, inclining his head at an angle enough to allow him to emit an immense sigh to the ceiling. Rapt, we realised then that the 'AH' did exactly what it said on the tin: it was simply an exultant exhalation to the heavens. It was Zen in the city!

'Ah!' Conor muttered. ' Right. Thanks,' before beating his hasty retreat.

Earlier that day, Ginsberg had told local radio that he had recently sent his peace 'manifesto' to the White House and that it had been accepted by Bill Clinton, from whom, he said, he had received a reply. That evening, long before any legally-sanctioned smoking ban in bars and public places, Ginsberg imposed his own, assuring us he would vacate the stage if anyone lit up. And then he proceeded to entrance with recitations, songs and spells, charms, chants and incantations.

Belfast did not have much to laugh at back then and people could present as a reserved, sometimes surly, buttoned-up bunch. So when, for his finale, he played the harmonium and sang William Blake's *The Nurse's Song* and requested that we sing with him aloud the final line, 'The Hills they echo-éd', he encountered a sullen, embarrassed non-compliance, but for a plucky, unabashed few. Undeterred, Ginsberg merely continued to sing calmly and patiently the line and play the harmonium and point out that he wasn't letting anyone go until the hall itself 'echo –éd' with our accompaniment. And all comically, all wonderfully, the audience began to join in. The trickle became a flow, the flow a torrent, until everyone was singing and chanting (howling?) along with Allen Ginsberg. A celebration; an almost atavistic exhalation. A release. AH!

True, three days later, ten people were killed when a bomb being planted by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) exploded in a fish shop on the Shankill Road, Belfast. And, over the next week, Loyalist paramilitaries killed a total of 12 Catholic civilians. But, in the background the Hume-Adams talks were under way which would lead the way eventually to the Good Friday Agreement.

And the Crescent Arts Centre is still here today; still a vibrant, lively arts venue. And still the place where, back that night in 1993, we had ourselves a Ginsberg Belfast. A Beat Belfast.

Not a beaten one.

A Belf-AH….

Forward Motion

Neil Hegarty

Neil Hegarty is a writer whose novels include *The Jewel*, published in 2019; and *Inch Levels*, which was shortlisted for the Kerry Group Novel of the Year award in 2017. Other titles include *Frost: That Was the Life That Was*, a biography of David Frost; and *The Story of Ireland*, which accompanies a BBC-RTÉ television history of Ireland.

This train is for

Bernie McGill

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www.noalibispress.com to order

'This is what we do here: move forward while facing back, keeping a sharp eye on what has been, in case it gets a run on us, overtakes on our blind side.' At the beginning of the title story of Bernie McGill's remarkable new collection *This Train is For*, the unnamed protagonist boards an early-morning train at Coleraine station. He is old – too old to be up and out so early, too old to be travelling alone, and certainly too old to have to deal with the future that is coming swift down the tracks towards him. This is not a sensible train journey. But he is thran, this old man, and determined to do what he absolutely must do, which is to reach a ward in the City Hospital in Belfast, and to see his sister before time and her life runs out. He is determined to look his future in the eye.

'This Train is For' is a dazzling exercise in compression, and an exemplification of what the short story form can achieve. In its few short pages, we discover much about the effect of Northern Ireland's fraught and turbulent history on not one or two characters but on three generations of one rural family. We are reminded of the imprint of the colonial process on our place names and our sense of where we live and belong. We learn of the power of silence and estrangement to distort – and to destroy – more than one life. We see and feel underscored the ability of love to hold on doggedly, and to make our circumstances less unbearable, less unendurable. And we come to know more about the necessary smallness of existence: how the local, the minute rhythms of speech, the ripples of our immediate landscapes, the tiny gestures and glances of our loved ones are woven together to bring meaning to our lives.

More than anything, however, we come to understand the proximity, always, of these same lives to darkness and brutality. There is no sentimentality in McGill's writing: and in this opening story in the collection, she reminds us of the harmful ways in which we can deploy language – especially if the targets of our bile are the ones closest to us. 'There is no denying the strength of words, their power to injure, the impossibility of taking back what is uttered

once it has gone from the mouth. The undulations and abrasions caused. The altered landscape formed of the tongue.' It is this vicious harm that the unnamed protagonist travels through early-morning County Antrim to at last address – and we are propelled forward with him, with shock and in trepidation.

One senses that this title story, with its literal forward movement, is intended as a bridge between McGill's previous collection, the Edge Hill Prize-shortlisted *Sleepwalkers*, and the later work collected in this new volume. The characters created in *Sleepwalkers* share a sense of locomotion suspended: having moved forward in their lives, they now find themselves becalmed in a range of liminal, betwixt-and-between situations, spaces doubtfully and temporarily occupied: in holiday accommodation in Provence, on a hospital ward, on an Italian railway platform. They watch and listen, ruminate and assess, they take a breath – and we leave them before decisions are made on a range of possible futures. A different thread runs through the stories brought together in *This Train is For*: now, movement has recommenced, and one senses the future already underway, passing like a breeze through the protagonists' senses. They and we have no idea what this future might hold – and there is certainly no guarantee that it will be filled with good things – but certain events have been examined, have been faced, and have been permitted to move slowly away into the past.

JONATHAN RYDER

Bernie McGill

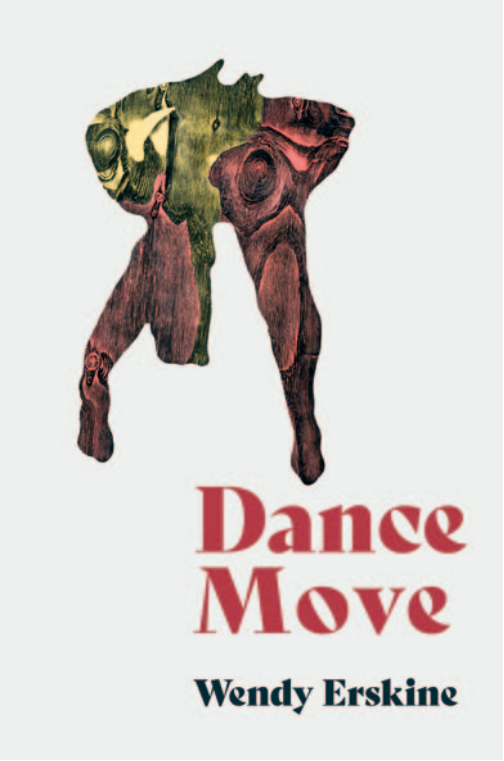
These diverse pasts are handled in various ways. Indeed, the stories collected here are remarkably diverse, now stretching traditional forms, now formally innovative. The exchange of terse text messages captured in 'The Snagging List', for example, dramatises the spaces and silences that surround our daily verbal exchanges; and 'In the Interests of Wonder' plays with the fable form, all magic and enchantment, to amplify very contemporary issues of loneliness, isolation, and frustration. Taken together, however, these stories share a formal subtlety and confidence. The elements of each narrative tend to be presented up front, as it were, with the reader trusted to anticipate and share in the unfolding of the tale. The effect of such an author-reader understanding is considerable: rather than depend excessively on epiphanies, shocks, revelations, McGill calls upon us to handle these components, to become familiar with them – and as a result to become invested in the motives and emotions that charge the narrative.

Take the story 'There is More Than One Word', in which we meet Jaynie trundling her suitcase along Botanic Avenue in Belfast, picking her way through fallen leaves, picking her way through to an immediate future the shock and horror of which she is already braced to recognise. The reader too finds herself braced, as the details are revealed: what has happened to Jaynie's loved and adored older brother Paul that she should be on her way to his funeral forty-seven years too late? We are told soon enough: but the impact of the story lies in the fact that we sense the truth before we are told, so that we find ourselves walking with Jaynie on this dreadful journey. 'Did the mist cling to the hedges, Paul? Did the crows rise up as you walked? Was the ground soft and giving like it was when we used to haul home the turf?' This story invites a cultivation of true empathy: not from a safe distance, but there in Jaynie's bones, and from behind her eyes. It is a tremendous narrative achievement.

Even when a moment of revelation or truth might present itself, McGill opts for the road less travelled: in 'The Cure for Too Much Feeling', for example, we

meet Rita, who suffers from 'a newly developed susceptibility to other people's misery'. Such a moment approaches close as she gazes at a painting hanging in the Ulster Museum, but will she seize this moment? We know that it might be better for her future if she did – but we know too that life tends not to be so slick. Or take 'A Loss', perhaps the story in this collection which might have lent itself most smoothly to a moment of epiphany. An aged aunt, recently deceased; a house – a life – to be sifted, gone through, packed up; a secret to be confronted, at last. This might have unfolded as the most conventional story in this volume: but McGill eschews excessive exploitation of her story's inherent drama in favour of creating a growing understanding and compassion, with the heart of the narrative coming steadily into focus, as a photograph might develop. The 'secret' is therefore telegraphed well in advance: rather than set out a series of clues for the sake of narrative tension, we instead are asked to observe steadily the griefs and the silences, and the sharp reactions that these griefs and silences bring with them – and we see and understand the consequences of a life deformed and lived not well. This sense of an ethical purpose energises 'A Loss', and imbues it with considerable power and electricity.

More than anything, that fundamental understanding of the local – its dignity, its inherent worth – thrums through the collection. Local language, local idiom and turns of phrase, the local plants that grow and their various names and frequently overlooked beauty, the inherent drama of the Antrim and Derry coasts: McGill's delight in and appreciation of a local context and what are sometimes called 'ordinary' lives grounds these stories. Wendy Erskine has recently remarked that 'Sometimes I think people get the wrong idea. You hear a lot of the time that [my stories] are dealing with ordinary people, and I think, where are the extraordinary people? Where is it they live?' *In This Train is For*, Bernie McGill demonstrates how the extraordinary is woven into life – and shows too, with compassion and gravity, how the short story form at its best can bring our always extraordinary lives into brilliant light.



Calling Earth, Calling Belfast

Mary O'Donnell

Mary O'Donnell is a novelist, poet and short story writer. Her last poetry collection *Massacre of the Birds* appeared in 2020. She is a member of Aosdana. www.maryodonnell.com

Dance Move

Wendy Erskine

Stinging Fly, pb £11.99 hb £14.99, pp224
PB 978-1-906539-93-1
HB 978-1-906539-92-4

If, in the far future of a million light years, intelligent entities in the multiverse cracked open a vessel containing representations of earthly effects in the 21st century, then happened on a copy of Wendy Erskine's new short story collection, *Dance Move*, they might find themselves wondering about the lives summoned by this author's vividly intelligent imagination.

Clutter—food, boxes, paint scrapers, tea and biscuits, laptops, keys, cellophane-wrapped flowers—the props of daily existence litter Erskine's sometimes mysterious and slowly-paced exposés of the human mind as it encounters an unforgiving outer world. The setting is Belfast, the atmosphere metropolitan and suburban, grimy, aspirational, and rarely without some degree of emotional evasion and even mendaciousness on the part of these ragged modern characters.

What makes them unforgettable is their pain. Everybody in Erskine's stories is, to one degree or another, in a quietly screaming state of existential pain, in itself nothing new in fiction. But in her case, the levels of melancholy and thwarted desire underpinned by a delicious contemporaneity, transform these moody scene-plays into imaginative achievement of a high order.

Nothing is ever quite what it seems and ambiguity and ambivalence are essentials. Our reader in the far-flung reaches of the multiverse might not quite understand what it means, for example in the love story *Memento Mori,* one of the book's astounding achievements, when cellophaned, rain-drenched bouquets of flowers and small teddies are laid outside Gillian's home to mark the murder of a young woman whose death goes viral on social media. They might not understand the parallel strategy that unfolds within that home, as Gillian nurses her dying lover Tracey in grey bedroom privacy, while just outside the hedge the world has turned another woman's death into a celebrity effect. Gillian's current life after these events is exposed in Erskine's typically clean, deadpan tone, framing the opening and conclusion as well as skilfully intercutting the main narrative.

In *His Mother,* Sonya obsessively trawls the city removing hundreds of posters of her missing son Curtis, paint scraper, cloth and soapy water in hand. Everybody else has moved on, especially Curtis's former girlfriend, while Sonya's life is lodged at the point at which her son disappeared for good, only to find herself indignant when she discovers a new poster on a wooden hoarding: 'So there's a new guy, another one. Curtis is what, old hat now? When Sonya looks at Tony McCartan—the edge of his shirt where it touches his arm, the smiling face—the things fall from her hands, the water-bottle and the cloth and the scraper. She sees his mother, getting the posters photocopied, sitting on her son's old bed, folding his old clothes, lying awake in the night. Tony McCartan's mother … Sonya wants to fall into her arms so that they can grip each other tight.'

Several women step up to bizarre situations in heroic ways despite being largely ignored individuals themselves. In the story *Mathematics,* we watch as low-key Roberta, whose job is to clean up rentals, and who (perhaps significantly) once got a bad knock on the head herself, gradually rescues a small girl who has been deserted in one such rental after an all-night party during which she was locked alone in a bedroom. Roberta's skills are calm, expert, precise, yet go usefully unremarked by the world. She shoplifts a school uniform for the girl, feeds her, brings her to school and collects her again in the absence of a parent. The real grit in this story comes when the mathematically inclined Roberta sets herself the task of finding the child after the Goliath-like authorities have removed her. And Roberta, we sense, will triumph.

Many of Erskine's characters hover on the soft side of criminal behaviour while not quite crossing the line, but it's this skew-wise evocation of extraordinary happenings within apparently ordinary people's lives that make them so appealing. A deadpan, laconic quality has already featured in her debut collection *Sweet Home*, and remains characteristic of her voice in this one. Authentically, she ferries us outside the squeaky-clean PCness and moral imperative of some contemporary short fiction, but this doesn't mean that her characters have bypassed either self-awareness or the markers of contemporary social living. If anything, they show us that the world is not homogenous, that the doctrinaire can never displace the ordinary, everyday, or accidental. In the whirl of our lives, Erskine tells us about memory, about traces of experience that no new knowledge can ever erase, because we are marked by them. Her unfashionable women and jobbing men, aspirational-but-insecure, remind the reader of human inadequacy, of worlds in which people pick up sandwiches in unfashionable garages, or chop tomatoes into quarters, in which posh

people have a marquee in a big garden near 'fat tubs of flowers', as in *Golem.* Here, the erotic interplay is a high stakes matter for its central character Rhonda, observing enviously the life of her sister Eloise and swish brother-in-law Edgar. Hotels with huge beds, a sunken bath, a rented car beyond their means, are the backdrop to this delicate story in which the childless Rhonda observes her husband fool around with his niece on the patio, where fantasies of wealth and sexual fulfilment vanish as the heart of the matter is exposed: 'They look like a father and daughter. He would have been a good dad. She would have been a good mother. She thinks so, at least.'

Many of Erskine's characters are heroic, extraordinary and compelling, killing the notion that what's significant in our lives lies in a fictive 'elsewhere'. While hell is others as Sartre noted, heavenly release comes unexpectedly through unconventional acts of kindness. In the title story, hyper-controlled, humourless Kate, mother to Clara, is portrayed as nagging and alienating but with good intentions. Comically, Kate wants ballet for her daughter (not modern dance and certainly not pole-dancing), while Clara wants to be simply left alone. There is not enough space, it seems, in which the dreams of both mother and daughter can thrive, with one in a permanent state of suspicion while the other, a thirteen year old, simply wants to practice dance moves on the decking with her friend Stacey: 'After a couple of false starts, she kicked first one, and then the other leg in the air. Next, she was down on all fours, shaking her behind. And then she lay flat out on the decking, as if she was having sex with it, slapping it on with one hand in encouragement.' The conversation that ensues between Kate and Clara's father Alan attests to the comic evasions and misunderstandings Erskine specialises in revealing. The 'inappropriate dance' shows Kate disapproving of several things, including the fact that the girls moved the plant-tubs in order to enact their erotic dance. Yet the benign tolerance of the very young is redemptive and this story concludes when Kate slips into a dancehall to collect her daughter and friend, thus crossing an essential boundary between parental anxiety and a scenario which Kate imagines will confirm her worst fears. It doesn't. Kate, beholding the movement and mood of the ritualistic space, is not repelled. She witnesses, like someone from another universe, the young, 'all these limbs, everywhere, liquid, and loose.' And what Kate misses entirely, bringing an essential sadness to the comic touches in this story, is that the little group in which her daughter and Stacey is dancing, are actually making room for her, the mother from another place, yet 'Kate, she waves back, but she cannot move.'

These richly realised stories strip away status and artifice, revealing people as they actually are: not necessarily the stuff of legends, but ordinary, vulnerable, and passionate. Furthermore, the created sense of patient illumination Erskine brings to an intriguing and evocative underworld of feeling, demonstrates once again that in the ordinary lies the heroic, even the epic.

PHOTO MATILDA REID

Wendy Erskine

I believe in Miracles

Helen McClements

Helen McClements is an English teacher and writer from Belfast. She is a contributor to *Thought for the Day* on BBC Radio Ulster, Tenx9 and she has a poem in *Washing Windows Too*, a newly-published anthology of women writers, by Arlen House.

The Raptures

Jan Carson

Doubleday £12.99, pp336
ISBN 978-1-7816204-7-2

No child wants to look up from the toilet and see someone looking on, especially when that someone is a dead classmate. If you're eleven-year-old Hannah though, this is just the start of what is going to be an unimaginable summer.

Although I've had my fill of small-town Northern Irish life; almost ulcerated my liver during the pandemic and am still recovering from being a 'happy clapper' myself, I was still excited to pick up a copy of Jan Carson's latest novel, *The Raptures*. Despite that tricky triad of themes, I had faith that she'd conjure an original way to present them. Having read her second novel, *The Firestarters* almost in the one sitting, and her pithy short story collection *The Last Resort*, I had a feeling I'd be in safe hands. I wasn't disappointed.

It is late June in the nineties in Ballylack, and the children in Hannah's class are looking forward to their holidays when the first child dies a slow, painful death. Soon, other children start to fall ill. The villagers wait, wondering who the next victim will be, and when. Tensions simmer as they determine to discover why and how this has happened. Someone has brought about this plague, and that someone will be made to pay.

I think of the line from Larkin's poem, *The Whitsun Weddings*, 'All human life is here,' as Carson takes a scalpel and lifts the skin on life in Ballylack, which until now, has been 'no different from any other one-street village, orbiting a market town'. We meet the local gossip, the frustrated farmer, and the foreign wives who know better than to even try to fit in. Hannah is our window into this tense, uneasy world, and we quickly learn that she belongs to a family which is, 'not the popular kind of Protestant.' The litany of what is off-limits for Hannah is so long, that she sums it up best by saying, 'Outside of school, we don't do anything that isn't church.' This line catapulted me back to my time at a Pentecostal Church in Bangor, where the Pastor encouraged the young people to attend Youth Fellowship on Fridays, Youth Club on Saturdays and church on Sundays (twice if we wanted.) 'Faithfulness,' he said, 'was a fruit of the spirit.' Stifled, I made my escape, but this was easier for me, since my parents were Church of Ireland and were more than a little relieved when I extricated myself. Hannah, with her own parents deeply wedded to their church, doesn't have that option. At a recent on-line book group I attended, the readers struggled to believe that this ultra-conservative Christianity still

exists, and that that, like the magic-realism of the book, wasn't just a figment of Carson's vivid imagination.

However, as her school mates start to succumb to this baffling new illness, I found it comforting that Hannah still found solace in a faith that is at best suffocating and at worst, cruel. Hannah has her own version of Jesus who is approachable, to whom she can turn. At her lowest point in the novel, she senses a benevolent presence, someone she knows well but can't quite identify. Carson is not advocating a life without faith; it is blind indoctrination with which she takes issue.

This is the book, says Carson, that she has been wanting to write for a long time. Growing up, while she enjoyed Joan Lingard's *Across the Barricades* series, she found the depiction of gritty urban life during The Troubles, to be far removed from her experiences in Ballymena. Even the more recent *Milkman*, Anna Burns's Booker Prize winning novel set in North Belfast's Ardoyne, was still in that urban mode and therefore in danger of confirming the perception of people not from Northern Ireland, that the Troubles were confined to Belfast and Derry. Michael Hughes's novel *Country* and Louise Kennedy's short story collection *The End of the World is a Cul-de-Sac* are adept at showing how the conflict permeated through to the countryside in its own distinct and deadly way. Even Granda Pete, perhaps the most sympathetic character in *The Raptures*, hides UVF tattoos under his jumper.

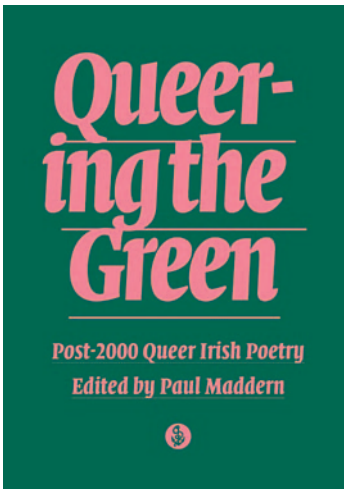
I can't help but feel that *The Raptures* would be a useful introduction to anyone new to Northern Ireland, and unfamiliar with our idiosyncrasies here. Carson has a knack for deftly pinpointing our myriad issues. She swiftly sums up the problems with the much-maligned transfer system. In the local town, 'The Grammar's decent but the High School's a holding pen for kids on a fast track to pulling necks at the chicken factory.' Trying to reconcile our identity is another difficulty many people from Northern Ireland feel: 'This is Britain. Or this is Ireland. Or both. Or neither. Or its own institution, peculiar as a maiden aunt.' The casual sectarianism to which most of us are sadly accustomed, is succinctly conveyed by Hannah's description of Seán Donnelly, a Southerner brought in to try to manage the crisis as more and more children fall ill. Hannah's father John remarks, "He seems nice enough, though he kicks with the other foot."

Carson makes no apology for presenting the life she has both encountered and continues to know. Her prose is peppered with local dialect and colloquialisms, and I hear the county Antrim lilt of the voices as I read, lending colour and texture. Her wry turn of phrase also adds humour to what could otherwise be a bleak read. When the media circus arrives, their fuzzy mics are 'like skewered caterpillars'. The Raggedy Tree, almost a character itself in the novel, is a 'gnarly-looking bitch of a hawthorn' which is found in a stony field, the soil 'of which, like a hormonal teenager's skin, was simultaneously damp and dry.'

Given our current world climate, one could be forgiven for not wanting to read about multiple child fatalities. To do so, however, would be to miss out on an exhilarating read; a story which canters along, gathering momentum and showing Carson's maturity as a writer. *The Raptures* also has an important message, particularly to those who find themselves bruised and recovering from their church experiences. Simply because one doesn't subscribe to a particular belief system, doesn't mean that they can't believe in miracles.

Jan Carson

PHOTO FRANKIE QUINN



A Queer Eye for the Lyric

Jack Belloli

Jack Belloli's first pamphlet, *Spandrel Routine*, was published by Broken Sleep Books in 2019. His writing on contemporary poetry has appeared in *Poetry London, Prac Crit, The Scores, Review 31* and *Religion and Literature*.

Queering the Green
Post-2000 Queer Irish Poetry
ed. Paul Maddern

Lighthouse Press £15.00, pp423
ISBN 978-1-9162228-3-0

This substantial, handsome anthology – all the more strikingly substantial, coming from a small press that has until now restricted itself to equally handsome pamphlets – situates itself in the wake of an explosion. In his introduction, editor Paul Maddern describes the title as 'a nod' to Yeats's "Easter 1916": to how the poet, while 'vehemently anti-violence' himself, recognised that future freedoms depend on such sacrificial violence, and that it should therefore remain celebrated 'wherever green is worn'. The book's very final pages are given to Rosamund Taylor's "Pride 2017", marking the summer day on which she remembers that 'strangers [had] already marched for us', even through the years she and her wife-to-be were growing up. The challenge, Maddern contends, of writing as a queer Irish person in the twenty-first century is to do justice to the experience of living *after* a series of layered struggles – after the Troubles, the "quiet revolution" of secularisation, the different paths to legalising same-sex marriage in North and South – in a way that acknowledges their partial completion, as their immediate violences are replaced by something more diffuse. Maddern calls this 'the anxiety' of 'uncertain futures': the anxiety, perhaps, of not yet knowing what new struggle we're living through, in which Yeats's moment of revolution is harder to isolate.

If, as Jane Clarke puts it in relation to 2018's Repeal the 8th vote, 'every family has stories, left like ploughs / and harrows among thistles behind the shed', how are queer poets narrating this uneasy settlement, in ways that are simultaneously creative and collective? For all that Maddern argues that there is a 'hypothetical spectrum' between 'radical poetics' and 'the lyric tradition' along which these thirty-two poets occupy various spots, a certain repertoire of strategies comes to dominate *Queering the Green* as a whole. Almost all the poets remain in some kind of dialogue with lyric: Stephen Mooney's glitchy digital-concrete poems, Kit Fryatt's anachronistic collages and Kevin Breathnach's accretive Steinian wordplay, make for refreshing exceptions, highlighting what can be done when language just surrenders the business of address or referentiality.

Queerness tends to be marked, instead, by artfully 'swerving' (in Maddern's words) from expectations of how a subject should imaginatively express its relations with the world. So a poem might be addressed to a pineapple or a Golden Age Hollywood star, to maintain commitment to the idea of committing one's self to another, only now with a difference. The register is often ironic, at times archly deflective or deflationary. Poems end with turns like 'I suspect it / doesn't matter much' or 'It was still / nothing like I'd imagined'; Mark Ward makes a noisy bus-ride the basis for a poem entitled "Creation Myth". This is particularly clear in relation to expected or inherited political pressure points. Paula Cunningham and Dawn Watson both write poems in which crossing a border in a car is the stuff of private, jocular rituals, one of Watson's mountains 'erupt[ing] like a Coke float into the oak-flanked road to Belfast'. in Simon Costello's "Aftermath of a Landslide", more acidly, videos of ancestral skeletons erupting from the past go viral on social media. Elsewhere, this gentle letting-go

of lyricism and its conceits is expressed in an aspiration to precise and exhaustive description, as if the expectations associated with particular ways of loving and belonging could be replaced, and made open to new possibilities, with frank attendance to things as they are. It's a tendency that achieves its purest expression, appropriately, in Mícheál McCann's "Immanence", an account of buying doughnuts in a café that ends 'You're wearing my jumper. You're eating.'

These poems are – with impressive consistency for a collection of this length – assured and delightful executions of these lyric swerves, and the anthology as a whole, makes a compelling argument for their vitality and the range of affects that these techniques can generate. Maddern's arguments that the reclamation of lyrical subjectivity and imagination is 'as radical and as effective a way of expressing queerness' as its refusal, is well-taken (and I note that the three poets whom I register above as performing that refusal are white men). That being said, the most exciting moments in this anthology are often those where the swerve is revealed to be not quite enough. On one side, all the irony and colloquialisms allow more classicist approaches to the tradition to stand out with greater force: notably Séan Hewitt's more total casting of scenes of cruising and clubbing into a mythopoetic, Hopkinsian register. In much the same way, the devastating serious play of Gail McConnell's "Untitled / Villanelle" stands out as the one employment of a highly fixed form. On the other side, highlights emerge when the risks and limits involved in saying 'I' or situating oneself in a landscape, are more pointedly exposed. This is perhaps particularly clear among some of the anthology's trans writers. Lyric provides a space for William Keohane to explore how his mother's gradual accommodation to his new name reveals anew his own incomplete process of self-identification:

> Not 'he': I am not
> her son, not yet, not quite.
> It hasn't settled. Nor have I
> but maybe soon, may-
> be.

Less directly, to read across Toby Buckley's pieces is to encounter a weird ecology of animal and inanimate bodies (boiled sausages, young frogs, mutilated fake dolphins) that sometimes explicitly stand in for the speaker's own, but are equally often left to hang, carrying a distinctive residual surrealism.

Buckley's poem about boiling sausages begins by noting that it was '[t]he first thing I learned at university […] an alternative to their fried selves': this serves as a cleverly understated acknowledgement of how an altered economic situation might affect a queer body. It's a recognition which characterises the anthology's sharpest poetry: that properly observing the immanent involves observing the political conditions which shape that observation just as carefully. Sarah Clancy is one of the standout voices in this respect. If a title like "In Cill Rialaig Trying Not to Write 'Digging'" sums up the instincts of many of the featured poets, her treatment of 'patronage' here and her refusal of irony and indirectness is distinctive, and perhaps still too rare, in troubling the relationship with literary forebears:

> …] I resolved to explode it
> instead of being subversive and half flirting
> with resistance
> but still and all submissive, I promised that
> from now on
> I'd outright confront things.

It's worth noting too, in this context, the work across English and Irish by Ciara Ní É – particularly her decision, in one of her four pairs of facing translations, to note that 'this [English] translation was made for the comprehension of the corresponding Irish phrases only'. It makes for a provocative resistance to the received assumption of reconciled, frictionless exchange across old colonial borders.

Queering the Green remains fairly well-behaved for an anthology of its name, even down to details like arranging the poets in alphabetical order with professional biographies. Getting to look less professional is certainly a privilege, and Maddern emphasises that many of the poets collected here are 'experimenting and feeling their way at the start of publishing careers'. This is a wonderful platform for them and deserves to be widely recognised as such. But I equally hope that these poets keep finding new ways to rock it, to change it utterly, as the grounds for new and much-needed revolutions continue to emerge.

The Protocol: the facts

Rory Montgomery

Rory Montgomery's career as an Irish diplomat included posts as Irish Permanent Representative to the EU and Second Secretary General with responsibility for European affairs in the Departments of the Taoiseach and of Foreign Affairs. He retired in 2019. He is currently an honorary professor of practice at the Mitchell Institute, QUB, and Is a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He was recently appointed chair of the Press Council of Ireland.

The Law and Practice of the Ireland-Northern Ireland Protocol

editor Christopher McCrudden

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When the Ireland-Northern Ireland Protocol appeared in February 2018 as part of the European Commission's draft Withdrawal Agreement, its name aroused suspicions in the Dáil. What was a protocol? What was its legal status? Was it binding? These fears were eventually allayed, to a point where the value and importance of the Protocol are almost universally acknowledged in the South, if not elsewhere. No reader of this volume of essays could be in any doubt about the legal, as well as the political, weight and importance of the Protocol.

The essays are based on contributions to seminars held between November 2020 and June 2021, of which Christopher McCrudden was a principal organiser. An additional note describes developments up to last September.

The twenty-five authors cover a remarkable array of topics. Their legal expertise is beyond doubt. All are lucid and succinct. McCrudden's masterly introduction, describing the evolution of the Protocol in the context of Brexit as a whole, is the best summary I have read. I, a non-lawyer, found all the essays informative. However some more than others illuminate broader, more political themes.

First, the Protocol is legally very complex and innovative, not just in its substance but in its governance. Its negotiators had to deal with an unprecedented and deeply sensitive situation in which some objectives predictably turned out to be irreconcilable.

Secondly, some of the Protocol is very hard to interpret – in part because successive drafts sought to make it more palatable to the British side through linguistic fudge. Stephen Weatherill, in a particularly incisive essay, argues that this 'calculated ambiguity' or 'outright evasion' means that the Protocol 'is written in a way which understates the nature and the extent of commitments made on the UK side.'

Thirdly, while the political focus has been on trade in goods and related checks and controls, the Protocol deals with several other important issues, including the Single Electricity Market. In some areas, its effects and consequences remain to be seen. McCrudden, writing about human rights and equality, speculates that "… it could be seen in practice as of limited application, but of surprisingly significant depth when it does apply." Mary Dobbs and Viviane Gravey fear that, while Northern Ireland will be bound by trade-related EU environmental legislation, the scope for divergence in other areas could lead to an overall decline in environmental protection. George Peretz argues that the state aid provisions of the Protocol should be looked at again in the light of the later Trade and Co-operation Agreement – this is one of the few cases where an author thinks the British have a serious point.

Imelda Maher describes how the Protocol safeguards the Common Travel Area, which is fundamental to the avoidance of a hard border for citizens, and offers the reassuring conclusion that "as a discrete, long-standing pragmatic arrangement…the

CTA is relatively robust and is likely to survive the political and legal challenges currently surrounding the borders between the EU and UK."

Fourthly, there are some very significant aspects of the relationship between North and South which the Protocol itself does not deal with, but which are covered, if by no means completely, by the TCA. One is trade in services – which, as Gavin Barrett reminds us, is economically much more important than trade in goods. Another is police and judicial cooperation. Gemma Davis, like Barrett, believes that the similarities between existing arrangements on the island, and a desire to find pragmatic ways forward, should mitigate the damage.

Fifthly, writing on goods, customs and the internal market, Teresa Jerewska notes that the Protocol, and the subsequent Gove/Sefkovic agreement of December 2020, left the detail of many issues unresolved. Some are fundamental, above all the identification and management of 'goods at risk' of leaking into the Single Market. Official guidance is not always helpful: the UK government advised businesses that "Goods which are subject to commercial processing, where the additional requirements to declare these goods 'not at risk' are not met, cannot be declared 'not at risk' and are therefore automatically 'at risk'." She explains how complicated procedures can be, especially for smaller businesses. A customs declaration has fifty data fields to be completed, for instance.

In the very laborious ongoing talks, the Commission is offering significant simplification of some of these arrangements, but this approach has not been enough for the British Government. Weatherill points out, however, that the Protocol also involved major concessions by the EU: allowing the UK, a third country, to police an external border of the Union, and accepting that the four freedoms would not be treated as indivisible.

A sixth point is fundamental. Was, and is, the British Government an honest negotiator? McCrudden comments that "a significant question is whether the UK intends to obey international law in the shape of the Protocol, or whether the Protocol was only ever a temporary political expedient." Weatherill has few doubts: it was only ever seen as a device to get Brexit done. Whether British Ministers and officials understood what they were doing remains a point of contention. Most observers think they did. All agree they ought to have.

Events since the Protocol was signed have added to suspicions of bad faith. Katy Hayward notes the 'chronic inadequacy' of how the various structures set up to manage the Protocol are operating. Threats to invoke Article 16 have diminished but cannot be ignored (incidentally, Billy Melo Araujo and Stephen Brittan conclude that "issues concerning invocations of the safeguard provisions … will predominantly be determined politically.").

As Weatherill puts it, the Protocol "belongs alongside the 1998 Agreement as a subtly written offer to all involved to accentuate the positive and live with the negative [and] … is a genuine attempt to address the unique circumstances". Brexit, in any form, was bound to impose strain on the institutions of the Agreement. The nature of the eventual Brexit accentuated the problems.

The Protocol is a genuine effort to make the best of a bad lot. It may be too stringent in some ways. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the blame for the destabilisation of the 1998 Agreement lies not with the EU or the Protocol itself, but with the British Government, which has over the last year essentially endorsed a unionist narrative through which Jeffrey Donaldson has imprisoned himself in a gaol from which he will find it very hard to escape.

It seems that the Truss/Sefkovic negotiations, despite a more cordial atmosphere, have reached an impasse, which will certainly last until the Assembly elections and probably well into the six-month period afterwards within which the FM/DFM must be chosen. The current stalemate may suit the British well enough. However, while the EU has been very reluctant to take countermeasures, its patience cannot be infinite. Moreover, the DUP cannot be satisfied with the status quo, and business continues to look for greater clarity and certainty if it is fully to exploit the positives of the Protocol. Something will surely have to change at some point. But the Protocol will, alas, remain the subject of acrimonious debate for quite some time to come.

Poems

Elaine Gaston

Elaine Gaston is from the North Coast of Ireland. Her collection *The Lie of the Land* was published by Doire Press, 2015.

Botanical gardens

Inside the palm house
my passion flower opens
to your midday sun

Barometer

Yesterday the sea-mist followed me as I drove
back from the Port round the coast
to where it split the town in two,
sun above Rathlin Road, fog below.

Next morning the beach was a pirate film,
or dry ice on a theatre set,
as the ferry loomed like the Marie-Celeste.
I could hardly see my finger in front of me
never mind the dog, as she romped in the waves.

During all those months when I couldn't walk far,
random, other days would come to mind.
Like that afternoon when you got off the school bus
at the start of secondary school. One of those blue September
days that always come just as the holidays end.

You were whacked out. Too many new faces, timetables,
the long bus journey. I carried your deadweight schoolbag
as we walked up the hill
rain hit the hot tarmac. Mist rose
in a magic trick.

Suddenly you lay flat on your back on the pavement,
school uniform and all – loosened the ridiculous tie –
face to the sky, open-mouthed, drinking it all in.

The good of the day

Months since I have seen you.
Oh, maybe once, yes, that time I delivered
your Christmas present and we stood
in the cold alleyway, yards apart, in the middle
of all this. You showed me your Spring bulbs
poking through, early, in the wee bin store
you have conjured into a garden.
You were always like that.
Growing things everywhere, anywhere to hand,
even, especially, surrounded by concrete.

And here you are dandering towards me
on the strand, towel in hand, swimmers on.
You plunge into the water, just like you always did.
I stand for a while, splash my arms and neck,
wade in slowly, alert for jelly fish, weaver fish,
sudden dips in the sand, eventually swim. My head out
of the calm, clear water. This big high has settled
for weeks now over the town. Crowds crammed,
digging in for the day. Parasols, sun tents,
the obligatory windbreak. And all those paddleboards,
wet suits, collapsible canoes.

We swim a couple of lengths between the lifeguards' flags.
Chat, this and that. Star-fish on our backs.
Good to dip our toes in the water again.
Aye, you nod, aye just.

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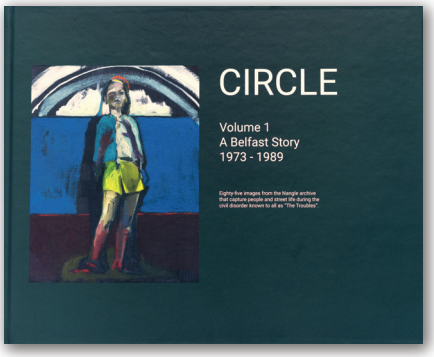

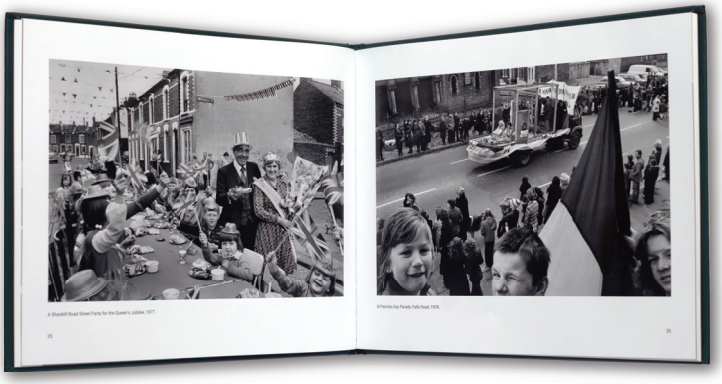

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