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POLITICS, ARTS & CULTURE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Prioritising reconciliation not legal vindication

Politics

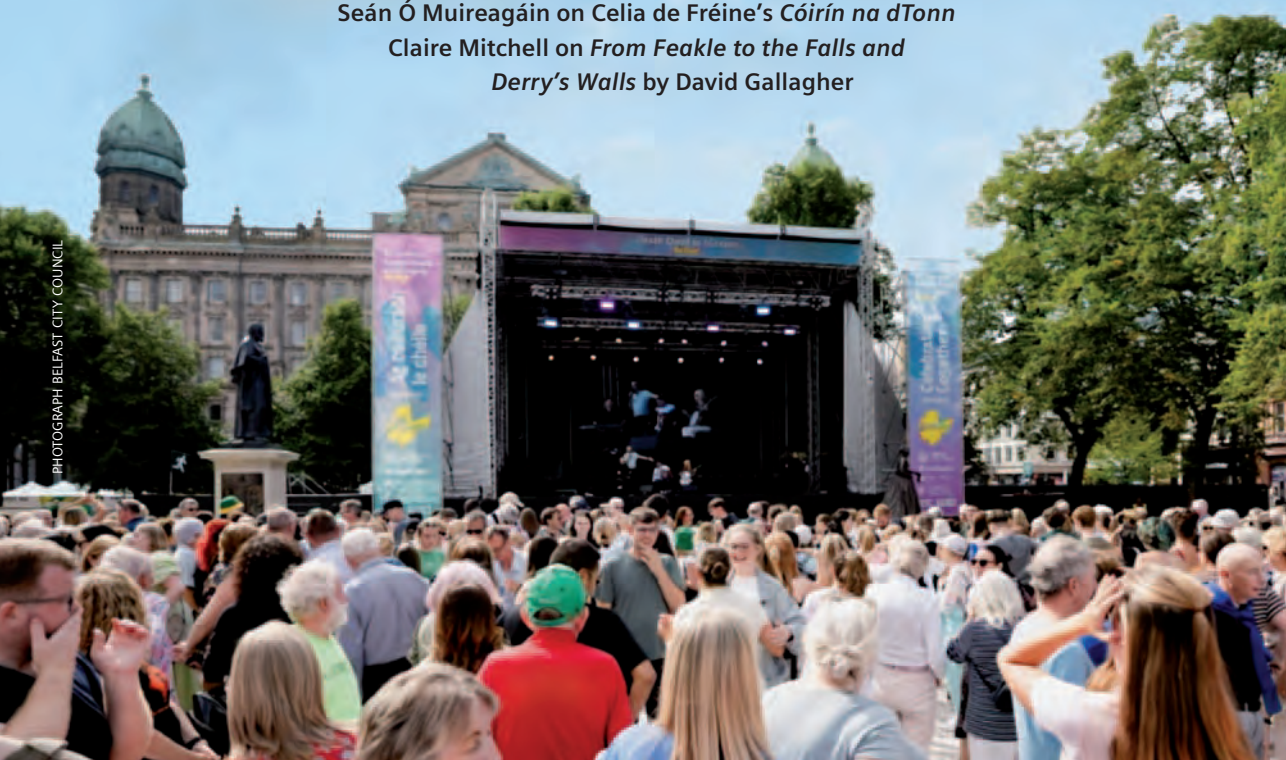
Do we need a border poll? by Feargal Cochrane
Border polls and opinion polls: a Fortnight analysis
Reconciliation or vindication by Tom Hadden & Paul Nolan
The spirit of the Fleadh by Malachi O'Doherty

Arts (guest editor Rosemary Jenkinson)

Waiting for Godot in Ulster-Scots by Frank Ferguson
Homeless in Camden by Martina Evans
May Morton – phantom poet? by Liz McManus
Milestones by Patricia Mallon

Reviews

Angela Graham on Damian Smyth's *Folly Lane*
Kevin Power on *Land* by Maggie O'Farrell
Seán Ó Muireagáin on Celia de Fréine's *Cóirín na dTonn*
Claire Mitchell on *From Feakle to the Falls and Derry's Walls* by David Gallagher



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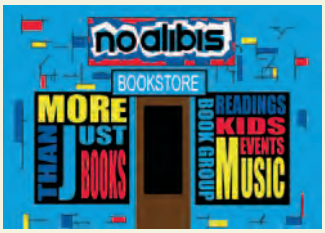
Independents build communities



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Contents

Editorial 1

Politics

Feargal Cochrane: Do we need a border poll? 2
Rory Montgomery: The UK and the EU 5
Malachi O'Doherty: The spirit of the Fleadh 7
Tom Hadden, Philip McGuinness and Duncan Morrow: Opinion polls and border polls 9
Tom Hadden and Paul Nolan: Prioritising reconciliation rather than vindication 12
Patricia Mallon: What's the story, Belfast Stories? 15
Paddy Hillyard: The pedestrianisation of Belfast city centre 18
Martyn Turner on Portadown 20

Arts

Rosemary Jenkinson: Arts editorial 21
Frank Ferguson: Waiting or ettlin for Godot 22
Martina Evans: All tied up 26
Liz McManus: May Morton: Phantom Poet 30
Rosemary Jenkinson: The importance of women's voices 33

Literature

Patricia Mallon: Milestones 36

Reviews

Angela Graham on *Folly Lane* by Damian Smyth 40
Kevin Power on *Land* by Maggie O'Farrell 42
Seán Ó Muireagáin on *Córin na dTonn* by Celia de Fréine 44
Claire Mitchell on *From Feakle to the Falls and Derry's Walls* by David Gallagher 46
Poems by Gerry Murphy and Philip McGuinness 48

COVER PHOTOGRAPH: The gig-rig at the Belfast fleadh
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Communal accommodation not legal vindication

The articles in this issue are centred on the difficulties – and possible resolutions – of the renewed standoffs over a contested Orange 'walk' and the resulting nationalist opposition.

The starting point was a procedural shortcoming in the initial banning of a regularly renewed application to parade by the Portadown Orangemen [of District Lodge No 1 – this is where it all started 200 years ago in 1796]. That opened the way for a series of legal adjudications culminating in an ill-judged last minute reversal of the initial ban by the Parades Commission and the formal authorisation of a much reduced parade. This reversion to the conflicts of the 1990s can still be avoided by joint action by the PSNI Chief Constable and the Secretary of State. The police have so far sensibly refrained from using their powers to clear the road of 'unlawful obstructers' and have only sought details of relatively minor offences. And the local population is enjoying a spell of quite peaceful campaigning. But the leaders of the main unionist and nationalist parties have stepped in to assert the very different principles of the 'rule of law' and communal human rights.

This is not the way in which the Good Friday Agreement was achieved: not by legal proceedings or majority voting but by 'sufficient consensus' in long-drawn out negotiations hosted by the British and Irish governments with Senator Mitchell as a neutral chair. These same procedures need to be revived not only on the Druncree/Garvaghy Road standoff but also on the equally fraught issues of Border Polls on Irish unification, which Feargal Cochrane thinks is best left to economic developments; and also the wide range of 'legacy' issues – not by majority voting or strict legal adjudication on contested incidents but by the shared Protestant and Catholic values of loving your neighbour and forgiving their trespasses, as argued by Tom Hadden and Paul Nolan in their pleas for prioritising reconciliation over legal action..

The article on the need for new opinion polling on options for the future, based on Fortnight's 'tolerability' surveys' in 1997, likewise suggests a way forward based on mutual accommodation, as in Malachi O'Doherty's account of the Belfast *fleadh*, rather than the assertion of incompatible legal and constitutional positions.

Do we need a border poll?

Feargal Cochrane

Feargal Cochrane is Professor (Research focused) of Politics and International Relations at the University of Warwick

Prime Minister Andy Burnham got a quick introduction to the bat-like hearing of Northern Ireland's politicians on his first official visit to Belfast last month. When questioned about the likelihood of his government triggering a border poll on political reunification, he replied; '*...that is one issue that will be off the table.*'

Burnham's offhand assumption that a UK Prime Minister could unilaterally disregard Irish self-determination was seen by nationalists as being in breach of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), though Secretary of State Sir Chris Bryant was quick to clarify that there had been no change in government policy.

While the recent Drumcree crisis is the latest episode to put the GFA institutions at risk of collapse, the perennial question of Northern Ireland's long term constitutional status remains open. A future breakdown of the devolved institutions is likely only to sharpen the focus on political alternatives to power sharing.

There has been extensive debate about whether the conditions exist for the triggering of a border poll and the implications of a positive vote. Many support the argument that the conditions for a poll either already exist, or soon will, and therefore it is incumbent on the two sovereign governments to plan for the inevitability of change. No one wants to end up with another Brexit mess, where a vote for change is followed by utter confusion about how it should be delivered.

No one wants to end up with another Brexit mess, where a vote for change is followed by utter confusion as to how it is delivered.

Unionists see little in it that looks attractive, save perhaps from the fact that a unified Ireland would automatically become a member state of the European Union. More fundamentally, there are many unionists who feel that the whole discussion is a political cul-de-sac with only one outcome.

Ritual dancing

So the 'should we-shouldn't we' dance has become ritualised and will remain so for the foreseeable future. Irish nationalists will claim that we need to plan ahead, unionists will argue that there are no grounds for thinking that a border poll is any closer today than it has been for decades. The British government will use the text of the GFA as a fig leaf behind which to hide its modesty – while the Irish government will breathe a metaphorical sigh of relief that the defibrillator paddles won't be applied to its vital organs.

But what if there is no table for a border poll

to fall off? To stretch Burnham's metaphor, what if all of the furniture is not as is seems? What if we are in a flat-pack IKEA version of reality, where the size and shape of tables is evolving and what is on them or off them will warp as surely as your poorly constructed coffee table? Those IKEA instructions always look a bit vague and sometimes you end up with extra bits that just end up in the bin when you're finished. (Civic Forum anyone?)

The political future is notoriously difficult to predict – partition itself was barely mentioned a decade before it was implemented. Few saw it as being a serious option during the Home Rule crisis until shortly before it was, – to coin a phrase –, put on the table. Few saw Brexit happening and tearing UK politics apart a century later. Few saw the Trump Presidency ripping up the post-1945 rules based order and emasculating NATO either, yet here we are.

However, barring the AI revolution sending out their robot armies to kill us all, some things are likely to be relatively safe bets in the years ahead.

Changing demography

The political demography of Northern Ireland has changed utterly since 1921. The partition of six of Ulster's nine counties was based on the rationale that a two thirds one-third Protestant/unionist majority would provide political stability. The concept of majority/minority became so ingrained that those terms became a popular proxy for referring to the unionist and nationalist communities.

That has gone, as recent census data and elections in Northern Ireland has consistently demonstrated. It is clear that in broad terms, the Catholic/nationalist community has increased relative to the Protestant/unionist community, while the non-aligned section of the electorate has also expanded considerably. We can quibble around the edges of the numbers and what they mean, but the big picture is that Northern Ireland's political geography has shifted away from its large Protestant/unionist majority and that is unlikely ever to return.

The all-Island economy is also accelerating and trade and infrastructural connectivity between the two parts of Ireland is strengthening. The figures vary slightly depending on what measures are being tested and over what timelines, but the message is clear, economic relationships on the island are strengthening and integrating in the aftermath of Brexit.

... the big picture is that Northern Ireland's political geography has shifted away from its large Protestant/ unionist majority

Interconnected economies

According to Colin McCabrey, from *Intertrade Ireland*,

> 'The island's two economies are now more interconnected than at any point in the preceding century, despite a myriad of challenges ...Between 2016 and 2022, total trade between Ireland and Northern Ireland grew by approximately 77 per cent, with goods increasing by 66 per cent and services by 132 per cent...'[1]

Economist Dr Esmond Birnie has interpreted data from NISRA on 2021–2024 post-Brexit trade patterns, (published in March 2026), to argue that the Windsor Framework has seen a significant movement of Northern Ireland trade away from GB towards the Irish Republic.

> 'In 2024 Northern Ireland's sales of goods to GB (its largest market for goods outside of the Northern Ireland region) grew by 0.8% whereas sales of goods to the Republic of Ireland grew by more than a fifth (22%). Sales to the rest of the EU (i.e. beyond the Republic of Ireland) also went up by almost 22% as well.'[2]

While there are numerous caveats with such statistics, the basic post-Brexit message is that many Northern Ireland businesses are pivoting

(at variable speed) away from a Northern Ireland-GB axis towards an all-island one. This does not mean that GB does not remain Northern Ireland's biggest trading partner, only that it is becoming less dominant than it was and that over time this trend may become increasingly significant.

Culturally, our imperfect peace process, in addition to increased investment on North-South infrastructure and connectivity, have led to more organic movement across the border in both directions for work and leisure. Over 1.3 million tourists from the Republic visited Northern Ireland in 2025, in comparison to under 400,000 in 2013. The huge success of *Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann* in Belfast in 2026 is the latest example of the cultural capital being strengthened between the North and the South and its return in 2027 is likely to further underline that trend.

The Cross Border Partnership for Employment Services 2024 Annual Report estimates that between 23,000–29,000 people move between the North and the South for work or study *every day*.[3] While this is connecting both parts of the island economically it is also doing so socially. On its own this might not amount to the proverbial hill of beans, but together with other incremental changes it takes on a greater significance.

Political lag

Politically there is perhaps a lag in comparison to economic and cultural interaction, but even here there are fewer political barriers in comparison to the 1921-98 period and the Strand II dimension of the GFA formalising North South bodies, together with the Irish government's Shared Island Fund and academic projects such as the ARINS initiative, are all working to find mutual benefits for people in both parts of the island.

All of this suggests that the tectonic plates underpinning Northern Ireland are shifting towards more integrative political, economic and cultural relationships between North and South. These are mostly evolutionary rather than revolutionary, baby steps, rather than giant leaps into the unknown.

> ... the direction of travel is clear. Ireland is likely to unite in practice *before* it unites in theory ... incrementally ...

While the prospect of a political and economic cliff edge is understandably concentrating minds, Irish unity might be better understood as a gentle gradient that is relatively easy, perhaps even pleasant, to walk down. This is likely to be more of an amble than a sprint towards Irish unity, but the slope itself is undeniable. The precise gradient will depend on a wide variety of factors, not least the desire of people to tiptoe down it, which will in turn be determined by the number of political, economic and cultural incentives for doing so.

Whether it is thought to be a slippery slope or a congenial stroll may depend on political perspectives, but the direction of travel is clear. Ireland is likely to unite in practice *before* it unites in theory. It will do so incrementally, via political, economic and cultural osmosis, in ways that may render a decision all but irrelevant – as it will already have happened.

[1] McCabrey, C. 'Cross Border Economic Collaboration on the Island of Ireland: Trends, challenges, and actionable pathways' The Journal of Cross-Border Studies in Ireland 2025, https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Colin-Mccabrey.pdf p.124.
[2] Birnie, E. 'Northern Ireland Trading Places and trade diversion, https://www.briefingsforbritain.co.uk/northern-ireland-trading-places-and-trade-diversion/
[3] https://crossborder.ie/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/CBPES-report-2024.pdf p.10.

The UK and the EU
The options

Rory Montgomery

Rory Montgomery is a former Irish Permanent Representative to the European Union and Second Secretary General for European and EU affairs in the Departments of the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs.

In an understatement not common at a party conference, Andy Burnham told the Labour Party in Liverpool that Brexit "has done more harm than good". Few would deny it. Even its champions now tend to argue that if it has not yet succeeded, it is because governments have not taken advantage of its opportunities.

The Prime Minister has announced a wider reconsideration the UK's relationship with the EU. The options include the status quo, presumably as modified by agreements on specific issues of the sort now being negotiated; a customs union, in which the UK would form part of a common trading bloc, applying the same tariffs and other external trade rules; a return to the Single Market, in which Britain would be subject to the same regulations regarding the free movement of goods, services, people and capital as a Member State; or a full re-entry to the Union.

November agenda

Burnham plans to use an EU-UK Summit, postponed from July after Keir Starmer's resignation, and now expected in late November, as an opportunity to begin the debate. Preparations for that summit have been grindingly slow since they began in the middle of last year. For months agreement has been reportedly close on the three issues identified: veterinary and other checks on agricultural trade, a "youth experience" scheme, and integration of emissions trading systems. It has been the hope of the Irish Presidency that these could be wrapped up quickly, and a new agenda for future work set. Some very difficult issues, notably British participation in EU protectionist measures against Chinese EVs, will be part of that agenda on which the Commission will lead, in consultation with the Council, chaired until December by Ireland.

Agreement in November, even if confined to the specific topics under negotiation, would be positive. From the viewpoint of Ireland, North and South, the elimination of any obstacles to agricultural trade would dramatically reduce the salience of the Irish sea border under the Windsor Framework. But from the wider European and British perspectives neither economically nor politically would the November deal be a striking leap forward.

Longer term options: (a) the Customs Union

Rejoining the customs union would be the least complicated of the major options available to Britain. But the economic benefits would be commensurately lower. Even if the idea that the UK would be capable of striking dramatic new trade deals on its own has been shown to be a chimera, the question of the US relationship would be very difficult, even post-Trump.

(b) the Single Market

Purely economically, in particular from the viewpoint of exporting SMEs, a return to the Single Market would be more beneficial. But there are at least four very significant challenges. First, the EU will stick to the principle of the indivisibility of the four freedoms. This would mean a return to the full freedom of movement of EU citizens – a major cause of the vote to leave. It is evident that Britain's problems with inward migration have little or nothing to do with the entry of EU nationals, but it could be a potent rallying cry. Secondly, deep integration into the Single Market would require a very substantial budgetary contribution – another of the trump cards of the Leave side in 2016. Thirdly, there are innovative sectors of the economy – such as quantum computing, biotechnology, aspects of financial services – where through greater regulatory flexibility the UK could conceivably outperform EU competitors if outside. Fourthly, the perennial issue of Britain as a rule-taker. Norway and to a considerable degree Switzerland have felt the obligation to accept rules made in Brussels, with only token inputs from them, a price worth paying for access to the market. Is it conceivable that the UK could accept this – a "vassal" status, as it has previously been described? And even if the idea could be swallowed in some sectors, could one really imagine the UK's financial services being governed by arrangements agreed within the EU without British participation?

In practice, security and political co-operation between the two sides is mostly working quite well. But the full re-integration of the UK into the EU's foreign policy and defence structures would benefit both and send a powerful external signal of unity.

(c) Future re-entry

Given the lesser benefits and major political difficulties of intermediate steps, full re-entry to the Union may be the most logical and advantageous step. But the challenges would be immense. The public may well now regret Brexit. But that is not the same as embracing a return to the acrimonious and chaotic debate which dominated British politics for years after 2016. Holding another referendum would be inevitable, and highly risky, and would soak up political oxygen for years. Most if not all EU countries would welcome Britain's return, none more than Ireland, but it would not be a political priority for them as it would be for Britain. Moreover, they would need to be very confident indeed that a deal of any sort, above all re-entry, would really represent the end of the story. The EU would be much the stronger partner in a renegotiation. I personally question whether the UK would have to accept the euro – after all, Sweden, Denmark and Poland have not done so. But the special budgetary rebate would not survive. Finally, the case for return would be easier to make if the major EU economies were in a better budgetary and economic condition – as was the case in the 1960s and early 1970s. But they are not. And there is also great uncertainty about the future political trajectories of France and Germany.

Holding another referendum would be inevitable ... and would soak up political oxygen for years.

As with the other bold steps announced by Burnham at his party conference – the end of the pensions triple lock, a new social care system, a reformed electoral system – no specific proposition will be made to the British people until the next general election. It appears that he is not minded to go to the country early. There is thus plenty of time – too much time? – for debate. The consensus of which Burnham speaks is surely unachievable. And in the here and now, will Labour's recovery of some popularity survive what is likely to continue to be a really difficult budgetary and economic situation? I hope not, but Burnham's bold announcement may turn out to be a failed delaying tactic.

The spirit of the Fleadh

Malachi O'Doherty

Malachi O'Doherty is a writer and commentator and former editor at *Fortnight*

Everyone agreed that Belfast had never quite looked like that before. And many who had come out on to the streets to enjoy the fun had perhaps little sense of what a *fleadh cheoil* usually is, or perhaps even knew what the words mean, festival of music.

I walked through it all thinking almost giddily, 'wouldn't it be great if it was like this all the time'. The conspicuous characteristic of a fleadh is the music on the streets, the groups of buskers, some of them children supervised by a parent standing back, the pub crawlers looking for one not so crowded they can get into it, and the big stage, this time in the City Hall grounds. And commerce joins in too with pubs and venues staging their own events in character with the occasion.

Actually this was unlike any other fleadh. Some musicians I spoke to complained that they couldn't get into pubs to join a session (pro:sesh-un) because those establishments had already hired their own performers. And the big distinction about this fleadh was the extension of the welcome to the Orange bands tradition. Lambeg drummers outside Kelly's Cellars could only gladden the heart if you were hopeful of community reconciliation and harmony in this awfully divided society. Forget for the moment that the drums were traditionally loud to be heard across the valley like war drums by Catholic country folk cowering in their thatched cabins.

And the big distinction about this fleadh was the extension of the welcome to the Orange bands tradition.

Orangeism may have a strain of triumphalism for some still, but it was clear that the welcome was genuine and appreciated. And there was a clear contrast with the Feile an Phobail up the road where thousands in the Falls Park were led from the stage in chanting of anti-brit sentiment and community coherence.

A cunning plan

But then … then Jamie Bryson came up with a cunning plan. Bryson views the inter-communal tension in Northern Ireland as a culture war and has resolved to help Unionism win it. He has published a book entitled *Culture War.* He advised the Portadown Lodge of the Orange Order that it might successfully challenge the Parades Commission's repeated refusals to let them walk down the Garvaghy Road and he was right. The commission had got into the easy habit of rejecting Portadown Lodge applications and then found itself compelled to take an application seriously.

People representing the case against a parade on behalf of the Garvaghy Road residents were simply insistent that there be no parade and the commission came up with a compromise such as a mediator might have prescribed, conceding something to both sides. The march could go ahead but only under potentially humiliating restrictions. Only 35 members could walk. They could carry only a single banner and they had to walk down at 8.30 in the morning when most people would be expected to be still in bed, and they could have no band. The lodge accepted those terms. The Garvaghy Residents coalition, backed by Sinn Féin and the SDLP and People Before Profit did not.

Those who recall the past Drumcree deadlocks know how divisive they were. The standoffs exposed the clear fault line through our society. Even the most reasonable and moderate Unionist was inclined to say, 'why not just let them walk and be done with it?' And the most reasonable nationalist would say, 'Why don't they just walk somewhere else?' And many on social media debating this have cited the Belfast Fleadh Cheoil as an example whose inspiration has expired, for if nationalists could be accommodating of the Orange tradition, why were all nationalist leaders supporting the refusal of the diminished parade? Because, they say, this is not just about 35 men, this is culture war that has been declared against us.

> And if every organisation was to be judged by its past … how would others fare: Sinn Féin , the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church or the GAA?

First Minister Michelle O'Neill said the people of the Garvaghy Road were being 'harrassed and intimidated'. But the only danger they faced was that their own human barrier across the road might be broken through by the police, as happened before in the 1990s. And Brian Feeney argued like many others, though more articulately, that the Orange Order was the problem. It was an anti Catholic organisation that had bullied Catholic communities for centuries, that had raged against Catholic Emancipation in 1829. And this is true but has to be somehow reconciled with the fact that a lot of Orangemen are ordinary decent grandads. And if every organisation was to be judged by its past and its constitution how would others fare: Sinn Féin, the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church or the GAA?

The spirit of the Fleadh

What the spirit of the Fleadh said was, 'we take you as we find you. Come into the parlour.' The spirit of Drumcree says, 'We will walk that road, whatever you say.' And the spirit of Garvaghy says, 'Over my dead body.' Maybe the Belfast Fleadh's spirit of generosity was only possible because the centre of Belfast is uncontested space. Much of the rest of the region is divided into Protestant and Catholic areas with understood boundaries between them. I would love to see those boundaries dissolve. I would not trust the Orangemen of Drumcree or the Garvaghy Residents Coalition to advance that project.

Opinion polls and border polls

This is a *Fortnight* analysis

The heavy concentration in opinion polls on whether there is a majority within Northern Ireland for Irish Unification obscures the more important issue of what most people think about the full range of current or amended arrangements under the Good Friday institutions as well as those under various forms of unification and how they would vote on them.

Fortnight has a long record of focusing on tolerability surveys on what most people would be happy to live with in the interests of communal peace rather than on simple majority voting. That was the basis of the 'sufficient consensus' test for the Good Friday Agreement which has served us reasonably well for the past 28 years. This article sets out some of the options that need to be explored in advance of any binding referendums North and South.

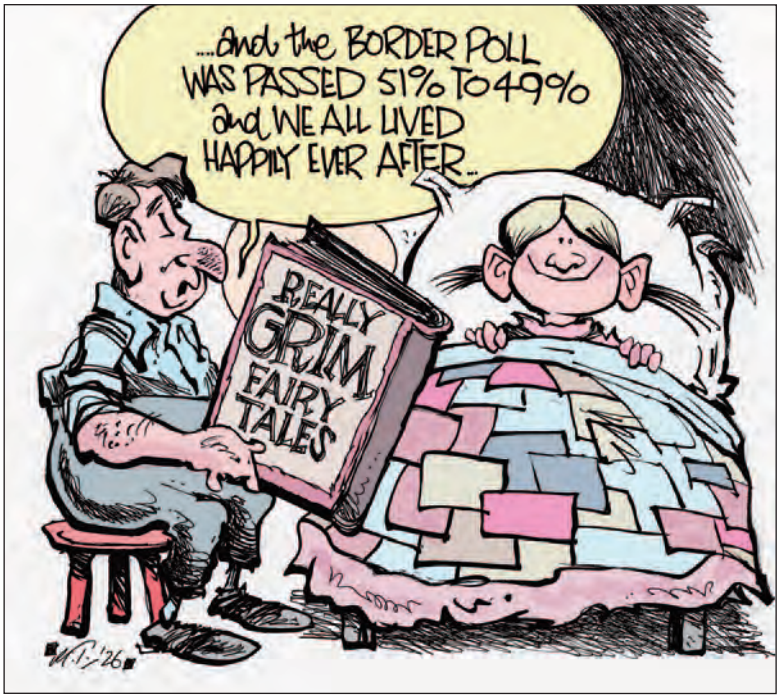
As already set out in a series of articles by leading commentators in our 500th Issue in January there are many unresolved issues that will need to be discussed and agreed by the two governments and the major political parties here before any substantive action can be taken. Some of the most important are on page 10 overleaf.

> ... issues need to be addressed in opinion polls if the British and Irish Governments jointly are able to assess the extent of support for a definitive Border Poll.

All these are matters of governance rather than of symbolism of the kind that have been polled on in ARINS surveys. But they need to be addressed in opinion polls if the British or the British and Irish Governments jointly are to be able to assess the extent of support within Northern Ireland or in the Republic for the holding of a definitive Border Poll.

Past Fortnight polls

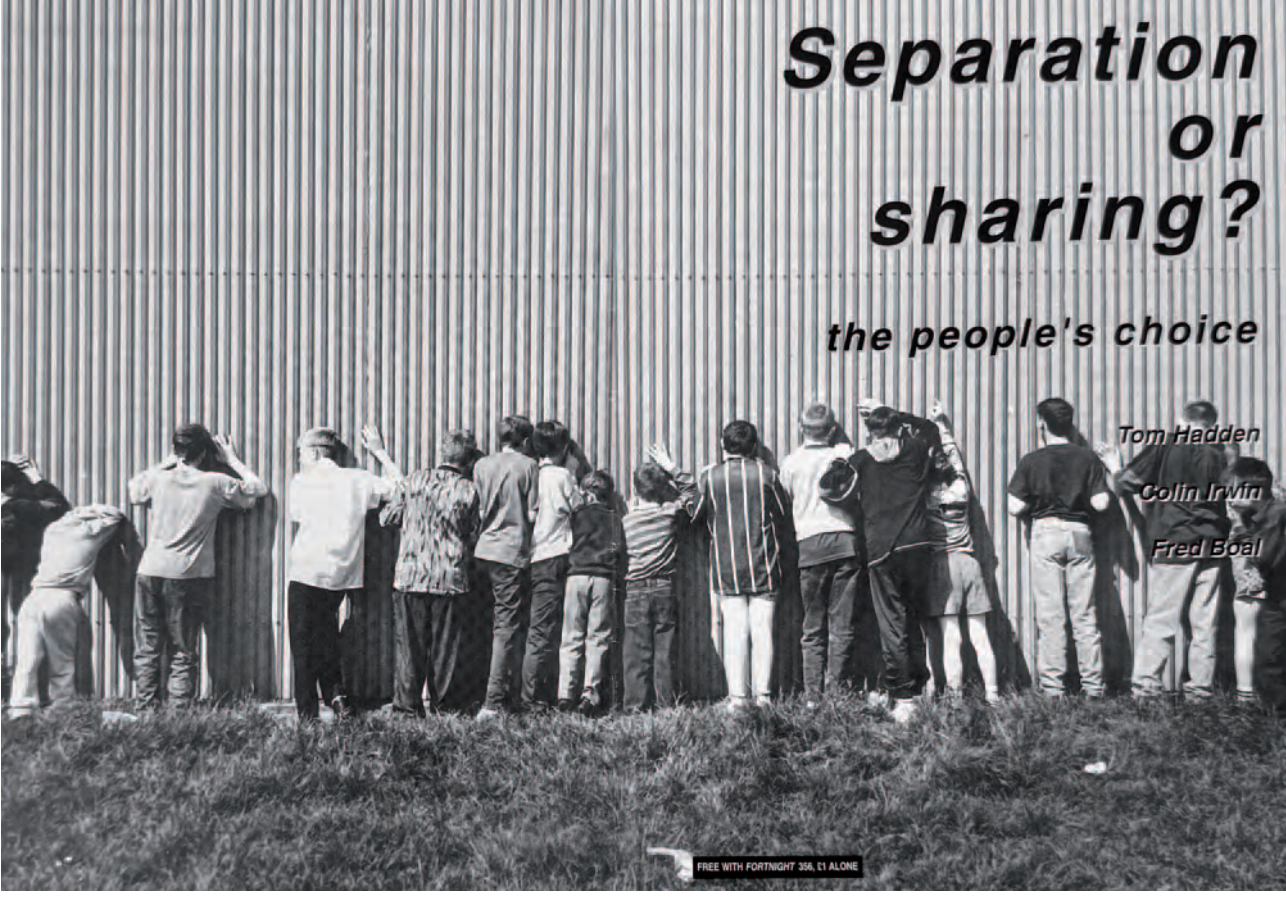
Fortnight has some useful experience in this sphere. It held the first opinion poll in the North following the Sunningdale Agreement in 1973. It produced an influential draft of a new British –Irish Treaty in the run up to the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985 and in the run up to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 it organised two very detailed 'tolerability' surveys on '*Separation or Sharing – the people's choice'* in public administration (Fred Boal, Tom Hadden, & Colin Irwin (with Fortnight 356) and '*The search for a Settlement – the People's Choice*' (Colin Irwin with Fortnight 368) with the support of Rowntree foundations in Britain. Whether equivalent finance will be available for a new set of ARINS surveys or via a DFA Reconciliation Grant like that for the recent University of Ulster survey on the information needed by voters before they make up their minds in a referendum remains to be seen. The recent UU survey cost some €9,000.



MARTYN TURNER

Unresolved issues

- are the arrangements for power-sharing in the North to be retained in a unified Ireland or will elected representatives from the North be expected to have exactly the same rights and responsibilities as those from the South?
- would there be a 'transition period', and for how long? How would decisions on alignment be reached during any transition period? Would there be all-Ireland elections to a new Dáil in advance of unity, or how would what currently operates as Northern Ireland be represented?
- For example, should the territorial basis be allocated by NI Council Electoral Areas which would clearly alter the overall balance of voting strengths between unionists and nationalists and that of 'others'? In simpler terms is there a need for a new Border Commission like that in the 1920s for unionist majority areas rather than a simpler 'six counties' Border Poll?
- how would public services be aligned and over what period of time?
- what would be the basis of the financial settlement between the two governments and how would the allocation of resources, notably for the NHS, be decided into the future? As the NI Assembly and Executive seem to be unable to agree on a budget, will there be a need for the two governments to decide on one in the absence of agreement at Stormont, setting out how much the UK will contribute and how much the Republic might contribute under an extended Shared Island Initiative?
- how would the 'right to be British or Irish or both' and the associated 'free travel area' be handled under any new constitutional settlement with the United Kingdom?
- what responsibilities would a new unified Irish state have for defence within its territorial waters and how will Irish neutrality be handled within NATO?
- would the PSNI or *an garda siochana* be responsible for policing within Northern Ireland and what arrangements might be developed for greater cooperation or mutual assistance if both are retained?



Cover illustration from a supplement with *Fortnight* 356

The levels of support for or opposition to each option in the 1997 Separation or Sharing survey were listed as:

- Essential – a necessary part of a lasting settlement
- Desirable – a good idea that that should be put into practice
- Acceptable – not what you think desirable if you had a choice but you could certainly live with it
- Tolerable – not what you want but you would be willing to put up with it
- Completely unacceptable – even as part of a lasting settlement

It is not practicable at this stage for all the possible options to be discussed by interested bodies or for sample draft questions and tolerability levels to be worked on. But some of the broad questions that might be asked are:

- `Should the arrangements for power-sharing in the North and other Good Friday Institutions be retained after unification ?
- Should the areas to which these arrangements would apply remain the 'six counties' or should any changes be made by a new Border Commission ?
- Should the PSNI remain the police service in those areas ?
- Should the special arrangements for The North in respect of the European Union under the Windsor Framework be retained ?
- Should the full range of personal rights of movement, settlement and voting within the Free Travel Area continue to apply as part of the right to be British or Irish or both ?

A consideration by the two governments of responses to all these issues by the people of Northern Ireland and the main parties North and South would help them to decide on the best way forward rather than a binary binding choice between unification or the status quo.

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Prioritising reconciliation rather than vindication

Tom Hadden and Paul Nolan

Tom Hadden is general editor of *Fortnight*
Paul Nolan is an independent political researcher based in Belfast

Recent policy decisions on the ICRIR/ICIR and the Supreme Court judgement on legacy issues have seemed to give priority to endless digging for details on who did what in the past. The result has been to relegate action and resources to foster reconciliation within Northern Ireland and between the North and the South to lesser importance.

The new Legacy Bill currently making very slow progress at Westminster sets an unfortunate lead on these issues by removing the word 'Reconciliation' from the title and thus a primary purposes of the Independent Commission. Though the Commission continues to believe that information recovery on past incidents is inherently aimed at reconciliation, there is little hard evidence to support that view. In practice the focus of the Commission on encouraging victims on all sides to engage with it in extracting more information on what happened tin individual incidents is as likely to increase feelings of self-justification, vindication and communal anger at what the other side, both state forces and paramilitaries, have done.

A telling point is that the list of investigations being initiated by the Commission is clearly biased towards incidents in which members of the security forces have been killed by the IRA while nationalist pressure groups continue to campaign for full public inquiries on cases in which civilians have been killed by the security forces. On both sides the objective is to bolster individual and communal self-justification and to vindicate their status as victims and their rights

Rory O'Kelly

to justice, though almost everyone knows that the chances of a successful prosecution are vanishingly small. The acquittal in the case of 'Soldier F' is a single high profile example of legal realities, as is the statement in the first ICRIR investigation report of the case of the SDLP lawyer Rory O'Kelly killed by the IRA in 1977 allegedly for cooperation with the then prosecution service that, unless sufficient evidence emerges, prosecutions are no longer possible..

... the new responsibility for independent judge-led Inquisitorial Proceedings (IPs), under the current Legacy Bill 'has the potential to substantially increase demand for the Commission's services. The Commission will continue to engage with the UK Government to discuss the necessary resourcing requirements that will enable us to meet the demand for our services and enable investigatory standards that secure public confidence in our work.

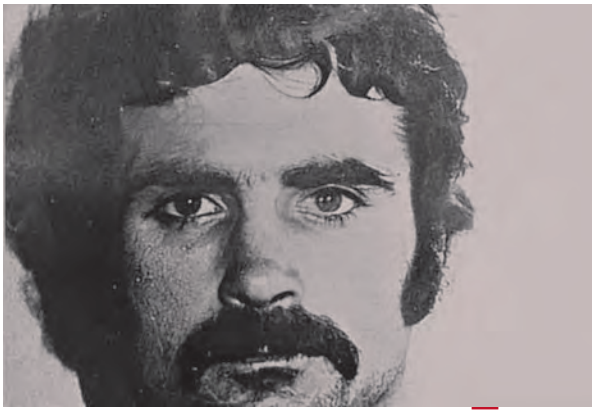
Annual Report for 2024–25

The focus of the critical May Report on problems within the Independent Commission has been on two aspects of its work: ostensibly about personal relations at various levels of staff but also less prominently about the growing costs: the number of its staff was 47 in March 2024, 169 in March 2025 and is now 270. The total budget in 2024–25 was £15 million; that for 2025–26 is likely to be substantially higher as the numbers of paid staff and lawyers has almost doubled. The question is whether spending this amount of money on establishing what almost everyone already knows is a sensible use of resources.

The question is whether spending this amount of money on establishing what almost everyone knows is a sensible use of resources.

There is much less focus on the production of a balanced overall account of the various stages in the Troubles as the government moved away from 'shooting to kill terrorists' towards a negotiated cessation of operations by both sides. This involved a heavy concentration on recruiting informers who were in effect granted a kind of amnesty for life, as notably for 'Stakeknife'.

The judgment of the Supreme Court in the Dillon case is another telling development. Instead of giving full support to the decisions of the initial judge and the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal and of some engaged commentators on the widest possible interpretation of the terms of the Windsor Framework's commitment to 'no diminution of rights' outlined in the Good Friday Agreement, the Court cast doubt on the enforceability of such a vague promise and included a strictly unnecessary review of the case-law of the Strasbourg Court on amnesties. That was a useful indication of how the Supreme Court would respond to a revised formulation on the obligation of states to prioritise prosecutions in the aftermath of serious communal conflicts. The first step in amending this approach would be an agreement with the Irish Government to drop its inter-state case. A second would be the switching of resources to encourage debate on practical measures to foster reconciliation of opposing legal and constitutional commitments as in the New Ireland Forum in the 1970s, the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Ireland in 1995–96 and the Opsahl Report of 1993. The Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin has set a good example by generous funding of projects under its



Freddie Scapaticci, Stakeknife

The shared island initiative of Narrow Water Bridge

Reconciliation Fund. Though the largest grants are for cross-border projects like the Narrow Water Bridge and for cross-communal discussion at a local level they also fund research and academic studies on practical reconciliation.

The essence of reconciliation in almost every sphere is to bring together perpetrators and victims, past enemies and opposing groups in an organised way to allow them to acknowledge their part in the conflict, tell the truth about what they did and apologise for their conduct. This can be at an individual level in restorative justice, or between organised groups or communities or between states and state bodies. It is not something that can easily be achieved in formal legal processes. But it has been used to good effect after many serious wars and conflicts in truth and reconciliation bodies and in political negotiations and settlements.

The objective of citizens assemblies and consultative bodies of this kind is to help in switching attention from 'dealing with the past' to planning for the future. This would be a welcome development for post-conflict generations in both parts of Ireland and more widely in Europe.

What's the story, Belfast Stories?

'not a building but an idea'

Patricia Mallon

Patricia Mallon is a peace activist from Belfast who writes short fiction and creative nonfiction

Belfast Stories purports to be rooted in a simple idea that it is a project with potential to bring people together 'to capture the unique spirit of Belfast in a living, permanent archive of stories from Belfast and beyond'.

At its launch in 2021 I conceived the project solely in terms of the construction of an archive from memories of the experience living in or visiting the city. I also associated it with its organising base in a renovated Bank of Ireland art deco building at the junction of Royal Avenue and North Street. It crossed my mind there may have been a therapeutic aim in there, given that Belfast (and Derry) were held to be the cockpit of the troubles. My bad. I had not done justice to the project's ambition, scope and scale.

Belfast Stories ... will be a multi-purpose tourist destination on the scale of the Titanic Visitor Centre

These days, when it is especially difficult to get resources for 'art for art's sake' projects, it is no surprise finding that a boost for the creative industries is tied to regeneration and tourism and the economy of the whole region.

Another difference from my imagined Belfast Stories is that the renovated former bank is not stand alone but will be incorporated into 5,000 sq metres of the surrounding area, a multi-purpose tourist destination on the scale of the Titanic Visitor Centre. It will have a roof garden, walks, food and drink outlets, event spaces, galleries and a state of the art multi-screen cinema. The thinking seems to be that a creative hub will attract arts practitioners of all kinds.

Belfast City Council is the promoter and main delivery body for the estimated £100 million project, with capital cost borne by Belfast Regional City Deal to the tune of 65 million capital investment via the Department of the Economy with Belfast Council paying the rest.

Inclusive Process

Belfast Stories literature recognises inclusion as a vital ingredient of success and at an early stage seminars and stakeholder forums were organised across the city to capture evaluations of the project's proposed design and delivery. Feedback from the consultations influenced the adjustment

Timetable

2021: Plans for BS announced
2026: Findings of Consultation published
2026 Arts grants programme commences
2027: Building works starts
2030–31: Visitors centre fully operational

Launch for the Belfast Stories development from Belfast City Council

of plans and findings were published in May 2026.

Ahead of the planned opening of the building, Belfast Council officers began collecting material and mapping out the archive. It also launched Belfast Stories Community Grants Programme directed at local people and visitors who told their stories in writing, audio-recording, film and music workshops. With a budget of £250,000, it offered grants of £10,000 to £30,000 for story-based creative heritage, community and cultural projects to be delivered between June 2026 and March 2027. The grants include the cost of organisational support and skills development for individuals delivering the programme.

Despite the programmes commitment to be open to all, in January 2026 Sinn Féin Councillors disagreed with grant decisions, citing concerns that the application and scoring system excluded many cultures and parts of the city. Other Councillors refuted the criticism, saying the process had been rigorous and inclusive. They also thought it would be unfair to applicants to defer their grants or blame Council officers who oversaw the scheme. It was also argued that as this was only the first stage of the story collection, subsequent gaps in participation could be rectified by offering further opportunities for people to contribute. Although Sinn Féin failed to get the grant decision deferred, later this year it also challenged a proposal to agree a deal with the BBC making it key user on the new development as it was 'inappropriate to have a financial relationship with a state broadcaster'.

Alliance and Unionist parties pointed out that the BBC was to have no editorial control over exhibits or the archive plus income from the BBC would provide the project with financial stability for 10 years, the duration of the deal. Another factor highlighted was that the studio would be used by the BBC for just 140 days a year, so space would be available during the rest of the year for exhibitions, screenings or cultural events. The BBC itself said there was a 'misunderstanding over its role', pointing out that the technically enhanced studio it used would generate opportunities for the local screen sector.

Although the SDLP and Greens voted against the deal with the BBC at committee level, the SDLP switched sides at a full Council meeting, thus tipping the balance in favour of the project. Sinn Féin responded by invoking the Council's call-in procedure, which permits a minority of councillors to demand a reconsideration of a majority decision.

The request is currently in a queue with three other call-ins, so there is a potential delay to the start to building infrastructure, currently scheduled to begin in 2027 and to having a fully operational Visitor Centre by 2030. Such a delay would disappoint people already committed to

The proposed Belfast Stories building by architects Snøhetta and Todd

Belfast Stories and likely add to overall costs. It would also further reduce people's confidence in politicians' ability to deliver in Northern Ireland. Hopefully a journalist's comment that 'this could be another Casement' will prove not to be prophetic.

The Belfast Stories project is timely given the enthusiastic response to the recent all-Ireland Fleadh. Its success seems to have whetted appetites for creative projects offering enjoyment that overcome normalised barriers to participation. Could Belfast Stories be just the shot in the arm to sustain the Fleadh momentum?

fortnight @56

A modest proposal

The pedestrianisation of Belfast city centre

Paddy Hillyard

Paddy Hillyard is Professor Emeritus, Queen's University Belfast

During the Fleadh, Belfast was transformed. The joy of the music was matched by the freedom of being able to move around the city without the fear of being struck by a car or a bus.

Following the success of the Fleadh, Minister Liz Kimmins announced that she was in favour of further pedestrianisation, saying:

"It is my ambition to reshape our town and city centres to put people first, creating more attractive, accessible and vibrant places while reducing car dependency and encouraging sustainable travel choices."

Liz Kimmins should be bold and pedestrianise the whole of the area within what is effectively an inner ring road incorporating May Street, Donegal Square South, Howard Street, College Square East, College Avenue, Millfield, Carrick Hill, Frederick Street, Great Patrick Street, Dunbar Link, Waring Street, Albert Square, Donegal Quay, Oxford Street (See map).

The inner ring should be turned into a one-way carriageway circulating traffic clockwise around the city centre with a speed limit of 20 mph. Traffic lights should be synchronised to provide a constant flow of vehicles to reduce pollution. Vehicles entering the inner ring from the left should have priority.

Bus stops would need to be developed at various points around the inner ring. In many places the road has sufficient lanes to accommodate bus stops.

Almost all of the existing car parks in the pedestrianisation area are close to the inner ring and access to and from them could be fairly easily accommodated without intruding too much on the pedestrianisation area.

Within the pedestrian area, there could be an electric light bus circulating to take people across town. In addition, the elderly and disabled could be accommodated by the provision of self-driving or autonomous mobility scooters. Cycle paths could be constructed through the area.

Delivery, as in other cities which have been pedestrianised, will have to occur before shops and businesses open.

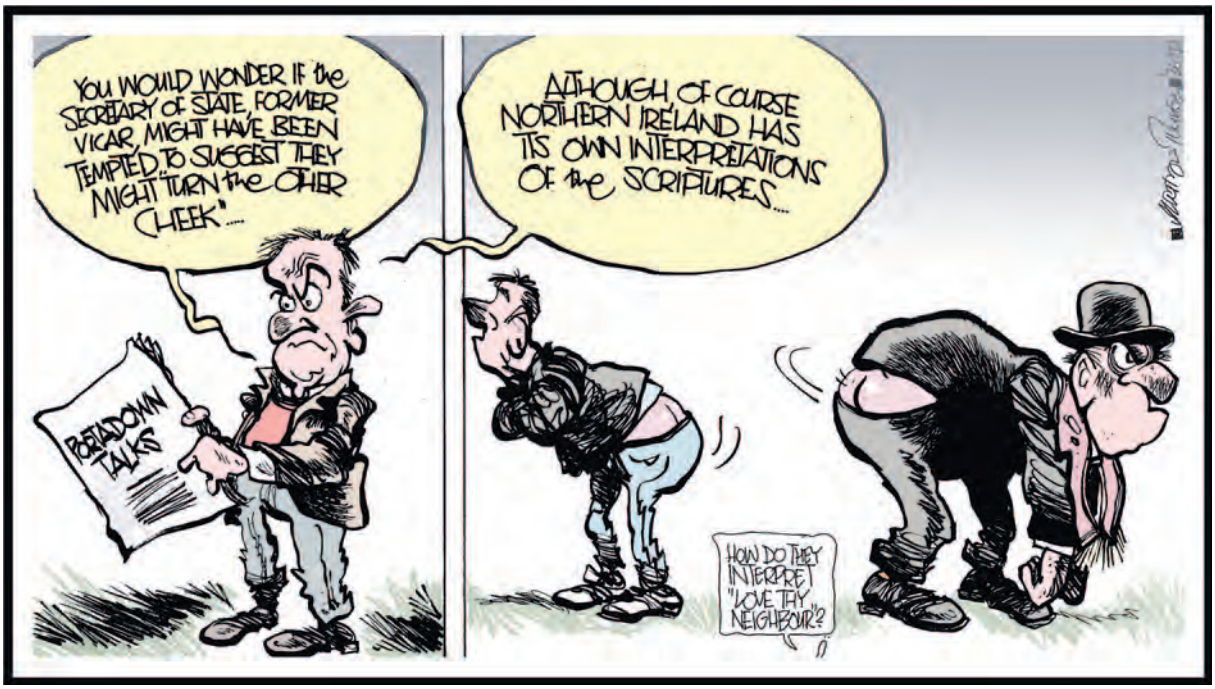
There will be objections from some quarters. Shop keepers will argue that such extensive pedestrianisation will lead to a drop in the footfall. But evidence from around the world suggest the contrary and that the footfall will increase.

There will be strong opposition from businesses which provide their own car-parking as they will have to find alternative means to access the area for the greater good. In the short term, their vehicles could be parked in part of Victoria Street which on this proposal will be closed to circulating traffic.

All the research shows that pedestrianisation is beneficial. It encourages walking and cycling. Vehicle accidents with pedestrians are eliminated and the creation of flat surfaces devoid of kerb stones prevents falls. And, as shown elsewhere, it is beneficial for the economy.

Yet in all likelihood this proposal to "put people first" will be yet another policy, such as a three year budget, health reform and the municipalisation of Northern Ireland Water, on which our politicians cannot agree.

Martyn Turner on Portadown



The Arts editorial

Talent to burn

Rosemary Jenkinson

As most people know, there is a superabundance of literary talent in Northern Ireland. It must be comparable to having too many whores in a brothel – the demand is usually for younger writers, but don't count out the older ones as they can turn a lot more tricks. Luckily *Fortnight* is here to give us the platform we need, or at least a comfy chaise longue on which to ply our trade.

In this October edition, I have invited some top flight writers to flaunt their wares. We have brilliant essays: Martina Evans on the inspiration of Camden cassettes behind her new poetry collection, Frank Ferguson on how the 'road wanderers' of Ulster-Scots fit into his translation of *Waiting for Godot*, and Liz McManus's important reclamation of Belfast poet May Morton. With my own essay I've waded into the mire surrounding Féile an Phobail's decision to cancel a women's event in this year's festival. Publishers universally warn their writers not to comment on the gender wars in case they are cancelled themselves and I largely try to abide by their advice. However, as a free speech libertarian, I couldn't overlook the Féile's stance.

Further riches are personal prose by Patricia Mallon, and new poems by Philip McGuinness and the acclaimed love poet, Gerry Murphy. Reviewers of the latest books include the refreshingly honest Kevin Power, Angela Graham, Seán Ó Muireagáin and Claire Mitchell.

While editing *Fortnight* in September, I was pleased to see the Equity protest at Stormont highlighting the failure of the Minister for Communities Gordon Lyons to produce an arts policy or invest properly in the arts. A subsequent open letter of no confidence in Gordon Lyons gathered more than 2,000 signatures from the arts community. More needs to be written about this, but Northern Ireland is the land of church-goers, pub-goers and writers, and it is ludicrous that Lyons doesn't see the value in supporting us. How can writers possibly make a living, never mind develop their craft in this financial climate? Some of us have spent longer learning the intricacies of the human heart than a cardiologist who earns a good wage for his/her skill. 'I believe there's no secret of the human heart into which we wouldn't pry,' said the novelist Eleanor Lavish in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*.

Universities and arts institutions may provide relief in terms of providing teaching posts or writers' residencies, but there is huge competition for such positions. In the meantime, most of us will just have to stay freelance ('More free than lance,' as Flann O'Brien put it). Interestingly, William Faulkner once said in an interview that 'the best job that was ever offered to me was to become a landlord in a brothel,' because of its 'perfect economic freedom.' Is that what you have in mind for us, Mr Lyons?

Rosemary Jenkinson is a poet and prose writer. Her new poetry collection, *Let Freedom Fall Upon You*, will be launched by Arlen House in October 2026.

Waiting or ettlin for Godot

Frank Ferguson

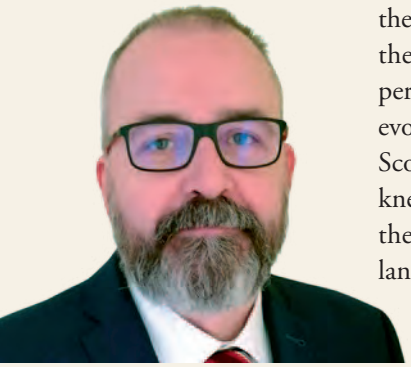
A generation has passed since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement declared:

All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland.

Dr Frank Ferguson is the Director of the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies at Ulster University.

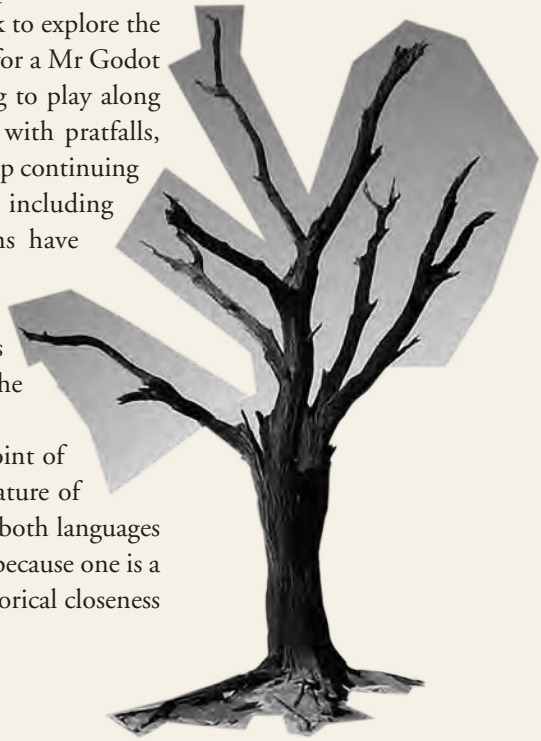
In the decades after 1998 a considerable range of Ulster-Scots initiatives have launched seeking to articulate the respect, understanding and tolerance that this major strand of our linguistic heritage deserves. But as a member of the Expert Panel that produced *Recommendations for an Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage & Culture Strategy* (2022) we concluded that much "levelling-up" was still required to enable Ulster-Scots language, literature and culture to achieve its potential.[1] Many questions remain about how the implementation of these findings will be accomplished. However, despite the glacial mechanisms of progress here, the ratification of the *Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022* along with the appointment of Lee Reynolds, another author of the aforementioned report, as Commissioner for the Ulster-Scots and the Ulster-British Tradition suggests a time may be coming finally when Ulster-Scots gets a good reddin up. However, a top-down model to advance Ulster-Scots may not be sufficient for success if its advocates disregard the significance of personal engagement with speech. One might wait and wait and wait for the perfect environment to see Ulster-Scots reclaim its grandeur, while all the while forgetting that language comes from within and stems from personal exercising of the language. A language can die and a language can evolve but rarely can a language be broken if you play with it. And Ulster-Scots has earned the right to return to the strengths of its heyday when it knew how to play. While we wait to see where the official drive to enabling the Hamely Tongue will go, we might take heart in the fact the Scots language had many permutations for waiting. One could simply wait, or wait of, or wait for. If any language could wait then Scots is your language of choice.

Lee Reynolds Commissioner for the Ulster-Scots and Ulster British Tradition

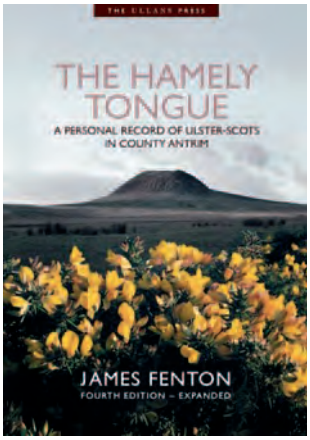


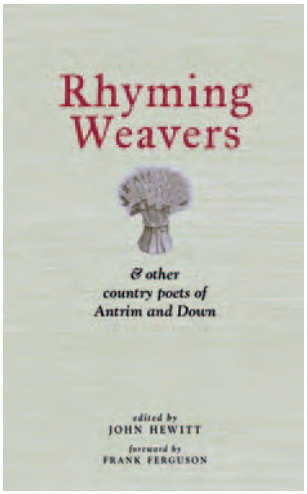
For the longest time one of my language games was a quest to find how the work of Samuel Beckett and the Ulster-Scots language might combine. I have long admired Beckett's economy of words to delineate the tragedy and comedy of life. There's also a challenge in wanting to bring Ulster-Scots alongside his labyrinthine vocabulary. Whether writing in English or French, there is such a strong sense of Beckett's aptness of word choice that translating this into something else seems a travesty if placed in inept hands. However, there are elements in his biography that hinted at more engagement with the Ulster-Scots than have hitherto been discussed. Beckett's mother, May, had until her real or apocryphal expulsion, boarded at the Moravian School for girls at Gracehill, near Ballymena; and Beckett himself had boarded as a "night rat" at Portora in Fermanagh for a number of years, rubbing shoulders with the "day dogs" from the local area. Additionally, he had spent a miserable two terms teaching French and English literature at Campbell College, where to alleviate his dislike of Belfast, he had played golf on North Coast links and may even have visited the Arcadia Ballroom of Portrush on occasion. These northern forays suggest various brushing against Ulster-Scottish words, culture and experience.

An opportunity arose to translate *Waiting for Godot* into Ulster-Scots. Why not? How difficult could it be? To many observers this is a play fraught with difficulty. An old school friend of Beckett, Vivian Mercier the critic, quipped about it being a play of two acts were nothing happens twice. It is not a play for the traditionalist. In it, a small ensemble seek to explore the meaning of existence through passing the time by waiting for a Mr Godot who might, but never appears. However, for those willing to play along with the idea it is an incredible play that mixes pathos with pratfalls, theology and slapstick and seeks to find out how we can keep continuing as humans when everything seems to have broken down, including language and memory. Actors and especially comedians have queued up to perform it. Most recently Keanu Reeves and Alex Winter, before them Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen, and Robin Williams and Steve Martin indicating the rites of passage the play provides for the serious actor and the serious comedian.



How then to approach the play from an Ulster-Scots point of view? One issue that became apparent was the cognate nature of English and Scots, and that words such as *wait*, appear in both languages as the same word and often the same meaning. This is not because one is a made-up language and the other is not, but because of historical closeness





at certain times, certain words remain the same. So, what does one do about waiting? Like *The Godfather*, one goes to the mattresses in time of stress and in this case what is safely filed away and on open access to provide a sense of what the Ulster-Scots lexicon comprises. The first port of call for me was James Fenton's *Hamely Tongue*, and a search for "wait" took me to *ettle*.[2] This word had a variety of meanings. In one sense it stood for intending to do something, and in another it represented anxious waiting. *Ettlin fur Godot* began then to materialize. And from that the stage directions of "Evening. A country road. A tree." began to focus in as "Dailygan. A loanen. A tree". There was a range of support texts, personal usage and play involved in the development of the text as I moved between a range of Ulster-Scots, Ulster and Scots dictionaries.

What came home to me was Beckett's immense personal vocabulary and how he had managed to extract so much humour and pathos from his learning. Yet alongside this there are few longeurs to deal with. Beckett's love of *Laurel and Hardy* and the slapstick of the music hall make the play much more accessible and fun than some of its decriers would admit.

In many ways *Waiting for Godot* fits very snuggly into an Ulster-Scots literary milieu. If we comprehend the existence of Vladimir and Estragon as one of eternally dannerin back to the same spot, we could say that Ulster has had its fair share of road wanderers and returners such as the Glens poet, James Studdert Moore's "Dusty Roads". Two of the greatest nineteenth-century Rhyming Weaver poets, Samuel Thompson and James Orr, were known to saunter alang the laneways of South Antrim together, talking about life, art, theology and road bowls.

In Godot we find a perfect background of movement into stasis and to fill the silences, words of all shapes and sizes: profanity, lewdness, circumlocution, disambiguation, philosophical and biblical exposition, memoir, lucubration, whinging, jesting, gurning, speechifying, consolation, weeping, and the term that seems to have gained particular appreciation from test audiences: the *makkin o big taak*. If Ulster-Scots tends towards the tongue of the country, then the inhabitants of Godotland are very well versed in the rise and fall of conversation. The dysfunctionality of main characters' Vladimir and Estragon's pseudo-marriage permits intricate flights of conversational word games that Ulster-Scots pithy, earthy, country speech more than copes with. It also remembers that like the once well-heeled characters, Scots was a language of better days— of court, law and

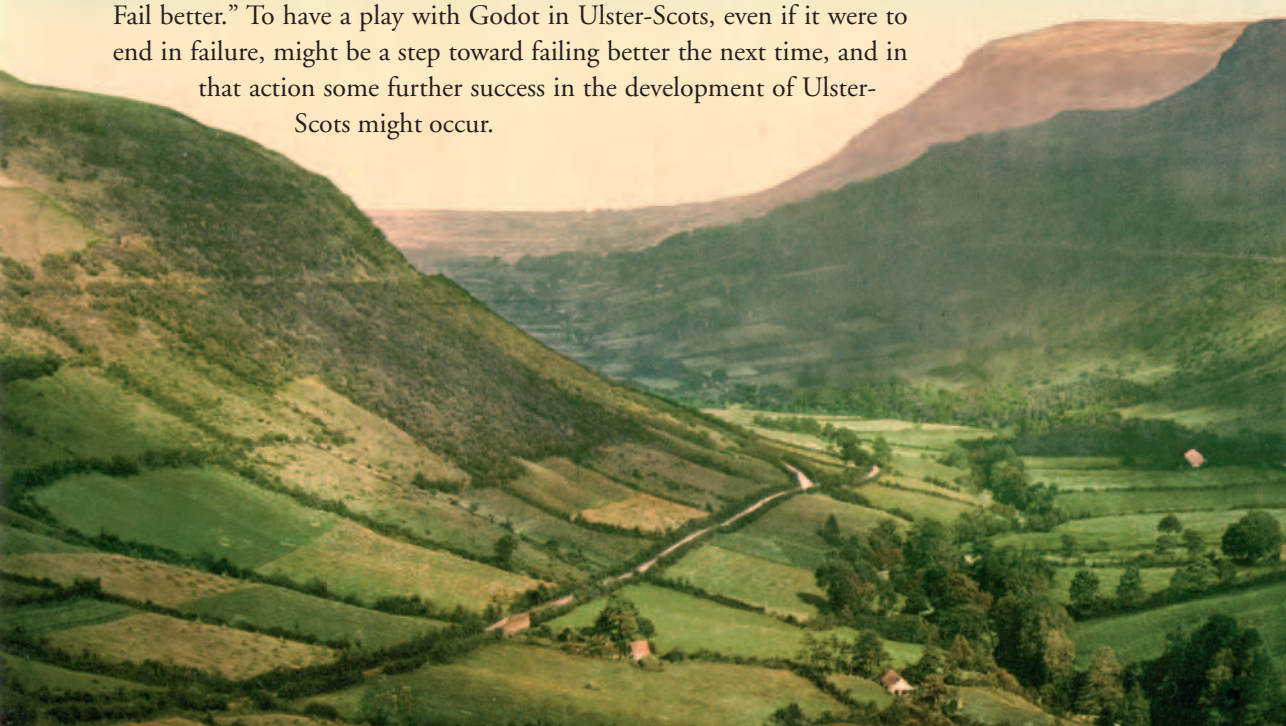
[1] The full report is available here: https://www.communitiesni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-ulster-scots-strategy-expert-panel-report-eng.pdf

[2] https://www.ulsterscotsacademy.com/words/hamely-tongue/index.php/

the aristocracy, so that some words that the loquacious Beckett sought so fastidiously to use in French and English do have their counterparts in Scots.

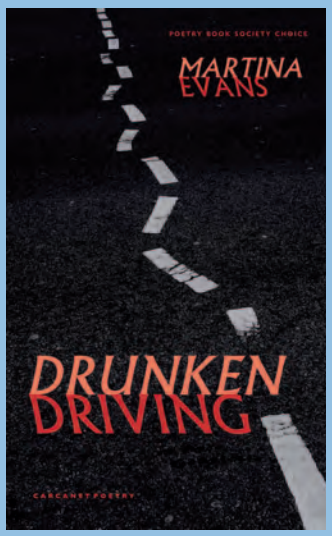
The ultimate translator's challenge was not so much in trying to match the scintillating hyper-volubility of the text but to evoke the poetic humanity of the pathos. Lines that had resonated with me for over thirty years proved the major test for the Hamely Tongue. And, I feel, at least that Ulster-Scots provides a match for these challenges. It was always going to houl its ain agin the dirty banter, and could offer linguistic pratfalls, farting and buffoonery as well as the next heritage language. But it's the moments of clarity and human awareness of personal and communal struggle that Beckett's sympathy for the world becomes apparent and it was in these translations that I was most at pains to ensure that both Beckett and Ulster-Scots were given proper attention.

What did I want to achieve with this project? For me, the translation task was a very personal test to develop more thorough engagement with Ulster-Scots in my daily life. This I hope could be shared with other speakers and readers who might contemplate a similar personal learning programme. By embarking on a translation of one of the most globally significant plays of the 20th Century, I was wanting to push where Ulster-Scots could sit in literary and linguistic arenas and test and tease other audiences, which might not be in love with either Beckett or Braid Scotch, but who might find their way towards more acceptance of both. I also wanted to follow Beckett's adage of "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." To have a play with Godot in Ulster-Scots, even if it were to end in failure, might be a step toward failing better the next time, and in that action some further success in the development of Ulster-Scots might occur.



The Glens of Antrim
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

All tied up



Martina Evans lives in London. Her latest collection *Drunken Driving* is a Poetry Book Society Choice for Summer 2026.

Martina Evans

In 2023 I began to listen to a bundle of old cassettes – recordings of interviews I'd done with homeless Irish men in Camden Town in the 90s – struck anew by their preoccupation with numbers.

Pat had grown up in a Dublin orphanage in the 40s and 50s and his use of numbers was haunting. On finding his birth mother, "I was 34 when I first saw her. 34, 3, 4, 34 when I found her." Tom, another interviewee from Down, was powered by numbers too, "You'd get 8 pints for a pound at The Mixer in Camden in 1972 which gave you 64 pints a day in the hand." When a teacher unfairly marked Tom's sums wrong in 1956, he "gave up, said to hell with it, started acting the bollocks".

I'd just written the first draft of my new poem *Drunken Driving* – set in Pentonville prison in the same decade. My Pentonville diary had also languished for thirty years beside the cassettes. For the prison narrative, I used the same sonnet form I'd used for *The Coming Thing* (Carcanet 2023) so by the time I'd begun listening to the tapes, I was already fixated by numbers too, counting my syllables and lines. I listened to the men's hypnotic repetition of numbers and thought about knitting.

Knitting is mathematical and satisfying and the best poems can be like that too – locked into their right shape. I saw the *Drunken Driving* sonnets as windows and I wanted to frame them in some way, something like the neat cuffs I love to knit. "Cuffs" worked well for sonnets set in a prison but I wanted some counterpoint for my narrator Imelda's voice. I thought about texts she might have been reading at the time.

Dracula, that timeless gothic novel of imprisonment and anxiety, fitted my purpose – the top cuff of each sonnet was formed from a handful of words from Bram Stoker. For the bottom cuffs, I went for the prosaic contrast and ironic commentary of the Pentonville security rules and the Rules of Road (Imelda is a learner driver). When each sonnet was firmly *hemmed* in, it felt right for a poem about self-imprisonment, like tying a knot which is, of course, what knitting is – a series of knots. Or is there something in the tying up itself? I've often seen a poem as a cage of lines – the spaces between the lines eloquent as unsaid things often are.

What is it about numbers that haunts us humans? We might have terrible memories of Maths lessons yet we're forever counting – the days, the weeks, the pounds or the hours. I grew up in a country shop and bar – dreading the *Sums* taught with a stick by a sadistic master – yet I was adding lists of figures in my head from an early age or confidentially working things out with a stump of lead pencil on the back of an old white paper bag. Local customer Christy Callaghan said I was "as good as a ready reckoner". Numbers were not frightening under Christy's admiring gaze but on a blackboard beside that unpredictable whiskey-smelling master, they were the stuff of horror. My friend Geraldine and I counted the hours to home time, never knowing the moment when he would make a wild dash to start beating a child. Or who he would come for next.

When school finished, the hours counted down fast to the dreaded next day. At home my sister helped me to turn the heel of a sock – what magic that was. Tricia was said to have a "boy's brain" because she was good at *Sums* (she was very good at knitting too). I puzzled over the "boy's brain" idea, no boys cut a dash with their *Sums* in my school but of course they were also terrified. I remember the master bending over a six-year-old boy, laboriously forcing his own motorcycle helmet over the boy's face, tying the strap behind – to stop him talking. He laughed breathlessly as he worked on the squirming boy and we sat in our desks transfixed. It didn't matter who was getting it, we all felt it. And the witnessing felt shameful.

Years later, Paul Muldoon's poem *Anseo* summoned those old powerful feelings with exactitude. The speaker remembers the roll call in primary school and the absentee pupil Joseph Mary Plunkett Ward. The master called Joseph "our little Ward of court" and sent him out to cut the stick

(sometimes a Salley rod) "with which he would be beaten". When the narrator meets the adult "Joe Ward" now risen through the ranks of the IRA, he finds Joe mirroring his tormented school days, calling a roll for his volunteers who answer *Anseo*. Is Joe Ward trapped or is he "making things happen"?

Anseo, centred on the roll call and made up of three linked sonnets is ruled by numbers. When I brought the poem to my fiction writing class at the City Lit, it spoke to Londoners too. They came from all over the world yet they identified deeply with *Anseo.* Interestingly, students from South America were convinced Joseph was a hero, "making things happen", the rest of us weren't so sure. Using the poem as a model, I set exercises on character and it never failed. Sometimes the stories were so disturbing, I wondered if school should be banned completely. Interestingly, the City Lit was where many mature students finally passed their GCSE Maths, years after they left school.

I listened to those old cassettes, remembering why I'd put them away for so long. It was for the same reason I'd put away my Pentonville Prison diary; they were too painful. But it was unfinished business. I'd always intended to write poems using only the men's words but so far I'd only written one poem called *Christmas Days.* Here Pat talks about the presents they received so briefly on Christmas mornings:

"And then the brothers said, now boys, time for your dinner./Line up, please./Christmas dinner on the table./But when we came back the presents weren't there…The next year./It was brushes and a bucket./And all the little colours, yellow, pink, orange./That was 1949. It was in a set./Big brushes, that length –/all little bottles, full of colours, red and blue. That was 1950…1951, one of the boys said and one of the brothers heard him,/we won't see this no more./He got a hiding, a good hiding./He was put to bed wrapped in a mackintosh with no food."

But listening was harrowing, I needed containment. Again I reached for a great text to "cuff" my poems. Only *The Book of Job* could get me through the murder and torture of innocents at Pat's institution. Job cried out for those boys as he's been crying out for centuries. The "Job cuffs" could be scaffolding which I will discard when I finish – there goes an unconscious reference to Pentonville again, Britain's primary execution site for 120 years and no stranger to the homeless. But for now, Job helps the work-in-progress, giving me the electrical connection which comes from great poems – like when I read *Anseo* with my City Lit students. Or when Tom from Down asked me if I knew what a Salley rod was –

THE SALLEY ROD

I was not in safety…neither had I rest,
neither was I quiet, yet trouble came

My father's voice was enough. Our mother used
the stick. She'd say *Go out to the wood & cut me a salley rod.*
I'd cut the thickest one & I'd bring it back but
she'd say *No, I want a thinner one* & I'd have to
go back again however many times. Uncle Mick came
down from Belfast on a Sunday. It was summertime
& I was in a pair of shorts & from my neck to my heels
was in welts. He said, *Joe get into that car*! I had to stand
in the back because I couldn't sit & he said *I am taking*
this child to the National Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
She got down on her knees to him then. For about two days
& she never touched me. & then *Ow! I'll get you little fucker*.
Yeah oh yeah & I remember being homeless & I'd get
some mad urge maybe sleeping round the Old Kent Road
& I always knew I needed a few in the morning. I might have
3 or 4 drinks for the morning & sometimes I would
wake up at 1 or 2 & I'd drink this 4 or 5 drinks &
I'd ring her up & fucking roar down the line,
Are you nice & warm in your bed? & what would she do?
Oh, she'd totally ignore me. Total silence
& then she'd put down the phone.

for now shall I sleep in the dust;
and thou shalt seek me in the morning,
but I shall not be.

Christmas Days was published in All Alcoholics are Charmers, Anvil Press, 1998.
A previous version of *The Salley Rod* appeared in the *The London Magazine*. (August/September 2025 issue).

May Morton: Phantom poet

Liz McManus

The first time that I read the poem, *Spindle & Shuttle,* I didn't care who had written it. I just loved its inventiveness: the cadences, the breadth of its vision, the rhythm, the story it told.

In its 200 lines, the poet May Morton traces the course of the linen industry in Northern Ireland. In particular, she writes about the women who worked as mill workers – known colloquially as the 'millies'. Over generations, their labours gave Belfast much of its prosperity, its civic architecture, as well as its 19th century nickname of Linenopolis.

In Northern Ireland, *Spindle & Shuttle* was first published in 1951 and became renowned, award-winning work. After Morton died, the poem languished in obscurity until, in 1988, Wolfhound Press published a groundbreaking anthology entitled *Pillars of the House.* It was the first anthology of Irish women's verse to be published and it incorporated the work of women poets over centuries. Importantly, it also celebrated the emergence from the shadows, of contemporary Irish women writers who, at last, had found their voices. Included in the anthology is Morton's greatest poem, *Spindle & Shuttle.*

It is only now, almost 40 years after I first read *Spindle & Shuttle* for the first time, that I have got to learn about the poet herself. As is the case for so many other writers – mainly women – her work and contribution fell into oblivion after her death. So I choose to call May Morton a phantom poet.

Morton was born in Limerick in 1879 into a Protestant family. As an adult, she got a job in the Model School for Girls in Belfast. By the time of her retirement, she was vice principal of the school. It is easy to imagine her as simply a spinster of a certain age living quietly with her sister in Waterloo Gardens, North Belfast, and making herself useful as secretary to a number of literary societies.

The reality is different: May Morton was a powerhouse in her day and passionate both as a poet and as a literary activist. She was part of a coterie of poets that regularly met in Campbells Coffee House in Donegall Square in the 1940s and 50s. The group included Roy McFadden, John Hewitt and Robert Greacen. Even Louis McNiece dropped in occasionally. These informal gatherings have been described as forming the second poetic revival in Belfast. The poets regularly met for spirited conversation that, in Greacen's words, had 'an exhilarating tang which led to perhaps more good work that might have been expected in the circumstances'.

May Morton participated in these conversations over coffee but she was more than just a talker. By that time, the eminent writers association, PEN, had gone global, It was progressive in outlook and sought to support writers and promote literature. Morton was pivotal in establishing the first PEN centre in Northern Ireland. Her dream of an all-island PEN, sadly, did not materialise until after her death.

Even so, it was tough going at times. Morton wrote to a friend that it was hard, in Belfast, to keep a liberal non-sectarian society alive and yet she continued to do so until late in her life. She gave it her all. A fellow poet, Roy MacFadden, years later, described Morton 'as a fierce presence at PEN meetings – whose gentle gloves sheathed knuckle dusters and for whom young poets were slight challenges in plasticine...' He described her as the Maud Gonne of the Ulster Union Club (another cultural society). She was, he wrote, the Lady Gregory of PEN.

To be an assertive woman during those years was not easy. I imagine Morton struck a lonely figure at times but she was always true to her craft. Four collections of her poetry were published between the 1930s to 1950s. At times, her style of writing was experimental. She was clearly trying to find her own voice but even her great friend, John Hewitt could be condescending. In a poem where he wrote at length about the male writers in the group, he simply depicted May Morton as

'That fine woman with the gentle skill
For roses, words and friendship most of all.'

Morton's works, however, speak for themselves. In his book *The Poetics of Partition: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (2012), Richard Kirkland describes one of her poems as encapsulating an 'erotically charged delight in the Ulster landscape.' His description applies to many of her early poems. *Isle of Mist* transforms the image of the sun setting on a misty island into a secret tryst.

He turns again, with laughter and a sigh,
To kiss the nipples of your naked breasts
And so is gone.

Had Morton stayed in her birthplace of Limerick, such sensuality in her writing might have brought her into conflict with The Irish Censorship Board although, at that time, poetry was not as strictly censored as prose.

In 1951 she completed her great poem *Spindle and Shuttle* and submitted it for consideration for the Festival of Britain, Northern Ireland Prize. The judges, W.R. Rodgers and H.O. White, selected Morton's poem over hundreds of others. They determined that,'The poem has remarkable qualities, it is original in design, it is a sustained effort and it breathes the spirit of our Province.'

There is no record of May Morton's response but, I imagine, she must have felt vindicated. After all, her friend, John Hewitt, had submitted his famous poem '*The Colony*' for the same prize and failed to have it selected by the

judges. There could be no doubt: hers was a major triumph. Against the stiffest competition she had been chosen to be the poetic voice of Northern Ireland. After she died her reputation faded. Until Wolfhound Press republished it over thirty years later, *Spindle and Shuttle* was largely forgotten. It begins, like any great saga might, with a simple image:

Last night I darned a damask tablecloth.
Back and forth
Warp and woof:
The cloth was old; a hundred years and more
Had come and gone since, master of his loom,
Some skilful weaver set the hare and hounds
Careering through the woodland of its edge
In incandescent pattern, white on white.
It was my mother's cloth, her mother's too
(Some things wear better than their owners do)
And linen lasts: a stuff for shirts and shrouds
Since Egypt's kings first built their gorgeous tombs
And wrapped their dead in linen, it may be
They held it symbol of a latent hope
Of immortality.

The contrast between the homely image of the tablecloth and the masculine authority of ancient Egypt is deliberate. Morton is celebrating the history of linen-making in Ulster but, more importantly, she is celebrating the role of *women* in that history. Her poem moves easily from cottage industry to advanced capitalism, while she uses the rhythm of the loom as a repetitive motif to bind up the poem: Back and forth
Warp and woof:
Wing of angel,
Devil's hoof.

The poet was seventy-two when she received the prize of a hundred pounds (valued as £3,600 today). After her retirement from teaching she had blossomed as a poet. From the youthful passion of her early works and belief in God, she developed into the political and historical maturity of *Spindle & Shuttle*. Then, in her later writing, she displayed a new meditative quality. *Sung to the Spinning Wheel* is her last collection published in 1952, five years before her death.

During her lifetime, May Morton left her mark, both as a poet and as a PEN activist, and yet, sadly, after her death her reputation dwindled. Her importance deserves to be acknowledged and I am grateful to Arlen House for inviting me to be the editor of her selected works: *May Morton: Phantom Poet*. In today's world of fake news and propaganda, Morton's commitment to the cause of Truth is still as relevant today as it was in 1942 when, in the magazine *The PEN in Ulster,* she wrote the following: 'Any work of art should bear the imprint of its creator's personality. But it should also bear the hallmarks of Truth. Sincerity is all.'

Liz McManus is a novelist, short story writer and former politician. She is editor of *May Morton: Phantom Poet* (Arlen House 2026).

The importance of women's voices

Rosemary Jenkinson

This summer, controversy galloped onto the Northern Irish arts scene like never before. It seems we're about five years behind the rest of the UK for culture war debates, but being behind the times is nothing new for this country.

As the issues can be perceived as partisan, I could easily shy away from them, but that would be cowardly since it was the biggest arts story of the summer, garnering international attention, and is relevant to the future of arts festivals. And don't worry – I am not going to mention the triggering word 'toilets'! This essay is about the principal, not the politics.

From the beginning it should be said that community arts festival Féile an Phobail, which rose out of republicanism, have a proud tradition of hosting speakers from cross-community backgrounds like the DUP's Arlene Forster and Ian Paisley Jr. in the West Belfast Talks Back debates. Even though I'm from a unionist Protestant background, I've been invited to appear on several of their arts panels and have greatly appreciated the opportunity to speak. Because I am fervently for free speech, I supported their brave decision in upholding the Frankie Boyle event in 2015 in spite of public protests. But Boyle was a man and it is notable that there was a previous incident with a female artist, Sinéad O'Connor, who was due to perform in 1999, but pulled out as the organisers asked her not to raise the issue of punishment beatings.

This year's contentiousness began when Féile an Phobail cancelled an event called 'Respect, Rights and Reality' with the Women's Rights Network a week before the festival commenced in July. The cancellation, as with so many cancellations, directly resulted from criticism for the event through social media. But what would have happened if the event had gone ahead? Surely nothing at all, apart from some vitriolic tweets, and, in fact, the increased publicity would have ensured that the event was well supported.

At most, some activists might have chanted and waved placards outside the event just as Free Presbyterians used to do outside risqué theatre shows in the past. Féile an Phobail, if anything, would have shored up their reputation as a bold provider of political debate from across the spectrum.

The WRN initiated legal proceedings to get their event reinstated, but soon withdrew them. In the end they organised their own event, keeping the Hilton Hotel venue secret until the night before. There were around a hundred attendees and nary a protestor in sight.

It seems strange that a festival which has a history of being politically engaged 'weren't aware' that WRN was about sex-based rights. Those details were included in the event write-up. But does cancelling 'Respect, Rights and Reality' mean that arts festivals are turning into echo chambers? Is it now Féile an Some of the Phobail? It's normal for festivals in Northern Ireland to have a degree of bias to cater for their local community, but surely they need to keep an open mind. What the organisers should have done instead of pulling the event was talk to the WRN and explain that they would keep it, but create a more complex panel with divergent views.

It was obvious that *Belfast Telegraph* journalist Allison Morris didn't feel comfortable with this topic as she took some days to write her article, which isn't typical for an opinionated opinion commentator. As she is from a West Belfast Catholic nationalist background and had skin in the game by appearing at Féile events, there was pressure on her to justify the Féile's stance as she indeed did. Some writers, mainly male, praised Morris' article on social media, ignoring her inaccuracy in stating: 'the claim that women are being silenced by Féile is the most disingenuous of them all'. The crux of the matter is that Morris, an otherwise avid defender of women's rights, supported a festival's decision to prevent three women from speaking because of political reasons. To be prevented from speaking means 'being silenced'.

The ensuing episode of BBC Radio Ulster's Talkback went absolutely viral, proving the public appetite for such a debate. It was a fabulous encounter between two polar opposites of journalism – the swashbuckling streetfighter and the rigorously-minded academic. Allison Morris vs. Helen Joyce. Looking at it as objectively as possible, Joyce won in terms of logical debating skills (instead of Talkback, it was Takedown) whereas Morris claimed her own measure of victory in terms of fast-talking Nolanesque pugnaciousness. The point is it was radio gold.

I'm not going to go into the ins and outs of the debate, but interestingly Morris said, 'I hate the fact that we're censoring ourselves' because of denunciation on social media. I completely agree with her on this, though the problem is she was supporting censoring others. She also revealed that

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Allison Morris and Helen Joyce

she knew women from the Green Party and People Before Profit who expressed sex realist views 'in private'.

'In private' is the key. We have to make it more acceptable to express all political views in public, including listening to opinions we individually don't like. We can't just drive ideas underground. We have to bring these issues offline and into public spaces like festivals where facts can be argued. Discomfort is part and parcel of any political debate. The most dangerous people are those who let ideology blind them to facts. And how can we possibly develop our thinking from brief snippets on social media?

Féile an Phobail's stated aim is to provide 'balance and *inclusivity*.' Then why did they *exclude* some women? Inclusivity stands for diversity of ideas. I understand the support for 'those who are marginalised and attacked', but women have always been on the margins of public life and are frequently attacked. What worries me even more is that the Northern Irish arts community only tolerates the public expression of certain views. My question to them is this: regardless of your own beliefs, do you honestly think that an arts festival should cancel a scheduled political talk? Do you truly believe in free speech and free writing? The reason I first fell in love with literature was because it is the one place that covers every political view and every human emotion. It is a libertarian haven where you are exposed to other people's perceptions and points of view.

In terms of literary cancel culture, it's true that women are more often on the receiving end than men. Polly Clark the Scottish poet was a recent casualty by dint of a few retweets, as was Australian Palestinian writer Randa Abdel-Fattah for her tweets. While censorship is in some cases not a legal offence, it is nonetheless a moral and cultural one. Secondly, isn't it time we treated the supposed power of social media with a pinch of salt?

I imagine I won't be invited back by Féile for raising this matter. However, I completely support their festival for combining politics with the arts, and am only criticising this one decision. The point is they can easily change things. Next year, they should hold an event bringing a WRN member into direct debate with a member of a trans rights organisation. I will very happily support it by attending, and one thing is certain. If it's anything like the Talkback show, it will be wonderfully entertaining.

Milestones

Patricia Mallon

No getting away from the hunger strikes in ’81. Prisoners starving themselves to death captured imaginations worldwide and disrupted life locally.

Bobby Sands mural, 1981

Like when I saw a new side to my neighbour after our paths crossed underneath the mural at the end of our street which screeched, ‘Don’t let them Die,’ and she asked if I was going to the hunger striker’s funeral. When I said, ‘No, I don’t know him – he isn’t in our parish,’ she snarled back, ‘Don’t you know yer Irish history?’ I quickly got offside.

Later I thought, why be surprised? With all that was going on in the Maze, I should have learnt people get riled over anything these days.

A few days earlier I was wound up myself and left the Andersonstown leisure centre when the instructor intoned in a sing-song voice, ‘And as you lie there – relaxing – think – as I am – about those poor men – in their cells – suffering…’ It was the second time that week I felt tears prick at the back of my eyes.

The first was in the staffroom of our school people call ‘an oasis of calm’. Eileen and I were in early, whingeing away and she said something like, ‘I’m fed up. Did you hear they called Dolores into the Head’s office? Asked her to take off her hunger strike sticker. A teacher wearing a political badge!’ The next thing you know we were interrupted by eavesdropper Colm. ‘I’m a bit sick of people like you yapping on about stuff. What do you know about those men or what their families are going through? It would serve you better if you shut your mouth.’

Something snapped and I gathered up my belongings and charged down corridors of chattering pupils, even bypassing the scary school secretary. I knocked on the Principal's door and hearing 'come in', entered the lioness's den. 'Sorry to disturb you, Sister, but people shouldn't have to put up with this kind of stuff.' I added about feeling under siege. About having to keep my cool … always being wary about what I said and to whom.

After it all tumbled out I felt a bit sheepish then – a tell-tale in trouble in the Head's office. But when Colm arrived at her request, what did she do but pour something golden into tiny sherry glasses she offered with the stipulation, 'Now sort it out. I'll get your first period covered.'

Immediately Colm downed his thimbleful and eyed mine. 'Aren't you having yours, Bernadette?'

'No, you go head. I don't drink. I'm a Pioneer.'

'Grand. We must do this more often!'

It set the tone for normal service to resume and as neither of us mentioned the incident again I presumed he too realised we were only letting off steam. I was never absolutely sure though.

• • •

After the hunger strikes, flags and emblems continued as the new normal round our way and occasionally when they got to me I talked to Joe about moving house. It was just talk though. We could afford to upsize now but how to let go of somewhere so steeped in memories of our son was the problem. Even painful memories were precious now.

Like that day twenty years ago when my young son and I left the house to see a consultant about 'developmental milestones'. He was lively in himself but late in walking and I often ended up carrying him. The GP and books I read all said that children develop at different rates so I expected the paediatrician would confirm there was nothing to worry about.

In the hospital waiting room initially I got distracted by a boy looking far too big to be sitting on his mother's lap, stroking her face. 'Disabled' passed through my mind. The mother looked somehow different too.

In the consultant's room, the first thing the doctor did was place Danny with his back on the floor and observe how he rose upright. Which was to turn over, steady himself with bent arms and push upwards.

Something disturbed me in the doctor's manner and a fear I little recognised made me burst out, 'Tell me the worst.'

'What do you think is the worst?'

'Leukaemia? I've read that it slows down milestones in children.'

'No. 99% sure it's not leukaemia. Most likely a muscle condition. But it's nearly Christmas. Let's do a few tests in the New Year?'

Outside in a bustling reception, I stopped to gather my thoughts. I was clear that the doctor held back from telling me something. Then when I considered his passing reference to a muscle condition an alarming thought surfaced: muscles are all over your body. Were tests being delayed to give our family a worry-free Christmas? Was that it?

As facts started to add up, I punched coins into the public phone-box and cut across Joe's greeting. 'There's something wrong with Danny. It's serious.'

His reassuring noises made no difference. He was not the one just faced by a doctor unable to meet their eyes or smile once.

Friends tried to be reassuring but one who was a nurse stopped me in my tracks when she mused, 'The only thing that comes to mind is a muscle wasting disease … it wouldn't be that,' and I knew, just knew, she had identified what was wrong with Danny. It galvanised me to ring the consultant's secretary and insist we must be told the truth and within hours had the answer: 'Bring your son in for tests tomorrow.'

In the aftermath of a diagnosis of a time-limiting muscle condition, family life did not stop. Just took on a different hue, always in the shadow of what was to come. When the woman with the child on her lap in the hospital crept into my mind, I hoped life was being kind to them.

• • •

As predicted, Danny died in his teens but cemetery visits were a comfort.

To get to the family grave you had to pass a large plot bursting with colour commemorating the hunger strikers. The skyline above was dominated by a large tricolour and mini flags stood to attention at individual graves headed by black marble slabs with gold engraving praising 'volunteers killed in action'. The whole plot was meticulously maintained by the National Graves Association and a magnet for tourists and locals.

Looking back, for some time I was blind to words and tokens of loss and remembrance from mothers, brothers, sisters, friends until I became more at ease in the place. What made the difference I suppose was time passing and an accumulation of small things. The sight of someone wiping away a tear or friendly nods from people who, like myself, just wanted to ensure loved ones were not forgotten.

And then there was Anna. She was an acquaintance I knew from the Maze prison in 1972 when I was a student teacher volunteering with the Legion of Mary to help in the Quaker-run crèche. Anna left her grandson in the creche whilst visiting her husband, an IRA internee.

I learned she was the child's full-time carer because his father, her son, had been killed by the army and the child's mother was never mentioned. In the margins of our encounters at the jail I gleaned from her something about the experience of prisoners' families: stigma, loneliness, money worries.

Snagged in those memories was a sense of Anna's determination to do her best to keep the family going in the midst of grief. Like when she said, 'I didn't know if I was coming or going. Didn't care what people said – wore old jeans to my son's funeral anyway.'

That sense of freedom after the worst life can throw at you struck a chord when decades later I too had to come to terms with the loss of my own son.

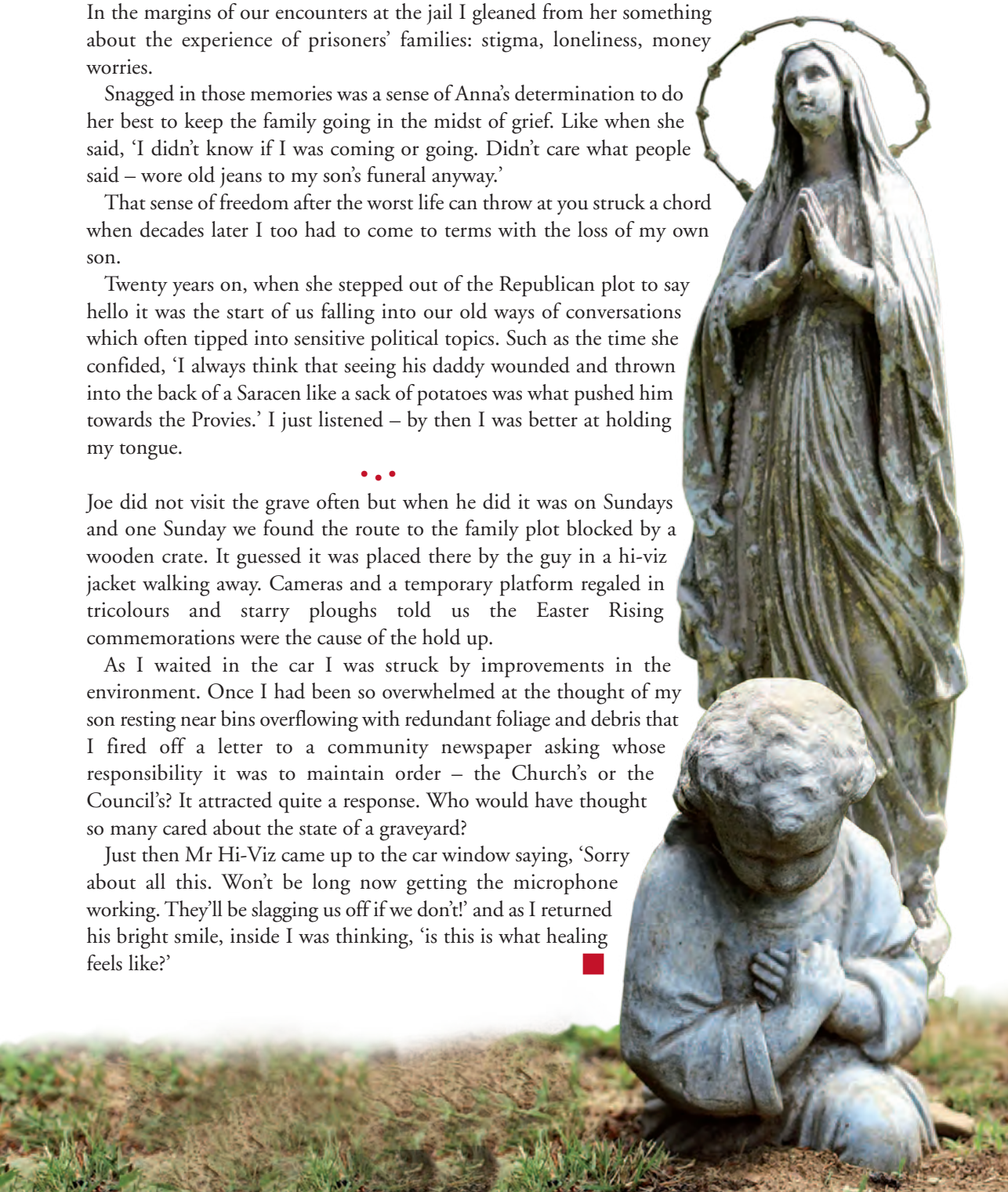
Twenty years on, when she stepped out of the Republican plot to say hello it was the start of us falling into our old ways of conversations which often tipped into sensitive political topics. Such as the time she confided, 'I always think that seeing his daddy wounded and thrown into the back of a Saracen like a sack of potatoes was what pushed him towards the Provies.' I just listened – by then I was better at holding my tongue.

• • •

Joe did not visit the grave often but when he did it was on Sundays and one Sunday we found the route to the family plot blocked by a wooden crate. It guessed it was placed there by the guy in a hi-viz jacket walking away. Cameras and a temporary platform regaled in tricolours and starry ploughs told us the Easter Rising commemorations were the cause of the hold up.

As I waited in the car I was struck by improvements in the environment. Once I had been so overwhelmed at the thought of my son resting near bins overflowing with redundant foliage and debris that I fired off a letter to a community newspaper asking whose responsibility it was to maintain order – the Church's or the Council's? It attracted quite a response. Who would have thought so many cared about the state of a graveyard?

Just then Mr Hi-Viz came up to the car window saying, 'Sorry about all this. Won't be long now getting the microphone working. They'll be slagging us off if we don't!' and as I returned his bright smile, inside I was thinking, 'is this is what healing feels like?'



A freshness of sensation

Angela Graham

Folly Lane

Damian Smyth

Templar Fiction pb £12.99 hb £14.99
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Never have I felt so indebted to the text of a book's front flap. I started Damian Smyth's debut novel "Folly Lane" at the beginning of chapter one, expecting, as one does, the usual novelistic menu – scene-setting or introduction to a character or an aim – but swiftly my reading legs were swept from under me and I was adrift in a welter of impressions: from bushcraft advice on suturing a wound, to systems engineering, and on to an account of a seventeenth-century Ranter's punishment for blasphemy. All within the first three pages. Where had the 'i' of the bushcraft section gone to?

The hastily consulted front flap informed me I was reading, "a biographic novel, skilfully weaving its weft of narratives and private text… The novel reveals an eclectic talkative self… and presents Smyth's existential consideration of his home town, Downpatrick…" Right. Well. So I took a deep breath and read on.

I surfaced convinced this is a book which expects the reader's committed collaboration with, even co-creation of, the book – certainly within parameters set by the author but with extensive leeway for the reader's own imagination to grasp material and wrestle it into relation with his or her particular life. I did struggle at first but the careful structure of every page and the meticulous relation of parts to the whole (typical of Smyth's work) result in a reading experience which is exceptionally dynamic and affecting. The approach is akin to marquetry, montage, film-splicing – the juxtaposition of pre-existing elements to release new meaning.

One would not read this novel for the conventional narrative pleasure of knowing what happens next but to be repeatedly surprised and challenged while noting emerging motifs, and a gradual chiming of elements – coherence ringing out above the turbulence. The author wants to

meet the reader in a new space, purged of hackneyed presuppositions. This is dangerous ambition for a writer because it risks toppling into chaos or platitudes but Damian Smyth is sure-footed throughout.

"Folly Lane" has eight chapters and 'a suffix'. The text within chapters is arranged without conventional punctuation. Instead, typographical techniques, such as extenuated spacing of words, and of letters within a word, are used to achieve emphasis or slow the reader's eye. A stylish ampersand marks off sections while at the same time insisting on their linkage to each other.

'a suffix' is Smyth's repository of "source text" ("everything here is 'found'") or citations, grouped per chapter. But the reader must figure out which source refers to which piece of the book without the aid of matching superscript and page numbers. Damian Smyth has long made skilful use of footnotes in his poetry collections to deepen the impact of his poems by extending their frames of reference. Here this practice is exploited as an essential component of the book. This working back and forward from text to source produces a disquieting, repeated shift of focus that sharpens the reader's appetite for coherence while stressing its elusiveness. Smyth is also seeking, I believe, that the reader should experience a freshness of sensation, undulled by habitual apprehensions and responses.

Chapter eight begins, "At this point you might expect a conclusion, an overview." However, this is Folly Lane, so a sense of perspective arrives by an unaccustomed route: "We…get waylaid by artifice, our own making. It seems everything we do asserts the self, expresses the self, affirms the self…". But in Folly Lane, "Nothing is owned, not even 'autobiography' where 'i' is a population of multiple selves, every ampersand reveals another diorama… Hand in hand with the self comes the assumption of its superiority as a point of view… None of that occurs with the anonymous text."

Smyth's vision of poetry and of poetry's omnipresence is so limpid and bold that I am reluctant to pre-empt its impact by delineating it here. Better to emerge into it having travelled the chapters. I content myself with this: "In short, using language as already poetry, as if it were already poetry, makes it happen."

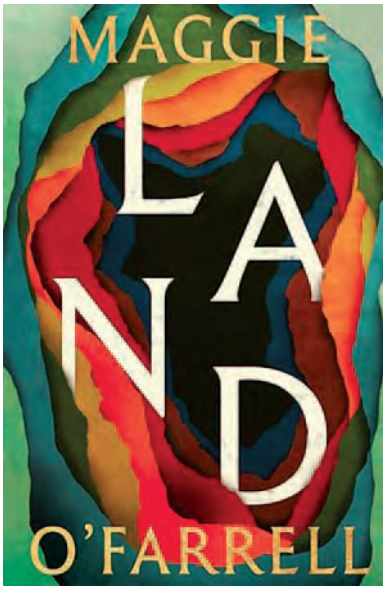
Folly Lane is a side road in Downpatrick. In "Folly Lane" Damian Smyth continues his scrutiny of the town and its environs (done to wonderful effect in previous collections such as "Irish Street" and "English Street") and once again he finds, among the atrocities, present and past, instances of people making room for one another: "No one who wanted a role would have none."

Having delivered harrowing composite accounts of human capacity to inflict appalling suffering, and of people choosing death over an unbearable life, when Damian Smyth offers accounts of inclusion and compassion their profound impact and "rightness" have been earned. We have seen ourselves. What we could be is visible and reachable.

This is a radically, determinedly, unselfish book that pushes brilliantly at the boundaries of genre and practice.

because love is an original act
through which a being without stopping to be this being
leaves itself to take part in another human being

is thus always out of herself



Fumbling for effect

Kevin Power

Land

Maggie O'Farrell

Tinder Press hb £25
ISBN HB 978 1 035441 29 7

In Anthony Burgess's *The Clockwork Testament, or Enderby's End* (1974), the eremitical and flatulent poet Francis Xavier Enderby ventures forth from his habitual seclusion to, among other things, teach a creative writing class at a university in New York. Confronted with a piece of violent agit-prop poetry written by a black student, Enderby points out a flaw in the imagery: "If the prick is to be chopped in segments," he says, "it will not resemble a dog-turd." Another student says, "it's the hate that it's about. Poetry is made out of emotions." "Oh no," Enderby says. "Oh very much no. Oh very very very much no and no again. Poetry is made out of words."

Novels, too, are made out of words but the quest to make them out of emotions continues uninterrupted, and continues, year on year, to meet with cataracts of approval. Maggie O'Farrell's *Hamnet* (2020) has sold north of two million copies and became an Oscar-winning movie directed by Chloe Zang. Until I was commissioned to review O'Farrell's follow-up, *Land*, I had not read *Hamnet*, because of a suspicion born of long professional experience that it would be a novel made not out of words but out of emotions. Even so, I was shocked to find how technically poor *Hamnet* is: that is to say, how padded, how structurally weak, and how laboriously overexplicit.

Hamnet is a speculative story about the death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet, about whom we know nothing more than that he died in 1596, aged eleven. The novel largely shies away from any undue scrutiny of Shakespeare himself and spends many pages instead with Agnes, a version of Anne Hathaway rendered as a sort of herbalist witch, a marginalised woman who is nonetheless in touch with mystical eco-energies. (*Land* also traffics in this sort of pseudo-feminist woo-woo.)

Hamnet is a novel that asks a lot of questions. The interminably overwritten opening pages find Hamnet going next door to look for his family because his sister Judith is ill. "Where can they be? What must he do? How can they all be out? How can his mother and grandmother not be in

the house, as they usually are, heaving open the doors of the oven, stirring a pot over the fire? […] Where should he go? Whom should he call on for help? And where is everyone?" Pure padding. A good writer would strike out all but the last three words, and get on with the story.

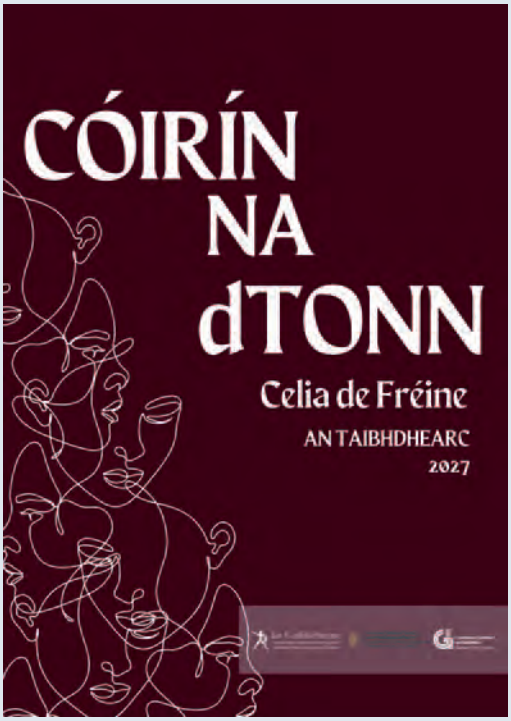
But O'Farrell pads because she doesn't really have a story. What she has are feelings. What she has are *vibes*. *Hamnet* and *Land* are vibes-based fiction. You are surely not meant to read them attentively, or in order to find out what happens next. You are meant to read them for the *emotions*. If you read attentively, you might start to find your mood somewhat spoiled by sentences like this, from *Hamnet*: "His grandfather is standing with his back towards him, in a crouched position…" So is he standing or crouching? Or this: "A cold fear rinses down through his chest, encasing his heart in an instant, crackling frost." Again, a good writer cancels all this vague striving at the revision stage and writes: "He was afraid."

But O'Farrell leaves in all the vague striving, the fumbling for effect. Indeed, fumbling for effect is what *Hamnet* and *Land* are all about. Often O'Farrell gives up on the fumbling and settles for cliché. Two separate forests in *Hamnet* are "verdant." The wind is "caressing." In *Land*, a character is startled from a "reverie." (Reveries only happen in bad novels. When was the last time you had a reverie?) The same character "sits bolt upright." With remarkable persistence, O'Farrell uses three phrases where one will do: "the need to leave, to rebel, to escape is so great that it fills him to his very outer edge" (an absolutely representative phrase from *Hamnet*). She sends her characters' eyes all over the place: "Tomás swivels his eyes towards the man so that they are gazing at each other, inches apart." His eyes are gazing at each other?

O'Farrell's unhandy prose finds itself frequently overmatched by physical realities. She enjoys describing smells but never gets them right: "the floral scorch of honey"? Actually, let's look at some more of the sentence that contains this phrase: "Tomás can catch the scent of baked apple, fragrant and hot, filtering into his nasal cavity: sweet and blistered peel, the floral scorch of honey." His nasal cavity? Ears, noses: Tomás's son Liam "presses the whorl of his ear to the door" – not just his ear, you see; that wouldn't have the right vibes. Later, a dead girl preserved in bog hears sounds with "the tawny shell-whorls of her water-filled ear."

Land is mostly set in the west of Ireland in 1865, on "a peninsula, stretching out into the Atlantic, like an imploring hand, the westernmost scrap of Europe before it surrenders to icy cross-currents of a vast ocean." Tomás is drawing maps for "the redcoats." One day he stumbles into a copse and has some sort of mystical vision. He decides to move his family to the peninsula. This takes 116 pages. In the remaining pages of this unbelievably turgid novel, not much else really happens. In a flashback, an iron-age girl dies alongside her wolfhound and both are preserved by the bog; is she the source of Tomás's vision? There is some woo-woo about "the colossal lifespan of a landscape" – the novel endorses a sort of harmlessly vague eco-consciousness that ironically ends up echoing the hokey rhetoric of blood-and-soil nationalism.

What do people get from reading these books? Not a literary experience. The prose is too clouded, the structures too loose. A warm, vague, sweetly melancholy feeling about some harmlessly unrealistic characters: this is the actual content of *Hamnet* and *Land*. "How radiant, how lovely is the land – and yet how empty." How elaborate, how fiddly is the prose – and yet how empty of anything but vibes.



Coinsias nó fochoinsias sin í an cheist

Review by Seán Ó Muireagáin

Cóirín na dTonn

A Play by Celia de Fréine

Arlen House pb €15 pp88
ISBN 978 01 98881 650
Due to be produced by An Taibhdhearc autumn 2027.

Nuair a hiarradh orm léirmheas a dhéanamh ar an dráma seo, bhí leisce orm a dhéanamh, rud nach maith liom a dhéanamh, breithiúnas ar obair scríbhneoir eile. Ní hé nach ndéanaim breithiúnas ar aon rud, déanaim i gcónaí ach coinním mo lámh ar mo bhéal faoi, bhuel, go dtí anois.

Tá an dráma seo lonnaithe in iarthar na hÉireann ag deireadh an fhichiú aois, agus a dhéanann saol Chóirín, an príomhcharachtar, a chur in iúl. Dráma é seo ina dtógtar mórcheisteanna an tsaoil ar bhealach iontach éifeachtach. Bean atá inti mar Chóirín a thugann cúram dá máthair le blianta gur cailleadh í. Tá saol úr uaithi anois agus is tóraíocht an tsonais sin a spreagann imeachtaí an dráma seo. Nó is léir nuair a thagann deireadh le saol amháin agus go dtosaíonn saol úr eile, gurb é is cúis le heasaontas agus le haighneas san idirthréimhse sin.

Tá saol eile beartaithe ag a deirfiúr Áine di. Ar ndóighe. Is léir an éirí in airde in Áine, scaoileann ainmneacha a cuid páistí cuid de sin láithreach, Nigel agus Genevieve! Ach, tá codarsnacht inti chomh maith, tá dáimh aici le Cóirín agus tá ag Cóirín léi. Tá doimhneacht sna príomhcharachtair sa scéal seo, a scaoiltear diaidh ar ndiaidh, cuid de phearsantacht an duine nach bhfuil súil leis agus a chasann an scéal, bealach amháin agus ansin, bealach eile.

Tá guth inmheánach ag Cóirín a dtugtar cruth daonna di, i bpearsa Críonna, coinsias Chóirín, a scaoileann an díospóireacht inmheánach leis an lucht féachana ar chaoi an-drámatúil a bhfuil feidhm leis, nó úsáideann an t-údar an cleas cumasach seo leis na codarsnachtaí i saol Chóirín a nochtadh dúinn láithreach. Goineann Críonna coinsias Chóirín, le réadúlacht agus fírinne, léiríonn sí mar a sheasann an saol. Cuireann sí rudaí i gcuimhne di.

‘Na blianta is fearr de do shaol curtha amú agat i bpost nach bhfuil meas madra air.’

Ach tarraingíonn sí siar í chomh maith le cáineadh. Ag cur i gcuimhne di nach gcomhlíonann sí a deir sí féin chomh maith.

‘Cé a dúirt le hÁine cúpla seachtain ó shin: ‘ní thuigeann tú an méid oibre a bhaineann le cúram othair?’

Cuireann Críonna in iúl di go raibh sí féin lochtach mar chúramóir. Go raibh sí cruálach in amanna.

‘Ná níl mé chun iarraidh ar éinne aire a thabhairt dom.’ Rud a fhoghlaimíonn cúramóir agus iad i mbun na hoibre sin.

Scaoileann an dráma seo rúin na gcarachtar uile. Maidhc, a d’éirigh as an ól mallaithe agus é sa tor ar Chóirín ariamh anall. Agus Ré ar thit Cóirín i ngrá leis agus é léi, agus a iníon Tara, a bhíonn searbh le Cóirín go minic. Ré atá tinn agus a iníon atá searbh, cad é atá taobh thiar den chasacht agus den chaidreamh sin?

Ar chluinstin an scéil ag Cóirín go bhfuil iníon ag Ré– tarlaíonn an rud a dhéanfadh fo-chomhfhios duine ar bith, tógann sí bacanna, castachtaí, constaicí... nuair atá inchinn an duine in anord, bíonn sí faoi eagla go ndearna sí óinseach di féin. Bíonn duine (bean) géilliúil, b’fhéidir a hanáil a chur faoin duine contráilte? Ar dhuine saonta í? Scéal chailleach an uafáis ar fad a dhéanfadh an fo-chomhfhios den scéal. Agus ansin déanann sé a mhalairt, cé air a bhfuil an locht... Is cuid den mhuc an t-eireaball. An dtabharfaidh sí cothromaíocht dí sa deireadh ar na haincheisteanna...

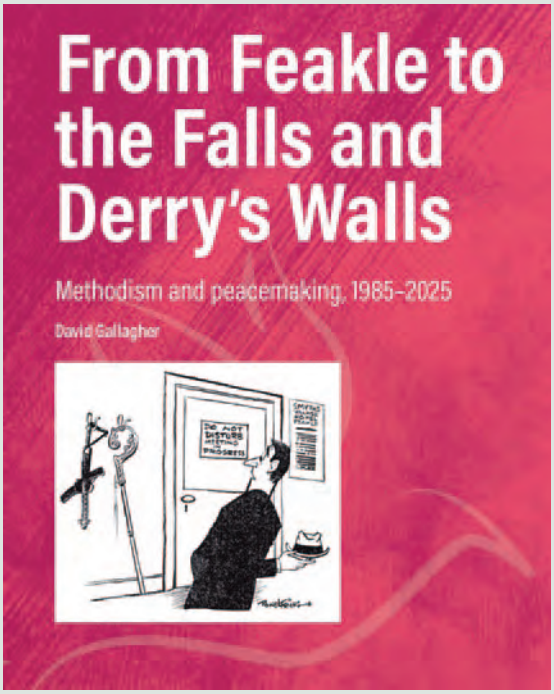
I measc na dtéamaí a phléitear i gCóirín na dTonn, tá an grá, an brón, an galar ainsealach, ról an chúramóra agus an bás cuidithe, an cumhacht atá agat ar bhás agus ar bheatha. Agus mar a théann na rudaí seo i bhfeidhm ar shaol an duine dá réir. Ceisteanna tráthúla go maith iad sa lá atá inniu ann. Pléitear go macánta iad sa dráma seo agus scaoiltear rudaí atá fíor faoin ghnáthdhuine amuigh ansin sa ghnáthshaol.

Celia de Fréine

Cad é mar a chaitheann daoine le daoine eile nuair atá siad i gcruachás, nuair atá siad i bpian. Nó mar a chaitheann daoine le daoine nuair nach n-aontaíonn siad le roghanna na ndaoine sin, is cuma cé hiad agus cad é an caidreamh atá acu leo. Saol marfach é saol na roghanna sin... agus mar a chosnaíonn siad a gcuid gníomhartha féin.

Is dráma réadúil saoithiúil é seo a gheobhas greim ar aird an bhreathnóra agus a thógfas ceisteanna a dhéanfar plé orthu sna huaireanta i ndiaidh den duine an dráma seo a fheiceáil.

Ainmníodh Cóirín na dTonn mar shaothar don Litríocht Bhreise a bheidh mar rogha ag daltaí atá ag tabhairt faoin pháipéar Gaeilge ag an ardleibhéal sa scrúdú Ardteiste ón mbliain 2027 ar aghaidh. Bheadh sé suimiúil aistí na ndaltaí a fheiceáil ar na téamaí uile atá faoi chaibidil sa dráma seo.



Where are the Peacemakers?

Claire Mitchell

From Feakle to the Falls and Derry's Walls

Methodism and Peacemaking 1985–2025

David Gallagher

Self-published £20

Feakle is a village in County Clare where Protestant churchmen met IRA leaders in 1974. This important book charts the subsequent evolution of peacemaking work amongst Methodists during the conflict and after the 1998 Agreement.

Methodism has a long history of social conscience, and David Gallagher's involvement in peacebuilding spans four decades, including service as Lay Secretary of the Methodist Church's Council on Social Responsibility, Northern Executive from 1990 to 2003. The book includes descriptions of the first official meeting of a Protestant church with Gerry Adams, a meeting with Martin McGuinness a fortnight after the Canary Wharf bomb, liaisons with British and Irish government officials, work with the East Belfast Mission for David Ervine's funeral, intercession around decommissioning.

The source material in the book is a great strength. It includes aide memoires, memos, minutes, summaries of points made in meetings, phone calls, notes jotted in notebooks and typed up for circulation. It's striking to see Methodists' thinking develop in real time, through the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, as more is understood and relationships deepen. There is a complementary archive in the Methodist Historical Society at Edgehill House, which alongside this book and Harold Good's recent memoir, is a vital archive for anyone interested in churches, conflict and peace in this place.

The chapter on Drumcree is very poignant. Thirty years later, some of the questions raised by the Methodists still resonate deeply: "What is the real nature of this march? In my opposition to it, am I attacking the other's culture? In asserting my right to march, am I trampling on the other's rights? Is my tradition so absolute that it is forever unchangeable?"

Chapter 14 is an evaluation of the work. Gallagher asks were he and his colleagues naive meddlers or intermediaries with integrity? Were they representatives, delegates, or mavericks? These are crucial questions then and now in a Northern Ireland where so many people claim to speak for a whole community.

Alongside the high level meetings, Methodists had to navigate trauma and loss amongst the congregations they were pastoring. Gallagher includes internal debates and disagreements, rather than smoothing them out, which feels like a faithful way to understand this work.

That said, there is a great sense of the collective in the book. It is multi-voiced. Gallagher lets other people's published accounts talk back to his own, and notes where something only became clear later on. So there is a dialogue between texts and understandings.

I was struck throughout by the importance of relationships. When Methodists put difficult questions to Sinn Féin, they did it face to face. There are jokes, gifts, a meeting at a roundabout. Compare that to now, when bad-tempered and caricatured exchanges often happen on social media platforms. Meeting people in real life, as fellow human beings, creates space for a different kind of politics.

Today, the constitutional question is different to the urgent violence of the Troubles. But we need interlocutors now too. This book makes me wonder who is doing this work? Can churches still speak to and for a unionist constituency, or has this connection loosened?

The book sits well with other works on religion, conflict and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland by, for example, Gladys Ganiel, Maria Power and Emily Stanton. But it is closer to a living document. It asks you to walk alongside the Methodists and decide for yourself. It is honest about its own limitations and is all the more useful for it. It gathers up a great deal of institutional knowledge for future generations to find, and makes an invaluable contribution to the archive of how the peace was won.

Morning ritual

Gerry Murphy

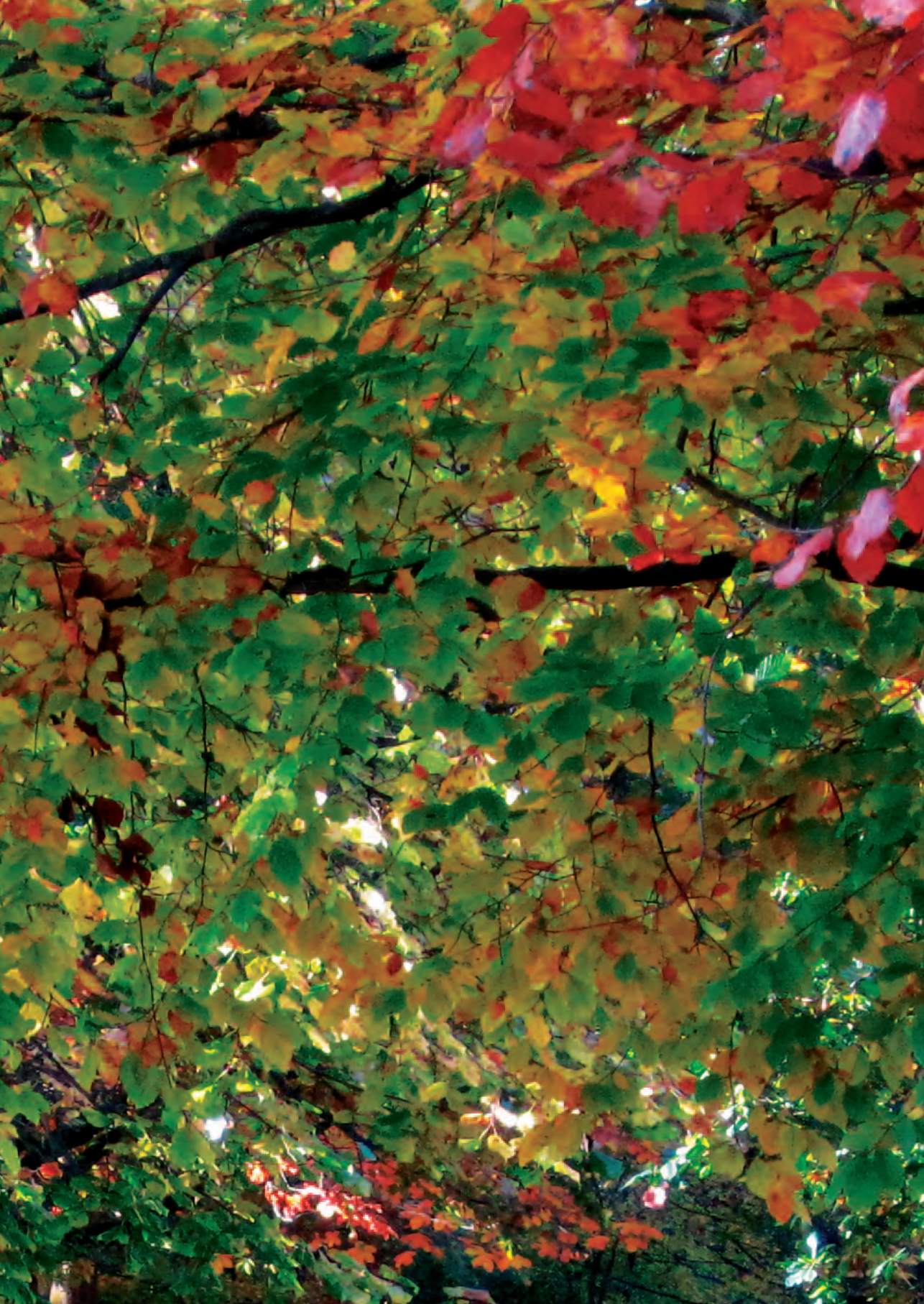
Sunlight gleams on the headboard,
your pillowed head warms to the day.
You brush those fabled black curls
from your eyes, you lick your lips,
you turn your face up to be kissed.

An Taoiseach Visits the White House on St. Patrick's Day

Philip McGuinness

Charred crops dusted the desecrated land.
The lough shore lapped against carcass of cow.
We fed on shamrock while our bellies moaned.

Woodkernes we were till they tore down the trees:
fine beams for shipping old world to the New.
Tears and sun bleached our stripped ossuary.

Our leader brings bowl to Leviathan.
Will he cast it towards starving Gazans,
while they gasp at bulldozer and settlement?

Patrick the swineherd nourished his enemy.
Is this the best we can offer the world?
Greed, god, Gun: trefoil of tyranny.