

Chapter 9: Society and Culture in Northern Ireland, 1949–1993

Introduction

Northern Ireland from 1949 to 1993 was defined not only by political conflict but also by deep cultural divisions between unionists and nationalists. The Troubles influenced education, sport, literature, music, and the arts, while sectarian parades and cultural traditions often fuelled tensions. This chapter explores the economic impact of the Troubles, the significance of cultural identity, and the role of figures like Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel in shaping Northern Irish culture.

1. The Economic Impact of the Troubles

The Oil Crisis and the Northern Economy (1973–1979)

- **October 1973:** The Yom Kippur War in the Middle East led to an oil embargo by the **Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)**.
- **Oil prices rose by 70%**, causing global economic struggles.
- Northern Ireland, being geographically remote, was hit harder than the rest of the UK.
- **Unemployment rose to 10% (1976)**, double the UK average.
- Catholic areas faced even **higher unemployment (up to 50%)**, as industry was concentrated in Protestant areas.
- **Manufacturing jobs declined by 5% annually (1973–1979)**.

The UWC Strike and Economic Decline (1974)

- The **Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) Strike (May 1974)** worsened economic hardship.
- **Harland and Wolff shipyard** had to be nationalised to prevent collapse.
- Over **25,000 houses were damaged in Belfast alone** by 1976 due to paramilitary violence.
- Many businesses refused to invest in Northern Ireland because of ongoing violence.

2. Nationalist and Unionist Identities

Unionist Identity

- Rooted in the **Ulster Plantation (1609)** and **British imperial traditions**.
- Saw themselves as **both Irish and British**.
- **Orange Order parades** became a major cultural symbol.
- **Loyalty to the monarchy and the British state**.
- **Protestant faith shaped their identity**, with some groups opposing Catholicism (e.g., Free Presbyterians).

Nationalist Identity

- Viewed themselves as **Irish, not British**.

- Retained a strong connection to **Catholic traditions**.
- Irish language and **Gaelic sports (GAA)** central to cultural expression.
- **The Catholic Church played a key role in education and social life.**
- **Partition led to isolation from the Republic**, but nationalists maintained cultural links with the South.

Religious and Class Divisions

Group	% Supporting Northern Ireland in UK	% Supporting United Ireland
Middle-Class Protestants	84%	<10%
Working-Class Protestants	90%	<10%
Middle-Class Catholics	30%	60%
Working-Class Catholics	10%	63%

- Working-class Protestants tended to support the **DUP**, while working-class Catholics leaned towards **Sinn Féin**.

3. The Apprentice Boys of Derry and Sectarian Tensions

History of the Apprentice Boys

- Formed in **1714** to commemorate the **Siege of Derry (1688-1689)**.
- Parades on **12 August (end of the siege)** and **18 December (closing of the city gates)**.
- **Loyalist in nature**, celebrating the victory of **King William of Orange** over **King James II**.

Why Were Their Parades Controversial?

- **Marched through nationalist areas**, such as the **Bogside** in Derry.
- Often led to clashes, with **coins and bottles thrown at Catholic residents**.
- **12 August 1969**: The parade triggered the **Battle of the Bogside**, seen as the beginning of the Troubles.
- **Unionists viewed the parades as a celebration of Protestant heritage**, while **Catholics saw them as sectarian triumphalism**.
- **1998**: The **Parades Commission** was established to mediate disputes over contentious marches.

4. The Impact of the Troubles on Culture and the Arts

Literature and Poetry

- **Seamus Heaney (1939-2013)**:
 - Explored themes of **violence, identity, and history**.
 - Poems like *“Mid-Term Break”* and *“The Tollund Man”* linked ancient violence to the Troubles.

- Won the Nobel Prize for Literature (1995).
- **Brian Friel (1929-2015):**
 - Founded the Field Day Theatre Company (1980).
 - *Translations* (1980) examined language and cultural identity in Ireland.
- Other notable writers: Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Derek Mahon.

Music

- **The Cranberries - “Zombie” (1994):** Protest song about the 1993 Warrington bombing.
- **Paul Brady - “The Island” (1985):** Reflected on the futility of violence.
- **Stiff Little Fingers - “Alternative Ulster” (1978):** Punk song criticising the sectarian state.
- **Van Morrison and Gary Moore:** Achieved global success while reflecting Northern Irish culture.

Theatre and Film

- **Field Day Theatre Company (1980):** Promoted plays that explored Northern Irish identity.
- **Films set during the Troubles:**
 - *In the Name of the Father* (1993) - Story of the Guilford Four’s wrongful imprisonment.
 - *The Crying Game* (1992) - Thriller involving the IRA and British soldiers.
 - *Hunger* (2008) - Depicts Bobby Sands’ hunger strike.

5. Sport and Cultural Divisions

Gaelic Games (GAA)

- Strongly associated with nationalist identity.
- **Rule 21 (until 2001):** Banned RUC members from playing.
- Teams played cross-border matches, reinforcing Irish unity.

Soccer and Sectarianism

- **Linfield FC:** Protestant-supported club, with some sectarian chants at matches.
- **Belfast Celtic (1949):** Catholic-supported club dissolved due to sectarian clashes.
- **Derry City FC (1972):** Left the Irish League due to safety concerns and joined the Republic’s League of Ireland (1985).
- **George Best (Manchester United, 1960s):** Protestant footballer but transcended sectarian divisions.

Rugby

- One of the few cross-community sports.
- Players from both traditions played for Ireland’s national team.
- **1995:** *Ireland’s Call* was introduced as a neutral anthem.

Conclusion

- Northern Ireland's cultural identity was deeply divided, with nationalists and unionists having separate traditions, sports, and symbols.
- Parades and sectarian marches fuelled tensions, particularly those by the Apprentice Boys.
- The Troubles influenced literature, music, and theatre, with writers like Seamus Heaney and Brian Friel gaining international recognition.
- Sport was also affected by sectarianism, though rugby remained a rare point of unity.
- By the 1990s, efforts were made to foster cultural understanding, through initiatives like the Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) programme.

Key Terms

- **Ulsterisation (1976):** Shift of security control to local forces.
- **Apprentice Boys of Derry:** Protestant fraternal order commemorating the Siege of Derry.
- **Parades Commission (1998):** Mediates sectarian parade disputes.
- **Field Day Theatre Company (1980):** Founded by Brian Friel to explore Northern Irish identity.
- **Ireland's Call (1995):** Neutral anthem for Ireland's rugby team.