

Introduction: The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain: impacts, engagements, legacies and memories

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This book addresses a paradox: that the Northern Ireland conflict, commonly known as ‘the Troubles’, has had profound and shaping impacts upon politics, culture and the lives of many thousands of people in Great Britain, producing lasting legacies that continue to resonate nearly half a century after the eruption of political violence in 1968–69; but that engagements with the conflict, and with its ‘post-conflict’ transformation, from within Britain have been limited, lacking, frequently problematic, often troubled, in ways that are not fully grasped or considered.

Some impacts of the conflict ‘in and about Northern Ireland’¹ upon Britain may be signalled by some stark figures. The military deployment of British armed forces, known officially as Operation Banner, lasted thirty-eight years, from 14 August 1969 to 31 July 2007. One of the British Army’s most senior officers during that period, General Sir Mike Jackson, has described it as ‘one of the most important campaigns ever fought by the British Army and its fellow Services ... the longest to date [and] one of the very few waged on British soil’.² Over 250,000 Regular Army soldiers served in Northern Ireland during the campaign, with a peak deployment of 28,000 at the peak of the campaign during the summer of 1972.³ A total of 1,441 members of the UK’s armed forces died ‘as a result of operations in Northern Ireland [NI] or ... Irish Terrorism ... outside of NI’, of whom 874 were members of the Regular Army and other services (excluding regiments recruited from Northern Ireland); of these, 507 died due to ‘Terrorist action’ and 367 from other causes.⁴ A further 6,307 military personnel were injured.⁵ The British Army was responsible for killing 301 people during the conflict, of whom 158 were civilians, all but twenty of them Irish Catholics, and 104 were members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA).⁶ Between 1973 and 1997, the PIRA’s bombing campaign in England

resulted in over 500 recorded incidents in which 115 people were killed and 2,134 people were injured – often seriously – many of whom were civilians.⁷ In total, nearly 17 per cent of all those who died in the conflict were from Great Britain, and ‘many more have been affected including relatives, friends and colleagues of the dead and injured, witnesses of incidents, those who have been psychologically affected, and members of the emergency services’.⁸ Further human costs of the conflict can be discerned in figures relating to the Prevention of Terrorism Acts (1974, 1978), which gave the British police emergency powers of arrest, detention and exclusion under which more than 55,000 people had been interviewed by the mid 1980s and 6,932 people were detained between 1974 and 1990.⁹

There has been relatively little systematic research to date addressing these impacts, or exploring the complex legacies and memories of the Northern Ireland Troubles in Great Britain. Initiatives in Britain to engage with them in the context of the Irish peace process have been piecemeal and fragmented. Whilst there is a widely expressed sense of relief that the violent conflict appears largely over, nonetheless, for both the political elites and the wider public, Northern Ireland, in both its historical and contemporary settings, remains viewed as ‘a place apart’, with a lack of salience for British politics, society and the wider culture more generally.¹⁰ Indeed, according to Catterall and MacDougall, there has been ‘considerable uncertainty in [British] electors’ minds as to whether Northern Ireland was actually part of the United Kingdom’.¹¹

This should not be viewed as altogether surprising, given that both during the Troubles and prior to them during the Stormont era of devolved government, British attitudes often reflected embarrassment, indifference and a deep-rooted desire to keep Northern Ireland at arm’s length, to ‘quarantine’ the problems associated with the conflict (see the chapters by Dixon (3) and Hopkins (4) in this volume). Indeed, from 1921 until 1972, Northern Ireland was governed with minimal engagement from Westminster; as Bloomfield has argued, ‘perversely, the United Kingdom Government was arguably less well-informed about developments in this patch of its own territory than it was about the more remote dominions and even many foreign countries’.¹² Northern Ireland was understood by many as ‘an intrusion’ in British politics, ‘despite continued efforts on the part of successive Governments to keep it off the agenda’.¹³ In keeping with the political elite, there is only patchy evidence that British public opinion was any more likely to engage with the problems of Northern Ireland and there has been little sign of willingness to undertake a process of critical self-reflection regarding the role of

the British State (and its armed services) in the conflict (see the chapters by Newsinger (1) and Bell (5)).

This has been in sharp contrast to the position in Northern Ireland itself, where efforts to discuss the contested past have been a regular, and fundamental, aspect of the contemporary political discourse since the start of the peace process in 1993–94 and the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement of 1998. This has occurred in terms of UK government-sponsored endeavours, such as the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past (2009), or the Haass/O’Sullivan negotiations (2013). However, it has also been a significant part of civil society’s engagement in shaping the historical narratives of the conflict. These wide-ranging debates and initiatives have encompassed collective memories, life-storytelling, commemorative practices, theatre and performance, oral history projects and myriad others. With respect to Northern Ireland itself, academic treatments of the social, political, cultural and psychological legacies of conflict have also proliferated in this period.¹⁴ The state-sponsored attempts at ‘dealing with the past’ have tended to become highly politicised and partisan encounters, despite the best efforts to ensure that consultation is meaningful and broadly conceived. Despite the tentative, and thus far unimplemented, agreement signed at Stormont House in 2014, there is no settled consensus regarding how best to take this work forward in a spirit of post-conflict peace building.

Arguably, one of the reasons for this has been the tendency for the UK State implicitly or explicitly to deny its role and activities as a protagonist in the conflict. Consequently its status and function throughout has been characterised by ambiguity. Should it be interpreted as essentially an ‘insider’, the sovereign power in the territory, fighting a determined insurrection by ‘terrorists’? Or was it instead really an ‘outsider’, keeping the peace between two antagonistic national-religious-ethnic communities, trying to act as a ‘neutral arbiter’ and ‘honest broker’, encouraging the ‘moderate silent majority’ who, it was hoped, would be willing to share power under a renewed devolved administration in Belfast? This ambivalence has suited the purposes of Westminster policy makers (from both major parties), who could portray their Northern Ireland policies in terms that represented a careful balancing act. However, it may be argued that this uncertainty has ultimately been damaging for British popular understanding of the conflict and, specifically, of the role in it of the British State. It has also led to confusion and disagreement within popular understandings in Great Britain regarding the nature of the ‘peace process’ in Northern Ireland. Has this involved an appeasement of terrorism, with Irish republicans now enjoying genuine power in the devolved government in Belfast? Does it represent a clear victory

for the State, given that Northern Ireland remains part of the UK and the insurgency has been contained, or even defeated? Or might it represent a resolution of historical enmities, enabling a lasting reconciliation ‘between the peoples of both islands’, as envisaged in the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 (and perhaps symbolised by the Queen’s handshake with the Deputy First Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive, former PIRA leader Martin McGuinness, in 2012)?¹⁵

Some civil society initiatives in Britain have engaged constructively with the legacies of the conflict and made some headway in terms of personal healing and reconciliation (see, for example, Lelourec’s chapter 18 analysing the aftermath of the Warrington bomb of 1993). Arguably, however, they have done so despite the ambiguity and neglect at the heart of the British State’s response, and at least in part because they have been able to circumnavigate the central problem of its political responsibility and accountability. It might be said that the conflict was ‘intellectually interned’ in Britain, with few among the political elite or the mass of the British public deciding to engage with either the historical context or the lived experience of the violent conflict.

For victims/survivors caught up in the violence, as well as the tens of thousands of British service personnel with direct experience of the conflict, this luxury of indifference was simply not available as an option (see the testimonies of Aubertin (chapter 2), McMahon (chapter 6), Bowman (chapter 19) and Berry (chapter 23) in this volume). For political activists motivated to intervene in the conflict, it was also true that Northern Ireland became a significant cause in British political life (see the chapters by Renwick (8), O’Halloran (9), Rossiter (11) and Parkin (12)); though this was always a minority view.

However, in the representation of Northern Ireland as an incomprehensible place (what Mary Hickman terms the ‘othering’ of Ireland¹⁶), official discourses arguably helped to promote a ‘turning away’ from the problem in the British population at large. Ex-Prime Minister Edward Heath lamented in 1985: ‘I confess I have always found the Irish, all of them, extremely difficult to understand.’¹⁷ On the Labour side, similar views were expressed by ex-Prime Minister Harold Wilson: ‘any politician who wants to be involved with Ulster needs their head examining’.¹⁸ This was aided by mainstream media reporting (see Baker and McLaughlin (chapter 13), Pettigrew (chapter 16)) which tended to replicate the lack of deep-seated engagement (with some honourable exceptions such as Peter Taylor’s consistently ground-breaking documentaries), or actively reproduced anti-Irish racism (Finch (chapter 10), Casey (chapter 15)). Consistent opinion polls showing a majority in favour of British withdrawal are open to conflicting interpretations

(see Bell (chapter 5), Dixon (chapter 3), Renwick (chapter 8)) and did not necessarily represent a principled anti-colonial or anti-imperialist political stance, but also reflected sentiments of indifference, embarrassment and unease at the ongoing violence.

By contrast, in the post-Agreement era there has been a mixture of relief that the conflict appears to be 'over', and also impatience with any groups in Northern Ireland who might be accused of 'dragging politics back into the past'. There are even some British politicians and officials from the New Labour era who have argued that the Northern Ireland peace process is a 'model for export'.¹⁹ Although the Blair administration did prioritise policy towards Northern Ireland in a fashion that was not true for many of its predecessors, and has not been the case for its successors, nonetheless this has been accompanied by a misplaced confidence, even hubris. The peace process has sometimes been portrayed as a totemic and unique achievement, an incontrovertible example of a successful understanding of how to defuse an insurgency, or handle terrorist challenges. This simplistic approach has not been supported by very much genuine engagement with the ongoing legacies of the conflict, nor the continuing elements of instability and sectarianism that still characterise political relations in Northern Ireland. 'Bringing in the extremes' or 'talking to terrorists'²⁰ has become a mantra in British rhetoric, but it masks a vacuum in serious efforts to reflect critically upon the UK State's role in the conflict.

Switzer and Graham identify a type of 'memorial agnosticism' on behalf of the UK State.²¹ This is not simply about a cultural and political amnesia with regard to the history of the British State's coercion and neglect in Northern Ireland (the Saville Inquiry into 'Bloody Sunday' and the apology of the Prime Minister David Cameron in its wake, suggest that there is some belated willingness to face up to the realities of at least some specific, and egregious, instances of British Army malfeasance). It is also about a range of unresolved (and sometimes unaddressed) issues that open up important questions concerning the wider relationship between the British people and their own State (and its understanding of its imperial history; see the chapters by Newsinger (1) and Armstrong (22)). This is one reason why the silences (and, latterly, some of the noise) that characterise British attitudes towards the legacies of conflict are of wider import. The present volume hopes to stimulate, through the prism of Northern Ireland, debate regarding the wider character of this relationship.

Central to any critical consideration of this matter must be the ideological strategies of the British State, deployed in what the then Prime Minister Edward Heath in 1972 famously referred to as the 'propaganda

war',²² to construct common sense understandings of the conflict and its history, to render the coercive and frequently illegal violence of British armed forces in Ireland effectively invisible within British popular narratives and to marginalise or discredit oppositional voices in Britain. Ideologically, the conflict was framed within official discourse as a problem exclusively of Irish violence. This was constructed either as inter-ethnic conflict between the 'two tribes' which required intervention by the peace-making British 'honest broker', or more insistently as irrational republican 'terrorism' by criminals which required the reassertion of law and order through police work and criminal justice supported by the military. This framing exerted hegemonic pressure on the ways in which the conflict could be talked about, represented and understood with legitimacy (whilst simultaneously reasserting the State as sole arbiter of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence).

The efficacy of such framing stems partly from the deep historical roots of British popular memory, in which the deployment of Britain's armed forces is represented (as Baker and McLaughlin (chapter 13) argue in this volume), in the terms of a 'national narrative' and its versions of Britishness, as essentially benign, just and measured in response to threats by various kinds of evil-doers to British national interests, national security and 'our way of life'.²³ For many people in Britain, constructions of this kind made meaningful and affective sense in a context where bomb and gun attacks by the PIRA introduced violent death, fear and multiple disruptions to socio-economic activity and everyday life into the towns and cities of England from 1973 to 1997. The national consensus shaped by this hegemonic narrative was structured by a set of simple binary equivalences – British/Irish, benign/evil, law and order/terrorism – that polarised the field of public discourse and debate, instituted demands for conformity and 'loyalty' and raised the risks of dissidence by demonising alternative voices and perspectives (see Hill's chapter 17).

While this kind of discursive construction is familiar in more recent times from President George W. Bush's so-called 'war on terror' following the 9/11 attacks on the USA, it has a longer genealogy in British (and 'Western') counter-insurgency strategies deployed in response to anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the twentieth century (including the Irish War of Independence 1919–21).²⁴ Continuities in personnel as well as in strategies and techniques link the British Army in 'Ulster' to its post-1945 campaigns in Malaya, Cyprus, Kenya and Aden (as Renwick (chapter 8) and Finch (chapter 10) argue in this volume). However, these continuities tended to be obscured in the British State's ideological management of its withdrawal from Empire, largely

completed by 1970, which was the year when the Army's relations with Northern nationalists broke down in rioting, the Falls Road curfew and the first armed exchanges with both branches of the IRA. Whilst British popular imperialism began to wane during the 1960s, anti-imperialism – or even its less forthright meshing with liberal humanitarian opposition to 'what is being done in our name', of the kind that flourished in the Peace With Ireland Council of 1920²⁵ – never inspired a sizable popular mobilisation for British withdrawal from the North of Ireland.

The State's management of decolonisation, and its framing of the Northern Ireland conflict as an 'internal' matter and decidedly not an anti-colonial struggle, were further underpinned by systematic practices to hide from public knowledge the routine use of extra-judicial killing, torture and mass-incarceration of civilian populations in 1950s Malaya and Kenya.²⁶ These have included concealment of the very existence of State archives and documentation, revealed only in 2011 during a successful legal case brought by Kenyan former detainees against the British State, which has established the basis in international human rights legislation for further legal actions concerning crimes committed by British colonial authorities.²⁷ The investigation of systematic human rights abuses and their concealment by the State in the colonial era is throwing light upon and setting precedents for public scrutiny of these practices in relation to matters of truth and justice in Northern Ireland²⁸ (and, as Baker and McLaughlin argue in chapter 13, with respect to recent deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq as well).

This hegemonic instituting of a legitimacy national narrative, with its accompanying polarisations, coercions and silences, framed the Northern Ireland conflict in ways that secured broad popular tolerance for British military involvement and wider counter-insurgency measures undertaken by the State. Even so, the Troubles was never a popular war in the sense that, say, the Falklands expedition was, with its popular mobilisations of support and its celebrations of the Task Force and its 'victory', that framed the grieving for its loss of life. In contrast, the conduct of the Irish war, sustained over decades rather than days, generated unease and anxiety, criticism and resistance on an altogether larger scale.²⁹ In the early years of the deployment, as Paul Dixon argues in this volume (chapter 3) and elsewhere, it held out the prospect that a 'populist movement for withdrawal ... might emerge' in response to the first deaths of soldiers;³⁰ and as chapters in Part II of the book demonstrate, it met with serious, committed political opposition within Britain throughout the 1970s and 1980s, by the Troops Out Movement, elements within the Labour movement and the socialist Left, and a range of activist groups and campaigns motivated by anti-imperialist and/or

feminist politics as well as concerns about human rights abuses. As chapters in Part III of the book make clear, dissenting voices and practices contesting the national narrative and policies of the State also materialised in the cultural sphere as writers (see Murray, chapter 14 and Casey, chapter 15), film-makers (Hill, chapter 17), broadcasters and journalists (Pettigrew, chapter 16) fought to keep open spaces where more nuanced and complex understandings, as well as directly oppositional narratives, could be produced and circulated. In a variety of ways, these counter-narratives were grounded on a defence of principles – justice and fairness, universal and inalienable human rights, democratic pluralism, national self-determination, solidarity with the oppressed – that were considered to be violated or placed in jeopardy as a result of the British State's conduct of the conflict.

While hegemonic discourse stemming from the State has had to shift, if ambivalently, to accommodate the new political landscape of the peace process (as discussed earlier), the wider field of public representations of the conflict in Britain – now a terrain of memory – has to a significant extent remained frozen in the polarised, antagonistic forms of wartime. This reproduction of conflict-era narratives, stances and emotions into the time after, commonly referred to as 'post-conflict' or 'transitional', is a central concern in wider debates about 'conflict resolution', 'peace building' and 'conflict transformation'.³¹ Far from being over and done with – as many people in Britain think of the Irish Troubles since the 1998 Agreement and the destruction of PIRA's arsenal in 2005 – 'the past' continues to make its presence felt long afterwards, influencing and 'living on' into the time of peace. Indeed, the problem of 'the past' constitutes the terrain on which such efforts towards any future-oriented remaking of politics, social relations and cultural worlds damaged by political violence must work. 'Dealing with the past', as this issue has come to be known,³² requires engagement with the legacies of conflict that take the form of unresolved questions of truth and justice; polarised understandings, feelings and identities of those involved and affected; and the 'memory wars' through which competing claims about the causes of, and responsibilities for, the conflict are expressed, clash and may enter into dialogue.³³

According to Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 'The politics of war memory and commemoration is precisely the struggle of different groups to give public articulation to, and hence gain recognition for, certain memories and the narratives within which they are structured.'³⁴ The history of any particular struggle, they suggest, may be traced through analysis of the relations between 'those memories which are publicly articulated, and ... those which have been privatized, fragmented or repressed'.³⁵

A key question for ‘post-conflict’ societies, then, is whether it is possible to create a public culture committed to engaging with the ‘present past’ in ways that enable the articulation, critical exploration and wider recognition of these privatised memories and silenced experiences. In Northern Ireland, over two decades since the paramilitary ceasefires that launched the peace process, considerable work has gone into building a more democratic, pluralist public culture open to the telling of – and listening to – narratives of the conflict across a diverse range of experiences, promoting historical reflection, dialogue and exchange about the past, and enabling unrecognised effects of the conflict to be acknowledged and addressed.³⁶ This has been a hugely difficult process, but nonetheless some progress may be discerned.

Great Britain, by contrast, could be described as a post-conflict society that does not recognise itself as such. Public lacunae continue to operate in ways that seal off from wider visibility and understanding the historical and current experiences of those groups and individuals most seriously affected by the Troubles. This volume addresses a number of these experiences, including those of the bereaved families of military personnel who died whilst serving in Northern Ireland – Dixon (chapter 3), Jenkins and Woodward (chapter 7), Bowman (chapter 19), Edwards (chapter 21); Irish communities, families and individuals subjected to anti-terrorist legislation, miscarriages of justice and associated anti-Irish racism – Finch (chapter 10), Murray (chapter 14), Casey (chapter 15), O’Reilly (chapter 20); the civilian victims, survivors and bereaved of IRA attacks in England – Lelourec (chapter 18), Berry (chapter 23), Combe (chapter 24); seriously injured and often traumatised ex-soldiers – Aubertin (chapter 2), McMahan (chapter 6); and republican and other political activists campaigning against British State policies in a hostile and dangerous environment – O’Halloran (chapter 9), Rossiter (chapter 11), Parkin (chapter 12). The conflict also touched many other lives in Britain, in ways that are only beginning to be noticed. For example, the Brighton-based dramatists Julie Everton and Josie Melia, researching the local impact of the IRA’s attack on the Conservative Party conference in 1984 for their play, *The Bombing of the Grand Hotel* (2015), elicited dozens of stories existing in an almost entirely privatised sphere of experience, from workers in the emergency services, hotel staff, surgeons at the local hospital, the police, the co-ordinator of the local Irish club and local councillors.³⁷ Another largely invisible historical experience – and one regrettably reproduced by this volume – is that of Northern Irish Protestant and unionist migrants in Britain during the Troubles, often (mis)recognised as simply ‘Irish’ in host communities impervious to nuanced distinctions of culture, identity and politics,

but with a marginal or problematical relationship to an ‘Irish in Britain’ community constructing itself as Catholic and nationalist.³⁸

Despite – or because of – the tendency of the British State towards silence, amnesia and denial regarding its own role in the conflict and responsibility for the conflict’s legacies, some important instances of active engagement with those legacies from grassroots organisations and groupings in Britain have emerged in the context of the peace process. These have very different motivations, as three examples demonstrate. The Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Foundation for Peace, launched in 1995 in response to the Warrington bombing two years earlier (as Lesley Lelourec explores in chapter 18 of this volume), established a permanent Peace Centre as the base for long-term undertakings in peace building. These included, from 2001, its Legacy Project ‘to identify and support people in Britain who had been affected by the conflict in and around Northern Ireland’ (subsequently widening its scope in the ‘Survivors for Peace’ programme);³⁹ research and advocacy that identified and challenged the absence of statutory support for British victims and survivors of the Troubles;⁴⁰ and an annual Peace Lecture which on 18 September 2013 brought Martin McGuinness, Sinn Féin’s Deputy First Minister in the devolved Northern Ireland Executive, to speak in Warrington. The Foundation for Peace played an important role in the development of this present volume, by supporting the participation of several contributors – Aubertin (chapter 2), McMahan (chapter 6), Bowman (chapter 19) and Berry (chapter 23) – who have benefitted from its work. (Jo Berry’s unique, important and sustained dialogue with Patrick Magee is explored in Verity Combe’s chapter 24.)

In a contrasting case, *Ireland: What Was That About?* was a small-scale research project and exhibition produced in 2011 by Eastside Community Heritage, a community history organisation in East London. This reveals ‘hidden memories and voices ... of two groups of people from Great Britain’ – British soldiers and activists from the Troops Out Movement – involved in ‘the recent political and military conflict in Northern Ireland’, presented as a ‘contested history [that] is also an attempt at mutual understanding and post-conflict reconciliation’.⁴¹ The project produced a booklet and a permanent website, and culminated in a two-day event bringing together participants (and a group of East London school students) at the Warrington Peace Centre.

A further contrasting example is that of Justice 4 the 21, a justice campaign organised by families of the twenty-one people who died in the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974 (discussed by Finch, chapter 10, Casey, chapter 15 and O’Reilly, chapter 20 in this volume), for which the Birmingham Six were wrongfully convicted and eventually

released on appeal, with no one subsequently held to account. Justice 4 the 21 engages in memorial activities to keep alive the memory of the victims and of the families' loss after more than forty years, but also campaigns for the cases to be reopened and fully investigated. As a result of the campaign, on 1 June 2016 the Birmingham and Solihull Coroner announced her decision to reopen the inquest into the deaths.⁴²

Two further general points may be made about the 'post-conflict' unlocking and challenging of hegemonic public representations of the Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain, with their lacunae and silences, and the related opening-out of polarised narratives to more complex, nuanced and diverse (if also often contested) understandings. These observations may suggest productive ways of reading this book.

Firstly, silencing must be recognised as an active process that is reproduced through modes of complicity and unwillingness to engage with voices that seek to 'break the silence', as well as by discouragement or suppression that deploys hostility, discrimination or intimidation to raise the bar of negative consequences.⁴³ It manifests in many different arenas, both private and public. Jo Berry, in her chapter 23 in this volume, recalls not being able to tell people about what had happened to her in losing her father in the Brighton bomb, because of responses that encouraged her to 'let go' of it. Similarly, Annie Bowman in her chapter 19 describes people in Britain physically turning away from her as if from a taboo when she begins to speak about the reasons for her reconciliation work in Ireland.

The public voicing of Irish republican perspectives, or views in any way supportive of them, continues to be a risky business in England today. Di Parkin's interviewees for her chapter 12, all Labour Party activists promoting dialogue with Sinn Féin in the 1980s, prefer to remain anonymous in order to conceal their political work in the past from their employers. Anecdotally, these concerns – and counter-measures for what Marie Breen Smyth has termed identity management⁴⁴ are widespread, especially among those who have or seek public positions of responsibility and accountability. A vivid example of the way political sympathy for, or engagement with, Irish republicanism during the conflict continues to provide a basis for hostility and delegitimation in British public culture can be seen in the attacks on Jeremy Corbyn during his successful campaign for the Labour Party leadership in 2015, and subsequently on Corbyn and his Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, for their 'links with the IRA' and refusal to single out republican violence for condemnation.⁴⁵ More thoughtful critics of Corbyn and McDonnell might point out that 'silencing' could also work in a different way here: they presented their position in 2015 as if, in the 1980s, they had simply

been encouraging dialogue and a ‘peace process’ with Irish republicanism *avant la lettre*. However, during the early and mid 1980s, Corbyn was unashamedly a supporter of Irish republicanism’s right to ‘resist’ British ‘oppression’.

What it takes to open up these histories in the face of such silencings – whether by political activists challenging the dominant national narrative, or victims of violence speaking out about painful emotions, or ex-soldiers speaking out against active service (Aubertin, chapter 2; Renwick, chapter 8), or young people probing their own buried family history (O’Reilly, chapter 20) – should not be under-estimated and needs to be more thoroughly understood. This volume contributes to that understanding.

Secondly, the critique and challenging of dominant narratives of the conflict, and the unlocking of binary oppositions and polarisations, does not necessarily manifest in their renunciation and the production of entirely new, alternative representations. It also, perhaps more commonly, occurs through a reworking of existing positions to render them more complex, reflective and open to engagement with the positions adopted by others, including opponents. Throughout this volume, writers deploying analysis, or polemic, or testimony, grapple with inherited positions and established understandings, revisiting and reassessing them in the light of the hindsight of twenty, thirty, forty or more years. In this sense, ‘frozen’ narratives, perhaps all too familiar to those who lived through this conflict, may be reproduced and reasserted in the pages of this book; but they do so in relation to memory-work and historical enquiry that interrogates the significance of meanings made in the past for the present moment, inviting a recasting of memory or the generating of new historical questions and interpretations.

Crucially, it is apparent that the various engagements with the histories and memories of the Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain made by many of the contributors to this book intersect with their awareness of a political context that has changed substantially since 1994, let alone 1969. Most obviously, their engagements with the legacies of the Irish conflict – or Northern Irish conflict⁴⁶ – are filtered through concerns with the effects of subsequent war and conflict involving British armed forces, notably in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the Islamophobia and repression produced by the ‘war on terror’ since 2001, and with attacks on British and other cities in the West by radical Islamist insurgents. These developments provoke renewed interest in their antecedents, as when Conservative MP David Davis criticises the strategy of the intelligence services in hindering the movements of suspected Islamist terrorists, due to ‘long-established practices in the UK, dating back to the Troubles in

Northern Ireland’;⁴⁷ when public commemoration of British war dead from recent conflicts stimulates reflection on its absence for those who died in the Troubles (Jenkins and Woodward, chapter 7), or generates new configurations of unionist memory through inclusion of the Ulster Special Constabulary at the National Memorial Arboretum (Armstrong, chapter 22); and when parallels are drawn between the climate of suspicion and fear engulfing Britain’s Muslim communities today and the situation of Irish communities during the Troubles (Murray, chapter 14; Casey, chapter 15). The contribution of women’s history to transnational feminisms and emerging interest in the history of social movements provide other political lenses through which to view resistance to the State in Britain during the Irish conflict (see Renwick, chapter 8; Rossiter, chapter 11).

This book breaks new ground in exploring the legacies of the Northern Ireland conflict in terms of individuals, political and social relationships, and communities and cultures in Britain. Holding together within a single framework the diverse experiences and understandings of the conflict in the lives of those who were engaged in the fighting, those who were bereaved, injured or otherwise directly harmed by it, and those who campaigned against it, the book investigates the ways in which people in Britain have lived with, responded to and engaged with (or *refused* to engage with) the conflict, in the context of contested political narratives produced by the State and its opponents.

Our intention is to establish a new field of enquiry, generating and setting an agenda for further research and debate. The book, then, has four main aims: to investigate the history of responses to, engagements with and memories of the Northern Irish conflict in Britain; to explore absences and weaknesses or silences in this history; to promote a wider academic and public debate in Britain concerning the significance of this history, and the lessons to be learned from the post-conflict efforts to ‘deal with the past’ in Northern Ireland; and to provoke reflection on the significance of opening up hitherto unexamined histories and memories of the Troubles, and the ways in which ongoing conflicts between competing understandings of the past might be addressed and negotiated. It does not claim to be a comprehensive or exhaustive study, and invites consideration of its own silences and absences.

The book consists of twenty-four chapters by authors working on a wide range of related themes from a diverse range of disciplinary perspectives – social, political and cultural history; politics; media, film and cultural studies; law; literature; performing arts; sociology; peace studies – that are more commonly kept separate in discipline-specific debates. Unusually, the book also includes the voices of political

activists, writers and artists, as well as individuals personally affected by the Troubles, writing in forms of memoir, testimony, oral history and reflective essay, that enter into dialogue with analytical inquiry.

The chapters are organised in four thematic sections. Part I addresses perspectives associated with the British State (by no means an undifferentiated entity), and explores differences and tensions in outlook and understanding articulated across a range of political and military voices, from prime ministers to the families of British soldiers. Part II investigates anti-State activism and traces a hidden history of organisations and campaigns – from the Troops Out Movement and Sinn Féin Britain to feminist groupings and the Labour movement – through the voices and analyses of former activists. Part III explores cultural representations of the Troubles in Britain, in readings of news reportage, imaginative fiction and film from the conflict era that analyse their textual construction and contestation of meaning, and reflect on the significance of these texts from vantage points within post-conflict culture. Part IV considers a range of questions relating to memory, peace building and ‘dealing with the past’ in Britain, and explores a number of ways in which those affected by the Northern Ireland conflict have worked to transform its painful and divided legacies, whilst reflecting on the difficulties and continuing contestations that are necessarily encountered in any such endeavour. More than twenty years since the ceasefires of 1994, and with the fiftieth anniversary of the civil rights marches that triggered the conflict due to fall in 2018, we believe this to be a timely initiative.

Notes

- 1 This phrase is used by the Healing Through Remembering organisation. See www.healingthroughremembering.org (Accessed 19 December 2015).
- 2 Foreword to Ministry of Defence, *Operation Banner: An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland*, Army Code No. 71842 (London: MoD, July 2006).
- 3 Ministry of Defence, *Operation Banner*, para 105.
- 4 Ministry of Defence, response to Freedom of Information request: ‘FOI Smyth 02-01-2013-160507-018 correspondence dated: 29 December 2012’. Available at www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/operation_banner_soldiers_that_d (Accessed 20 December 2015).
- 5 G. Bell (ed.), *Ireland: What Was That About?* (London: Eastside Heritage Publications, 2010), no page numbers.
- 6 D. McKittrick, S. Kelters, B. Feeney, C. Thornton and D. McVea, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2007), p. 1561.

- 7 G. McGladdery, *The Provisional IRA in England: The Bombing Campaign 1973–1997* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006). See also *The Legacy: A Study of the Needs of GB Victims and Survivors of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Warrington: Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Trust, 2003).
- 8 *The Legacy*, p. 1.
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