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**From Belfast to the Somme (and Back Again):  
Loyalist Paramilitaries, Political Song, and Reverberations of Violence**

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**Abstract:** During the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-1998), paramilitary groups were supported and sustained by a sociocultural apparatus that helped legitimise their position within the community and disseminate their political message. From the use of flags and murals, to loyalist and republican parades, working-class vernacular culture revealed who was in control of various districts within the Province. For many working-class Protestants, loyalist songs were a key component of this culture, connecting the past and the present. Unlike the better-known marching band scene, which is a huge public spectacle, the loyalist song scene is much more private. Performed in a closed setting, within local bars and clubs, loyalist songs are reproduced for internal consumption rather than outward expression. Yet, in addition to celebrating a particular loyalist culture, such songs also serve an important function in authenticating and legitimising paramilitary groups, connecting them to older organisations, whose legacy they draw upon. This paper focuses on one such song, exploring how 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' is used to connect the Ulster Volunteer Force of the 1960s onwards, with the 1913 organisation of the same name. In so doing, the paper attempts to illustrate the political utility of song and how songs can be used to launder and legitimise conflict, as well as those engaged in political violence.

**Keywords:** Political Song, Northern Ireland, Conflict, Memory, Reverberation

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On Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2018, the First World War Ancre Somme Association unveiled its statue of Private Billy McFadzean in his birthplace of Lurgan, Northern Ireland. The town's centre is geographically divided between an Irish nationalist north, and a British unionist south, and, walking past the offices of local unionist politicians, one could see the event heavily advertised in their windows, underlining that this was something with which they sought to be associated. Not long after the proceedings began, John McFadzean, Billy McFadzean's great nephew approached me.<sup>1</sup> He was wearing a baseball cap; political differences with the event's organisers meant he didn't want anyone to know he was there. It felt strange to be standing with this relative, unbeknownst to everyone else, while those gathered there celebrated, commemorated, and co-opted his ancestor. Shortly after the event started, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Arlene Foster showed up, having just returned from Brexit negotiations in Brussels, and was given a seat with the other dignitaries on the elevated dais.

The event was cordoned off by the police and, while people from the Irish nationalist side of Lurgan could walk down to take part in it—many of their relatives having been killed in the First World War, too—the whole event had been so completely dominated by the DUP, and by the unionist community more generally, so as to be conspicuously partisan. This was starkly—and darkly—

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<sup>1</sup> All fieldwork and interviews were conducted by Millar.

illustrated by the sight of sniffer dogs and armed police sifting through rubbish bins and dismantling lampposts in search of possible explosives planted by ‘dissident republicans’<sup>2</sup> who retain a strong presence in the town. After a series of speeches and prayers, and just as the statue was being unveiled, a hush fell over the crowd and a local loyalist singer performed ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’.

**Figure 1. Photograph of Loyalist Singer in Lurgan, Northern Ireland. Photograph by Millar.**

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During Northern Ireland’s ‘Troubles’ (1968-1998), paramilitary groups were supported and sustained by a sociocultural apparatus that helped legitimise their position within the community and disseminate their political message.<sup>3</sup> From flags and murals to loyalist and republican parades, working-class vernacular culture revealed who was in control of various districts within Northern Ireland. For many working-class Protestants,<sup>4</sup> loyalist songs were, and continue to be, a key component of this culture, connecting the past and the present. Unlike the better-known marching band scene, which is a huge public spectacle, and occasional ceremonial events, like the one described in the opening vignette, the loyalist song scene is usually much more private. Performed in a closed setting, within local pubs and social clubs, loyalist songs are reproduced for internal consumption rather than outward expression. Such sites are less ritualistic and scripted than parades, offering more agency to musicians and audiences, and allowing for more intimate processes of both sociality and othering. Crucially, loyalist songs also serve an important function in authenticating and legitimising Protestant paramilitary groups, connecting them to older organisations whose legacy they continue to draw upon.

This article traces the cultural biography of ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ and the reverberations where the song has been performed and ‘replayed’ to explore how loyalist culture brokers connect the 1912 Ulster Volunteers—many of whom fought and died at the Battle of the Somme—with the 1966 paramilitary group of the same name. Although musicians and audiences have used the song to create a direct historical connection to the past, examining these reverberations

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘dissident republican’ refers to those who continue to wage a paramilitary campaign against the British state and includes organisations such as the New IRA and the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA). However, there are republican groups that do not support the Good Friday Agreement politically, yet honour the decision of the electorate to move beyond violence. For more on dissident republicanism, see McGlinchey 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Such social apparatus existed within both loyalist and republican communities. For more on the projection of Irish republicanism through music and political song during the Troubles, see Millar 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Both unionists and loyalists positively identify with the United Kingdom and support Northern Ireland’s continued position within this political union. Loyalism is a subgroup within unionism and, historically, the key distinction between the two has been in their approach to ‘defending the union’. In the words of one loyalist research participant, ‘a unionist is somebody who wants to remain a part of the union, a loyalist is a more extreme version of a unionist who would either be or support the use of paramilitary actions to defend unionism’ (Sam). In contemporary media reporting, the term ‘loyalist’ is often used as a pejorative and there is a strong class dimension between the two terms, with loyalists being almost exclusively working class, and unionists middle class. This class dimension is explored later in the article. For more on the two traditions within unionist political culture, see Todd 1987.

challenges the linearity that is assumed in the mobilisation of memory. ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ allows us to address the active role songwriters and musicians take as ‘memory activists’ (Gluck 2007) in the process, but also how such agency is disrupted by the power of songs themselves. It is this inter-subjective relationship between artists, spaces, and songs across time and space, as well its relative unpredictability and multimodality that allows these reverberations to be forces of expectation and possibility.

### Reverberations of Violence and the Power of Songs

The concept of echo has been employed widely to articulate legacies of war and political violence.<sup>5</sup> In an analytical sense, echoes have been connected to processes of ‘haunting’ (Derrida 1993), and the inescapability of past atrocities that appear and disappear in the present like ghostly figures through memories, storytelling, objects, and ruins (see for instance Papadakis 2005; Emcke 2007; Navarro-Yashin 2009; Nagle 2018). But hauntological analyses have also been extended to cases in which echoes are studied as acoustic and musical products. Reflecting on Steve Reich’s 1966 composition ‘Come Out’, and its connections to police violence, racism and civil rights, Vallee (2017: 101-102) writes that, ‘[e]choes are not representations of a sound that is absent, but rather a haunted extension of the strike between bodies dwelling within the complexity of those extensions and relations. In echo, we are in the presence of the strike that made its sound resonate, but in an uneasy distance from its source’.

While echo involves an—albeit uneasy—distance from an original source, reverberation is characterised by a prolongation of sound that renders such distinction less perceivable. It is for this *indistinguishability* that we choose to deploy ‘reverberation’ over ‘echo’ to examine how the past is (re)used and appropriated through cultural reproduction in the present. In doing so, we align with work documenting the continuum of violence in war and peace by tracing interconnections between symbolic, structural, and political violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Arts, and music in particular, play a crucial role in facilitating the construction of the self and simultaneously legitimising the exclusion of others and processes of othering (Baker 2013). Music, therefore, can become a tool of symbolic violence in the present to legitimise past acts of violence. In other cases, songs of the past can be employed as symbolic capital to justify physical violence and hatred in the present. What we describe here are both socio-cultural connections between past and present, but also disconnections and disjunctures between the purpose of an original act (in this case a song) and its current meaning.

It is this distortion and ‘muffling’ through repetition that Adi Kuntsman highlights as important analytical considerations in the use of ‘reverberation’. Applying it to a different context, Kuntsman (2012) conceptualises through ‘reverberation’ continuities of violence and hatred in and out of cyberspace especially with reference to the Israel-Palestine conflict. She traces the affective terrains of

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<sup>5</sup> The term has also been used by performers within the loyalist song scene itself. The loyalist group Platoon, discussed later in the article, recorded an album called *Echoes of the Somme*, which contains a song titled ‘From the Road to the Somme’, which inspired the title of this article.

political discourse and how such affective interactions are shaped by and shape broader political structures through circulations of texts, images, and sounds. However, there is no linearity in these processes, and the distancing between an original sign(al) and its reverberated versions allows for and often presupposes slight or significant alterations and levels of intensification. As such, she describes the concept of reverberation as ‘allow[ing] us not only to follow the circulation of texts and feelings, but also to trace and open up processes of change, resistance or reconciliation, in the face of affective economies of mediated violence’ (ibid.2).

While Kuntsman is predominantly preoccupied with reverberations across different sites, digital and non-digital, we are mainly here concerned with the temporal dimension of reverberations and how to trace that through an anthropological and ethnomusicological analysis of historical and social memory. In doing so, we examine how and why, unlike other songs that become buried under a collective amnesia and deafening silence, ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ is remembered and ‘replayed’ across time. We also examine the contexts and spaces in which this song re-emerges and is re-enacted. To take an interesting analysis of acoustics to a metaphorical level, it is not only spaces that produce sound but also sound that creates space. In past times, there was a perception that reverberation was purely a quality of space. However, as Stoichiță (2013: 582) posits ‘[i]t is now possible to tweak sound waves to alter their indexes of spatiality. This is how echo and reverberation can effectively suggest spaces which do not actually exist in the physical sense (they can only be heard, not seen or touched)’. Reverberations, therefore, are not only produced in particular spatialities but also produce and link particular spaces, allowing us to trace connections between different ‘soundscapes’ (Tagg 2006).

The appropriation of the past in political agendas for the legitimisation of state narratives, community mobilisation, or social reproduction becomes a powerful practice in contexts of conflict, and social and political violence. In the context of loyalism in Northern Ireland, musical parades have been analysed for their centrality in political ritual, performance, and the embodiment of tradition (Jarman 1997; Bryan 2000; Ramsey 2011; Blake 2019). Other commemorations and commemorative events also become the cultural sites for the (re)production of social memory and division (Radford 2004; Grayson and McGarry 2016; Hinson 2018), and operate both as acts of compliance with and contestation against the ‘haunting’ effects of the past (Evershed, 2018). We build on such analyses, but apply a different analytical lens, informed by ethnomusicological analysis and fieldwork, arguing that songs and sound performed outside such public-facing events are also an integral and crucial part of these political and affective landscapes. As such, a historical and ethnographic analysis of songs and performance ‘offstage’ (Scott 1985) offers further explanations of how political identities are enacted and constructed, and how violence and ‘structures of feelings’ (Williams 1977) are ignited or suppressed.

We also seek to highlight the agentive elements of reverberation as a metaphor, and the active role of musicians as cultural and memory brokers. In a process of socio-cultural poiesis, loyalist musicians are actively involved in the appropriation and reintroduction of songs that are employed to

convey new narratives on the past and related political agendas. At the same time, such agency should not be over-emphasised. As Catherine Baker (2013: 20-21) argues in the case of Former Yugoslavia, the role of musicians in inflicting actual or symbolic violence should not be generalised, as musicians are not a homogenous, one-dimensional community. Some of them, for instance, find the space through performance and repetition to question or even fully resist the divisive use of songs. The agency of musicians is also partially hampered by ‘the power of songs’ themselves. As will be demonstrated, songs such as ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ are deemed to carry an ‘essence’ that overpowers aesthetic choices and creates ethical dilemmas for musicians. It is in these moments new possibilities of cultural interpretation may emerge and shift.

### Setting the Scene

The composition and performance of loyalist songs has a long history in Ireland and one that continues to be invoked within the contemporary loyalist music scene. Dowling notes how twentieth century loyalist songs drew on a template of songs established during the eighteenth century, in their melodies, structures, and lyrical devices (2009:3). During the early years of the Troubles, loyalist songs were disseminated through loyalist newspapers and songbooks, before the proliferation of affordable recording equipment enabled for the production of LPs, tape cassettes, and CDs. Presently, such songs are most readily accessed online via YouTube and SoundCloud, as well as online radio stations such as Ulster-Scot FM.

Rolston argues that loyalist songs both ‘provide a window into the mentality of loyalism’ and ‘give people the terms in which to articulate and so experience their emotions’ (1999:53;45). In order to fully understand such songs, Rolston challenges the reader to imagine themselves ‘as a loyalist in a crowded, smoky loyalist club with good friends and lots of drink’ when listening to such songs, arguing ‘[o]nly then can the power of the song be understood’ (Rolston, 1999:30).

Fieldwork for this article was conducted in circumstances similar to those set out above, between May 2018 and February 2020. This included attending performances in loyalist pubs and social clubs in Belfast, Londonderry, Lurgan, and Monkstown. Millar established contact with loyalist musicians and culture brokers through gatekeepers in two Belfast-based NGOs. After this, he asked for, and was given, warm introductions with other individuals identified as prominent taste-makers via participant observation, which took place in loyalist pubs and social clubs, as well as online through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Soundcloud, where many loyalist musicians have a presence. Those interviewed included eight loyalist singers and culture brokers, as well as two of Billy McFadzean’s descendants. Participants spoke for as long as they wished during semi-structured interviews that lasted between one and three hours. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and all participants have been anonymised.

In the next sections, we outline the historical context surrounding ‘The Ballad of Billy

McFadzean' and its titular figure. We trace its multiple reverberations, historically, in order to unravel how the song has been reinterpreted and reconstituted in meaning throughout the years. We also follow its use within the contemporary loyalist song scene to demonstrate that such reinterpretation has been far from unanimous or linear, and instead involves multiple processes of contestation and debate both within and outside loyalism.

### A United Kingdom

Following centuries of revolt against colonial England, the Kingdom of Ireland entered into a political union with Great Britain in 1801. The move was driven by economic and political elites who hoped that closer union would prevent further rebellions. Yet this was ultimately unsuccessful. More effective than the three failed armed rebellions mounted by Irish republicans during the nineteenth century (in 1801, 1848, and 1867) was the political mobilization of Irish nationalists. As a constituent country of the United Kingdom, Ireland elected political representatives who took their seats alongside those from England, Scotland, and Wales in the British Parliament. In what might be called a 'confidence and supply agreement' in the political parlance of today, Irish nationalist MPs supported the British Liberal Party, lending it the required votes to form a working government. In exchange, Irish nationalist MPs obtained support for a promised Home Rule Bill, which would allow Ireland a parliament to decide its own affairs.

For those living in Ireland's northern province of Ulster, Home Rule posed an existential crisis. Ulster served as Ireland's industrial and economic base and its largest city of Belfast was much more culturally attuned to the British cities of Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester than those in agrarian Ireland. Ulster also housed the majority of Ireland's Protestant population, most of whom were the descendants of Scottish and English planters. Home Rule would cut Ulster Protestants adrift from their coreligionists in the rest of the UK, rendering them a minority in any independent Ireland.

In 1912, new parliamentary arithmetic rendered Home Rule all but inevitable and, responding to events, the Irish Unionist MP Edward Carson led the signing of the Ulster Covenant: a written pledge to prevent Home Rule, even if this meant military confrontation with the British Army. The Covenant was signed by almost half a million men and women and, in 1913, many of these signatories formed a Protestant-unionist militia named the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The Volunteers smuggled 25,000 rifles and two million rounds of ammunition from Germany into Ulster and prepared for civil war. Yet, this never came. Although the Home Rule Bill was passed, the outbreak of the First World War prevented it from being implemented. Unlike in Britain, where young men were legally obliged to join the armed forces in 1916, conscription was never implemented in Ireland. Instead, in an attempt to increase Irish recruitment into the army, 'perfidious Albion' led the Ulster Volunteers and their

nationalist equivalent (the Irish Volunteers) to believe that they would obtain mutually exclusive goals if they joined the war effort.<sup>6</sup>

As such, many of those in the UVF joined the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, which was lauded for its bravery at the Battle of the Somme. Yet it suffered catastrophic losses. Some 2,000 soldiers were killed on the first day of the battle alone—one of the highest losses of any British division from the period (Bruce, 1992:11). For Protestants in Ulster, such blood sacrifice was viewed as tangible proof of their loyalism. Yet as well as securing Ulster's position in the Union, the memory of such sacrifice was used to create a sense of indebtedness to those who 'paid the ultimate price'.

Musically, Radford (2004), Wilson (2005), and Scott (2013) point to the use of tropes in loyalist songs such as 'Daddy's Uniform', 'Our Flag', and 'The Sash My Father Wore', respectively, as demonstrating how the present generation can be manipulated by the past through metaphors of indebtedness to their forbears, which Scott describes as often being 'pushed further and further back in time so as to mythologize events' (2013:241). Yet within contemporary loyalist culture, such sacrifice is best personified by one soldier and one song in particular.

**Figure 2. Photograph of William 'Billy' McFadzean. Used with permission.**

#### Private William 'Billy' McFadzean<sup>7</sup>

Born in Lurgan, on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1895, Billy McFadzean was the son of a middle-class businessman and clerk of sessions. The family moved to Belfast and Billy was raised in the east of the city. Like many young men of the time, McFadzean joined his local unit of the UVF and, with the outbreak of war, was posted to France. On the evening before the Battle of the Somme began, McFadzean was preparing ammunition when a box of grenades fell, dislodging their safety pins. McFadzean threw himself on top of the grenades and was killed outright in the ensuing explosion. In so doing, he saved the lives of nearby members of his regiment who would otherwise have been killed. For his bravery, McFadzean was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross—Britain's highest military honour.

Following the war, McFadzean's father travelled to London to receive the award on behalf of his son. Yet in an interview with one of McFadzean's descendants, John, he explained the father's anxiety, stating:

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase 'perfidious Albion' is a pejorative used to signify the English, and later the British, state's history of deception. Its antecedents can be found as early as the medieval period, although the phrase has come in and out of fashion ever since. For a detailed account of the history of the phrase, see Schmidt 1953.

<sup>7</sup> In a Northern Irish context, the name Billy McFadzean is highly significant, drawing together William of Orange and the Scottish variant of the much more common 'McFadden' surname. Indeed, the Ulster Covenant lists only two McFadzeans compared to 348 McFaddens. By selecting this specific individual for commemoration, 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' can be said to point to a more complex notion of cultural identity than a simple British/Irish dichotomy. The authors wish to thank Reviewer 1 for this observation.



Billy's father *didn't* want his [Billy's] name to be used for any political or religious purpose, *ever*. He said he was almost embarrassed to receive the Victoria Cross because he said "look, if my son hadn't done this somebody else would have. They were all in it together and none should be held as a greater soldier or a braver soldier". He couldn't *stop* the award, but he said, "I'll keep this, but it's as a representative of *all* the guys that went off to the war".

John explained how, following the war, the local UVF issued Billy's father with a commemorative plaque, in appreciation of his son's sacrifice. Yet this was but the first of the UVF's tributes to McFadzean, which would grow to include poetry and song.

### Reforming the UVF

Between 1965 and 1966, the UVF was reformed by a shadowy group of unionist politicians to destabilise the liberalising reforms of Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O'Neill and ward off any upsurge in IRA activity accompanying the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising.<sup>8</sup> Yet the UVF's first targets were, for the most part, innocent Catholics who were murdered in lieu of IRA volunteers (Bruce, 1992:14). Indeed, although he denied the allegation (Ibid.,110), UVF leader Gusty Spence was imprisoned for his role in directing one such attack in June 1966.<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to delegitimise the newly reformed UVF, Terence O'Neil dismissed those invoking the UVF moniker in a speech to the Northern Ireland Parliament on June 30, 1966:

I flew back last night from France. The purpose of my visit there was to honour the men of the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division, many of whom were members of the authentic and original UVF. Let no one imagine there is any connection whatever between the two bodies; between men who were ready to die for their country on the fields of France, and a sordid conspiracy of criminals prepared to take up arms against unprotected fellow citizens (Bruce, 1992:14).

Limited by the confines of his Belfast jail cell, and in an effort to strengthen and legitimise the connection between the original UVF and the organisation he now led, Gusty Spence turned to poetry and song writing to help propagate the loyalist cause and cast it in a more favourable light.

In a 1995 interview with the Northern Irish radio host Bobbie Hanvey, Gusty Spence was asked about his motivation for writing such songs.

Hanvey: Back, I suppose, almost 25 years ago, Gusty, you saw a *gap* in the loyalist tradition. Because, up until then, all the Protestant people had, really, was *Orange* songs. But you supplied them with a *new* type of song, the *loyalist* song, which I suppose, if you like, would be the equivalent of the [Irish] rebel ballad.

Spence: Well, I suppose maybe that would maybe be the case . . . I engaged myself in a certain amount of amateur song writing. But the songs' situation, the poet situation, had more or less stood still. And I think poetry, and I think music, and I think songs, are very, very, very

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<sup>8</sup> There have been several conflicting accounts of the UVF's reformation and the exact players involved. For a detailed discussion of these accounts, see Novosel, 2013:15-21.

<sup>9</sup> Gusty Spence was a former British Army Soldier who had served in Cyprus. His father was a member of the original UVF (Garland, 2001:6).

important. And we really didn't have any *movement* in the song situation, or even the poetry situation, since 1912. And there was, yes, there was definitely a void there. (Spence, 1995).

Hanvey continues with specific reference to 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean', which he attributes to Gusty Spence.<sup>10</sup> However, the song's melody has a longer and more complex history. The melody sung to the earliest ancestor of Billy McFadzean is 'Loch na Garr' composed by the early-nineteenth-century art music composer Henry Bishop to a poem by Lord Byron. Indeed, the version attached to Billy McFadzean can be seen to follow the same basic outline as the first half of this tune. However, 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' shares most similarities with Scottish folk group The Corries' restyled version 'Dark Lochnagar'. Released in 1974, 'Dark Lochnagar' includes both parts of the tune as verse and chorus, and uses Byron's text. Its nostalgic, anthemic quality has made it extremely popular within the Scottish folk tradition and beyond.<sup>11</sup>

'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean'

Let me tell you a story of honour and glory  
Of a young Belfast soldier Billy McFadzean by name  
For King and for Country Young Billy died bravely  
And won the VC on the fields of the Somme.

Gone like the snowflake that melts on the river,  
Gone like the first rays of days early dawn.  
Like the foam from the fountain,  
Like the mist from the mountain,  
Young Billy McFadzean's dear life has gone.

Now Billy lies only where the red Flanders poppy,  
In wildest profusion paints the field of the brave.  
No piper recalling his deeds all forgotten,  
For Billy McFadzean has no known grave.

So let us remember that brave Ulster soldier,  
The VC he won, the young life that he gave.  
For duty demanding his courage outstanding,  
Private Billy McFadzean of the UVF.

(Lyrics transcribed by Millar).

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<sup>10</sup> Hanvey's assertion that Gusty Spence wrote the song was disputed by one loyalist singer who attributed the song to a Scottish-based performer—now deceased—named Samuel Dennistoun. However, the covert nature of the loyalist song scene, coupled with the fact that Spence and Dennistoun are both now dead, heightens the obscurity of the song's origins, which has become enveloped in its own reverberation.

<sup>11</sup> In a 1999 essay on loyalist songs, Bill Rolston states that 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' borrows the tune of an earlier Irish rebel song, 'The Ballad of James Connolly' (40), which the Wolfe Tones released as a single in 1968. However, although written before 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean', 'The Ballad of James Connolly' borrows the tune of 'Dark Lochnagar', too. When asked, none of the loyalist singers interviewed had heard 'The Ballad of James Connolly' and chalked this up to coincidence. Yet when one looks at the lyrical similarities present within other examples set out by Rolston (40), they will see just how scant some of the changes are. Rolston does not posit how such similarities occurred. If pushed, however, we would suggest that earlier loyalist songwriters must have had some familiarity with rebel songs and borrowed the tunes for their own ends, in keeping with the tune sharing that took place between cultural traditions in Northern Ireland more generally (see Valley 2008 and Cooper 2010).

The song's nostalgic quality chimes with that of Byron's original. Although not acknowledged by Spence, a closer reading of the song's lyrics reveals cross-references from two of Scotland's most popular poems. Specifically, the reference to snowflakes melting on the river is reminiscent of snow melting in the river in Robert Burns' 'Tam O' Shanter', while the rhyming of 'fountain' and 'mountain' is similar to the that used in Sir Walter Scott's 'The Lady of the Lake'. Coupled with the Scottish spelling of McFadzean, such literary influences point to loyalism's strong Scottish roots and enduring cultural connections.

'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' would go on to be recorded by numerous loyalist artists and the song is a popular feature of today's loyalist song scene. A cursory glance at *Heroes of the UVF*, produced halfway through the Troubles, illustrates how heavily loyalists were appropriating McFadzean and his UVF connections by 1982. Here, McFadzean's army portrait is reproduced alongside mention of his Victoria Cross (VC), and the battle for which he was awarded it. Left of centre is the Ulster Banner, whose six-pointed star represents the six counties of Northern Ireland,<sup>12</sup> which surround the ancient red hand of Ulster long associated with the province, which has been appropriated by virtually every loyalist paramilitary group, in particular the UVF's sister organisation the Red Hand Commando.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 3. *Heroes of the UVF* album, 1982.**

Interestingly, the UVF banner (bottom right) is not one typically associated with the UVF. Instead, it mimics the style of those carried by the Orange Order—a Protestant fraternal organisation whose members were often sympathetic to loyalist paramilitaries, some going so far as to enlist themselves. The song title 'Every Other Saturday' (top right) points to loyalism's connection to Glasgow Rangers football club,<sup>14</sup> while 'No Pope of Rome', set to the tune of the American country song 'Home on the Range', fantasizes about a Protestant utopia where there are 'no chapels to sadden my eye, no nuns and no priests, fuck your rosary beads, and every day is the 12<sup>th</sup> of July'. This illustrates the 'siege mentality' that characterises the Ulster Protestant outlook (Cooper, 2016:15), as well as the overt sectarianism present within some loyalist songs. Through such associations *Heroes of the UVF*

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<sup>12</sup> Although Northern Ireland does not have an official flag, the Ulster Banner was used by the Government of Northern Ireland between 1953 and 1972, when the Parliament was prorogued. The flag is divisive, but continues to be used to demarcate space in working-class cities and towns, as well as in rural villages across Northern Ireland. For a detailed discussion on the history and divisive use of the Ulster Banner in Northern Ireland, see Bryan, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Wilson notes that loyalists 'have taken great pride in the contribution of Irish Protestants to the political and religious culture of the United States' (2005: 194). The American bald eagle seems a clear invocation of this legacy.

<sup>14</sup> There are longstanding links between Ulster loyalism and Glasgow Rangers. The club had a strong Protestant, British unionist identity that emerged in the late nineteenth century, with their connection to Glasgow's Clyde shipyards. This intensified when the Belfast-based Harland and Wolfe established a base there in 1912—culminating in a policy of refusing to sign Catholic players—and formed part of a general climate of anti-Catholicism that stretched throughout the decade and beyond (Bruce et al., 2004: 128-129).

invokes each of the main facets of loyalism within Northern Ireland,<sup>15</sup> all of which are assembled around the central image of McFadzean. Such reverberations enable loyalists to *capture* McFadzean and are a common feature within contemporary loyalist music videos, for example, where the collocation of flags and emblems imbue their subject with what Simon McKerrell, in his own work on loyalist songs, refers to as ‘visual gravity’ (2015:622).<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 4. *Songs of Honour and Glory* songbook.**

As with *Heroes of the UVF*, *Songs of Honour and Glory* also features the crest and flag of the UVF, alongside the Ulster Banner. Published by the loyalist band Platoon in 1998, the songbook takes its name from the first line of ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’: ‘Let me tell you a story, of honour and glory’. Inside, the contents page lists ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ alongside other loyalist songs invoking the First World War—such as ‘Poppy Fields’, ‘Armagh Brigade’, and ‘Suicide Battalion’—as well as others written by Gusty Spence.

The muffling produced in these reverberations downplays the inconvenient truth that UVF membership in McFadzean’s time was neither uncommon nor controversial, compared to the latter-day UVF. Steve Bruce describes the 1913 UVF as having almost ‘universal appeal’ for Ulster Protestants—its 90,000 Volunteers comprising estate owners and the rural farmers who worked on them, as well as factory owners and inner-city labourers (1992:9). The UVF’s leadership was drawn from social elites that included ‘lords, knights, and very senior army officers’ (Ibid.,11). By comparison, the UVF of the 1960s onwards consisted of only a few hundred volunteers, most of whom were based in Belfast, were solidly working class, and had little (if any) connection to the state’s ruling elite.

### The Enemies Within

Yet perhaps the most controversial appropriation of McFadzean is by those loyalist singers who served in the loyalist paramilitary organisation depicted on the songbook’s cover. John McFadzean spoke of his first encounter with ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’, thus:

The first time I heard [the song] the last line was not ‘Billy McFadzean of the UVF’, it was a repeat of ‘his dear life has gone’. So, it was kinda nice: ‘oh, they’ve remembered Uncle Billy in a song’. Then when I saw that [*Heroes of the UVF*] I was like ‘hmmm, that doesn’t sit easy with me’. Because all of a sudden there’s an association with a terrorist paramilitary organization.

He continued by talking about how loyalist paramilitaries and their supporters have positioned themselves as the direct inheritors of McFadzean’s cause, carrying on his legacy.

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<sup>15</sup> The only major facet of loyalism not invoked here is the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). However, the reason the UVF did not namecheck their main loyalist rivals on a UVF LP seem obvious.

<sup>16</sup> Such techniques are also used in *corridos paracos*, a genre glorifying right-wing paramilitary groups in Colombia (Caro and Suavita, 2019).

I saw a video clip of a prisoner in Long Kesh<sup>17</sup> and he was singing and strumming the guitar [playing] ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’. I thought, that’s really...well, it’s disturbing [...] By him singing it, it’s almost as if it’s justification for him being in the organisation that he was in, because here’s somebody else who was in the organisation [the UVF] and, [through] that sort of attachment that he has gathered, well, we’re sort of...we can connect with each other.

The video clip John is referring to is from *The Enemies Within*, a BBC documentary which first aired in 1990 and was produced by veteran BBC Troubles correspondent Peter Taylor. The prisoner singing the song—who we refer to as ‘Sam’—was one of the UVF’s most prominent gunmen, responsible for multiple murders, who received a combined prison sentence of over 300 years. In performing the song, Sam is clearly creating a connection between the past and the present, conflating both versions of the UVF. This connection was compounded by an album Sam released in 2000, which included a performance of ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ that he recorded inside Long Kesh.

During an interview in 2019,<sup>18</sup> Sam made this connection between the past and the present explicitly, recounting an incident following the airing of *The Enemies Within* where a fellow loyalist prisoner—aggrieved at not receiving the same attention in the documentary—compared Sam’s version of ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ to another he had heard performed in a local Belfast club. The man reproached Sam, saying:

‘See that song McFadzean—you’re singing it wrong. I was up at the Liverpool Club and heard [Johnny] singing it at Christmas and you’re singing it wrong’.

Now I knew what he meant. The tune, he meant, was different. So, I got that. But I knew right away that his nose was out of joint because he wasn’t on [the documentary]. So, what I says to him was, ‘I know what you mean, I don’t sing it [to] the same tune as other people, as [Johnny]. But you see when [Johnny] has done as much for the loyalist cause as I have, he’d start to sing it from there [points to his heart] instead of from there [points to his wallet]’.

[Johnny] and I are good mates, he wouldn’t pass me [without saying hello] but [Johnny] doesn’t sing it from here [points to his heart] because he hasn’t lived it.

[...] You have somebody who can sing the song and somebody that’s lived the song.

(Interview with ‘Sam’).

Sam’s statement reinforces John’s point regarding the appropriation of Billy McFadzean, illustrating the political utility of song and how this can be used to launder and legitimise conflict, as well as those engaged in political violence. Yet, interestingly, Sam’s argument vis-à-vis his legitimacy as a loyalist singer, was repeated by Johnny (mentioned above) to another loyalist singer still further down the ladder of legitimacy.

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Long Kesh’, also referred to as ‘the H-Blocks’ and, officially, ‘Her Majesty’s Prison Maze’, was the prison in Northern Ireland which housed the vast majority incarcerated loyalist and republican paramilitaries.

<sup>18</sup> Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement (1998), Sam’s sentence was commuted and he was released from prison in 2000.

Johnny was a prominent singer in loyalism's most popular musical troupe, Platoon. The UVF leader Gusty Spence helped found the band as a way of promoting loyalist culture and was instrumental in providing them with the resources they needed—via the Shankill Activity Centre—to produce their first two albums in the 1980s. Platoon performed songs written by Spence and he appears making a propaganda statement on the power of loyalist songs on their album *Gunrunners*. More tangibly, Platoon performed regular concerts to raise money for UVF prisoners, which Cusack and McDonald allege were amongst the organisation's 'biggest fund-raising events' (1997:199). As such, although not active paramilitary fighters, Platoon could be said to have been 'involved' in the wider struggle.

In an incident involving two loyalist singers, Johnny's connection to the UVF—via his place in Platoon—was used to settle a dispute over which of the two singers' versions of the song was the most authentic or 'traditional'. One of the men on the receiving end, his bandmate 'Robert', recounted the exchange as follows:

Robert: [Johnny] hates the way [Kevin] sings McFadzean. He says it's not traditional. But I've seen us getting standing ovations for the way [Kevin] sings it. It's just a piano and a vocal . . . When [Johnny] sings it, it's completely different to the way [Kevin] sings it.

Malcolm: But who *decides* what's traditional and what's not? And how can you?

Ken: I think it's because of what's on the records. I think it's what's on the LPs.

Robert: This is the thing, see, because Kevin's not *involved* [with the UVF] - -

Malcolm: Aye, well. Yeah, I understand that.

Robert: He isn't allowed a say in what way it's sung.

Malcolm: Of course, he is.

Robert: That's what we've been told.

Malcolm: He's a fuckin professional singer.

Robert: I know that, because that's what we've been told...over the years. You can't sing it that way. [Kevin] says, "it's called interpretation. I can sing it whatever way I want to. I'm not changing the words. I'm not trying to make the song about anything different about what it was written about." He says, "I'm just singing it my way."

Here, Robert recounts how the singer of his band was told his—alternative—version of Billy McFadzean was not 'traditional' and that his lack of UVF credentials meant he was not entitled to change the song, so completely has the song been captured by the organization.

### The Power of Songs

While there is no doubt that loyalists have appropriated McFadzean, and that 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' is clearly part of a larger cultural laundering within loyalism more generally (wherein groups reach further back into the past to legitimize themselves via the original Ulster Volunteers of

1913 as opposed to the proscribed paramilitary organization of the 1960s onwards) they nevertheless respect the song, albeit on their own terms. During the same interview, two of the men spoke about ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ and how they resented it being sung alongside the more sectarian loyalist songs one might find in what is locally referred to as a ‘Sash Bash’—the name given to an event dedicated to playing overtly loyalist and, often sectarian, songs.

Ken: There’s nothing worse, for me, sometimes hearing the *historical* songs—song about the soldiers and Willie McBride, McFadzean, Green Fields of France—in a Sash Bash, then—for instance—you get ‘King Billy’s on The Wall’...it jumps...it doesn’t suit...see, to me...I don’t know, if it’s just me...

Robert: No, it’s not.

Millar: It bothers you, you mean?

Ken: It does! I go to myself, ‘it’s not the right tone...’

Robert: It’s not the right context.

Ken: Or if I’m sitting there and see the likes of ‘Erin’s Fenian Valleys’ [‘Here Lies A Soldier’] and all that comes on, it doesn’t sit right with me, sometimes. Because even though there’s maybe no Catholics in the room, to me, it just doesn’t sit [right].

Robert: It’s not right. I *fully* get where you’re coming from.

Millar: You mean because the message of one contradicts the other one?

Ken: Yeah, but even sometimes I’m sitting and some of the songs come on...there’s always a song where you go to yourself ‘it just doesn’t sit right’ . . . See if it’s like the hatred side of it...By all means, I want to sing ‘The Sash’ because it’s my culture, but say for instance it’s ‘The Famine Song’ that doesn’t sit well with me.<sup>19</sup>

Johnny, who performed at fundraisers for the UVF, spoke of ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ in similar terms, holding the song as sacrosanct because of McFadzean’s sacrifice. He talked about how he would often adapt other songs and joke with the crowd, but that he never does this with ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’. As such, the invention becomes tradition: ‘The Ballad of Billy McFadzean’ starts off as something functional, forming a connection between the UVF of 1913 and the reformed group of the 1960s onwards before itself becoming too sacrosanct to alter.

Such cultural laundering feeds into what has been dubbed a ‘culture war’ in Northern Ireland where, in the absence of intercommunal violence, the commemoration of paramilitary groups is used to continue the conflict by other means.<sup>20</sup> As a proscribed terrorist organization, the post-1960s UVF

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<sup>19</sup> The Famine Song is a satirical song that mocks the descendants of Irish Catholics who settled in Scotland in order to escape the Great Famine (1845-49). See McKerrell 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Referring to commemoration specifically, Evershed states that it has become ‘a primary site for the reassertion of Loyalist identity and a—if not the—predominant form of Loyalist cultural production and transmission’ (2018:123).

cannot legally be commemorated in public (Bryan 2018:78). However, the earlier UVF is free from such limitations. This has led to loyalists going to great lengths to connect the more modern organizations to their older equivalents.<sup>21</sup> One way that loyalists have negotiated this is through the creation of Somme Associations, many of which are populated by former post-1960s UVF volunteers and their supporters.<sup>22</sup>

Just as Gusty Spence utilized song writing to legitimize loyalism and propagate its cause, Spence used the Somme and its symbolism to teach UVF prisoners loyalist history and politics, in an attempt to help them understand why they had been incarcerated. Evershed has noted how the Somme became part of the UVF's political project as it transitioned from conflict to peace, with UVF prisoners playing a key role in establishing the first Somme associations, which have since 'drawn an increasing number of members from beyond the ranks of the UVF's former prisoners' (2018:143). This expansion of Somme associations' membership, coupled with their celebration of an event foundational to the creation of the modern United Kingdom, has allowed legitimate groups such as the DUP and the British armed forces to participate in an event organised by those with links to the illegal UVF. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Billy McFadzean has been continually invoked by such groups to facilitate their remembrance of the UVF more generally.

### Conclusion

This article began with a vignette recounting the unveiling of the Ancre Somme Association's statue of Billy McFadzean. There, a lone loyalist singer performed the 'Ballad of Billy McFadzean' in a solemn fashion as the statue was unveiled. After the event, we contacted the singer through her Facebook page and asked what motivated her to sing at the event. She replied:

I grew up in a loyalist background. As I've grown into it, I've really noticed how important it is to keep our culture alive in the likes of [these] songs. It's a way of expressing how those men felt when they had to face the [first and second world] war[s]/ troubles. And I'm so thankful for the sacrifice they gave. The Billy McFadzean unveiling was such a memorable experience, in which I took pride taking part of, for a man that was born so close to home and served for our people, it's [singing] just the purpose of keeping his memory alive. He fought for us so the least we could do is remember such a brave courageous man.

In a similar fashion, we emailed John McFadzean to ask for his thoughts on the tenor of the event and received the following reply:

Perhaps the saddest song I have ever heard was that rendition of 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean'. Sad not because of a mournful melody or sentiment written poetically into the

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<sup>21</sup> Drawing on articles published in the UVF journal *Combat* in the 1970s, Jarman shows how the organisation attempted to connect itself to an eighteenth-century Protestant militia called the Irish Volunteers (1997:217). However, he notes that such attempts were short lived.

<sup>22</sup> In an interview with the aforementioned 'Ken', he recounted an instance when, while participating in a Somme parade, one bandsman in his 20s asked 'when was the Battle of the Somme?' For an extended account of the tensions between those tradition bearers focused on the original UVF and the present-day paramilitary grouping. See Evershed, 2018.



lyrics. Sad because whoever had chosen to sing a song that applauded the UVF in 2018 could not see how abhorrent those lyrics would be to the many victims of terrorism. How would a public anthem to an Al-Qa'ida terrorist be received on the streets of the UK today? Well it just happened in Lurgan on Saturday. My sadness is due to the sad, prejudged blinkered view of life many of my fellow Norn-Irelanders have. Of all the songs that had relevance for the occasion they chose that one with the altered lyrics that acknowledge the UVF rather than the original [his] 'dear life has gone'.

Earlier, John spoke of how Billy McFadzean's father '*didn't* want his name to be used for any political or religious purpose, *ever.*' Yet the examples discussed here have shown how not only has McFadzean's *name* been used for political and religious purposes, but that his legacy has effectively been used by those associated with a latter-day terrorist organisation with which he was never involved, via a process of reverberation. 'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' has been central to this process, being used as a means to underline the UVF's ownership of McFadzean.

'The Ballad of Billy McFadzean' is clearly connected to loyalist pride. In spite of internal contestations, in performing the song, loyalists in Northern Ireland feel connected to a seismic event that shaped European history and are drawn closer into a cultural repository shared with their fellow British citizens. Crucially, unlike many other aspects of loyalist culture, this event, and their connection to it, is uncontroversial enough to celebrate publicly. Although John McFadzean dislikes and disagrees with contemporary loyalism's use of the song, through repetition and the ways in which it has reverberated, it has now become embedded in loyalist cultural repertoire and identity. While loyalism has undoubtedly curated McFadzean's memory, it has also cared for it and carried it into the present. Indeed, if not for loyal(ist) performers, Private Billy McFadzean may have remained buried in the trenches with so many of his compatriots.

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