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## **'Whatever you say, say nothing': researching memory and identity in Mid-Ulster 1945-1969**

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# 'WHATEVER YOU SAY, SAY NOTHING': RESEARCHING MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN MID-ULSTER, 1945-1969

by Anna Bryson

The influence of collective memory on political identity in Ireland has been well documented. It has particular force in Northern Ireland where there is fundamental disagreement about how and why the conflict erupted and how it should be resolved. This article outlines some of the issues encountered by an 'insider' when attempting to record and analyse the conflicting memories of a range of Protestants and Catholics who grew up in Mid-Ulster in the decades preceding the Troubles. In particular, it considers the challenges and opportunities presented by a two-pronged approach to oral history: using testimony as evidence about historical experience in the past and as evidence about historical memory – both collective and individual – in the present.

## ABSTRACT

**KEY WORDS:**  
Northern  
Ireland;  
insider;  
collective  
memory;  
individual  
memory

Although Northern Ireland is arguably 'one of the most heavily researched areas on earth',<sup>2</sup> relatively little has been written about the pre-Troubles period. A number of general histories span the period between the Second World War and the outbreak of widespread violence in 1969 but there are few micro-studies to account for the intense levels of sub-regional variation.<sup>3</sup> Rather than adding to the body of literature on political developments, I employed an oral history methodology to capture the experiences of a range of individuals who grew up in the town of Maghera in the period 1945–1969.<sup>4</sup>

At one level these interviews were designed to provide factual detail about the nature of society and politics at this time. Such evidence was processed in much the same way as any

other source – it was carefully scrutinised for internal consistency and cross-checked with a range of other primary and secondary sources. As the interviews progressed, however, I became increasingly interested in the manner in which a range of Catholics<sup>5</sup> and Protestants<sup>6</sup> presented their past.<sup>7</sup> I thus re-examined the transcripts in search of key themes which might enable me to systematically compare their accounts. The isolation of collective memory, however, did not fully represent the complexity of experiences recorded. In order to document the shadings, contradictions, and tensions within each testimony I began to examine the context in which individuals departed from established communal narratives. This paper presents some of the key findings of this research and considers the partic-



*Political Map of  
Northern Ireland,  
2004*

ular opportunities and challenges posed by this two-pronged approach to oral history research. By way of a backdrop, the first section provides a brief overview of economic, political and social developments at both regional and local level.

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Northern Ireland enjoyed an economic boom during the Second World War. Industrial employment increased by 20 per cent between 1941 and 1942 and agriculture benefited from the wartime priority given to the production of essential foods. By the mid-1950s, however, the prosperity had faded and employment generated by new enterprises provided insufficient compensation for the numbers being laid off in traditional industries. One of the main features of the Northern Ireland economy in this period was the concentration of industrial activity around Belfast and the towns of the Lagan valley and the upper Bann. By contrast, the area west of the river Bann, where Maghera is situated, was predominantly agricultural, with farms of generally less than thirty acres.

There was a range of different socio-agrarian structures within County Derry.<sup>8</sup> In the north-west of the county, sizeable farms were to be found and commercial farming was important. The south-east, by contrast, was dominated by smaller hillside farms. Although it is in the latter area, Maghera was performing relatively well at the beginning of this period. With its own railway station, an embroidery factory, a busy weekly market and close proximity to Clark's linen mill in Upperlands, it was one of two major towns within Magherafelt Rural District.

The town also benefited from post-war advances in education, housing and transport. In order to meet the requirements of the Northern Ireland Education Act (1947), separate primary and secondary schools were built for Catholics and Protestants in the 1960s. More than a dozen new housing estates were constructed between 1945 and 1969 and the increased availability of motor cars precipitated the widening of many of the town's narrow streets. By conventional measures – population growth, improved amenities and increasing educational opportunities –



*Photograph of  
Lower Main Street  
Maghera, 1956*

Maghera was not in economic decline but there was nevertheless a strong perception that the town was becoming marginalised in the post-war period. While it remained the second largest town in Magherafelt rural district, its significance relative to its larger neighbour, Magherafelt, had declined considerably by 1971. Between 1937 and 1971, Maghera's population grew by 75.1 per cent whereas Magherafelt's population more than trebled. This relatively slow growth of Maghera compared to the dramatic growth of the populations of nearby towns such as Magherafelt, and the larger provincial towns of Belfast and Derry, suggests a high level of migration from the area.

One of the main explanations for this economic marginalisation relates to transport facilities. Maghera railway station had been particularly important during the war years because of its proximity to a US army camp but, once military use ceased, goods and passenger volumes declined rapidly. Railway closures began in the early 1950s and, in October 1959, the Derry Central rail network ceased to operate. The commencement of work on a new 8.5 mile roadway on a realigned section of the Glenshane Pass in 1968 meant that motorists no longer had to negotiate the streets of Maghera en route from Belfast to Derry, with further adverse effects for the town's economy.

### RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS

Derry was one of three Northern Ireland counties that had a Catholic majority by 1961. Of the urban and rural districts within County Derry, Magherafelt Rural District had the highest

proportion of Catholics throughout this period.

The distribution of Catholics within Magherafelt rural district can be broadly traced to the original patterns of the Plantation.<sup>9</sup> Situated to the north of a central belt of Protestant settlement, the District Electoral Division of Maghera was 33 per cent Catholic in 1911, well below the average for the district as a whole.

The religious breakdown of the populations within each District Electoral Division was not provided in the census reports of 1937, 1961 or 1966 and the religious breakdown as set out in the 1971 census is unreliable because of the proportion who did not respond. Making adjustments for non-response, however, the geographer, Paul Compton, estimates that the intercommunity division in the town of Maghera in 1971 was finely balanced within the 44-55 per cent range.<sup>10</sup>

### POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

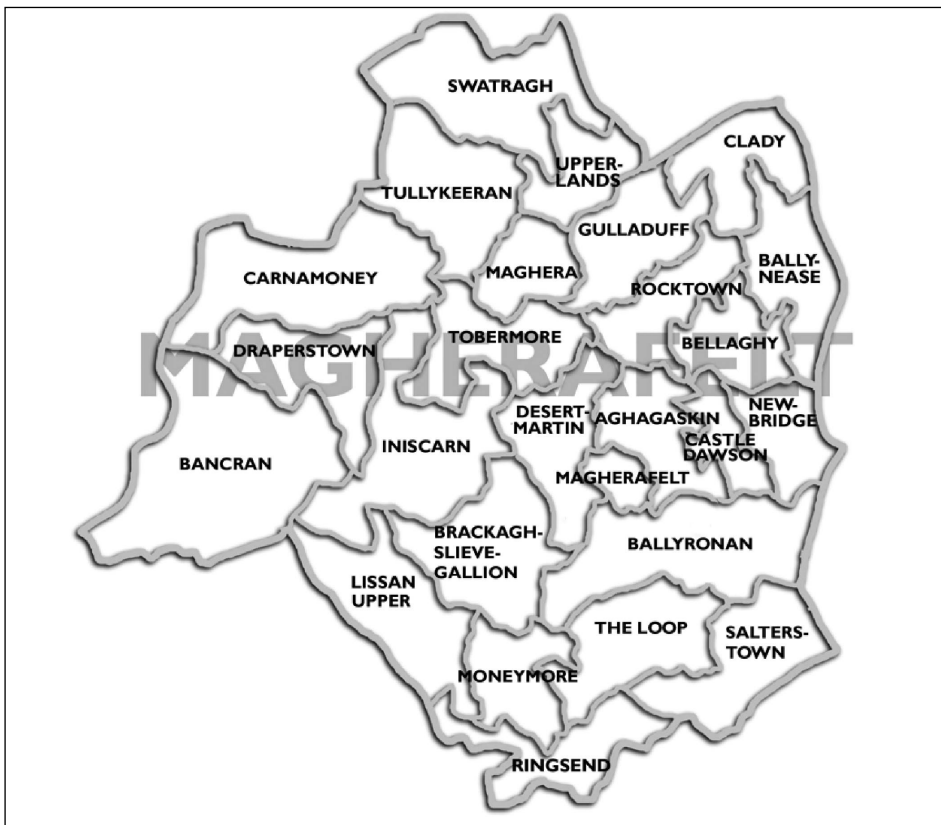
Between 1922 and 1969 the South Londonderry seat in the Northern Ireland parliament was held consistently by an Ulster Unionist representative, and more specifically by a member of the Chichester-Clark family.<sup>11</sup> During the years covered by this study it was only twice contested – once in 1949 by a republican solicitor, Archie Agnew, and again in 1969 by Bernadette Devlin.<sup>12</sup>

At local level, Magherafelt district council had been dominated by nationalists prior to the establishment of Northern Ireland but the abolition of proportional representation for local elections in 1922 tipped the electoral balance. Throughout the period 1945-1969, the Maghera seat on the district council was held by a local

*Map of Northern Ireland Showing Local Government Boundaries and Co. Boroughs of Belfast and Derry, 1961*



*Map of Magherafelt Rural District in 1961 showing District Electoral Division of Maghera*



Unionist businessman and the council itself was unionist dominated. On the county council, the Maghera seat was won in 1946 by a republican businessman, Willie Noone, by a margin of less than twenty votes, but a unionist candidate, J.R. Crawford, regained the seat in 1949 and held it without contest for the remainder of this period.

In the absence of regular electoral contests for either the South Londonderry seat at Stormont, or the Maghera seat on the rural district or county council, it is very difficult to gauge the relative levels of support for constitutional and militant nationalism during this period.<sup>13</sup> Support for the latter, however, was clearly in evidence during the 1955 Westminster election when Sinn Féin<sup>14</sup> fielded candidates in all twelve constituencies in Northern Ireland and returned two prisoner candidates, Tom Mitchell for Mid-Ulster and Philip Clarke for Fermanagh-South Tyrone.<sup>15</sup>

There was also a degree of local involvement in the IRA's 1956-1962 campaign<sup>16</sup> to force a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.<sup>17</sup> Officially launched at midnight on 11 December 1956, 'Operation Harvest' prescribed a series of attacks on police stations, B Special<sup>18</sup> huts, transport and communication networks, customs posts and government buildings across Northern Ireland. Magherafelt courthouse was among the first targets to be struck in December 1956. There was a bomb explosion at a B Special hut in Upperlands, three miles north of Maghera, in January 1957 and the RUC station in the nearby village of Swatragh was attacked by gunfire in August 1957 and again in January 1958. By this stage, however, the IRA had been literally forced to go underground and a total of nine hidden 'dug-outs' were subsequently unearthed in the Maghera district.<sup>19</sup> There were some further attacks on local electricity transformers, telephone exchanges and bridges and in August 1958 a machine gun was fired at a police sergeant in Maghera. By 1959, however, the campaign was winding down and a ceasefire was finally declared in February 1962.

Rising educational levels and civic expectations combined with an interest in human rights and direct-action politics wrought a dramatic change in the Catholic community in the 1960s. New pressure groups, such as the Campaign for Social Justice, began to collect and publicise evidence of discrimination against Catholics, particularly in housing and the gerrymandering of elections. Republicans had also regrouped under various different titles since the proscription of Sinn Féin in 1957. The idea of launching an official civil rights campaign originated at a conference of one such front, the Wolfe Tone Society, at the home of Maghera solicitor, Kevin Agnew. At this meeting in August 1966 Eoghan Harris, a young history graduate from Cork, read

a paper agreed by the IRA army council on a civil rights strategy for Northern Ireland. This strategy appealed to a broad cross-section of society and in January 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was formed in Belfast. The political controversy generated by the civil rights movement brought Northern Ireland to the brink of collapse. It also precipitated a radical reorganisation of constitutional nationalism which re-emerged in 1970 in the form of the SDLP.

The paucity of electoral contests makes it equally difficult to assess intra-unionist divisions during this period. In spite of virtually uninterrupted electoral success at both provincial and local level, it clearly became increasingly difficult to maintain unity within the Ulster Unionist Party. A series of incidents in the early 1950s, including the banning of an Orange march<sup>20</sup> in Co. Down and the curtailment of a Coronation parade in the nearby town of Dungiven in June 1953, for example, provoked accusations that certain Unionist leaders had abandoned loyalism.<sup>21</sup> Eight Independent Unionist candidates challenged the government in the general election of October 1953 and an Ulster Orange and Protestant Committee was formed to organise opposition to any such appeasement of nationalists in the future.

Divergence of opinion over the rights and wrongs of seeking accommodation with Catholics in Northern Ireland intensified with the election of Terence O'Neill as Prime Minister in 1963. O'Neill advanced a new strategy of pursuing general economic growth alongside conciliatory gestures towards the Catholic community. These measures provoked a deep-seated crisis within the Ulster Unionist Party and eventually, across Northern Ireland as a whole. A series of civil rights demonstrations and counter-demonstrations made for an increasingly volatile political climate in the summer of 1969, culminating in the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland on 14 August.

## **SOCIAL SEGREGATION**

While some of the factors that facilitated mixing between Protestants and Catholics will be discussed in the second section of this paper, the extent of social segregation must be acknowledged. Fionnuala O'Connor notes that official Catholicism played a crucial role in defining and sustaining Northern Catholic identity from partition until at least the late 1950s. She states that, 'for a community that disliked and felt alien from the wider state, the parish became the main civic unit...the Church by default was the acknowledged chief source of authority and social coherence in a "state within a state"'.<sup>22</sup> On grounds of both religious and political principle, the Catholic Church strongly resisted secular inter-



*Photograph at a meeting of South Derry Unionists in Maghera Orange Hall on 25 January 1948, to mark the completion by Mrs Dehra Parker of twenty-five years' service as Member of Parliament for the division. Left to right – Mrs J. Love, Mrs H.J. Cousley, secretary of the Women's Association, Magherafelt; Mr W. Clark, Mr R. Evans Burns, Mrs Parker, Mr H.E. Thompson, Mr J. M. Shearer and Sir Basil Brooke.*

ference in the running of their schools with the result that the vast majority of Catholics and Protestants went to separate schools. The link between religious and social life was clearly in evidence in the town of Maghera where the majority of social organisations to which Catholics subscribed were organised in association with the Catholic clergy and convened in the local National hall. Conversely, while social functions in the Maghera Assembly hall did attract a cross-section of Protestants and Catholics, the local Orange hall was the main forum for meetings of Protestant social and political groups.

There were cricket and rugby clubs in nearby towns such as Dungiven and Magherafelt but the two main sports clubs in Maghera at this time were the Maghera Reds soccer club and Watty Graham's Gaelic Athletic Club.<sup>23</sup> The ban upheld by the latter until 1971 on engagement in 'foreign games' (in practice, soccer and rugby union) and the insistence of many Protestants that 'Sunday Observance' precluded them from partaking in Gaelic football matches meant that there was also a significant degree of segregation in organised sport.

Casual socialising between Protestants and Catholics was also strongly discouraged by representatives of both the Catholic Church and the Orange Order. Expressing his fear that such mingling might lead to a mixed marriage or, worse still, conversion to Protestantism, Dr Farren, Bishop of Derry, warned parishioners at a Confirmation ceremony in Maghera in May 1951 that:

If you allow your children to be contaminated by those who are not of the fold, then you can expect nothing but disaster [...] it is too late when your boy cries out that he

prefers Barrabas to Christ and will give up his Church and soul rather than the girl he is infatuated with.

While he stressed that Catholics should try to live in peace with their non-Catholic neighbours, he concluded that the salvation of their souls must come first.<sup>24</sup> The following year, Brother Roy Shiels, Worshipful Master of the nearby Curragh 'Rising Sons of Joshua' Loyal Orange Lodge 855, similarly cautioned that many young people were being 'lured away to attend Roman Catholic dances and sports meetings' and noted that some were 'drifting away to Romish beliefs' as a result of mixed marriages. He concluded that, 'Surely there were sufficient Protestants halls, Church halls and Orange Halls where youth of their own could have entertainment and social enjoyment at its best'.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to mixed marriages, the situation in Maghera broadly tallied with the findings of Richard Rose who calculated from his 'attitudes survey' data of 1968 that only 4% of the population in Northern Ireland married across religious lines.<sup>26</sup> The equivalent figure in Moxon-Browne's survey of 1978 was 4.5%.<sup>27</sup> On the rare occasions when a mixed marriage did take place one partner usually changed their religion ensuring that, for most individuals, social interaction was contained within their own religious community. Observing a similar pattern in the rural border town of 'Ballybeg' in the 1950s, Rosemary Harris concluded that, 'Protestants and Catholics form two endogamous groups probably more separated from each other in sexual matters than most white and Negro groups in societies which supposedly abhor miscegenation'.<sup>28</sup> This is the stark, and in many ways remarkable, social landscape which I

sought to examine more closely. What were the shadings and ambiguities, and how should they be understood?

### COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

The role of collective memory in shaping Irish history has been well documented.<sup>29</sup> Academic interest undoubtedly intensified with the eruption of the Troubles in Northern Ireland as past and present became embroiled in an increasingly bloody and violent conflict. Although my interviews focused on the period 1945-1969, memories were inevitably filtered through the prism of the Troubles. It was not surprising, therefore, to detect two distinct communal narratives, each carefully reinforced with reference to both the recent and distant past.

Green cautions, however, that, 'oral historians are increasingly focusing upon the ways in which individual recollections fit (often unconscious) cultural scripts or mental templates'.<sup>30</sup> Noting that collective memory studies are inclined to ignore or at least diminish the contradictions and complexities of an individual's life, she calls for a renewed interest in the 'ways in which individuals negotiate competing ideas or beliefs, or find space within or between dominant discourses'.<sup>31</sup> In order to trace the contours between collective and individual memory in my interviews, I tried to separate the many references to 'them' and 'us' from the less obvious allusions to individual experience. By analysing the context in which individual experiences were presented, I was then able to identify two types of agency: those which reinforced the communal boundary and those which facilitated a departure from it. Whilst acknowledging the influence of contemporary and historical discourses on interviewees' memories, I was thus equally concerned to account for the complex interplay within and between the individual and the collective.

The most striking theme in my interviews with Protestants was their depiction of the post-war period as a golden age of community relations. To illustrate the lack of animosity between Protestants and Catholics at this time, Ian Gordon recalled that:

At that time, there was never any talk about Protestant/Catholic or anything. As I said, there were Catholics went to the Protestant school and I would say it was vice versa, and we all played football together [...] things changed dramatically in this country.<sup>32</sup>

It was also repeatedly stressed that large numbers of Catholics attended dances in the local Orange hall and that, conversely, many Protestants attended functions in the local Catholic hall.

In stark contrast to this depiction, many Catholics opened their recollections of the post-war period with references to both public and private discrimination against their community. Such discussion also inevitably provoked stereotypical depictions of the Protestant and unionist community. Paddy Murphy, for example, recalled:

They had no conception, the Protestants and Unionists, at that time, of being in a democratic government [...] they were just in charge of everything, they ruled the roost and they thought it could go on forever.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly Peter O'Kane suggested that the rationale for such discrimination was a mixture of superiority and fear.

I discovered in my time with them [...] there's a fear of losing their position all the time, fear was their main thing [...] they had this feeling that 'you're down there, boy, and we're up here', and they were scared of losing that.<sup>34</sup>

Catholics did not discount the fact that there was more mixing between Protestants and Catholics before the Troubles, but they were much more inclined to qualify it. Any suggestion of a golden age of community relations was restricted to discussion of the war years. It was suggested that Catholics were more inclined to socialise in Protestant halls at this time and that, for special dances, the bands stopped playing the British national anthem at the end of the night.<sup>35</sup> It was also noted that the arrival of evacuees from Belfast after the German bomb attacks on the city promoted increased mixing between the two communities.<sup>36</sup> To John Convery, this camaraderie faded in the immediate post-war period and he even suggested that the Unionist Party had been so alarmed by it that it actively encouraged the Orange Order to 'drum up' sectarianism again.<sup>37</sup> Even Mary Armstrong, whose parents had a mixed marriage and who emerged as the Catholic interviewee who had socialised most freely with her Protestant neighbours throughout her life, qualified her account as follows:

There was always them and us. Always, no matter what happened [...] sectarianism was there underneath – all you had to do was sweep it a wee bit away – it was there...they were in charge and there was no way anybody was going to rock their boat – they could afford to be nice the odd time, as long as you didn't ever put a foot wrong.<sup>38</sup>



*Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O'Neill, in conversation with a RUC county inspector in January 1969 about the possible re-routing of a Civil Rights march from Belfast to Derry so as to avoid the town of Maghera*

In addition to querying Protestant assertions that a large proportion of Catholics would have attended dances in the local Protestant hall in the post-war period, a number of Catholic interviewees deprecated the type of Catholic who did so. They were, for example, described by one interviewee as 'milk and water Catholics' and later as, 'the type that lived down in that part of the town, the bottom end of the town'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, while many Protestant interviewees referred to the camaraderie which existed between the old constitutional Nationalist MPs and their Unionist counterparts as an illustration of communal harmony, a number of Catholics concurred with this fact but berated these politicians as 'quislings'.<sup>40</sup> In a further example of conflicting interpretation, one Protestant interviewee referred to

the fact that the local Hibernian<sup>41</sup> and Protestant bands occasionally shared instruments and banners but this practice was independently referred to by a Catholic interviewee as evidence that one should 'never trust a Hibernian'.<sup>42</sup>

The contrasting emphasis placed on various celebrations, riots and disturbances by Protestants and Catholics reverberates strongly with Passerini's detection of silences in the accounts of Italian workers under fascism.<sup>43</sup> While the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was recalled by a number of Protestants as an occasion of great celebration for both sides of the community, for example, this event was referred to by only one Catholic interviewee, and this in the context of a scuffle which had broken out between Catholic and Protestant schoolchildren in the nearby town of Magherafelt.<sup>44</sup>

On the whole, therefore, Catholic interviewees did not subscribe to the notion of the post-war period as a golden age of community relations, yet it was nevertheless possible to unpick generalisations about the two communities by carefully contrasting collective statements with evidence of individual experience. Peter O'Kane clearly stated that Protestants generally viewed themselves as superior to Catholics. Later in the interview, however, he recalled that the few Protestant children who lived in the townland of Lisnamuck, about three miles outside the town of Maghera, attended the local Catholic primary school and he reflected that:

It's a funny thing, the lads, the Protestant lads that were at Lisnamuck school in my day, you hadn't the same feeling about them as you would have about the ones that weren't, you know, you would have a closeness with them.<sup>45</sup>

This allusion to intensely local demography was also evident in the depiction of Catholics who attended dances in the local Orange hall as, 'the type who lived down at the bottom of the town'. O'Kane also noted in passing that, through his interest in greyhound racing, he became very friendly with a Protestant man from Bushmills.<sup>46</sup> Employment emerged as another factor that encouraged a certain degree of mixing. Mary Armstrong, for example, recalled that, although her religion strongly restricted her choice of employment, she did eventually secure a job as a primary school cook in an almost exclusively Protestant village. While she noted that her initial reaction was, 'to work in Amper-taine or Tobermore – I thought, my God, you might as well say "the gates of heaven"', she went on to say, that she got on very well with the staff and that she was sorry in the end to leave.<sup>47</sup>

Not surprisingly, class cut across both

communities. Both Protestants and Catholics agreed, for example, that businessmen of all denominations were inclined to socialise together during this period. In particular it was noted that the local republican solicitor was quite friendly with both Roy Crawford, a local Protestant councillor, and Joe Burns, the Unionist MP for North Derry. Mary Armstrong explained that:

You see, there was no Protestant lawyer in Maghera until Burns came. And then when he came the Presbyterians didn't want him to know their business [...] and that was how Archie Agnew's father, and even Archie and Kevin, had to keep friendly with Roy – it was through business [...] you see the Protestants would have gone in and said that they had a field or something, land to sell. And then they would explain to the Agnews, 'But I don't think any of you boys need apply for this one.'<sup>48</sup>

In spite of generalisations about the Protestant community, there was also a recurrent suggestion that ordinary decent individual Protestants were held to ransom by agencies within their own community. Mary Armstrong, for instance, recalled that her Protestant friend apologised that she couldn't give her a job in the local library explaining that, 'my hands are tied'.<sup>49</sup> John Convery also claimed that, while a small number of his Protestant friends did play Gaelic football in the immediate post-war period, they were pressurised into stopping. He went on to express the view that the 'cream' of the Protestant community emigrated at this time as they felt stifled by the restrictions placed upon them by agencies such as the Orange Order.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, while all Protestants stressed that the pre-Troubles period was characterised by communal harmony and referred to friendship between individual unionist and nationalist politicians, and their own friendship with members of the Catholic community, a certain distinction was made between the Catholic Church as an institution and individual Catholics. David Wilson, for example, clearly expressed his opinion that the Catholic Church was wrong to insist upon segregated education and that this had a very negative effect on community relations.<sup>51</sup>

That they might have held totally opposing political views did not, as we have seen, necessarily deter friendship between Protestants and Catholics. It is clear, however, that the authorities differentiated between constitutional nationalists and republicans. While he alluded to general discrimination against Catholics, for example, Peter O'Kane added that the specific reason he waited so long to be allocated a house

by Magherafelt District council was that he had chosen a republican councillor to 'do his fighting for him'.<sup>52</sup> During a discussion of the local police force, John Convery also recalled that the police often stood outside the local Catholic Church on Easter Sunday to observe which Catholics were sporting an Easter lily.<sup>53</sup>

It is also possible to connect the political divisions within each community to the dynamics selected to explain historical developments. Some Catholic interviewees, for example, contended that developments in education were a key factor in bringing about a reform of the state in the 1960s, while others referred to the IRA raids of the mid-50s and the subsequent military campaign as having, 'awakened nationalism throughout the north'.<sup>54</sup> Some Protestants did not offer any explanation for the dramatic eruption of conflict in the late 1960s but others referred to the civil rights movement and the Provisional IRA as agencies that destroyed this golden age of community relations and, furthermore, robbed them of their sense of Irishness.<sup>55</sup>

## INSIDER ISSUES

While the foregoing discussion of collective memory referred frequently to two distinct religious and political communities, Portelli notes that, 'oral history can never be told without taking sides, since the "sides" exist inside the telling'.<sup>56</sup> In the case of this study, the fact that I was originally from the local Catholic community undoubtedly influenced the nature of the evidence collected. Indeed, although I appreciated the compelling logic of studying the two main religious communities together, rather than in isolation, I was initially apprehensive about approaching Protestant interviewees. I was concerned that approaching them might be a little awkward; that they would query my motivation in writing a history of this period; and that, even if they did agree to be interviewed, their responses might be somewhat stilted.

There were, however, a number of encouraging factors. Firstly, the local political climate had thawed considerably in the five years following the Provisional IRA and loyalist ceasefires of 1994.<sup>57</sup> Secondly, in contrast to urban areas such as Belfast and Derry, the religious and political boundaries in a rural community tend to be less tightly drawn along residential lines and are thus more permeable for researchers. Thirdly, I felt reasonably confident that both gender and age (I was in my early twenties when I commenced interviewing) might serve to soften the edge of my religious and political identity.

My first effort to interview an elderly Protestant neighbour, however, seemed to confirm my original fears. While she provided some interesting detail on the nature of local shops and

businesses at this time, any mention of the relationship between Catholics and Protestants was studiously avoided. My entire relationship with her was based on an acceptance of this, and I found it very difficult to bring up potentially sensitive topics relating either to religion or politics. On a follow-up interview with a Catholic interviewee, however, I mentioned my apprehension about approaching members of the Protestant community. He explained that he had been very friendly with a well-known unionist family in the town throughout this period and, on his recommendation, I set up interviews with two members of this family. Thereafter, I combined a 'snowball sampling' method, based on recommendations from interviewees themselves, with my own network of contacts.

While the clear benefit of not being from the area under scrutiny is that it is easier to convey a neutral perspective, there is also some truth in the old joke about a Jewish visitor to Belfast being asked whether they were a 'Catholic Jew' or a 'Protestant Jew', as it underlines a very real danger of outsiders being hi-jacked by one side or the other. In his recent study of 'Ballybogoin', for example, William Kelleher similarly states that, although he had hoped to establish networks with 'both sides of the house', he was not able to do so and, instead, concentrated his research on the local Catholic community.<sup>58</sup>

While my identity as a local Catholic was clear to all those I approached, in many ways I had a more leverage than an outsider. I was instinctively aware of the multiple gradations within, and between, the local Catholic and Protestant communities and was ultimately able to employ a range of different contacts to ensure that I reached out to a broad range of respondents. A prior knowledge of my family background also saved the time and energy usually expended on delicately ascertaining the religious and political background of a stranger.<sup>59</sup>

Although the experience of my first interview with a Protestant was not repeated, my identity did to some extent influence the tone of many subsequent interviews. For example, I found that most Protestants were at pains to stress at the outset that they had been brought up never to discriminate against Catholics. Raymond Brown, for example stated within the first few minutes of his interview that:

I mixed with everyone – I would safely say that most of my friends and the people that I played around with [as a child] were all Catholics – so I was never brought up to discriminate between Catholics and Protestants because of that, probably. And my mother and father never were that way inclined either.<sup>60</sup>

It seemed likely that the desire to establish this clearly at the outset was motivated by an awareness of my own religious background but this recollection was, however, linked to the genuinely persistent theme in Protestant testimonies of a golden age of community relations. In the end, while I certainly found that, as a Catholic, it was easier to elicit frank information from Catholics about prejudices and stereotypes, I was nevertheless satisfied that the diversity of experience recounted by Protestants provided for a reasonably balanced comparison.

Indeed, while one must be constantly vigilant to the influence of the interviewer on the tone and content of interviews, I was often equally struck by people's insistence, once started, on telling their own stories. In particular, the fact that I was born several years after the Troubles began allowed interviewees to delight in explaining how different (whether positively or negatively) their experience of growing up in the same town was.

## CONCLUSION: ETHICAL ISSUES IN FACING UP TO THE PAST

Although all interviewees read and approved their transcripts, many expressed concerns that, if published, negative references they had made to various individuals might upset those relatives who continued to reside in the town of Maghera. This fear prompted a number of people to request that their real names would not be used in the event of publication.<sup>61</sup> A more troublesome issue, however, was that the fact that, having highlighted their concerns, almost all interviewees indicated that they were content to leave judgement on this issue to my own discretion. This implicit trust in turn caused me to reconsider my interpretation of their accounts. Although my study was concerned with factual information about Maghera in this period, my analysis ultimately concentrated on the way in which memories – both collective and individual – were presented. While the dissection of individual accounts for communal myths and evidence of contrasting individual experience made for interesting academic analysis, it provoked an age-old dilemma between the duty to produce good history and the sense of responsibility towards real people including, in this case, neighbours and friends.

Although the exploration of collective memory in Ireland, and in Northern Ireland in particular, is a well-established academic pursuit, there thus remains a paradox which has infected much oral history research. There is a rich oral culture and a strong sense of community identity built around story-telling and well-rehearsed versions of local and communal history. At the same time, the existence of long local memories provides precisely

the rationale for the reluctance to publicly verse these accounts.<sup>62</sup> This was particularly true of this study as the trust that interviewees placed in me was based on unwritten references from family and friends who would stand to absorb some of the criticism which could be generated by complete publication.

On a more positive vein, it has already been noted that the political climate in Northern

Ireland has thawed significantly in the last decade. While the instinct to 'say nothing' was reinforced by dynamics of violence, repression and fear, there is now an increasing acceptance that facing up to the past is an essential part of moving beyond the conflict. In keeping with the contours of this study, however, this process will involve on-going negotiation between the collective and the individual, the past and the present.

## NOTES

**1.** This maxim was immortalised by Seamus Heaney in his 1975 poem, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing', *North*, London: Faber & Faber, 1975.

**2.** John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990, p. viii.

**3.** General histories include Michael Farrell's, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State*, London: Pluto Press, 1976; Patrick Buckland's, *A History of Northern Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981; David Harkness's *Northern Ireland Since 1920*, Dublin: Helicon Press, 1983; and Sabine Wichert's, *Northern Ireland Since 1945*, London: Longman, 1991.

**4.** I interviewed a total of fourteen people for this project – seven Catholics and seven Protestants. While the inclusion of both Protestants and Catholics was the main control factor for the sample, I deliberately sought out people of differing political persuasions, tried to maintain a reasonable balance of men and women and, as far as possible, endeavoured to include members of different social classes. Although this was a relatively small sample of the local population, I transcribed more than 200,000 words and felt reasonably confident that the patterns presented were worthy of in-depth analysis.

**5.** The term 'Catholic' refers throughout to 'Roman Catholics' as opposed to Anglican Catholics.

**6.** The term 'Protestant', as understood in Northern Ireland, encompasses Presbyterians, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists as well as a range of smaller Christian groups.

**7.** This focus on identity meant that the analysis had much common ground with a range of Northern Ireland participant observation studies, conducted mainly by anthropologists. Rosemary Harris's seminal study of attitudes in the rural border area of 'Ballybeg' in the 1950s provided a particularly valuable comparative framework. Rosemary Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbours and 'Strangers' in a Border Community*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972.

**8.** The official title given to the county at the time of its creation was 'Londonderry'. The title 'Derry', emanating from the name of an ancient Christian settlement (Doire), has always been preferred by nationalists. It was also the term adopted by all

interviewees, including Protestants.

**9.** The Plantation of Ulster, which began in 1607, was a systematic attempt to plant or settle English and Scottish Protestants on land which had been confiscated from Gaelic Irish chieftains.

**10.** Paul Compton, in association with A. Smith et al, *Northern Ireland: A Census Atlas*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978, p. 83.

**11.** In 1929 the seat was won by Captain James Lenox-Conyngham Chichester-Clark. He was replaced in a byelection in 1933 by Dehra Parker (formerly married to Chichester) and she was then replaced upon her retirement in 1960 by her grandson, Major James Dawson Chichester-Clark. He held the seat until the Stormont parliament was suspended in 1972.

**12.** In 1949 Major James Chichester-Clark, the Unionist candidate, held the seat with 9195 votes, a majority of 3383, on an 83.5% turnout. In a byelection for the Mid-Ulster seat at Westminster in April 1969, Bernadette Devlin defeated the Unionist candidate, Anna Forrest, on a 91.5% turnout with 33,648 votes, a margin of 4211.

**13.** After partition, the difference between constitutional nationalists and republicans was most clearly reflected in the degree of accommodation which they were prepared to afford to the Northern Ireland state. Although they occasionally contested elections to test their support, Sinn Féin refused to take their seats at either Stormont, the seat of the Northern Ireland Parliament, or at Westminster, the seat of the United Kingdom parliament. Constitutional nationalists, meanwhile, attempted to steer a pragmatic course between abstention and constitutional opposition.

**14.** Originating in 1905, Sinn Féin emerged into a modern political party primarily concerned with the reunification of Ireland.

**15.** Tom Mitchell and Philip Clarke had each been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for their role in a failed attack on Omagh Barracks in October 1954. The raid had been designed to secure arms for a projected IRA campaign. Mitchell's election agent for Mid-Ulster was Kevin Agnew, a republican solicitor based in Maghera. Both candidates were subsequently unseated by legal process because of their convictions before the courts but Mitchell stood again in a byelection for the Mid-Ulster seat. He won the election with an increased majority but this time was precluded on

petition from taking the seat and the Unionist candidate was duly elected. Charles Beattie was later disqualified, however, for holding an office of profit under the Crown and, in a third contest, a constitutional nationalist, Michael O'Neill, ran alongside Mitchell. This split in the nationalist vote ensured that the Unionist candidate, George Forrest, won an overall majority. He held the seat until April 1969.

**16.** Building on a long tradition of militant resistance to British rule in Ireland, the Irish Republican Army emerged from the Irish Volunteers who fought in the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921). Following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 and the establishment of the Irish Free State, the IRA split into pro and anti-Treaty factions, culminating in the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). Pro-Treaty forces won the Civil War and established the Irish Defence Forces. There was a further diminution of the IRA in 1926 when the majority of those who had opposed the Treaty regrouped under a new political party, Fianna Fáil. This party recognised the Irish Free State and subsequently endeavoured to suppress the IRA. The IRA continued in existence throughout the 1930s and directed a brief bombing campaign in England (1939-1940). Wartime internment and repressive measures by both the British and Irish governments all but defeated the IRA in the 1940s but they subsequently reorganised and prepared for a new campaign directed at targets of British military occupation in Northern Ireland.

**17.** Two Maghera men were convicted for their involvement in the IRA campaign – Liam Flanagan was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment at Belfast prison in March 1959 and Michael McEldowney was sentenced to eight years' imprisonment at the Special Criminal Court in Dublin in December 1961. Up to a dozen local men were also interned without trial at Belfast prison.

**18.** The Ulster Special Constabulary (based on the Special Constabulary [Ireland] Act of 1832) was a largely voluntary armed militia. Recruitment for this exclusively Protestant force commenced in 1920. It was originally divided into three categories (full-time members operating across Northern Ireland known as A Specials; part-time members restricted to their own districts known as B Specials; and a reserve force known as C Specials). Only the B Specials continued beyond the 1920s.

**19.** Wallace Clark asserts that this was, 'more per square inch than were found anywhere else in the Province.' Wallace Clark, *Guns in Ulster*, Upperlands: Wallace Clark Booksales, 2002, 115.

**20.** Originally known as the Orange Society, the Loyal Orange Institution was formed in 1795 as a fraternal organisation to defend Protestantism and its political principles in Ireland. It played a central role in the campaign to resist Home Rule in the late nineteenth century and later provided a crucial support network for the Ulster Unionist Party. It is most popularly associated with the annual march and parade on the Twelfth of July to commemorate the defeat of Catholic King James II in 1690.

**21.** The dispute in Co. Down arose when members of the Orange Order proposed to change their traditional route to link up with a newly built Orange hall. Their proposal to march along the mainly Catholic Longstone Road was strongly resisted by Catholics in the area and the parade was eventually banned by the Minister for Home Affairs. The Dungiven incident arose due to local resistance to the Coronation parade being led by the loyalist Bovevagh band, with whom there had been trouble in the past. The distinction between Unionism and loyalism in this instance separates members of the Ulster Unionist Party from rank and file Protestants, whose loyalty to Protestantism and the Crown remained untainted by political exigencies.

**22.** Fionnuala O'Connor, *In Search of a State: Catholics in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1993, p 274.

**23.** Founded in 1884 by Michael Cusack, the Gaelic Athletic Association is primarily concerned with the promotion of Gaelic games such as Gaelic football, hurling and camogie. It also supports the Irish language, Irish music and dance. It is organised on the traditional parishes and counties of Ireland and, with a membership of approximately 800,000, it is the most popular organisation in the country. The first Gaelic football club was formed in Maghera in 1933 and it was officially reconstituted as 'Watty Graham's Gaelic Athletic Club' in 1948.

**24.** *Derry Journal*, 4 May 1951.

**25.** *Northern Constitution*, 19 July 1952.

**26.** Rose, *Governing Without Consensus*, London: Faber and Faber, p 507.

**27.** Edward Maxon-Browne, *Nation, Class and Creed in Northern Ireland*, Aldershot: Gower, 1983, p 130.

**28.** Rosemary Harris, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ulster: A Study of Neighbours and 'Strangers' in a Border Community*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972, p x.

**29.** See, for example, Ian McBride (ed.) *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

**30.** Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and

'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates' *Oral History*, 2004, vol 32, no 2, p 35.

**31.** Green, 2004, p. 43.

**32.** Interview with Ian Gordon, 28 March 2001.

**33.** Interview with Paddy Murphy, 6 December 1999.

**34.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999.

**35.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999. The playing of the British National anthem at the end of a dance would have deterred many Catholics, on principle, from attending.

**36.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 26 March 2001. Further evidence of this improvement in community relations was displayed when the members of Maghera Orange Lodge were publicly thanked by the Padraig Pearse Amateur Dramatic Club for the loan of chairs for a performance at Gulladuff. PRONI, HA/32/1/828: Inspector General RUC to Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 22 March 1945.

**37.** Interview with John Convery, 14 June 1999.

**38.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 26 March 2001.

**39.** Interview with Anne McDaid, 31 October 2001. In common with many towns in Northern Ireland, Maghera has one long main street, one end of which has traditionally been associated with Protestantism, the other with Catholicism. This division would seem to have intensified following a dispute about the placement of banners associated with the Orange Order at the Catholic upper end of the town in 1938.

**40.** Interview with Michael Convery, 14 July 2000.

**41.** The Ancient Order of Hibernians emerged from a number of eighteenth-century Catholic defence organisations. Although banned by the Catholic Church until 1904, it expanded rapidly through its association with the constitutional Irish Parliamentary Party. After partition it faded in southern Ireland but maintained reasonable support in Northern Ireland. It is a fraternal Catholic society boasting a somewhat similar array of passwords, titles, collars, bands and parades to that of the Orange Order. During this period, animosity between local Hibernians and republicans was often quite intense.

**42.** Interview with Michael Convery, 14 July 2000.

**43.** Luisa Passerini 'Italian working class culture between the wars' *International Journal of Oral History*, 1980, vol 1, pp. 4-27.

**44.** Interview with Mary McKenna, 18 September 1999.

**45.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999. Such non-team sports and hobbies, unlike soccer and Gaelic football, facilitated social interaction between Protestants and Catholics.

**46.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999.

**47.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 29 October 2001.

**48.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 29 October 2001. The intense sensitivity about the sale of land in Northern Ireland was captured in a famous play by Louis J. Walsh called *The Pope in Killybuck*. The play charts a deal made between a Hibernian and a Protestant auctioneer to inflate the price of a farm by pretending that the Hibernian is secretly bidding on it.

**49.** Interview with Mary Armstrong, 26 March 2001.

**50.** Interview with John Convery, 14 June 1999.

**51.** Interview with David Wilson, 8 January 2001.

**52.** Interview with Peter O'Kane, 10 August 1999.

**53.** Interview with John Convery, 14 June 1999. The Easter lily, an artificial paper badge, was introduced by Cumann na mBán, a women's republican organisation, in 1926 to commemorate those who died during (and since) the Easter Rising in 1916. Proceeds from the sale of the badge went to the Irish Republican Prisoners' Dependents Fund. The lilies have been traditionally sold outside Church gates on Easter Sunday and are worn at republican commemorations.

**54.** Interview with Paddy Murphy, 6 December 1999.

**55.** Interview with David Wilson, 8 January 2001 and interview with Ian Gordon, 28 March 2001.

**56.** Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, p 73.

**57.** In August 1994, the Provisional IRA declared an indefinite ceasefire. A similar announcement was made in October by the Combined Loyalist Military Command, an umbrella group for loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland.

**58.** William F. Kelleher Jr, *The Troubles in Ballybogoin*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2003, p x.

**59.** This process of delicately ascertaining the religious and political persuasions of a stranger before engaging in any meaningful dialogue is described by sociologists of Northern Irish society as 'telling'.

**60.** Interview with Raymond Brown, 23 January 2001.

**61.** For the purposes of this article, pseudonyms for all interviewees have been employed.

**62.** For a fuller exposition of this dilemma see, Guy Beiner and Anna Bryson, *Listening to the Past and Talking to Each Other: Problems and Possibilities Facing Oral History in Ireland*, Irish and Economic Social History, XXX (2003), pp 71-78.