Gaeilge Bhriste

The Irish Language, Conflict, & Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

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Contents

Abstract

The Troubles, a 30-year period of violent conflict between Northern Ireland's Catholic and Protestant populations, has left deep scars in Northern Irish society. While the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 brokered peace and power-sharing, underlying rifts between the two communities have persisted, largely maintained through cultural identity (Hall, 2022). Language has long been a bitter point of contention in the conflict: the Irish language, which has endured a long history of oppression and decline under British rule, has been portrayed as a cornerstone of cultural expression and anticolonial resistance to Catholics, and a symbol of sectarian hatred and violence to Protestants (McMonagle, 2010). But the history of Irish linguistic and cultural identity is far more nuanced than modern sectarian narratives would imply. Many in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant alike, are unaware of the long tradition of Protestant Irish speakers, who played formative roles in leading the Gaelic revival and shaping Irish national identity (McCoy, 1997; Pritchard, 2004).

In the face of intense political polarization, the modern Irish revitalization movement has been met with staunch opposition from pro-British political parties, who contend that efforts to preserve and promote the language constitute an attack on British identity (Dunlevy, 2020). Even so, a number of initiatives have worked to foster cross-community reconciliation in Northern Ireland through Irish-language education (Mitchell & Miller, 2019; Nic Craith, 2003). By drawing on the historical connections between Protestants and the Irish language, I argue that Protestant Irish learners of today are not only engaging in the work of reconciliation by building bridges with the "other" community's culture, but are also embracing a forgotten part of their own heritage; I further suggest that promoting visions of a shared heritage will be an essential part of ensuring peaceful co-existence in the modern reality of Northern Ireland as a multiethnic and multilingual state.

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This paper comes from a place of deep personal attachment. My parents, in particular, deserve special recognition for their unquestioning moral support, and for offering me their personal thoughts, memories, and experiences. Perhaps most importantly, for sharing with me his mother tongue and his love for his homeland, I owe a lifelong debt of gratitude to my grandfather.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the people of Northern Ireland of all linguistic, ethnic, religious, and political affiliations, who, it is my hope, have a peaceful and prosperous future to look forward to.

1 Introduction

When Pádraig Mac Piaris[1] uttered the phrase *tír gan teanga, tír gan anam*—"a country without a language is a country without a soul"—it is quite likely that he felt the very soul of Ireland was indeed in mortal peril. By the latter half of the 19th century, the Irish language had been so devastated by centuries of British colonial rule that less than a quarter of Ireland's population spoke it fluently (Doyle, 2015, p. 129). Mac Piaris's devotion to the Irish language was not only a matter of culture, but sovereignty. A staunch Irish republican, he would go on to become a prominent figure in the 1916 Easter Rising, an armed revolt against British rule that instigated the Irish revolutionary period, for which he was later executed (Thornley, 1966). Mac Piaris's aspirations of self-rule would be realized five years after his death, but only partly. After a bloody war of independence, Ireland was partitioned into two entities—the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland), and British-administered Northern Ireland (Lynch, 2019).

Mac Piaris's now-iconic statement echoes the zeitgeist of the 19th-century nationalism that inspired him and his fellow Irish revolutionaries: that is, that nations, generally defined by shared culture, language, and ancestry, naturally lend themselves to the formation of states (Calhoun, 1997, pp. 4-5). Nationalistic ideas about language would undergo a renewal during the Troubles, a low-level irregular war fought in Northern Ireland between the late 1960s and the 1990s. At the heart of the conflict lay the question of Northern Ireland's status. While Irish nationalists and republicans (largely Catholic) sought reunification with the Republic of Ireland, Ulster unionists and loyalists (largely Protestant) wanted to remain a part of the United Kingdom. As republican paramilitary groups embraced the Irish language as a cornerstone of cultural identity and the struggle against British occupation, unionists increasingly came to see it as a symbol of intolerance, violence, and a threat to the continued existence of their community (McMonagle, 2010).

The position of the Irish language in modern nationalism is not an untroubled one. The saying *is fearr Gaeilge bhriste ná Béarla cliste*—meaning "broken Irish is better than clever English"—has been embraced as a slogan of encouragement to struggling learn-

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[1]Mac Piaris was born Patrick Pearse, the name he is most commonly cited by; however, as an Irish speaker and nationalist, he would have gone by his Irish name.

ers (Alison, 2017); more cynically, *Gaelige bhriste* ("broken Irish") may also be taken as an indictment of the current status of the language. Despite its cultural and political significance, Irish is in an undeniable and perhaps irreversible state of decline. Though roughly 40% of the population of the Republic of Ireland claimed knowledge of the language in 2016 (the most recent year for which comprehensive data is available), just shy of 2% reported speaking it daily outside of the education system, a slight decrease from 2011 numbers (*Census 2016 Summary Results*, 2017, pp. 65-67). The status of Irish in Northern Ireland appears to be even more precarious—according to the 2021 census, only 12.4% of the population claims any ability to speak Irish, and of this group, around two in five report only being able to understand Irish. All in all, a scant 0.3% of Northern Ireland's population describes Irish as their "main language" (*Statistical Bulletin - Language*, 2022, pp. 2, 4-7). Because of its perceived sectarian affiliation, Irish in Northern Ireland has faced additional obstacles of inadequate language planning and intense political opposition, which have hindered revitalization efforts (Jacob-Owens, 2021; McMonagle, 2010).

For all the controversy the language evokes, the history of the Irish language is far more complex than is often portrayed. The relationship between Protestants and Irish has, at varying times, been marked just as much by contempt and fear as by fascination and admiration; paradoxically, Protestants have been both the greatest threat to the language and among its most ardent supporters. In defiance of modern sectarian ideas about culture, there exists a long, yet widely-neglected tradition of Protestants who learned Irish and made immense contributions to its survival, and many Protestants count among their ancestors speakers of Scottish Gaelic, a language that shares common Gaelic roots with Irish. Indeed, far from being the sole property of Catholics, the Irish language has a place in the heritage of both communities, and a role to play in building reconciliation between them (McCoy, 1997; Pritchard, 2004).

1.1 Overview

This paper is an examination of the past, present, and future of the Irish language, especially as it pertains to Northern Ireland. It considers the role of nationalism and sectarianism in shaping attitudes towards the language and ideas about who an Irish speaker is—or

is not. Most significantly, it evaluates language as both a driver of conflict and a potential vehicle for intergroup reconciliation.

In Section 2, I contextualize my discussion of modern-day identity politics in Northern Ireland with a summary of the Troubles, their causes, and their legacy. In Section 3, I turn my attention to the emergence of Ireland's contemporary ethnic, cultural, and national identities. Starting with Gaelic Ireland, I follow the history of the Irish language through its decline under British colonial rule, its resurgence with the Gaelic revival, and its politicization in the 19th and 20th centuries. In doing so, I aim to shed light on the diversity of peoples—Gaelic, Anglo-Norman, Catholic, Protestant, Irish, British, republican, and loyalist—who have at varying times laid claim to the language in one way or another. My exploration of the complicated histories of Irish speakers challenges revisionist sectarian narratives that portray the Irish language, Irish culture, and even Irish nationalism as inherently exclusionary to Protestant identity.

In Section 4, I outline two theoretical frameworks through which the revitalization of Irish may facilitate reconciliation: *reparation* and *integration*. Irish speakers in Northern Ireland have long struggled to preserve the language in the face of hostility and political repression under British administration. Through reparation, the removal of legal barriers to the use of Irish and the implementation of effective language planning to protect and promote the language make amends for this historical injustice. In the second approach, integration, the dispersion of sectarian identity narratives through the engagement of Protestants in the Irish language fosters a communal identity that is inclusive of Northern Ireland's ethnic and religious diversity. These two approaches are somewhat contradictory, in that reparation requires the acknowledgment of the British state, and by extension, the Protestant establishment as hegemonic settler-colonial forces; yet integration recontextualizes the Irish language as part of the shared heritage of both the Catholic and Protestant traditions. Still, I contend that both will be necessary to bring about true reconciliation.

Finally, in Section 5, I discuss ongoing political and demographic changes in Northern Ireland and their implications for the future.

1.2 Positionality Statement

The Troubles were a time of great pain and suffering on all sides, the aftershocks of which are still being felt today. In discussing this contentious and often deeply emotional topic, it bears acknowledging my own background and the stakes I hold here. Having an Irish mother and an English father, I have always been conscious, to some degree, of the checkered history between both sides of my heritage. Though I am not from Northern Ireland, as a dual national of Ireland and the United Kingdom, I consider myself to have a foot in both camps, so to speak. Furthermore, as the granddaughter of native Irish speakers, and an Irish learner myself, I am all too aware of the emotions and power dynamics that are bound up in language. To that end, whenever possible, I make effort to acknowledge the Irish names of the individuals I discuss, alongside their more well-known English names.

While I seek to avoid any kind of bias in fairly evaluating all the facts at my disposal, I recognize that forced neutrality is not true objectivity. As is the case in many conflicts, certain word choices are inevitably mired in political and sectarian baggage. For example, like most individuals of a Catholic or *gaeilgeoir* (Irish speaker or learner) background, I refer to Northern Ireland's second-largest city as "Derry," an anglicization of its original Irish name *Doire,* rather than its official name "Londonderry," which is viewed by many as a colonial imposition. Conversely, there are a number of individuals who would take my usage of "Derry" as an act of sectarian provocation. In any case, with such unavoidable political entanglement, I maintain that acknowledgment of these power dynamics is not counterproductive to peace efforts, but rather, an essential step in confronting the realities of Irish history.

1.3 A Note on Terminology

Irish is a Celtic language belonging to the *Gaelic* family, which also includes the closely-related Scottish Gaelic language, itself a descendant of Old Irish. The word "Gaelic" is frequently used in reference to the Irish language and its associated literary and cultural movements. Confusingly, this term is also sometimes applied to Scottish Gaelic, as well as the cultures of historically Gaelic-speaking peoples. A related word, *Gaeltacht*, refers to the regions of Ireland where Irish remains the predominant vernacular.

Irish speakers themselves lack consensus on how to refer to the language. Although its official name in English is "Irish," it is common to hear the term *Irish Gaelic* used in the diaspora. Among my own family, I have heard *Irish*, *Gaeilge*, and *Gaelainn* used interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the language solely as "Irish"; when making reference to the cultural heritage of historically Gaelic-speaking peoples (Irish as well as Scottish) and the Irish-speaking social order that preceded British colonization in Ireland, I use the term "Gaelic."

There exists a common misconception that the Troubles—fought primarily between the Catholic and Protestant populations of Northern Ireland—were a matter of religious contention. Despite the near-ubiquitous use of religious labels, the conflict was in fact ethno-nationalist, not theological, in nature. In Northern Ireland, regardless of personal religiosity, Catholics generally claim descent from the native Irish-speaking Gaels, while Protestants, with little exception, trace their roots back to the English and Scottish settlers who immigrated to the northern province of Ulster in the 16th century (see Section 3). Though a growing number of individuals now identify as both British and Irish, or just as Northern Irish (see Section 5), overwhelmingly, Protestants identify as British and Catholics identify as Irish.

Irish nationalists support the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland under a single sovereign state governed from Dublin, while Ulster unionists support continued political affiliation with the United Kingdom. Largely, though not exclusively, Catholics identify as nationalists and Protestants identify as unionists, to the extent that the labels "Catholic" and "Protestant" widely serve as shorthand reference to one's ethnic, national, and political affiliation. Irish republicanism and Ulster loyalism generally align with nationalism and unionism respectively, but are conceived as being more extreme, especially in their historical use of violence (such as through paramilitary groups) to achieve political goals (Nic Craith, 2003).

2   Northern Ireland

Current understandings of cultural identity in Northern Ireland are intimately connected with the state's history of political struggle and competing national ideologies. Most significant is the Troubles, which have played a profound role in entrenching division between Catholics and Protestants and bringing culture, and by extension, language, into the realm of politics.

2.1   The Troubles

The 1921 partition of Ireland had ensured a Protestant majority in the north, which would continue to enjoy the political and economic dominance it held historically over Catholics (Ó Dochartaigh, 2005, p. 9). The disenfranchisement of the Catholic minority, upheld through political exclusion, voting repression, gerrymandering, and housing discrimination, was seen as critical to maintaining the legitimacy of Northern Ireland as a British, Protestant state (Borsuk, 2016, p. 48).

In late 1968, a protest campaign organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association mobilized Northern Irish Catholics to demand civic reform. Demonstrators were met with counter-protests from Protestants, who regarded the movement as antagonistic, and brutality from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the majority-Protestant police force (Ó Dochartaigh, 2005, pp. 17-19, 31-32). The civil rights campaign and the response it elicited did much to shatter a number illusions: namely, that Catholics were content to accept their continued marginalization, and that support for the unionist establishment was maintained only by a minority of Protestants. Over the next few months, tensions continued to escalate, sparking low-level sectarian violence and riots. After a revenge attack against Catholic civilians by the RUC, residents in the Bogside neighborhood of Derry, a Catholic enclave, erected barricades and established local vigilante committees, shifting the locus of authority away from moderate civil rights leaders towards more radical republicans (pp. 30-37). In August 1969, an annual parade commemorating the 17th-century Protestant victory in the Siege of Derry became the center-point of clashes between Catholic youths and the RUC when the marchers passed the Bogside. Skirmishes

erupted into an enormous three-day riot known as the "Battle of the Bogside," and the British Army was sent in to aid the overwhelmed RUC (pp. 104-114). This is generally considered the formal "beginning" of the Troubles.

The deployment of British troops was initially welcomed by moderate Catholics, who perceived the Army to be less sectarian than the RUC. Public opinion quickly soured as the Army began subjecting Catholic neighborhoods to curfews and checkpoints (pp. 134-138). The Ballymurphy and Bloody Sunday massacres, in which British forces opened fire on unarmed Catholic civilians, stoked further anger and perceptions of pro-unionist bias ("The Ten People Killed in Ballymurphy in 1971 Were Entirely Innocent", 2021). Meanwhile, republican and loyalist paramilitaries engaged in guerrilla warfare against British security forces and each other, enacting horrific violence against civilians through shootings and terrorist bombing campaigns (De Fazio, 2020). By the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA), which negotiated a formal end to the fighting and provisions for power-sharing, over 3,000 people had been killed, the majority of them civilians (Sutton, n.d.).

2.2   Northern Ireland Post-Conflict

The specter of the Troubles looms large in the modern Northern Irish consciousness. Almost two decades after the GFA, a "substantial proportion" of Northern Ireland's adult population suffers adverse mental health effects as a result of "chronic trauma exposure" (Ferry et al., 2014, p. 1). With the near-total[2] cessation of violence, cultural expression has become the primary means of maintaining ethnic division and reinforcing conflict-based community identities. In cities like Derry and Belfast, which faced some of the worst violence of the conflict, a long-standing tradition of painting murals to distinguish Protestant and Catholic neighborhoods evokes their respective historical memories: British dominion over Ireland, and Irish suffering under that dominion (Rolston, 2004). Of all cultural events, few have achieved more notoriety than the annual July festivities commemorating the victory of Protestant William of Orange over Catholic King James in 1690 in the Battle of the Boyne. Bonfires, hundreds of which are lit annually on July 12, are frequently ac-

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[2]Though the GFA put an end to large-scale paramilitary activity, sporadic violence carried out by loyalist gangs and dissident republican groups has claimed up to 100 lives since 2002 (Melaugh, 2022).

companied by displays of violent sectarian rhetoric, such as effigies of prominent Catholic figures and signs reading "KAI" and "KAT," meaning "Kill All Irish" and "Kill All Taigs"[3] (Hall, 2022).

For all intents and purposes, Northern Ireland remains a segregated society. Catholic and Protestant students largely attend separate educational institutions (Mac Póilin, 2019), and Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods in major cities are divided by so-called "peace walls" (or "peace lines"). Despite the Northern Irish government's pledge to dismantle all barriers by 2023, the walls today number over one hundred, and a startling 40% of residents have never interacted with their neighbors on the other side of a peace wall (Dixon et al., 2020, p. 925). Although 76% of respondents to a 2019 survey reported that they were "strongly in favour of the barriers being removed within the lifetime of their children or grandchildren" (up from 68% in 2017), residents generally felt favorably about the peace walls, citing safety and security concerns (*Attitudinal Survey Summary of Results*, 2019, pp. 21-23).

The legacy of sectarian division is reflected in and even built into the structure of the Northern Ireland Assembly (also known as metonymically as *Stormont*). The power-sharing agreements put in place in 1998 stipulate that any government executive must have representatives from both the nationalist and unionist communities (Goddard, 2012). While some scholars have attributed the success of the GFA to its implementation of power-sharing (Mueller & Rohner, 2018), critics have suggested that in institutionalizing sectarian division, the GFA has in fact codified and prolonged conflict (Nagle, 2018). Today, the two largest parties in Stormont, the republican *Sinn Féin* (Irish for "ourselves") and the unionist Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), have historically maintained ties, however official or unofficial, with their communities' associated paramilitary groups (Rankin & Ganiel, 2008; Whiting, 2016)

2.3   Irish, Irishness, and Sectarianism

Language in and of itself is rarely the direct cause of intergroup violence (Laitin, 2000), but as one of the most salient avenues through which social identity is constructed, it

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[3]Slur for Irish Catholicst, derived from the Irish name *Tadhg*

possesses significant influence in identity-driven conflict. In highly-divided societies like Rwanda, South Africa, and the Basque Country, political decisions regarding language, such as recognition or non-recognition, are regarded as "highly emotive" and "may act to destabilize the peace process" (Nic Craith & McDermott, 2022, pp. 2, 4). Linguistic politicization in Northern Ireland is somewhat unusual in that it largely concerns a language spoken only by a minority of the population it is associated with. Still, the centrality of cultural identity to the conflict means that Irish has become highly symbolic of political polarization.

Social belonging in Northern Ireland can be broadly understood through the "two traditions" or "two communities" model: Catholics-nationalists-republicans, whose loyalties lie with the Republic of Ireland, and Protestants-unionist-loyalists, allegiant to Great Britain. These identities are constructed and reinforced through binary opposition, in which "who you are is defined against who you are not" (McMonagle, 2010, p. 255). Oversimplified historical narratives mobilized by both communities portray themselves as enemies from time immemorial (Purdue, 2021), and with little regard for personal beliefs or affiliation, an individual may be identified as a Catholic or a Protestant by their surname or accent alone (O'Connor, 2021). Though, as McMonagle (2010) reminds us, the Troubles cannot be described as strictly ethnolinguistic in nature, sectarian violence has been driven by "the politics of identity whereby one's culture becomes paramount" (p. 255). As a result, the Irish language, intertwined in the popular imagination with Catholicism and nationalism, is widely regarded as exclusionary to the Protestant community. In response, Ulster Scots,[4] traditionally spoken by some Scottish settlers in the northern province of Ulster, has been promoted as the language of the Protestant tradition, but because it lacks broad support among unionists, it does not evoke the same depth of emotion or controversy as Irish (McMonagle & McDermott, 2014, pp. 246-247).

The current politicization of Irish is due in no small part to its promotion by militant republican groups like the Irish Republican Army, who frame their use of the language as an act of resistance against an illegitimate settler-colonial state. This has given rise to

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[4]Ulster Scots, it should be noted, is distinct from Scottish Gaelic, another language historically spoken by Protestants in Ulster. Whereas Scottish Gaelic is a Celtic language, Ulster Scots derives from the Germanic language family, as does English, but retains strong influence from Scottish Gaelic.

what McMonagle and McDermott (2014) refer to as a "binary of blame," in which "republicans blame the British state for the demise of the language in the first place, while unionists point to the active promotion by republicans of Irish in a politicized manner that is seemingly hostile to the existence of the Northern Ireland state" (p. 248). It is unsurprising, then, that post-conflict attitudes towards Irish are largely delineated along sectarian lines. In a 2012 survey, 52% of Catholics considered the Irish language an important part of their personal identities, compared to only 5% of Protestants. Sectarian attitudes towards the Irish language include far more than ambivalence, however—according to the same survey, 46% of Protestants were against the use of Irish in Northern Ireland (as opposed to 6% of Catholics). Though the vast majority will not encounter any Irish in their day-to-day lives, 67% of Protestants said that they would like to see and hear less Irish usage, an opinion shared by only 16% of Catholics.[5] Catholics and Protestants similarly disagreed on whether or not there should be more support for learning and using Irish (Carmichael, 2012).[6] Opposition to Irish remains so salient that in 2021, an Irish-medium preschool based in majority-Protestant east Belfast was forced to relocate after a vicious "hate campaign" (Meredith, 2021).

Northern Irish policymakers have long understood the significance of linguistic identity in conflict and in peacemaking efforts. The GFA makes explicit reference to language, stating:

> All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in Northern Ireland, the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland. (*The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland*, 1998, p. 19)

In the highly sectarianized arena of language policy, however, "any attempts to grant

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[5]Apathetic and even hostile attitudes towards the Irish language are hardly exclusive to Protestants and unionists; as I discuss in Section 3, the Catholic Church and even the Irish nationalist movement have at varying times embraced and rejected Irish.

[6]It should be noted that across the board, the majority of both Catholic (93%) and Protestant (73%) respondents agreed that "pupils, who wish, should be able to take Irish as a subject at school."

recognition or support to these [minority languages in Northern Ireland] comes under the intense scrutiny of zero-sum partisan politics" (McMonagle & McDermott, 2014, p. 246). Even matters of symbolic recognition become embroiled in sectarian division—the suggested inclusion of an Irish language proficiency question in the 1991 Northern Ireland census, the first of its kind since 1926, was so controversial as to ignite fears of a Protestant census boycott (Cooley, 2022). Attempts to pass legislation granting Irish equal status to English have been met with staunch opposition from unionist political parties and accusations of "[weaponizing] culture," promoting "balkanization," and "[dividing] communities who would otherwise live in harmony" ("Council's Erection of Irish Language Street Signs 'an Attempt to Divide Harmonious Communities' Says UUP Representative", 2020; "Irish Language Act a Political Tool That Could Balkanise NI", 2017; "Steve Aiken: 'UUP Will Continue to Oppose Irish Language Act but Will Keep Freedom of Conscience on Matters Such as Abortion'", 2019). MacKenzie et al. (2022) describe this "discursive construction" of Irish as disruptive and dangerous as a propagation of the "hegemonic and homogeonising intentions" of British settler-colonialism. English, in contrast, is so thoroughly positioned as normative that in 2018, Northern Ireland's largest university rejected bilingual signage on the basis that the inclusion of Irish would undermine its neutrality (pp. 491-492).

This "two communities" model, entrenched as it is in both nationalist and unionist narratives, fails to capture the true diversity of Northern Ireland's ethnic and linguistic groups. Largely absent from policy-making discourse are sign languages, migrant languages, and Cant, the traditional language of Irish Travellers (McMonagle & McDermott, 2014, p. 246). Most significantly, the portrayal of the Irish language as inherently republican or antithetical to Protestant identity feeds a narrative that prolongs sectarian antagonism and alienates Protestants from their own history.

3 A Nationalist History of the Irish Language

Though historians widely agree that the concept of nationhood is a relatively recent phenomenon, nationalists understand people to have always existed as distinct nations, which Anderson (1991) describes as "imagined communities." "Members of even the smallest

nation," he says, "will never know most of their fellow-members ...yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." In fact, he argues, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (pp. 5-6). In the construction of these imagined national communities, shared territorial boundaries, ancestry, culture, and connection to land are mobilized as common points of identification (Calhoun, 1997, pp. 4-5). Just as Northern Ireland's ethnic and linguistic groups are understood to constitute two national communities in the present, this imagined binary—Irish and British, Gaelic and English, Catholic and Protestant, colony and colonizer—is projected backwards through time. Yet ideas about what it means to be Irish have proven quite malleable throughout history, and an exploration of the various peoples who have considered Irish their language reveals the extent to which modern Northern Irish identity politics (and indeed, all forms of modern national identity) are a construct.

3.1 The Conquest of Ireland

3.1.1 Gaels & Galls

For much of its history, Ireland was dominated by the Gaelic social order, a patchwork of often-warring clans and lordships that followed traditional Gaelic law. Despite a common language, there did not yet exist a concept of a unified Irish identity, much less an Irish nation; as was the case in most medieval societies, loyalty was first to one's kin group, then to broader Christendom (Klos, 2017, p. 12, 42). While 9th-century Viking raids had seen the establishment of foreign coastal settlements and introduced linguistic influence from Old Norse, the Viking invaders and their successors soon became assimilated into Gaelic society, eventually disappearing as a distinct group (Doyle, 2015, p. 12).

The late-12th-century Anglo-Norman conquest marks the beginning of the long and tumultuous history between Ireland and the English crown. A scant six years after the initial 1169 invasion, the Anglo-Normans, then the ruling class of England, had claimed sovereignty over vast swaths of Irish land and named Henry II as Lord of Ireland. But only in two regions did the crown succeed in effectively establishing English law: the Pale (consisting of Dublin and its surrounding areas) and the southeast, where the 1169 invading forces had first made landfall. Over the next 300 years, Gaelic chieftans, often allying with

dissident settler Anglo-Norman lords, fought a series of intermittent wars against the king of England. Anglo-Norman settler families, who were largely speakers of English and not aristocratic Norman French, began to intermarry with the native population, adopting Irish as a vernacular and observing the customs of Gaelic law. Though an ethnic distinction was still quite salient—Anglo-Normans were referred to as *Galls* ("foreigners") to distinguish them from indigenous *Gaels*—the assimilation of Anglo-Norman settlers was to such an extent that one 17th century historian described them as *Hibernicis ipsis Hiberniores*— "more Irish than the Irish themselves" (Doyle, 2015, pp. 11-16). Out of fears that the Anglo-Normans might lose their English ways altogether, the Lordship of Ireland passed the Statutes of Kilkenny (ironically, written in Norman French) in 1366, forbidding the use of Irish in courts of law, prohibiting intermarriage, and requiring colonists to speak English (Crowley, 2000, p. 12).

The later Tudor conquest of Ireland in the 16th centurywould prove far more brutal and its consequences far more devastating than its Anglo-Norman predecessor, as Henry VIII and later Elizabeth I embarked on an aggressive campaign to subdue unruly Gaelic and Anglo-Norman lords and bring the entire island under English dominion. The Elizabethan administration, in particular, made a policy of confiscating land from Gaelic and Anglo-Norman lords and "planting" it with English settlers. Unlike the assimilated "Old English" Anglo-Normans, who, like the Gaels, practiced Catholicism, these "New English" settlers were Protestants and did not learn Irish. Many of the Old English, who were bilingual, took pains to distinguish themselves from these newcomers by refusing to communicate with Tudor officials in English.[7] In this way, language had become enmeshed in "a broader political and cultural identity" (Doyle, 2015, pp. 39-44).

Believing that the adoption of English would hasten Catholic conversion to Protestantism, Tudor administrators passed statutes intended to coerce the Irish to "use and speak commonly the English tongue and language" and compelled Gaelic lords to send their sons to England to be educated in English. Even when the use of Irish was officially sanctioned, such as in the printing of an Irish-language Bible, it was with expressly colonial and proselytizing intent (pp. 45-46). Catholic resistance to English rule, rallied by the

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[7]It should be noted that the Old English were not universally loyal to Ireland; some even felt it fitting for the Irish to be forced to adopt the language of their conquerors (Doyle, 2015, p. 43).

Anglo-Norman James FitzMaurice FitzGerald and the Gael Hugh O'Neill, was met with crushing military defeat, but gave rise to a new understanding of Irishness, one based "not on language or ancestry but on religion." In the works of some Tudor-era Irish poets, *Gael* and *Gall*—Gaelic and Old English—merged into *Éirionnach,*[8] meaning "Irishman" (pp. 30, 50).

3.1.2 The Protestant Ascendancy

After the death of Elizabeth I, the throne passed to James I, a member of the Scottish Stuart dynasty. The shared Gaelic heritage of Ireland and Scotland led many to initially believe that the new king might look more favorably upon the Irish than the Tudors had; these hopes were dashed when it became apparent that James I was intent on finishing the work his predecessors had started, and in 1607, the Gaelic lords of Ulster went into self-exile to seek refuge among the Catholic rulers of continental Europe (Doyle, 2015, pp. 62-63). With the now-total collapse of Gaelic society, there remained a broad perception of Ireland as unsettled and barbaric, no province more so than Ulster, which encompasses the modern-day Northern Irish state. The plantation scheme offered a number of solutions to the challenges Britain faced in effectively governing its newly-subjugated territory: the presence of planters, who could share the costs of defending themselves, meant that there would be no need for the deployment of a standing army to subdue Irish rebellion; the prohibition of mobile dwellings on plantation land would repress traditional Irish semi-nomadism, which presented a "security nightmare"; most critically, the large-scale development of agriculture would finally put to good use the undeveloped land that, in British eyes, had been wasted in the hands of the Irish (McVeigh & Rolston, 2009, p. 12). And so, with a "civilizing" mission, the British crown began its most ambitious campaign of settler-colonialism in Ireland to date. Protestants from England and Scotland, who were to form a new ruling class known as the Protestant Ascendancy, were invited to settle land confiscated from the exiled Gaelic lords, establishing the Plantation of Ulster and laying the roots for the future Northern Irish conflict.

Made into rent-paying tenants on their traditional lands, Catholics were further disen-

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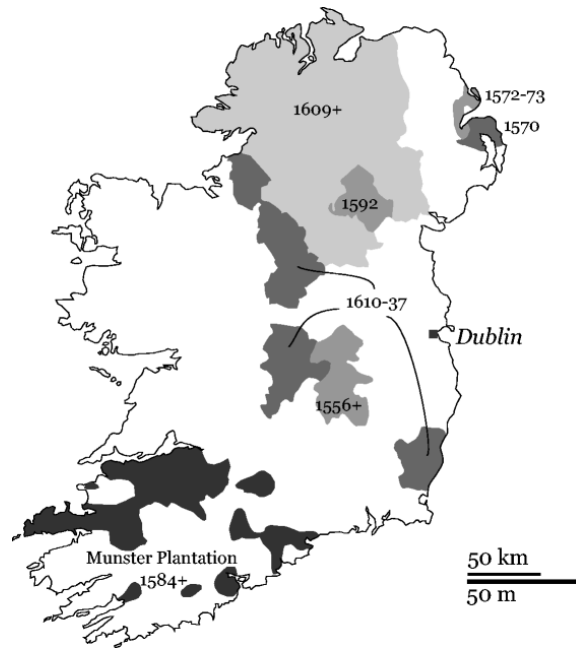
[8]*Éireannach* in Modern Irish

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Figure 1: Plantation Ireland (Smyth, 2006)
Fig. 3.11, as cited in O'Keefe (2017)

franchised by the Penal Laws, which barred them from political office, voting, or entering into professions (Doyle, 2015, pp. 81-82). In the works of the 20th century poets John Montague and John Hewitt (Catholic and Protestant respectively), the cultural landscape of Ulster came to be defined by the binary of "the Planter and the Gael" (Foster, 1975). Very often, however, the Planter was in fact also Gael—many of the new landowners from Scotland were speakers of Scottish Gaelic, which at the time was mutually intelligible with Irish (Scott, 1993). Among those who spoke only English, the acquisition of Irish was, for some time, a matter of practicality in communicating with the largely-monolingual natives, and young Protestants learned the language from nurses, household servants, and tenants (McCoy, 1997, p. 5). To a lesser extent than Catholics, the Presbyterian Ulster Scots also faced a degree of religious marginalization as non-Anglicans (Doyle, 2015, p. 82). But this common "Gaelicness" and exclusion from Anglo-Irish Anglican preeminence did not necessarily translate into actual political solidarity with the dispossessed Irish. In 1641, when rebellion broke out in Ulster, the Ulster Scots supported British head of state Oliver

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Cromwell, who led a brutal campaign of pacification (pp. 63-64).

By the late 17$^{\text{th}}$ century, though over 80% of the population spoke Irish, the dominance of the Protestant Ascendancy ensured the dominance of English, the language of education, law, and commerce. Increasingly, Catholics adopted English as a prestige vernacular and deliberately withheld Irish from their children. By some estimates, less than half of the children born in Ireland between 1771 and 1781 were brought up speaking Irish (Doyle, 2015, p. 65-67, 97). In this way, the decline of Irish was driven by both colonial policy and the internalized perceptions of Irish speakers themselves.[9] At this time, with many Catholics abandoning the language in favor of English, certain members of the colonial elite developed an attraction for Irish: Presbyterian interest in educating and proselytizing Catholics in their own language resulted in the publication of the first vernacular grammar of Irish (Scott, 1993); among the Anglo-Irish, a social class "violently opposed" to the language at the turn of the century, growing interest in the Celtic history of Ireland made ancient Gaelic poetry into an exotic spectacle and an object of scholarly fascination. A brief flicker of anticolonial solidarity emerged in the 1790s with the Society of United Irishmen, which called for Catholic emancipation and the establishment of an Irish republic. Remarkable for the support it received from Irish Catholics, Anglo-Irish Anglicans, and Ulster Scots Presbyterians alike, the short-lived Society advocated for the printing and learning of Irish and even disseminated the first Irish-language periodical (Doyle, 2015, pp. 88-90).
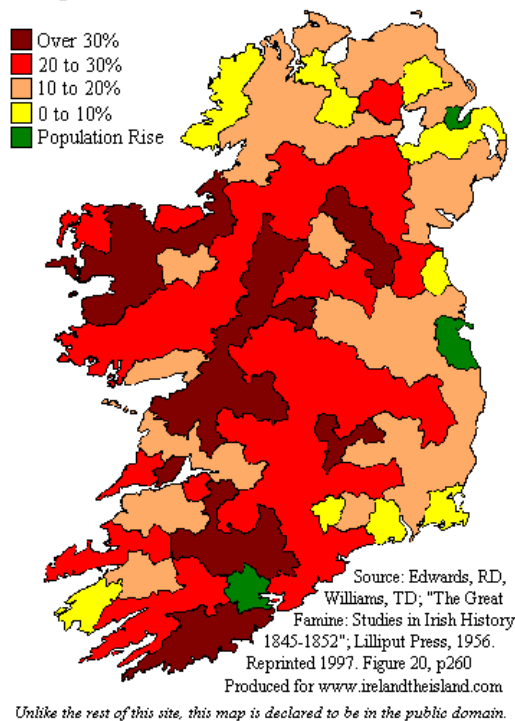
3.1.3   Famine

There is perhaps no singular event in Irish history that has dealt a greater blow to the vitality of Irish or left a more significant imprint on Irish cultural memory than *An Gorta Mór*, or "The Great Hunger." The land confiscations and evictions enacted by the Tudors and Stuarts had forced Catholics onto small and unfavorable plots of land, where they increasingly came to rely on the hardy Irish lumper potato for sustenance. Irish dependence on the potato would spell unprecedented disaster with arrival of the potato blight. Between 1845 and 1850, the ensuing crop failure and famine saw the death and emigration of over

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[9]In practice, Amano et al. (2014) find that GDP per capita, and not the decline of speaker populations, is the single greatest primary predictor of language shift worldwide.

one-third of Ireland's population, a staggering 3 million people (Powderly, 2019). So great was the devastation inflicted by the famine that the population of present-day Ireland still has yet to attain pre-1845 numbers ("Census 2022: Ireland's Population Hits Record Levels", 2022). Rural, predominantly Irish-speaking counties in the west suffered the greatest decline, while industrialized, English-speaking cities like Dublin saw population growth (Figure 2). Emigration, largely to anglophone countries and especially the United States, incentivized and hastened the adoption of English in the diaspora. By 1851, less than a quarter of the Irish population could speak Irish, almost exclusively along the west coast (Doyle, 2015, p. 129).

(a) Population fall in Ireland (Edwards et al., 1994)
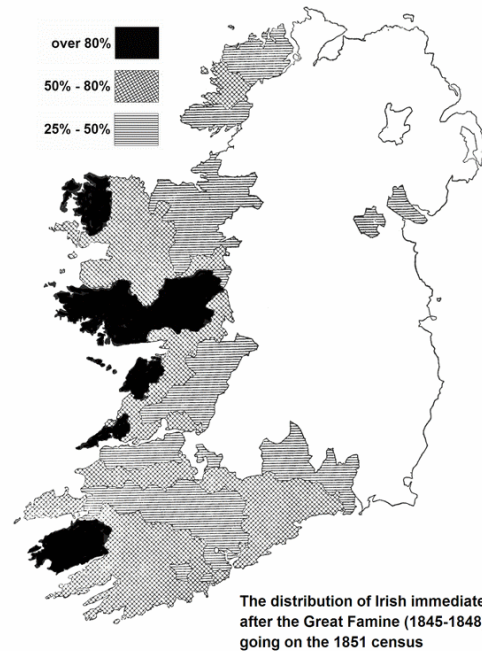
(b) Irish after the famine (*Dialect Areas in Ireland*, n.d.).

Figure 2: Demographic changes in Ireland as a result of the famine.

The legacy of the famine resonates powerfully in modern Irish nationalist and republi-

can thought. Nationalist narratives have traditionally portrayed the famine as a man-made disaster, alleging that mass starvation was allowed to happen, even pursued as a matter of genocidal policy.[10] Later revisionist historiography, in response, tended to downplay British culpability and minimize the significance of the famine (Hamera, 2011). Though it cannot be said that the blight itself was a product of British colonial policy, the circumstances that led to its unique lethality in Ireland certainly were. When the famine did strike, British response was hamstrung by an inability to properly assess the scale of the crisis and a "dogmatic obsession with the moral hazard ... arising from gratuitous or over-generous relief." Relief, when it was provided, was "too little, too slow, too conditional, and cut off too soon" (Ó Gráda, 2000, p. 49).

3.2 Building an Irish Nation

Europe in the mid-19th century was shaken by a number of revolutions as smaller nations sought to assert their independence from powers like the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. European nationalists stressed the significance of language, contending that "every ethnic group had its own territory, its own culture, and its own language, with an organic connection between the three" (Doyle, 2015, p. 114). The recognition and protection of national languages, therefore, became a critical interest of nationalist movements. But the connection between language and nationhood was not always readily immediate, and in many cases, required deliberate cultivation. In Fishman's model of language and nationalism (1989, as cited in Pritchard, 2004), early nationalist elites tend to be of different backgrounds to those they mean to mobilize; it is this distance that allows them greater breadth of imagination. Nationalist doctrines are often initially rejected by the lower classes, who lack meaningful stakes in the politics of nation-building, on the basis that they are overly intellectual, urban, and upper-class. In order to foment a viable political movement and build a compelling national identity, nationalist elites must ac-

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[10]While the accusation of genocide remains a salient and emotional through-line in populist nationalist history narratives, most historians reject this categorization on the basis of a lack of specific murderous intent. Rather than a deliberate and calculated effort to exterminate the Irish people, in keeping with the definition of genocide developed by the United Nations, the scholarly consensus is instead one of exploitation, neglect, and a "slavish adherence to laissez-faire capitalism" (McGowan, 2017, p. 88); O'Leary (2019) suggests the term "geno-slaughter" as a descriptor.

quire a common vernacular with the lower classes, through with they themselves become linguistically "re-ethnicized" (Pritchard, 2004, p. 16).

There are clear echoes of Fishman's model, as well as the broader sentiments of contemporary European nation-building projects, in the emergence of Irish nationalism. Prior to the 20th century, and especially in the wake of the famine, Irish Catholics were by and large not particularly concerned with the survival of the Irish language, which was regarded by many as provincial and old-fashioned (Pritchard, 2004, pp. 64-65). "I am sufficiently utilitarian not to regret [the abandonment of Irish]," said Daniel O'Connell,[11] an Irish nationalist and political leader, himself a native Irish speaker, in 1833. "Although the Irish language is connected with many recollections that twine around the hearts of Irishmen . . . the superior utility of the English tongue, as the medium of all modern communication, is so great that I can witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of Irish" (Tuathaigh, 1974, p. 23). Even the Catholic Church, suspicious of the historical use of Irish as a means of Protestant proselytism, treated the language with contempt (Doyle, 2015, pp. 120-122). This perceived casting-off of Irish culture drew the ire of certain Protestant intellectuals, though many in fact spoke little or no Irish themselves. Stressing the importance of preserving the language, Thomas Davis forged a vision of Irish nationalism that was non-sectarian, democratic, and anti-English, yet because he "did not know a word of the language he was advocating," his writings were entirely in English (pp. 115-116).

A number of nationalist elites did, however, succeed in achieving re-ethnicization, from which they drew political legitimization. In an 1892 lecture delivered to the National Literary Society in Dublin, Douglas Hyde, a Protestant scholar of Irish language and literature, criticized "the illogical position of men who drop their own language to speak English, of men who translate their euphonious Irish names into English monosyllables, of men who read English books, and know nothing about Gaelic literature, nevertheless protesting as a matter of sentiment that they hate the country which at every hand's turn they rush to imitate" (Duffy, 1894, pp. 118-119). Hyde was not a native speaker of Irish, having acquired the language as an adolescent from a local gamekeeper, but often spoke of it as his mother tongue (Doyle, 2015, pp. 170-171). Referring to himself as an Irishman, he argued for the need for an Irish language revival on the basis that "in Anglicising our-

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[11]Dónall Ó Conaill

selves wholesale we have thrown away . . . the best claim which we have upon the world's recognition of us as a separate nationality" (Duffy, 1894, pp. 119). Though figures like Hyde were in the minority among their Protestant Ascendancy peers, as far as early Hibernophiles went, he was quite the norm. Indeed, it was educated Protestants like him who were among the most ardent proponents of Irish nationalism in its early stages (Pritchard, 2004).

If Ireland was to become a nation, then the question of confronting and identifying what it meant to be Irish was of utmost importance. Drawing on the same Protestant fascination with pre-Christian Ireland that had first emerged in the 18th century, the Gaelic revival located the crux of authentic Irishness in the Celtic, the ancient, and the rural, which was to be "reawakened" and returned to the masses. Lower-class Catholics found cultural pride in the Gaelic Athletic Association, which promoted traditional sports like hurling and Gaelic football over colonial cricket and rugby. Protestant writers such as Lady Gregory, W.B. Yeats, and John Millington Synge set out to create a "national" literature for Ireland, one written in the Hiberno-English dialect to evoke the vernacular of the common people (Doyle, 2015, p. 164). Religious differences could be overcome with essentialist appeals to a common Gaelic past—Aodh de Blácam,[12] himself a Gaelicized Englishman and Catholic convert, argued that most of the Protestant planters had spoken Gaelic; therefore, their descendants were imbued with "Gaelic blood" (McCoy, 1997, p. 79). Whereas earlier scholarly interest in the Irish language had been more antiquarian in spirit, now, with the entanglement of language and national identity, the focus turned to the preservation of Irish as a living language and an indelible part of the Irish nation. For Protestants, a group long distanced from their mainland British counterparts, Pritchard (2004) argues that this involvement in Irish culture offered a coherent sense of identity, which they had previously lacked (p. 72).

In 1893, alarmed by the rapid decline Irish faced, Hyde founded the Gaelic League (*Conradh na Gaeilge*), a cultural organization that was at the forefront of the Irish revitalization movement. An advocate of Home Rule, which sought a self-governed Ireland within the United Kingdom, Hyde nevertheless prioritized cultural revival over direct autonomy, believing that "political independence without a Gaelic civilisation was meaning-

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[12]Harold Saunders Blackham

less" (McCoy, 1997, p. 74). In Hyde's eyes, the Irish language offered the potential of an Irish nationalism that was inclusive of all the island's ethnic and religious communities, and as president of the Gaelic League, he sought to keep the Irish revitalization movement apolitical and non-sectarian.

3.3 Towards Independence

The secular ideas of nationhood embraced by Davis and Hyde were not to last, and perhaps had been impractical from the start. The Great Famine had left an indelible mark on the collective memory of Catholics, creating what Hutchinson (1984, p. 114, as cited in Pritchard, 2014) refers to as a "reservoir of hatred" from which separatist sentiment could be drawn. For all the contributions the Protestant Ascendancy had made to the preservation and revitalization of Irish, they themselves were not Irish, but an "exploitative colonialist culture" (Pritchard, 2004, p. 72). An alternative form of Irish nationalism emerged, one that emphasized adherence to an Irish Gaelic identity and Catholicism, and undermined the possibility of the Irish language to be seen as common cultural heritage of both the Catholic and Protestant traditions (Doyle, 2015, p. 115). As Irish became a rallying cry of this new nationalist movement, so too was it abandoned by the Protestants who had once been its most ardent supporters. Disillusioned by the growing politicization and Catholic affiliation of the Gaelic League, Douglas Hyde resigned from his position in 1915 and remarked that it "put an end to [his] dream of using the language as a unifying bond to join all Irishmen together" (Ó Huallacháin, 1994, p. 73, as cited in Pritchard, 2014).[13]

Sinn Féin's victory in the 1918 Dáil Éireann elections marked another precipitous point of change for Irish society. The previous Irish Parliamentary Party strove for Home Rule, a limited form of self-government within the United Kingdom. Sinn Féin, in contrast, demanded the establishment of an independent Irish republic. War ensued; while Catholics largely backed independence, the Protestant majority in Ulster rejected efforts to sever union with Britain. Ultimately, the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 partitioned the island into the Irish Free State (later to become the Republic of Ireland), and Northern Ireland (Doyle,

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[13]Despite his aversion for revolutionary politics, Hyde would later go on to become the first President of the independent Republic of Ireland.

2015, p. 163).

3.4 Partition

Upon partition, Irish became the official language of the Irish Free State in the south, but a "lingua non grata" in Northern Ireland (McMonagle & McDermott, 2014). British policy throughout the 20th century was clear in its intent to eradicate the use of the language in public and academic spheres. Unionist lawmakers withdrew government funding for Irish-language education, removed the Irish language question from the census, and prohibited the erection of street signs in Irish. The ever-diminishing presence of Irish became an existential threat to the unionist establishment; the teaching of Irish was said to be "a ploy to drive English speakers out of Ireland," and any funding for Irish teachers was tantamount to "forc[ing] it down the throats of Ulster Loyalists." Unionist politicians openly denigrated "the so-called Irish language" as a "leprechaun language" and "a dead language for a dead people" (Cahill, 2007, p. 122).

The outbreak of the Troubles witnessed a semi-revival of Irish that further drew the language into the fold of nationalism and republicanism. Between 1971 and 1998, up to 25,000 prisoners, the majority of them Catholic men, passed through Northern Ireland's prison system under a policy of internment without trial. Despite bans on teaching materials and the use of the language, prisoners self-organized Irish classes, often conducted aurally or with improvised writing materials. The learning and use of Irish by republican prisoners was seen as a form of resistance on two fronts: firstly, that of the broader anti-colonial struggle, and secondly, direct resistance against English-speaking prison wardens (Reinisch, 2016, pp. 240-243). This community of Irish speakers came to be known as "jailtacht," a portmanteau of "jail" and "Gaeltacht" (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012).

The physical isolation of the jailtacht from the outside world did not prevent, but rather arguably heightened, its influence on broader Northern Irish society. The 1981 prison hunger strikes, especially the death of republican hunger striker Bobby Sands, ignited passion and outrage among Catholic civilians, and enrollment in Irish-language schools increased sharply, with many pupils claiming Sands and the hunger strikers as their inspiration (Reinisch, 2016, p. 249). Former republican prisoners played an important role

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in promoting and teaching the language, which came to be so thoroughly embedded in the political consciousness of the republican movement that its revival was a "constitutional aim" of the Irish Republican Army (Mac Giolla Chríost, 2012, p. 15). "I don't think we can exist as a separate people without our language," a Sinn Féin cultural officer was quoted as saying 1984. "Now every phrase you speak is a bullet in a freedom struggle. Every phrase you use is a brick in a great building, a rebuilding of the Irish nation" (Goldenberg, 2002, p. 70, as cited in Pritchard, 2014, p. 75). But the political underpinnings of the jailtacht were not uniform, and it was there that mainstream loyalist prisoners also sought engagement with the language, though for more pragmatic than ideological purposes. Gusty Spence, a founding member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, reportedly learned enough Irish during his internment at Long Kesh to later exchange "initial pleasantries" with nationalist Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich; though reports of his actual proficiency were later greatly exaggerated by the press, Spence claimed that five of his men had attained fluency in Irish and a further 16 were studying it. Remarkably, a small number of loyalist prisoners engaged in dialogues with republican prisoners through the language, which led one William Smith to leave prison an advocate for bringing Irish culture into the purview of Protestants (Malcolm, 2009, pp. 48-50). Once a site of republican inculcation, by the late 90s, the jailtacht had become a "driving [force] behind the ... deradicalization process of the Republican Movement in Ireland" that facilitated the peace process negotiations and the eventual ceasefire (Reinisch, 2016, p. 242).

The republican political project was not alone in turning to history for modern-day legitimization. Despite immense, often violent hostility towards all things Irish, a small minority of loyalists sought to "reclaim" Irish culture, suggesting they had just as much a claim to the language (if not more so) as Catholics. Drawing on images of Cú Chulainn, a legendary Irish warrior closely associated with Ulster, these loyalist histories portrayed Protestants as the rightful inheritors of an ancient Gaelic heritage that had been appropriated and distorted by republicans (Malcolm, 2009, pp. 46-48).[14] Still, other loyalist narratives have striven for self-indigenization by supplanting, rather than assuming a Gaelic, or even Celtic, identity. Ian Adamson's widely-discredited Cruthin theory positions the

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[14]It is interesting, Malcolm notes, that loyalist efforts to reclaim Irish "look not to relatively recent times when Protestants engaged with the language in 'real life,' but to a dim pre-Christian past" (p. 46).

ancient Cruthin people of Ulster as the original inhabitants of Ireland and Scotland, who were ultimately driven out of Ireland by the invading Celts. The 17th-century immigration of Scottish settlers to the Plantation of Ulster, then, was not settler-colonialism, but rather the return of a displaced native people to their rightful homeland (Howe, 2002). In this way, it cannot be said that loyalist ideology was uniformly opposed to Irishness; rather, it was quite often an effort to appropriate and re-define Irishness in the service of Protestants.

3.5 Conclusion

Ethnicity, religion, and language have long been powerful tools in constructing understandings of Irish identity, many of which would be unrecognizable in the context of current-day Northern Ireland. Irishness throughout history has accommodated groups as diverse as the Gaels, the Vikings, the Anglo-Normans, the Ulster Scots, and the Anglo-Irish; it has been Irish-speaking, English-speaking, and both; it has been claimed by Catholics and Protestants, republicans and loyalists alike; above all, it has been a construct, one that has shown great capacity for change.

4 Language & Reconciliation

The polarization of language has proven especially potent in reinforcing existing cultural divisions. However, as Nic Craith and McDermott (2022) note, in the post-conflict arena, the same conceptual fluidity that allows culture to be deployed as a tool of conflict also opens "opportunities for identities, including linguistic identities, to become more malleable" in the service of reconciliation (p. 4). Just as the Irish language was used to build a national identity that united Catholics and Protestants, then later re-imagined as a symbol of sectarian division, so too can it theoretically be a part of the construction of a new, post-conflict Irishness that is inclusive of both the Catholic and Protestant traditions.

In the work of reconciliation, it is not enough to consider Irish merely as a language of sectarian conflict; Irish has not acquired its marginalized and politically-charged status solely as the result of conflict between two parties of equal parity, but in large part due to "centuries of colonial pressure and violence" (MacKenzie, Engman, & McGurk, 2022,

p. 491). The historical oppression of the Irish language under British rule and continued unionist opposition to its revitalization fuel nationalist and republican perceptions of cultural persecution, and in turn, legitimize the language as a symbol of anti-colonial (and in the eyes of Protestants, anti-British) resistance. It is difficult to imagine Catholics accepting Irish as part of a heritage shared with Protestants so long as Protestants are also understood to constitute an existential threat to the language. The work of rapprochement must, therefore, engage with Irish as both a post-conflict and postcolonial language.

4.1 Language as Reparation

The destruction of Indigenous cultures, and by extension, languages, has been "central to the colonial project and nation-building by settler states" (Vrdoljak, 2008, p. 197). Khawaja (2021) identifies the loss of Indigenous languages as a barrier to inter-generational knowledge transfer and damaging to Indigenous cultural identity, society, and well-being. Though efforts to amend these losses are frustrated by the fact that "intangible heritage, such as a language, a cultural rite, and the relationship with the land, cannot be reconstructed" (Novic, 2016, pp. 194-195), the protection and revitalization of Indigenous language has been suggested by some scholars as a means of restitution for "linguicide" (Fontaine, 2017). The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), while not legally binding, suggests the beginning of efforts to seriously engage with these initiatives. Within a broader framework of Indigenous rights to self-determination and protection from forced assimilation, it affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to "revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures" and a state obligation to "take effective measures to ensure that this right is protected" (p. 5). Language has also been recognized as an important aspect of postcolonial reconciliation by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which aims to redress the legacy of Canada's residential school system. Among the calls to action issued by the Commission to the federal government are the recognition of Indigenous languages as "a fundamental and valued element of Canadian culture and society" and the provision of "sufficient funds for Aboriginal-language revitalization and preservation" (*Calls to Action*, 2015).

The situations of Irish and Indigenous languages are not fully analogous. For one, unlike most Indigenous languages, which lack meaningful legal recognition, Irish enjoys official status and significant political support in the Republic of Ireland, where it is is regarded not only as an academic subject, but "one of the substantial signs of national identity and cultural identity of the Irish nation" (Slatinská & Pecnikova, 2017, p. 318). Still, analysis of Irish identity through the lens of Indigenous studies is not unprecedented (Scanlon & Satish Kumar, 2019), and in light of the social and legal barriers it continues to face in Northern Ireland, framing the Irish revitalization movement in the context of Indigenous language rights offers a helpful starting point in discussing postcolonial reconciliation in Ireland.

4.1.1 Irish Revitalization

In his 4-part documentary series *No Béarla* ("No English"), Irish filmmaker Manchán Magan humorously illustrates the difficulty of navigating life in Ireland *gan focail Béarla a labhairt*—without speaking a word of English. Though he encounters a small number of proficient Irish speakers, Magan is largely unable to communicate with bus drivers, shopkeepers, and pedestrians. Over the course of the series, he is subject to ridicule, abuse, and in a loyalist area of Belfast, threats of physical violence (Magan, 2007). Indeed, though 39.8% of the Irish population—1.76 million people—self-reported ability to speak Irish in 2016, with only 4.2% speaking it daily, this number is in all likelihood a gross exaggeration of actual fluency (*Education, Skills and the Irish Language*, 2017).[15]

The support Irish receives at the level of political and educational institutions in the Republic of Ireland makes it an anomaly among minority languages. Article 8 of the Constitution of Ireland recognizes Irish as "the national language" and "the first official language" (*Constitution of Ireland*, 1937); the Official Languages Act 2003 guarantees the right to receive public services in Irish and use Irish in a court of law (*Rights under the Official Languages Act 2003*, n.d.); members of the Oireachtas (the parliament of Ireland) have the right to use Irish in any official proceedings, and all Acts of the Oireachtas must

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[15]Further obscuring matters, the census does not provide a breakdown of language skills, such as listening, speaking, writing, and reading, nor is there any option to self-evaluate one's level of proficiency. In this way, it makes no distinction between native speakers and learners possessing only rudimentary Irish.

be published simultaneously in Irish and English (*Irish in the Oireachtas*, n.d.). Yet the Irish revitalization movement has so far failed to replicate the modest success of Welsh, another Celtic language that has faced repression and decline under British rule (Dubinsky & Davies, 2018, pp. 375-377). Though Irish is taught as a core curriculum subject in English-medium education during the years of compulsory schooling, a "notable minority" of students fail to attain proficiency, and Irish-medium schooling in the Gaeltacht regions is threatened with the growing intrusion of English as the main language at home (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015, p. 187-188). Shah (2014) attributes the overall failure of Irish revitalization to a broad perception of Irish as "useless," suggesting that limited opportunities for engagement in Irish in day-to-day life outside of the Gaeltacht relegate the language to the realms of education and ceremony.

Lackluster proficiency levels, combined with the political and cultural significance of the Irish language, have given rise to a sort of linguistic "NIMBY-ism," in which Irish people by and large feel strongly about the continued survival of the language in spite of their inability or unwillingness to contribute to its revival personally. In a 2013 survey, two-thirds of respondents from the Republic of Ireland agreed that "without Irish, [the Republic of Ireland] would lose its identity as a separate culture," and four-fifths agreed that "Irish should be taught to all children as a subject in school" (Darmody & Daly, 2015, p. 79-80).[16] A strong sense of duty underscores an attitude of stewardship towards the language: according to Garland (2008), adult learners of Irish perceive themselves as "having a role to play" in the revitalization of the language, which they hope will one day be widely spoken again across Ireland. Adult learners also widely report feeling ashamed of their poor command of Irish, and perceive foreign learners as doing something "above and beyond the call of duty" (pp. 69, 86-90).

One significant troubling factor in the Irish revitalization movement is the question of linguistic authenticity. The standardized variety of Irish used in official proceedings and education in the Republic of Ireland is *An Caighdeán Oifigiúil* ("The Official Standard"), an artificial compromise between the primary dialects of the Gaeltachts—Ulster, Connacht, and Munster. In drawing on contemporary spoken varieties, rather than written

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[16]The survey was conducted binationally; however, as the results from Northern Ireland do not differentiate between Catholic and Protestant respondents, they do not offer an appropriate point of comparison.

Classical Irish, the authors of An Caighdeán sought to promote a "speech of the people" model that recognized the Gaeltachts as "the source of traditional and authentic linguistic practices," while also "[providing] regularity and simplicity" (Ó Murchadha, 2016, p. 202). The implementation of An Caighdeán has arguably done much to promote the use of Irish in education and media, but ironically, as the language of government, it has now become privileged over the same Gaeltacht varieties to which it originally intended to pay homage (Ó hIfearnáin & Ó Murchadha, 2011, p. 100). This rift between regional dialects and An Caighdeán speaks to a growing polarization within the broader Irish-speaking community between native speakers associated with the Gaeltachts and urban second-language learners. Where speakers of An Caighdeán dominate the use of Irish in public spheres, Gaeltacht speakers tend to regard outside learners and revivalists as inauthentic and foreign (O'Rourke, 2011)—even as "cultural pirates and thieves" (Shah, 2014, p. 72).

Issues of linguistic authority take on a different shape in Northern Ireland, where the Ulster dialect, not An Caighdeán, is the preferred variety of Irish instruction. Northern Ireland has no official Gaeltacht regions; its present Irish-speaking communities consist of non-native speakers and their children, the last native speakers of Northern Ireland's indigenous Tyrone dialect having died in 1970 (Mac Póilin, 2019, p. 5). To the extent that this language community is the product of intentional—even artificial—construction, the use of an "authentically" northern variety grounds Northern Irish speakers and learners of Irish in a linguistic Ulster heritage, one that in many ways was historically closer to the Scottish Gaelic spoken by Protestant settlers than more southerly dialects of Irish (Ó Baoill, 2000). Even so, the politicization of culture in Northern Ireland, which overlooks this shared Gaelic past, has led to accusations of a different kind of inauthenticity: that efforts to promote Irish do not constitute a matter of cultural reclamation, but rather, an anti-British republican political project. Consequently, the Irish revitalization movement in Northern Ireland has had to struggle against a number of legal challenges.

4.1.2 Language Rights in Northern Ireland

With the signing of the GFA in 1998, Irish received official recognition for the first time in Northern Ireland's history. This would not, however, mark the end of the struggle

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for language rights in Northern Ireland. Firstly, the GFA's recognition of Irish, while groundbreaking, was largely symbolic and did not grant it any sort of official status. The British government agreed to take "resolute action" to "promote the language"—but only "where appropriate and where people so desire it," ambiguous wording that has impeded Irish language development since (McKendry, 2017, p. 121). Furthermore, while it placed a statutory duty on the government to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education, this obligation did not extend to the promotion of the language in English-medium schooling (*The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland*, 1998).

The commitments made in the GFA, as acknowledged in the document itself, came against a backdrop of heightened concern for minority language rights—namely, the British government's then-consideration of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. With its ratification in 2001, the British government officially recognized Irish as a "regional or minority language." Among the binding promises made in the Charter were to provide both Irish-medium and Irish-language teaching at all levels of education concurrent with demand; to make available "the most important national statutory texts" in Irish; to allow the use of Irish in public services and in local and regional assemblies; to facilitate the creation and dissemination of Irish-language broadcast media; and to encourage Irish-language cultural activities (*Guidance on Meeting UK Government Commitments in Respect of Irish and Ulster Scots*, 2005, pp. 6-11).[17] However, a 2013 report by the Council of Europe found that the British government had fallen short in upholding its legal obligations towards the Irish language (*Application of the Charter in the United Kingdom*, 2014).

Indeed, Northern Irish institutions have repeatedly failed to uphold the rights of Irish speakers guaranteed under both the GFA and the Charter. In 2010, judges dismissed a legal bid to overturn an 18th-century law banning the use of Irish in court proceedings, holding that the 1737 Act was not in violation of the Charter, and that such measures were "necessary and proportionate in a democratic society" ("Judges Reject Bid to End Court Ban on Irish Language", 2010). Investment in Irish-medium education is critical for the continued survival of the language (Roloff, 2015), but despite growing demand and

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[17]Ulster Scots also received recognition under the Charter, but to a lesser extent.

the statutory duty incumbent on the government to encourage and facilitate it, Northern Irish state support for Irish-medium education has lagged behind that of heritage language programming offered in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, and Irish receives far fewer resources and professional support than other curricular languages (McKendry, 2017). The ability of the Department of Education to offer Irish-medium instruction commensurate with demand has been further obstructed by a "disgraceful" lack of qualified teachers (Dunbar, 2019).

Post-conflict Irish-language activists in Northern Ireland have largely focused their attention on the failure of the government to provide adequate language planning (Jacob-Owens, 2021). Under the St. Andrews Agreement of 2006, which established power-sharing in Stormont, the British government agreed to introduce an Irish Language Act (ILA, often referred to by supporters in Irish as *Acht na Gaeilge*) to "enhance and protect the development of the Irish language" (*Agreement at St Andrews*, 2006, p. 11). Various versions of an ILA have since been proposed, drawing influence from similar legislation in Wales and Scotland. In one of its more contentious incarnations, the proposed ILA, supported by both republican Sinn Féin and the nonsectarian Alliance Party, would provide "official status for the Irish language, bilingual signage on main roads and shared spaces, a language commissioner, public services to the Irish language community" and "the right to use Irish in court" (Ó Caoillaí, 2020, para. 3).

Unionist opposition to an ILA has at every turn drawn from chauvinistic colonial tropes that echo common themes deployed against the Irish language since the early 20th century—namely, that Irish is useless, Irish is inauthentic, and Irish is sectarian. In 2014, Gregory Campbell, a DUP politician, drew controversy for performing a derisive imitation of the Irish language on the floor of the Northern Ireland Assembly, saying, "Curry my yoghurt can coca coalyer," a corruption of the phrase *go raibh maith agat, Ceann Comhairle* ("thank you, Speaker"), an opening remark traditionally used by nationalist politicians. Campbell refused to apologize for his comments, saying, "My tolerance gets stretched beyond any credibility when I hear Irish ad nauseam on hundreds of occasions for no purpose other than a political one" ("'Curry My Yoghurt': Gregory Campbell, DUP, Barred from Speaking for Day", 2014). In a later comment, Campbell would claim that he would treat a proposed ILA as "no more than toilet paper," and that he was not "against those who

use the language but those who abuse the language" (Ryan, 2014). In 2017, Arlene Foster, then-Leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), stated that her party would never agree to an ILA and that a "Polish language act" made more sense than an ILA. Foster further likened agreeing to Sinn Féin's demands to "feed[ing] a crocodile"—"it will keep coming back for more" (Aodha, 2017). Citing the historic promotion of Irish by militant republicans, an infographic disseminated by the Traditionalist Unionist Voice, a unionist political party, warned voters that an ILA "[lay] at the heart of its culture war against all things British" and that it must be "resisted under any guise, including the deception that Ulster Scots could also be advanced" (*Irish Language Act - What Would It Mean?*, 2017). The intrusion of Irish into public life, even its equal parity with English, was deemed unacceptable: senior officials of the Orange Order, a prominent Protestant fraternal order, cited the possibility of widespread bilingual signage as a point of contention against the ILA, which would "further the Irish identity in a way that puts it above the British identity" ("Orange Order Reiterates Irish Language Act Opposition", 2020).

In January 2017, then-Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness resigned in protest of the DUP's handling of a renewable energy scheme scandal, triggering a collapse of the power-sharing Executive and leaving Northern Ireland without a functional government (Kelly, 2019). In negotiations between Sinn Féin and the DUP, the ILA emerged as the most prominent sticking point, and restoration of the Executive was delayed by Sinn Féin's refusal to cooperate without Westminster's agreement to put forth an ILA ("Sinn Féin 'Will Not Back New First Minister without Irish Law'", 2021). In 2018, amidst negotiations, the Council of Europe made renewed calls for an ILA, condemning the treatment of Irish (as well as Ulster Scots) "dysfunctional . . . in comparison with all the other countries of Europe and all the other languages." Officials took particular issue with the British government's failure to pass adequate language legislation in keeping with its Charter obligations (Meredith, 2018).

The New Decade, New Approach agreement restored Northern Ireland's devolved government in 2020. Rather than taking a specifically Irish-language-oriented approach, in reaffirming the "birthright" of all Northern Irish citizens to "identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both," the agreement commits to introducing legislation to "recognise, support, protect, and enhance the development" of the Ulster Scots language,

as well as Irish (*New Decade, New Approach*, 2020, p. 15). Amidst further delays from the DUP, a pro-ILA rally in Belfast organized by Irish language activist group An Dream Dearg ("The Red Dream") attracted thousands of attendees ("Irish Language: Thousands Attend Irish Language Rally in Belfast", 2022).

With the passing of the ILA—renamed the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022—Irish is, for the first time in its history, an official language in Northern Ireland. With intent to respect the linguistic traditions of Catholics and Protestants alike, the Act appoints Irish and Ulster Scots Commissioners, to "enhance and protect" the use of these languages "by public authorities in the provision of services to the public" (7B, 7C). In addition to establishing an Office of Cultural Identity and Expression to "provide, commission or support educational programmes, engagement and training on matters relating to national and cultural identity in Northern Ireland" (78G), it repeals a previous law banning the use of languages other than English in courts. Whether such legislation will ultimately prove effective supporting and developing Irish in public life is yet to be seen; still, the recognition provided under the bill is momentous and "necessary as a means of social justice to finally remedy the historic repression of Irish" (Rea, 2022).

4.2   Language as Integration

True post-conflict reconciliation means more than the formal cessation of violence. As we have already seen, underlying cultural antagonisms in Northern Ireland have persisted in the face of ceasefires, peace agreements, and power-sharing. Language, as a representation of group identity, is "more significant for the stability of a post-conflict region than is generally recognised." As such, Nic Craith and McDermott (2022) argue that "engagement within and between groups on the thorniest and most intractable aspects of conflict"— specifically, linguistic identity—"is necessary but difficult in post-conflict contexts" (p. 2).

Kumove (2022) finds that shared language "reduces the negative effect of conflict on intergroup trust and friendship" primarily by enabling cross-group communication (in this instance, in former Yugoslavia). But where Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks alike assert the distinctness of their speech varieties despite their near-complete mutual intelligibility, abil-

ity to communicate between groups is hardly preclusive to the maintenance of conflict-based identity, intercommunal enmity, and violence (Okey, 2004). In Northern Ireland, with English as the primary language of virtually all involved parties, conflict is driven not by an inability to communicate, but rather by fundamentally oppositional ideas about statehood; in other words, disagreement is caused not by a lack of mutual understanding, but precisely because of it. And while intergroup contact facilitated by integrated education initiatives has been shown to decrease levels of prejudice through the formation of cross-group friendships (Hewstone & Hughes, 2015), without the establishment of proper channels for intragroup dialogue, which can challenge harmful attitudes towards the language and culture of the "former enemy," inter-cultural dialogue on its own is not likely to be sufficient in preventing the re-emergence of conflict (Nic Craith & McDermott, 2022, pp. 4-5).

Where the communicative aspect of language holds little weight in Northern Ireland's situation, engagement with language as an aspect of culture may promote reconciliation by opening this necessary intragroup dialogue; confrontation with the heritage of "the enemy" may force learners to interrogate their previously-held beliefs about the other group and themselves. Donitsa-Schmidt et al. (2004) note such a humanizing effect in Israeli students studying Modern Standard Arabic, who hold markedly more positive attitudes towards Arabic and Arabs. Similarly, Tum and Kunt (2021) find that Turkish Cypriot involvement in Greek language education "[improves] Turkish Cypriots' attitudes towards the Greek language, its culture, and speakers" (p. 1). Cross-cultural reckonings like these may promote the discovery of shared commonalities, from which broader, intercommunal identities can be constructed. "Both communities have so much in common such as the words we use and expression we have," said one Turkish Cypriot Greek language teacher. "When [Turkish Cypriot students] get to speak Greek when they are within a Greek Cypriot community . . . they see that our cultures are the same or similar. . . . As they notice things like this, their attitudes definitely improve" (p. 6). Such sentiments, observe Donno et al. (2021), often give way to identification with a pan-Cypriot identity: "[A]part from the language, I see ourselves as the same"; "[E]ven though sometimes we don't want to accept it, we are very very similar to Turkish Cypriots" (Donno, Psaltis, & Zarpli, 2021, p. 417). This sense of Cypriotness is emphasized in Guney's (2019) exploration of the role

of "language of the other" in Cypriot classrooms, in which the Cypriot dialects of Greek and Turkish (which have had shared significant mutual influence) are understood by some as part of a shared Cypriot heritage distinct from that of mainland Greece and Turkey (p. 236, 259-263).

Efforts to build bridges in Northern Ireland through language, much like in Cyprus, have the opportunity to draw on both the empathy built through cross-cultural education and the intercommunal identity offered by the awareness of cultural commonality. Indeed, as I have shown in my discussion of the history of Protestant Irish speakers and the shared Gaelic roots of Irish and Scottish Gaelic, it can be said that Protestants, by engaging in Irish, are connecting with the culture of the "other" community just as much as they are embracing a part of their own heritage.

4.2.1 Protestant Learners of Irish

Unlike in the Republic of Ireland, Irish is not a compulsory subject in Northern Irish state-run English-speaking schools; Irish is offered as a subject almost exclusively in Catholic institutions (Mac Póilin, 2019, p. 22-23, 27). Because the Northern Irish education system remains heavily segregated,[18] most Protestant students lack any kind of access to Irish-language education, and Protestant proficiency in Irish lags behind that of Catholics (*Profiling the Irish Language in Northern Ireland*, 2022). With this political and physical polarization of language education, a primary challenge for Protestants looking to study Irish has been the inavailability of "neutral" spaces. But as Ian Malcolm, himself a Protestant unionist Irish speaker, explores in his 2009 book, *Towards Inclusion: Protestants and the Irish Language*, efforts to welcome Protestant engagement with Irish predate even the Troubles. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, Cumann Chluainn Árd, an Irish-language educational institution based in historically-Catholic west Belfast, provided a non-sectarian space for Irish speakers and learners of all affiliations by prohibiting the use of English and discussion of politics; however, with the outbreak of the Troubles, few Protestants

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[18]Protestant students in Northern Ireland largely attend state-run institutions, in which the three main Protestant churches of Ireland (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, and Methodist) maintain a key management role. The majority of Catholic students attend institutions run by the Catholic Church. Though a number of integrated schools have opened, educating Catholic and Protestant students under the same roof, they are in the minority (Mac Póilin, 2019).

would have been willing to venture into west Belfast. Efforts to promote cross-community engagement in Irish since the start of the conflict have not wholly escaped republican suspicion either. In the 90s, the ULTACH Trust encouraged Protestants to learn Irish and reflect on the historic role of Presbyterian clergy in advocating for both Irish and Scottish Gaelic in the face of English hegemony (Nic Craith & McDermott, 2022, p. 11), but was met with criticism and accusations of espionage from republicans who distrusted its efforts to accommodate unionists (Malcolm, 2009, pp. 73-74).

Starting in the late 90s, Dublin-based NGO Gael-Linn developed a Gaelic Studies enrichment program *Aspects of a Shared Heritage,* targeted primarily at Protestant students. The course, intended to dispel Protestant misconceptions about Irish culture and encourage Protestants to "reclaim a common Gaelic heritage," was made available to every state school in Northern Ireland (p. 95). In addition to providing an introduction to spoken Ulster Irish, the course offered units on the Gaelic roots of common Northern Irish surnames (of which many Protestants are unaware), and the history of Protestant Irish speakers. *Aspects* was moderately successful, both in majority- and minority-Protestant areas, attracting dozens of schools and hundreds of students and earning largely positive reception. Though in discussions about the course a number of students disagreed as to whether the Irish language had been "hijacked" by republicans as a political tool or "surrendered" by unionists, most "believed it was a pity that it had been brought into the political arena in the first place." Overall, while pupils' attitudes towards the language itself were mixed, Malcolm observes "a strong feeling that the course had broadened horizons without changing anyone's core beliefs" (pp. 128-132, 161).[19]

More recent initiatives have achieved some success in the context of post-conflict Northern Ireland. Turas—meaning "journey" in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic—is a grassroots project that since 2011 has worked to promote peace-building through education. Operating on the belief that "the [Irish] language belongs to everyone" and that "it can be a mechanism of reconciliation," Turas offers Irish classes to a primarily Protestant audience (*Turas at East Belfast Mission*, n.d.). Turas is strategically well-positioned to address the political and social baggage associated with anything Gaelic: based in historically-

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[19]Changes to Northern Irish curricula have since greatly reduced the ability of schools to offer such elective programs; it is unclear to what extent *Aspects* is still taught today (p. 111).

unionist East Belfast, the program sits at a confluence of some of the most violent episodes of Northern Irish history and is led by Linda Ervine, an Irish language activist with "unquestionable loyalist, unionist, and Protestant credentials" (Savage, 2021). In examining the contribution of Turas to the broader work of rapprochement, Mitchell and Miller (2019) argue that language learning promotes reconciliation through "revising destructive understandings of history; challenging exclusivist territorializations of group memory; and facilitating critical reflection on self, and empathy for other" (p. 235).

A major component of Turas's educational work concerns the "expansive heritage" of the Irish language and inviting Protestants to consider their own relationship to it. One talk given by Ervine, titled *Gaelic Place Names for Dummies*, explores Northern Irish toponymy, which largely derives from Irish descriptions of the natural world. Emphasizing "the Irish all around us," Ervine suggests that knowledge of the language provides individuals with a deeper connection to the land and to themselves: "...all of a sudden people understand that it's part and parcel of who and what they are, and it's all around them" (p. 243). Besides attempting to connect learners to Irish, Ervine draws links to Protestant understandings of heritage. She stresses the diverse origins of Northern Ireland's toponyms, which include Norman and Scottish Gaelic, and the close links between the Irish and Scottish Gaelic languages.

One participant described students reacting in surprise:

> It's people's faces when they see it ... you should see a few of them, they're sort of [shocked look], "didn't know that, did you," you know, and they're getting educated ... which is, I have to say, part of reconciliation in my opinion. (p. 244)

Crucially, the intent of the program is not to convert Protestants to a more Catholic- or nationalist-oriented identity; rather, Turas sees learners as both discovering a part of their own heritage and connecting with a part of the "other" community's culture. As Mitchell and Miller point out, the spirit of Turas directly draws on the GFA's recognition of the right to be "British, Irish, or both." Learners spoke of feeling able to "own" an Irish identity that was not at odds with their British identity—even an ability to "merge" the two:

I enjoy my Irishness... it ultimately made me a stronger person... and what's wrong with the unionist community, with this fixation on Britishness is... it makes you weak. They don't have as many roots to put down into the ground, and they're easily blown over, by the words of a politician or somebody else. (p. 244)

Mitchell and Miller identify this cultural anxiety with the settler origins of the Ulster Protestant community, and argue that Turas confronts this insecurity by fostering "a sense of rootedness" in Ireland and a connection with Irish people (p. 244). In this regard, the work of Turas can be characterized by an ethos of crossing barriers, cultural, ideological, and territorial. One participant described the program as an opportunity to "break [the] stigma" around Irish, a language that had previously been perceived as "off limits" due to his strict Protestant unionist upbringing (p. 243). The context in which language is presented—through the incorporation of culture, music, and dance, rather than politics—is believed to play a major role in the program's success. In addition to fostering a warm learning atmosphere ("I couldn't believe the fullness of the community, it was so welcoming"; "I immediately felt a sense of belonging"; "It's the craic[20] in here"), it positions Irish as a living language embedded in community, not a sectarian weapon. Excursions into the Donegal Gaeltacht in the Republic of Ireland expose Protestants to majority-Catholic territories they would otherwise never have ventured into, with a marked mutual humanizing effect: "They found out we are not all waving flags and shouting 'no surrender'[21] ... we're actually normal people"; "It opens up that link with Irish speakers who are not of the same religious persuasion as yourself. It's easy to hate people that you don't know. But once you get to know them, it's tougher" (p. 245).

The proximity of language to conflict nevertheless remains quite salient to Protestants. Dunlevy (2020) finds that a number of Turas participants keep their involvement in Turas a secret from their family, friends, and neighbors. For some, this extended as far as declining to participate in class photographs for fear of being identified. As summarized by one

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[20]Irish slang for 'fun'. The etymology of *craic* in and of itself is another story of cultural exchange between Catholics and Protestants—the word was borrowed into Irish from the Scots *crack*, then borrowed into English in its Gaelicized form.

[21]Traditional unionist slogan

participant: "I wouldn't tell everyone because you're never quite sure here what way the tide is going to flow or when it'd come back to bite you" (p. 10). To that end, Protestant learners stressed the significance of having Irish classes taught by, for, and in their own community. In the case of Turas, Lina Ervine's ability to "get away with" teaching Irish was attributed to her status within the unionist community (p. 9). Physical location too played an important role in learners' perceptions of community affiliations—participants spoke of feeling more comfortable being able to study Irish in Protestant or mixed neighborhoods, rather than having to travel to Belfast's heavily Catholic Gaeltacht quarter to attend classes.

Even so, political polarization may have a more inviting than chilling effect on would-be learners. Dunlevy notes that the Stormont shutdown and debate over the ILA correlated with a dramatic increase in Turas course enrollment, from just over 150 in 2016 to 250 by 2018, and suggests that the spectacle of Irish in media and public discourse has encouraged interest in would-be learners (p. 8). At least one participant admitted that media attention piqued his interest in Irish: "It's something in the media a lot and has you thinking about it, then you're more interested in it and ya end up deciding, you know, what's all the fuss about, I want to look at it more" (p. 9). Beyond bringing the language to the attention of would-be learners, Dunlevy suggests that language discourse has "forced [Protestants] to consider their own attitude towards and relationship with the language" (p. 9). For some, this has manifested in confronting and subverting sectarian beliefs about "who" an Irish speaker is—sometimes on the basis of spite. "I thought . . . Politicians don't get to tell me what's good and what's bad," said one Protestant participant. "Hence the two passports. You don't get to tell me what to be scared of" (p. 11). Another expressed a desire to impart on his children positive attitudes towards the Irish language so that they might see it not as "something alien," but "just a part of the island's rich tapestry" (p. 9). In discussing their learning experiences, Protestant participants described greater openness to the "other," not only psychologically, but in their willingness to travel to predominantly-Catholic areas of Belfast. Overall, learners perceived their engagement with the Irish language as contributing to the greater work of building and maintaining intercommunal peace in Northern Ireland.

The work of Turas, while groundbreaking for its ability to bridge sectarian division

through a highly sectarianized aspect of culture, does have its limits. For one, it can be argued that individuals who are willing to study and engage in the "other" community's culture are quite likely to be more open to the idea of intergroup reconciliation in the first place. Still, as Nic Craith and McDermott (2022) note, intragroup dialogue within the unionist community has shown potential to "[facilitate] a breaking down of binary senses of identity" and "broaden a sense of Britishness and a positive sense of belonging to Ulster," which lays the foundation for a common sense of heritage. The significance of this work, they conclude, "cannot be overestimated" (pp. 14-15).

5   Conclusions & Looking Ahead

Northern Irish society has undergone dramatic changes since the time of the Troubles. Immigration, largely from Poland, Lithuania, India, and Romania, has begun to strain the validity of the "two communities" model. As of 2021, 6.53% of Northern Ireland's population was born outside of the United Kingdom and Ireland, most heavily concentrated in Belfast (9.8%), up from 0.98% in 1971 (*Country of Birth - 1851-2021*, 2022). Of all national identities, "Other"—meaning of origin outside the United Kingdom and Ireland—is proportionally the fastest-growing (*Statistical Bulletin - National Identity*, 2022, p. 2). The increasing presence of immigrants has been adopted in the rhetoric of unionists, who have contended that support for minority migrant languages should take precedence over provisions for Irish (namely, the passing of an ILA), while nationalists, "[situating] the position of both immigrant and indigenous languages together," have argued for the need to protect all of Northern Ireland's linguistic diversity. But so far, ethnic minorities seem to have eschewed identification with the traditional Catholic-Protestant political divide, making their presence most known in the nonsectarian Alliance Party (McMonagle & McDermott, 2014, pp. 258-259, 261-262).

Other demographic shifts may have profound implications for the future legitimacy of Northern Ireland as a state. As predicted by unionist Ian Paisley in 1969 ("They breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin" (*Ian Paisley: In Quotes*, 2014)), 2021 census results indicate that for the first time in Northern Ireland's history, Catholics outnumber Protestants (45.7% and 43.5% of respondents respectively) (*Statistical Bulletin - Religion*,

2022). While the number of individuals identifying as "British only" remains marginally higher (31.9%) than those identifying as "Irish only" (29.1%), since 2011, "British only" has seen a decrease of 16%, and "Irish only" an increase of 21% (*Statistical Bulletin - National Identity*, 2022, p. 2). This is mirrored in the increase in Irish passport holders—over 60% between 2011 and 2021 (*Statistical Bulletin - Passports Held*, 2022, p. 2).[22] Roughly 20% of the population, however, identify as "Northern Irish only," a figure that has remained stable since 2011, and a small but growing number of individuals identify as "Northern Irish" along with "British" or "Irish." Growing acceptance of a "Northern Irish" nationality may imply greater openness to the idea of a broader, shared Northern Irish identity, or at least, a willingness to incorporate it into existing British and Irish identities.

It is true that Irish reunification currently lacks majority support. According to a 2022 poll, only 27% of Northern Irish citizens would choose to reunite with the Republic of Ireland, compared to 50% in favor of remaining with the United Kingdom. More specifically, while 55% of Catholics support reunification, 21% prefer to remain in the United Kingdom (the same number as those who responded "I don't know") (Stanfiel, 2022). But political trends speak to growing disfavor with unionism, and in the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, pro-reunification Sinn Féin ousted the DUP as the largest party in the Assembly, making it the first nationalist party to ever lead the Northern Irish government. The centrist Alliance Party, neutral on the subject of reunification, also enjoyed its best results to date, coming in third place behind the DUP (Tonge, 2022).

Despite the waning popularity of unionism, among those who continue to cling to sectarian divides, political cleavages have been further stratified in the wake of Brexit, with nationalists largely voting to remain in the European Union and unionists voting to leave.[23] Çoymak and O'Dwyer (2020) hypothesize that Brexit may lead to a regression into more sectarianized identity among young Northern Irish people, many of whom have

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[22]It is worth cautioning that increased demand for Irish passports in the rest of Great Britain as well as Northern Ireland was driven largely by the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union. Under Irish nationality law, anyone with an Irish parent or grandparent is eligible for citizenship; those obtaining Irish passports may be doing so for pragmatic reasons (namely, the right to live and work in the European Union), rather than national ideology.

[23]Among those who do not identify as either nationalist or republican, 70% voted to remain.

no memories of the violence their parents and grandparents lived through. Further complicating matters is the yet-unresolved issue of Northern Ireland's border, which has led to fears of a resurgence of widespread paramilitary violence. A hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland would "constitute acute provocations" and "prime targets for for a revived physical-force republican movement that has neither disappears from the Ulster landscape nor forgotten its military modus operandi" (Stevenson, 2017, p. 120). Alternative arrangements under the Northern Ireland Protocol, which introduced an Irish Sea border with checks at Northern Irish ports, have been condemned by the unionists as "an existential threat to the future of Northern Ireland's place within the Union" (*Remove the NI Protocol*, n.d.). These growing rifts can be observed in the renewed uptick of paramilitary activity linked to loyalist opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol and continued dissident republican rejection of the GFA (Sproule & O'Neill, 2023; "Paramilitaries Remain 'Clear and Present Danger' in Northern Ireland", 2021). More recently, in the lead-up to commemorations of the 25th anniversary of the GFA, the terrorism threat level was raised from "substantial" to "severe," meaning an attack is believed to be highly likely (O'Neill & Glynn, 2023).

With all this in mind, it must be stressed that reconciliation between Northern Ireland's divided communities will not occur through language and language alone. The ugly legacy of the Troubles and the political challenges raised by Brexit, if improperly addressed, present a very real threat to the peace established by the GFA. But whether or not reunification does eventually occur, the ability of the Northern Irish people to prevent a return to the violence of the late 20th century will be directly informed by their ability to peacefully co-exist in the modern reality of Northern Ireland as a multiethnic and multilingual society.

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