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## SPIRIT Working Papers

*The Irish Border as a Cultural Space*

Cathal McCall



# THE IRISH BORDER AS A CULTURAL SPACE

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## **Abstract**

*The Irish border is a territorial divide on the island of Ireland. It has been claimed that the border is also a 'natural' cultural divide between the island's two dominant indigenous ethno-national communities. However, an examination of key resources of ethno-national group culture - religion, sport, language and historical legacy - provides evidence to refute this claim. Moreover, in a contemporary period of conflict transformation, evidence is also presented to support the proposition that, in fact, the Irish border region has developed into a cultural space in which Irish nationalist and Ulster unionist ethno-national communities can explore cultural differences and commonalities through cross-border, cross-community communication and interaction in small group encounters.*

*The EU's Peace programmes for Ireland provided the support for this cross-border approach to escaping the cage of ethno-national conflict in Northern Ireland. However, EU enlargement signalled an end for EU Peace funding and severe economic recession undermines the expectation of British-Irish intergovernmental intervention to support cross-border partnerships and their work. Furthermore, unionist political elites have begun to engage in rhetorical recidivism regarding the border and culture. Therefore, the outlook for the sustainability of this cultural space and, by extension, the implications for the conflict transformation effort are ominous.*

## **Résumé**

*La frontière irlandaise constitue une division territoriale sur l'île d'Irlande. On a pu avancer que la frontière représentait également une division culturelle « naturelle » entre les deux principales communautés ethnonationales autochtones de l'île. Or, un examen des ressources principales de la culture des groupes ethnonationaux – religion, sport, langue, héritage historique – conduit à réfuter cette thèse. De plus, dans une période de transformation de conflit, la région frontalière irlandaise s'est ancrée dans un espace culturel au sein duquel les communautés ethnonationales nationaliste irlandaise et unioniste d'Ulster ont pu explorer leurs différences, mais aussi leurs traits culturels communs au travers d'interactions trans-frontalières et trans-communautaires, notamment via des échanges entre groupes restreints. Le programme de l'Union Européenne pour la paix en Irlande a constitué une ressource essentielle pour cette approche transfrontalière aspirant à extraire les acteurs de la cage du conflit ethnonational nord-irlandais. Cependant, le processus d'élargissement de l'UE a mis un terme au financement du processus de paix, et la récession économique sévère a rendu de plus en plus improbable une intervention intergouvernementale anglo-irlandaise en matière de partenariat transfrontalier. Qui plus est, les élites politiques unionistes se sont engagées dans une rhétorique récidiviste concernant la frontière et la culture. De fait, ces évolutions ne sont pas de très bon augure en ce qui concerne le caractère durable de cet espace culturel et, par extension, ses implications dans la transformation du conflit.*

## **Keywords | Mots clés**

*Irish border, culture, conflict transformation, Peace programmes, sustainability  
Frontière irlandaise, transformation de conflit, programmes de paix, durabilité*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1962, the Dutch geographer Marcus Heslinga published his detailed and influential study entitled *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide* with a second edition appearing in 1979, ten years into the “The Troubles”<sup>1</sup>. In his book Heslinga concluded that there were good cultural reasons for the creation of the Irish border, dividing North and South, in 1921. Paramount among these was religious difference which constituted the border as a ‘spiritual divide’ (p. 78) or ‘religious frontier’ (p. 204). For Heslinga, religious difference underpinned ‘two nations’ on the island of Ireland – the Catholic Irish nation in the South and Protestant British ‘Ulstermen’ in Northern Ireland (p. 62).

After its creation the Irish border certainly became a political divide, as well as a marker of cultural difference for Ulster Protestant unionists, that was reinforced by the state-building priorities of nationalists in the Irish Free State and unionists in Northern Ireland. However, a decade after the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement, which politically addressed relationships between the unionist and nationalist communities in Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Britain and Ireland through the provision of a raft of institutions and reforms, the Irish border may be understood in terms of a political bridge between North and South. Importantly, an associated Irish border region<sup>2</sup> cultural space developed after the Irish nationalist/republican and Ulster unionist/loyalist ceasefires in 1994. Through cross-border co-operation initiatives in this space the island’s two indigenous ethno-national communities were provided with opportunities for exploring cultural commonality and diversity, building cross-border, cross-community relationships and cementing

1 ‘The Troubles’ is the commonly used name given to the Northern Ireland conflict from 1969 to 1994.

2 The Irish border region comprises of local authority areas - North and South - that are contiguous to the border. In 1993, O’Dowd estimated that the Irish border region had a population of approximately 800,000 people (O’Dowd 1993, p. 97). Since then, there has been net migration (including migrant workers from the EU and further afield) into the region as a result of the Celtic Tiger economy in the South, the Irish peace process, and EU Structural Funds and Community Initiatives benefiting the region as a whole.

the peace process.

The European Union (EU) has had an important influence on reconfiguring the border economically and politically, not least through the removal of non-tariff barriers and support for North/South institutions provided by the 1998 Agreement. It has also been integral to the development of an Irish border region cultural space through its provision of funding for cross-border, cross-community partnerships under the auspices of structural funds and community initiatives including the EU Peace programmes for Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland (1995-2013).

At the outset this paper challenges Heslinga's conceptualisation of the border as a 'natural' cultural divide. It does this by examining his representation of culture and his hypothesis that the border accurately reflected ethno-national cultural difference on the island of Ireland. Thereafter, it proposes that European integration, the Irish Peace Process and EU programmes have lead to a reconfiguration of the border from a political barrier to bridge and to the production of a cross-border cultural space that is conducive to communication between unionists and nationalists to a conflict transformation<sup>3</sup> end. In particular, it examines the role of the EU Peace programmes in creating opportunities for cross-cultural communication in an Irish border region space. The paper uses semi-structured in-depth interviews, conducted with a range of politicians and community activists, to support the proposition. It also addresses the issue of the sustainability of this cultural space after the 2004 enlargement of the EU and in a period of sharp economic downturn commencing in 2008.

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3 According to Reimann, 'conflict transformation refers to outcome, process and structure oriented long-term peacebuilding efforts, which aim to truly overcome revealed forms of direct cultural and structural violence' (2004, p. 10). Conflict transformation is used here to capture a peacebuilding effort wherein political violence has largely abated, competing ethno-nationalist elites have entered into an agreement on governance and, crucially, local 'grassroots' communities have been engaged in an on-going peace-building effort (Lederach 1995, p. 26).

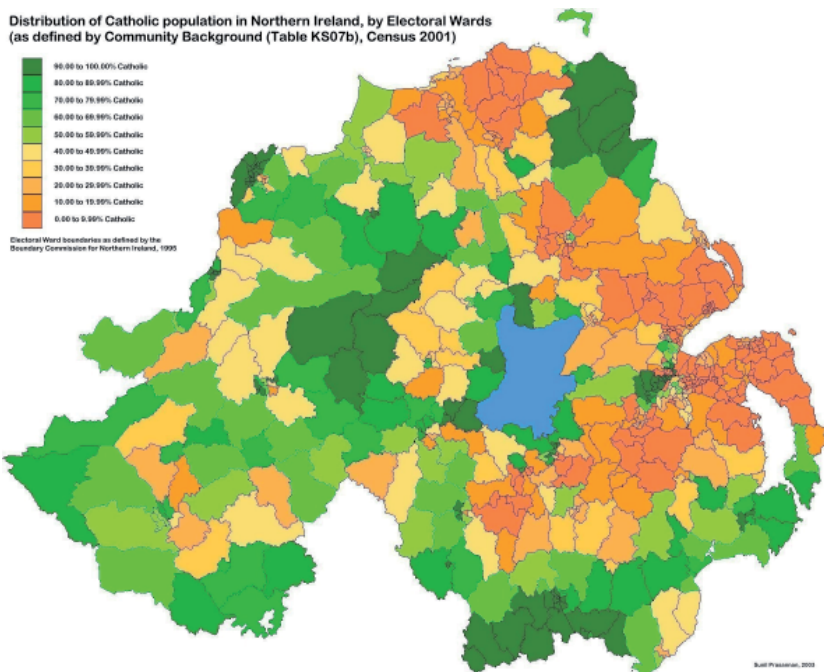
## THE RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

According to Heslinga, religion is fundamental to a sense of cultural difference between Ulster Protestant and Irish Catholic communities (p. 78). However, he also identified some shared cultural commonalities including: an abiding interest in history and mythology; a dedication to parading and wild rhetoric; and a conservative morality promulgated by Presbyterian preachers and Catholic priests alike (p. 81). With perhaps some justification he could have also included: A commitment to heavy drinking, demonstrated during 'a session', or teetotalism; a devotion to martyrs, be they reformers (Protestant) or revolutionaries (Irish nationalist); a fondness for flying flags with political, religious or sporting import; and 'the craic'<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, Heslinga maintained that religious difference between North and South culturally legitimised the border. If one accepts Heslinga's narrow religious conception of culture then it is fairly straightforward to demonstrate that his argument is built on flimsy demographic foundations. The Irish border is patently not accurately representative of a cultural divide in religious or ethnic community terms because, before partition, a substantial segment of the population of what would become Northern Ireland was Irish Catholic, with Ulster Protestants concentrated in the north-east of the new entity.

Partition and time did not wither the Irish Catholic population in the North. The 2001 census found that, while 53 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland belonged to the Ulster Protestant community, 44 per cent belonged to the Irish Catholic community. Moreover, the Irish Catholic community was in the distinct majority in the west of Northern Ireland and in local authority areas right along the Irish border. Map 1 vividly illustrates the fact that, in Heslinga's ethno-religious terms, Northern Ireland itself is riddled with cultural divides that run through its cities, towns and counties.

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<sup>4</sup> 'craic' is a gaelicisation of the Hiberno-English word 'crack' meaning news or gossip. While 'craic' can also mean 'crack' it has come to denote a good time usually lubricated by music and alcohol. Equally, 'the session' is often gaelicised to 'seisiún'.



MAP 1. (Source: <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/images/maps/map12.htm>)

The 2001 UK General Election resulted in Irish nationalist/republican Sinn Féin candidates capturing the two remaining unionist seats west of the river Bann<sup>5</sup>, heightening the river's significance as a symbolic border - arguably a much more accurate 'cultural divide', from Heslinga's ethno-religious point of view, than the Irish border. This increased political definition ascribed to the 'Bann border' post-2001, in turn, may have lead to an intensification in the symbolic significance of borders between the 'Irish Catholic nationalist west' and 'Ulster

<sup>5</sup> The Bann runs roughly down through the middle of Northern Ireland from north to south.



Protestant unionist east' of many towns and cities in Northern Ireland including Armagh, Portadown, Omagh, Enniskillen, Dungan-  
non, Magherafelt, Derry and Belfast.

Borders within Northern Ireland are particularly explicit in the urban working-class and under-class areas of Belfast, as demonstrated by the abundance of 'peace walls'<sup>6</sup> and by the 2001 Holy Cross Primary School dispute. 'Holy Cross' involved a potent brew of territorial insecurity and sectarianism which inspired Protestant loyalists to protest at the route taken by pupils and parents to a Catholic primary school in a so-called 'loyalist area'.

Many inner-city border battles are also fought in cyberspace. Ó'Dochartaigh (2007) has described how new information and communications technology features, like a website guestbook, and tools, such as digital cameras, have been used in interface areas of Belfast for the purposes of feeding insecurity through taunts of incursion and the photographing of individuals 'on the other side', thus reinforcing inner-city ethno-national territorial boundaries.

## THE CULTURAL DIVIDE

Williams maintained that 'culture' was one of the most complex words in the English language (1976, p. 87). Eagleton has argued that the denotation of 'culture' is 'both too broad and too narrow to be greatly useful' (2000, p. 32). Lane and Ersson initially concurred with this view pointing out that 'recent cultural theory continues to speak of culture as values and beliefs, social relations and ways of life – in other words, 'culture' denotes almost everything' (2002, p. 30).

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6 Approximately 40 'peace walls' divide Catholic and Protestant working-class neighbourhoods (for details see: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/8121228.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/8121228.stm)). Their purpose is generally understood to be to prevent outbreaks of inter-communal violence. However, the 'peace walls' also prevent inter-communal communication and interaction and thus, paradoxically, militate against the resolution of senses of insecurity and perceptions of threat.

However, in an effort to grasp the culture of a society they singled out 'ethnicity, religion, historical legacy and value orientations' as important 'bases' while not dismissing the possible validity of other bases (p. 38). Kottak was more interested in the way in which these 'bases' or 'phenomena' are shaped, changed and used: 'Cultural traditions take ... phenomena ... and channel them in particular directions. Everyone is cultured, not just people with elite educations. Cultures are integrated and patterned through their dominant economic forces, social patterns, key symbols, and core values' (2000, p. 61). Similarly Avruch concluded that, 'culture is to some extent always situational, flexible and responsive to the exigencies of the worlds that individuals confront' (1998, p. 20).

By virtue of this shifting threshold, 'culture' itself produces a space in which fertile discussions can inform questions of national identity, belonging and a distinctive way of life. The cultural content of nationalism on which these discussions are based includes the resources of religion, ethnicity, historical legacy, sport and language though others like food, customs and rituals are often important too. As Edensor argues persuasively, the nation is not just imagined through the printed page (as Benedict Anderson suggests<sup>7</sup>) it is also imagined through '... for instance, music hall and theatre, popular music<sup>8</sup>, festivals, architecture, fashion, spaces of congregation, and in a plenitude of embodied habits and performances, not to mention more parallel cultural forms such as television, film, radio and information technology' (2002, p. 7). Culture may therefore be regarded as a multi-dimensional site of daily struggle and ongoing contestation wherein the meanings of multiple resources of identity and belonging are continually negotiated through communication (Goody 1992). In effect, culture is underpinned by communication; it is shaped by arguments and debates (Delanty 2008). And, of course, in a national arena,

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7 In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

8 A canon of popular Irish rebel songs dating from the nineteenth century and including *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, *Down By the Glenside (The Bold Fenian Men)*, *A Nation Once Again*, Kevin Barry, *The Patriot Game*, and *The Men Behind The Wire* has added to the emotional appeal of Irish nationalism at home and among the Irish Diaspora.

intrinsic to those arguments and debates are cultural entrepreneurs, political actors, political ideologies, as well as the state or states with a vested interest.

## **Sport**

Sports in Ireland and elsewhere have come to be regarded as an increasingly prominent cultural resource for national identity. MacClancy contends that sports 'may be used to ... define more sharply the already established boundaries of moral and political communities; to assist in the creating of new social identities; to give physical expression to certain social values and to act as a means of reflecting on those values; to serve as potentially contested space by opposing groups' (1996, p. 7). Sport as national performance, for which training begins at school and is witnessed regularly throughout most adult lives whether in stadia or on television and radio, rivals religion as a cultural resource for national identity in the contemporary secular age.

Eric Hobsbawm first recognized the importance of sport for national identity when he interpreted the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a defining moment for 'competitive national self-assertion'. This site of sporting contest had profound implications for culture and identity in Germany and Europe generally at this crucial moment in world history. For Hobsbawm, national communities are imagined and re-imagined through the prism of mythology and particular cultural artefacts. Sport is a contemporary cultural artefact (or 'resource' or 'basis' or 'phenomena') that, in the national context, through repeated contests with 'Others' in cathedrals of sporting contest, with national flags waving and national anthems blaring, has proven able to tap into the emotional appeal of religion. According to Hobsbawm, 'The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself' (1992, p. 143). Basque nationalist supporters of Athletic Club de Bilbao would no doubt recognise instantly this imagined reality when their team takes to the pitch to

do battle with Real Madrid (MacClancy 2007, p. 54-57).

In the Irish context, one of the most insightful analyses of the role of sport in inventing the modern nation is offered by R. V. Comerford (2003) in *Ireland*, a volume in the *Inventing the Nation* book series. It is no accident that Comerford devotes a chapter of his book to the subject of sport such is its importance to the nation-building project. By codifying games involving, for example, balls and sticks that had been played without rules on roads and in fields, and organising them on a national basis, the nation could appropriate individual and team glory and even defeat for its own ends (2003, p. 213). In 1880s Ireland, a period of political and ideological upheaval, the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the identification by its leading cultural entrepreneurs of some sports as ‘foreign’, that is, ‘British’, also served a nation-building purpose through the identification of internal ‘Otherness’ and, by extension, internal British ‘Others’ (p. 220)<sup>9</sup>.

The GAA, principally through its invented codified field sports of hurling and Gaelic football<sup>10</sup>, has become the most visible representation of sport as a cultural resource for a 32-county island-wide Irish national identity. The GAA had a central role in defining the modern nationalist identity and provided a cultural route through partition for Irish Catholic nationalists in Northern Ireland. One prominent GAA spokesperson asserted that: ‘Partitionism, the border, is not something the GAA centres on. The GAA focuses as a 32-county [All-Ireland] body. It’s saying that there is a 32-county identity through culture. The border is a mark on a map. The border that divides people just doesn’t apply within the GAA<sup>11</sup>’. All-Ireland

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9 The ‘foreign’ sports that GAA founding fathers Archbishop Thomas Croke and Michael Cusack had in mind included cricket which, in codified form, was a well established sport in the south and east of Ireland before the founding of the GAA in 1884 (Comerford, 2003, p. 214).

10 While there is evidence of uncoded hurling matches in eighteenth century Ireland (Comerford 2003, p. 215), the Gaelic football code was invented in the 1880s and resembles an amalgam of Association Football, Rugby, and Australian Rules Football (critics may also include basketball and brawling) to produce something unique.

11 Interview, 16 May 2006.

final days in Croke Park are the climax of the GAA calendar year and celebratory social occasions in which the GAA acts as a national binding force (Comerford 2003, p. 224-225). Gaelic football finals, in which Northern teams have featured prominently in recent decades, are particularly prominent displays of this 32-county national identity, though occasional complaints from Southern TV pundits about the 'northern style of play' when, for example, Tyrone (from the North) beat Kerry (from the South), may suggest a degree of Irish nationalist cultural estrangement along the north-south axis.

Although some other team sports in Ireland did split following partition and duly established separate associations North and South - notably Association Football (soccer) - others, like rugby, continued to transcend the border and attract players and supporters from North and South, and, unlike the GAA, from both the Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant communities. The All-Ireland, cross-community embrace of rugby necessitated the sidelining of the Irish national anthem *Amhrán na bhFiann* ('The Soldier's Song') for the Irish rugby team's away matches. Unfortunately, the replacement 'inclusive' anthem is an uninspiring pedestrian dirge entitled 'Ireland's Call', which, as one commentator argued, puts the national team at an immediate disadvantage when it is played alongside *La Marseillaise* (McNally 2007).

Heslinga had no understanding of the cultural significance of sport for national identity. He simply dismissed the popularity of Gaelic games throughout Ireland as merely an 'outlet for their mania for sport and gambling - a mania which the Irish share with the English and other inhabitants of the British Isles' (pp. 92-3). In fact, the GAA is also a significant social actor on the island given the reach of its extensive club structure into local communities and its ability to identify and address areas of social need. For example, 2009 saw the launch in Croke Park of a project to tackle the social isolation experienced by older men living alone and vulnerable to depression, illness or self-harm as a result. Working in partnership with other

interested organisations – the Irish Farmers Association, Senior Help Line, Third Age Foundation, An Garda Síochána, Macra na Feirme and Muintir na Tíre - the GAA has sought to utilise its network of clubs to host social events for such men and provide transportation<sup>12</sup>. GAA clubs abroad also serve as a first port of call for many newly arrived émigrés searching for accommodation, work and a social network<sup>13</sup>.

### Language

Heslinga also considered another cultural resource – language. He was quick to point out the obvious, namely, that although the 1937 Bunreacht na hÉireann (Irish Constitution) claimed that ‘The Irish language as the native language is the first official language’, the English language is the *de facto* first language by dint of the fact that it is spoken by virtually everyone on the island – though dialects and accents may suggest otherwise to outsiders - whereas the Irish language is spoken by relatively few for the purpose of everyday communication (p. 81).

Despite the introduction of compulsory Irish language learning at primary school level in the new Irish Free State, as well as Irish language entrance requirements to the civil service, any revival was undermined by the suspect quality of the effort and, crucially, the social and geographical mobility afforded to individuals by the English language (Kelly 2002). After 1921, the identification of the Irish language with radical Irish nationalism meant that the language was greeted with suspicion by the new unionist government in Northern Ireland. There it could be offered as an optional subject in schools wishing to do so but it was banished from all aspects of public life, including BBC Northern Ireland programmes (Comerford 2003, p. 149).

Yet, efforts by Comhaltas Uladh/Ulster Association to promote the language through, for example, support for the Donegal Gaeltacht<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Irish Times*, 27 February 2009.

<sup>13</sup> *Irish Times*, 21 March 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Irish-speaking area.

and its summer schools, to which hordes of teenagers were dispatched during the school holidays, helped to maintain the language, at least at the level of cultural consciousness. It is a consciousness that is shared island-wide and beyond, even if competence in the language may not stretch far beyond *an cúpla focal* (a few words). Despite the close association of the Irish language with Irish nationalism research finds that the language continues to attract some Protestant unionists who may be motivated by the desire to reclaim it as an aspect of Presbyterian heritage (McCoy 1997; Pritchard 2004).

From the early 1980s the UK government has made funding available for Irish-medium education in Northern Ireland resulting in the creation of a number of *bunscoileanna* (Irish language primary schools) and *meánscoileanna* (Irish language secondary schools) in Belfast and beyond (Mac Póilin 1999, p. 114; O'Reilly 1999, pp. 22-3). This new approach was linked to the UK government's 'parity of esteem to cultural traditions' agenda in Northern Ireland, itself closely associated with the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, some unionist politicians interpreted this development as anything but parity. The response was to resurrect an 18th century Ulster-Scots dialect of the English language, principally to compete with the Irish language for government funding (McCall 2002). It eventually translated into an institutional accommodation embodied in the North/South Language Body, composed of Foras na Gaeilge representing the Irish language and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch representing Ulster-Scots, which was established by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement for the promotion of Irish and Ulster-Scots on an all-island basis.

Cultural difference in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland is often asserted in terms of the Irish language versus the Ulster-Scots dialect. As such, these markers of identity provide a platform for the extension of conflict by cultural means. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) resistance to an Irish Language Act for Northern Ireland is but one pillar of this conflict that has the potential to destabilise the post-



1998 power-sharing dispensation between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland. However, where the Irish language can be used as a potential totem of tourism regeneration then objections are more muted. Belfast City Council promotes the Gaeltacht Quarter (Irish-speaking Quarter) of Belfast, alongside the Queen's, Titanic and Cathedral Quarters, in an effort to attract 'cultural' (presumably as distinct from 'war' or 'dark') tourists<sup>15</sup>.

### **Historical legacy**

The history of Protestant and Catholic cultural representations in Ireland has been traditionally one of opposition. The crudest representations portrayed Irish Protestants as products of the Enlightenment who were, therefore, rational, truthful, law-abiding, hardworking, progressive, clean and virtuous. On the other hand, the majority Catholic community was represented as unenlightened, backward, superstitious, seditious and untrustworthy with a questionable attitude to order, progress and the rule of law (Todd and Ruane 1996, p. 44). It is a dichotomy that has echoed through the centuries from overt depiction in the pages of Punch magazine during the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries to more coded expression beyond.

This stereotyping made its way into unionist histories of the 1920s and 1930s as they sought to generate an Ulster Protestant cultural response to the Irish cultural revival which straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Ulster Protestant cultural revival celebrated the Ulster dialect and the role of the Scotch-Irish in America. It also juxtaposed the stereotype of the 'Ulsterman' as dour, honest, shrewd, God-fearing, straight-talking, though sometimes in an incomprehensible accent, with that of the 'Irish Other' which was often portrayed as superstitious, lazy, untrustworthy, uncivilized, and lacking in moral courage (Fitzpatrick 1998, p. 220; McIntosh 1999).

Heslinga indulged in these stereotypes when he claimed that the

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15 <http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/news/news.asp?id=515>



‘observant traveller’ could not help but notice the ‘less well kept’ Catholic farms in comparison to their more ‘house proud’ Protestant neighbours, though he did qualify this claim to some extent by stating that ‘the difference does not hold good in all cases’ (p. 73). Perhaps the historically literate ‘observant traveller’ would consider the import of the legacy of the Plantation of Ulster in the early 17th century which involved the re-settlement of mainly Presbyterian Lowland Scots and Northern English ‘Planters’ on large estates seized from Irish Catholic landowners in Ulster. According to S. J. Connolly, ‘The main losers from the plantation were, by any calculation, the native [Catholic] Irish’ (2007, p. 295). Connolly rejects the commonly held Catholic interpretation of this historical legacy as the displacement of their ancestors to less fertile outposts. However, he maintains that the native Irish upper classes were displaced to much smaller plots of land. Other proposals were intended as an obstacle to the Catholic lower classes being assigned any land at all. As a result, ‘... it is important to recognise the extent to which [the plantation] transformed irreversibly the face of what had previously been the last stronghold of Gaelic Ireland’ (2007, p. 301). As historical legacy the plantation cannot be underestimated as a cultural component of Irish national identity though others, principally famine and revolutionary martyrdom, have been used to potent political effect in positioning Irish identity in oppositional terms to Britishness.

## RECONFIGURING THE BORDER AS A BRIDGE

After partition in 1921, the border between the two parts of Ireland came to represent a primary marker of political separation and cultural differentiation for Ulster Protestant unionists. It also became a symbolic security barrier from the threatening Irish nationalist ‘Other’. When the Northern Ireland Prime Minister Terence O’Neill entered into a *rapprochement* with the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Seán Lemass in the 1960s he was lavished with opprobrium by the fundamentalist Protestant preacher turned politician the

Reverend Ian Paisley: 'he is a bridge builder he tells us. A traitor and a bridge are very much alike for they both go over to the other side' (Mulholland 2000, p. 84). How remarkable then that Paisley himself, as Northern Ireland First Minister, went over to the other side four decades later to heartily greet the then Irish Taoiseach Bertie Ahern with the words:

Some say hedges make the best neighbours, but that is not the case. I don't believe we should plant a hedge between our two countries ... I am proud to be an Ulsterman but I am also proud of my Irish roots ... Today, we can confidently state that we are making progress to ensure that our two countries can develop and grow side by side in a spirit of generous co-operation. Old barriers and threats have been, and are being, removed daily. Business opportunities are flourishing and genuine respect for and understanding of each other's differences, and for that matter, similarities, is now developing<sup>16</sup>.

The factors that brought about this ideological transition and the reconfiguration of the border include: the development of a British/Irish intergovernmental relationship after both states joined the European Economic Community in 1973; the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement which gave the Irish government an advisory role in the public affairs of Northern Ireland; the corrosive impact of European integration on member state's borders; a politically repositioning and numerically strengthening Irish nationalist/republican community in Northern Ireland; violent stalemate involving republican and loyalist paramilitaries and the British Army, and the subsequent paramilitary ceasefires of the early 1990s; and the changing international context after the collapse of communism and the 9/11 attacks on the United States of America which sounded the death knell for revolutionary liberation struggle as a viable political ethos<sup>17</sup> (McCall 2001). These

16 From the Speech by Ian Paisley on meeting Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in Dublin on 4 April 2007. <http://borderireland.info/arts/artdetail.php?artref=99>

17 Under apartheid, the African National Congress (ANC) became the figurehead of revolutionary liberation struggle which, from a leftist perspective, bestowed this political

factors provided the impetus for unionist/loyalist and nationalist/republican political elites to challenge their traditional opposing ideologies based on securing and destroying the border respectively, and subscribe to an infrastructural compromise that included a North/South cross-border institutional dimension contained in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leaders signed up to the 1998 Agreement. Important pre-conditions for them included the rescinding of Articles 2 & 3 of Bunreacht na hÉireann (Irish Constitution) which laid claim to the whole territory of the island, and nationalists/republican acceptance that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the UK could not be changed without the consent of the majority in the region. After the 2003 Northern Ireland Assembly elections Paisley's hitherto implacably anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) emerged as the dominant unionist party in Northern Ireland and followed the UUP's lead in accepting inclusive governance with nationalist and republican parties (The SDLP and Sinn Féin) in Northern Ireland and the reconfiguration of the border as a bridge embodied in functioning North/South institutions. After the event Arlene Foster, a DUP minister in the new Northern Ireland Executive, commented on cross-border co-operation:

Sometimes if you give it [North/South co-operation] a grand name and give it a grand structure then people rightly feel threatened on some occasions. But if communities are working together [cross-border] in a very low-level way and getting on and making relationships for their own communities then it works. I'm not ruling out having relationships – as one would expect in normal times – between two neighbouring countries, if there is an issue that has to be dealt with by Belfast and Dublin<sup>18</sup>.

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ethos with a degree of legitimacy. Consequently, Sinn Féin made common cause with the ANC seeing the ANC's struggle and the 'Irish republican struggle' as one of liberation from oppression.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, 20 May 2007.

The reconfiguration of the border from a barrier to a bridge began with the physical removal of border customs points and closure of checkpoint hangars, huts and houses after the introduction of the European Single Market on 31 December 1992. That was followed by cross-border, cross-community co-operation initiatives mostly funded by the EU Peace Programmes and Interreg, as well as advances in the Irish Peace Process and institutionalised North/South co-operation. The Good Friday Agreement's provision of cross-border institutions was a key infrastructural element. These institutions included North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), six North/South Implementation Bodies, as well as Tourism Ireland Ltd, a semi-official body established to promote the island as a tourist destination. After the Agreement, the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), one of the North/South Implementation Bodies attached to the NSMC, was given responsibility for the management of the Peace programmes as well as Interreg IIIA and its successor.

In the context of the Peace programmes' cross-border priority, voluntary sector organisations, operating as Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs), were central to the implementation of a number of measures. The IFBs – Border Action, Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI), and Co-operation Ireland - also assumed an important lobbying role in the context of cross-border, cross-community co-operation and were welcomed by local community and grassroots project organisers as important elements in the governance and peace and reconciliation aspects of the programme.

According to Mark Durkan, Leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP):

Possibly the most important thing the European Union has done has been the creation of discrete cross-border funds and deliberately building in cross-border measures into wider programmes of the Structural Funds like the Peace Programme. [Government] departments, voluntary and community bodies,

and private businesses have all have budget lines to bid to in order to fund cross-border initiatives, produce pilots which have proved the worth of cross-border activity and that in turn has lead to more mainstream cross-border activity<sup>19</sup>.

Arlene Foster (DUP) also recognised the significance of EU involvement in terms of infrastructural development and community support:

I think the European Union has played a role most specifically in the physical context of the border because when I was growing up along the border the roads to the south of the border were probably the worst on the island of Ireland and now they are probably some of the best roads that we have and that's down to the impact of the European Union. And obviously the European Union has had an impact through the special programmes of a cross-border nature that they run and the interaction that goes on there<sup>20</sup>.

## THE IRISH BORDER REGION AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The Irish border region may be understood as a cultural space that provides opportunities for escaping the cage of ethno-national conflict in Northern Ireland, thus advancing conflict transformation (O'Dowd and McCall 2008). This space resonates with the idea of borders being reconfigured as networks that increasingly enable flows of communication and mobility, as well as that of the EU as the 'paradigm of the network state' (Rumford 2006, p.55). The borders as networks thesis is qualified by the post-9/11 emphasis on border security and illegal immigration (Vaughan-Williams 2009). However, it has not been significantly undermined in the context of the

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19 Interview, 23 May 2007.

20 Interview, 20 May 2007.

EU's internal state borders.

With the diminishing political and violent threats from Irish nationalism and republicanism in the 1990s, the Irish border appeared to offer a less contentious transnational space in which unionist and nationalist cultural differences and commonalities could be explored through dialogue. Such communication is crucial because language may not just inform it may also affect the emotions (Britton 2000, p. 277), something integral to a conflict transformation enterprise.

Through its Peace programmes the EU has endeavoured to support political élite level efforts dedicated to accommodating political and cultural differences and transcending ingrained territorialism by creating frameworks of communication and co-operation that traverse the border at the local 'grassroots' community level. Essentially, these broader frameworks of communication and co-operation are made manifest in cross-border, cross-community partnerships funded by the Peace programmes<sup>21</sup>.

Many cross-border, cross-community projects involved discussion on Irish histories with the aim of increasing mutual understanding. For example, one project initiated fruitful discussions on the meaning of 1916 for unionists/loyalists (the Battle of the Somme during World War I) and for nationalists/republicans (the Easter Rising). Cross-border projects for young people have included the Cultural Pathways project which brought together young people from Protestant East Belfast and 'Southern' Catholic Ballybofey to play music and sport, as well as talk about issues that interest them and visit each other's districts<sup>22</sup>. Other projects with a cross-border, cross-community sports focus have included the Dunfield project which

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21 In *The European Union and Cross-border Co-operation in Ireland* Pat Colgan, Chief Executive, Special EU Programmes Body estimated that 130,813 individuals had participated in Peace II sponsored cross-border activities.

[http://www.crossborder.ie/events/Lessons\\_Colgan.ppt#463,11](http://www.crossborder.ie/events/Lessons_Colgan.ppt#463,11), The Impact of the Peace Programme PEACE II Objectives

22 <http://borderireland.info/discuss/?p=132>

is a joint initiative of Linfield Football Club and Dundalk Football Club involving 1,000 young people, mostly school pupils. The project has organised cross-border, cross-community soccer matches, 'blitz networking' days, 'conflict resolution classes' and a 'cultural diversity awareness group'<sup>23</sup>.

Other projects have involved storytelling in English, Irish and Ulster-Scots in an effort to promote in school pupils an appreciation of cultural diversity through languages. Regarded as an integral element in a conflict transformation endeavour (Salmon 2007), storytelling was employed in projects beyond the confines of schools and languages – from carnivals to art in public spaces to film-making to the life stories of ex-prisoners - in an effort to challenge diametrically opposing perceptions of 'Self' and 'Other' (McCall and O'Dowd 2008).

Challenging stereotypes, discussing history, and recognising diversity and commonality among indigenous ethno-national groups have been important conflict transformation outputs of the Irish border cultural space. The emphasis of projects in this space has been on the search for commonality, the acceptance of difference and the promotion of diversity rather than on attempting to narrow political and cultural difference. Respect for difference is a pre-requisite. As Anton Blok has observed 'it is hard for people to survive physically and socially when they are not in some way 'respected'. Violence underwrites reputation – either directly ... or indirectly, when the state holds effective monopoly over the means of violence and can thus protect its citizens' (2001: ix). Therefore, without respect, violence becomes the default position in the quest to assert cultural reputation.

The involvement of Protestant unionist groups in cross-border activities funded under Peace I (1995-9) was underwhelming. However, the 1998 Good Friday Agreement signalled a distinct turning point in attitude resulting in a significant upturn in unionist involvement under Peace II (2000-6). Indeed, some Protestant unionist groups

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23 <http://www.cooperationireland.org/files/NewsLink-summer2007.pdf>

have stated a preference for cross-border projects rather than cross-community projects within Northern Ireland. It would appear that the underlying reason for this is that nationalist groups south of the border represent the less threatening Irish nationalist 'other' because they have existed outside the territorial cage of the Northern Ireland conflict. Nevertheless, some also stated that cross-border activity is a necessary first-step that they envisage will lead eventually to cross-community discussion in Northern Ireland (O'Dowd and McCall 2008).

Taking the first physical step across the border has been challenging but ultimately rewarding for Protestant unionist cross-border project participants. One project provider commented:

The first time I went across [the border] was in 1998. This last couple of years there has been a lot travel back and forward. I brought a young school group up from Ballyshannon for a concert one night. They were apprehensive about even coming up here and Ballyshannon's not that far away. They'd never been over the border before but they enjoyed it, it broke down a barrier<sup>24</sup>.

Another pointed out the practical difficulties for cross-border interaction after the beginning of the conflict in 1969: 'The border roads were all blown up so cross-border social activity around here would have been practically non-existent. There was a generation that never went across the border – not because they didn't want to go across, because they couldn't'<sup>25</sup>.

However, degrees of continuing alienation and mistrust are also evident among some Ulster Protestant groups and cultural entrepreneurs. The leader of a Protestant victim's group bemoaned the fact that his group could not attract funding:

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24 Interview, 10 September 2003.

25 Interview, 30 May 2007.



As far as funding goes, we are just bottom of the pile. They have this notion that unless you are prepared to say that 'everybody is getting on well' and you are reaching out the hand of friendship then you are not entitled to funding. We would differ with that. We believe that you have to be truthful, up-front and straight. Instead of sitting down and having a cup of tea and a biscuit and pretending everything is OK we believe that you have to be truthful with the people and hopefully that's when you will start to get to the core of the problem<sup>26</sup>.

Nevertheless, this vocal community activist remained open to the idea that cross-border communication could benefit conflict transformation:

I believe that people should be talking from North and South. I believe that it is important that we do talk so that people learn about each other, especially in the border areas. We have people who live in the border areas who have never put their foot on the southern side of the border - that's hard to believe - but they have lived all their lives and would never put their foot into the southern side of the border<sup>27</sup>.

Yet, mistrust also surfaced as to the ends of this communication when he commented:

I couldn't give 'a stuff' about cross-border activity, you know, within reason. If it's people coming from the southern side to make political decisions here then I would differ there but as far as 'people working together' goes ... I don't have a problem with that<sup>28</sup>.

Lord Laird, a high-profile advocate of Ulster-Scots also demons-

<sup>26</sup> Interview, 27 May 2006.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

trated mistrust when he complained of lack of co-operation from the Irish government in promoting the work of Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch through the North/South Languages body. According to Laird, this was a case of ethno-national bias rather than the difficulty faced by Irish civil servants in adapting to a transnational ethos. Laird's conclusion was that 'you cannot trust people in Dublin'. He maintained that the inclusion of the Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch with Foras na Gaeilge in the North/South Languages body was tokenism to disguise a united Ireland intent<sup>29</sup>. Laird's irritation with Southern state officials may have been exacerbated by different organizational cultures of the civil services, North and South. They may also have been spiked by what Freud and later Blok referred to as a 'narcissime des petites différences' (1929, p. 39) and a 'narcissism of minor differences' (1998). Such irritation raises the possibility that increased cross-border communication and contact, facilitated by a border cultural space, may actually intensify the narcissism of minor cultural differences, particularly among ethno-national groups and individuals seeking to maintain the differentiation and oppositional elements of their subject positions.

Heslinga maintained that both communities in Northern Ireland – unionist and nationalist – harboured a 'sense of difference from Southerners' (p. 75). While Northern nationalists are likely to deny the existence of cultural difference from their Southern co-nationals they may concede that a degree of estrangement has developed since partition in 1921. Southerners may more readily concede estrangement because the post-1969 British/Irish conflict was largely contained within Northern Ireland with differing life experiences resulting between North and South (Cañas Bottos and Rougier 2006, p. 634). However, this has not translating into differentiation and 'othering' in a 26-county 'Free State' nationalism: 'North and South – it's all the same, we're all the same' was a comment that reflected general opinion among Southern border region respondents in a study by Todd,

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29 At the 2005 Institute of British-Irish Studies (UCD) conference, *The North/South Bodies, Five Years On*.

Muldoon, Trew, Cañas Bottos, Rougier and McLaughlin (2006, p. 372-373). Cross-border communication and co-operation helps to diffuse the territorial issue for nationalist/republican groups because it begins to address degrees of estrangement along the North-South axis caused by partition and conflict.

## AFTER PEACE?

Peace I (1995-1999) was allocated EU funding totalling €500 million. Between 2000 and 2004 Peace II received €531 million from the EU<sup>30</sup>. Peace II was extended until 2006 with an additional €160 million in funding<sup>31</sup>. Finally, Peace III (2007-13) is worth €333 million for the period<sup>32</sup>. In total, therefore, the Peace programmes will have drawn €1,524 million from EU structural funds and community initiatives over almost 2 decades. A priority of all three programmes has been the development of cross-border co-operation to the ends of conflict transformation, peace, and ultimately reconciliation.

EU enlargement in 2004 incorporated a swathe of post-communist Eastern European states with serious structural problems and a combined average GDP per capital that was approximately one third of the existing EU member state average. With most of the 10 applicant states qualifying for Objective One funding from a limited EU structural funds budget the case for continued levels of EU structural funding for Ireland was untenable. That was made clear when the Peace III programme (2007-13) was allocated an amount that was less than half the value of its predecessor and it was announced that this would be the final programme<sup>33</sup>.

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30 [ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/about\\_us/office\\_in\\_northern\\_ireland/funding/peaceii.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/unitedkingdom/about_us/office_in_northern_ireland/funding/peaceii.pdf)

31 <http://www.seupb.org/documents/PEACE%20II%20Extension/peaceextendsumm.pdf>

32 [http://www.dfpni.govuk/index/finance/european-funding/eu-funding-2007-2013/peace\\_iii\\_programme\\_2007-2013.htm](http://www.dfpni.govuk/index/finance/european-funding/eu-funding-2007-2013/peace_iii_programme_2007-2013.htm)

33 [http://www.dfpni.govuk/index/finance/european-funding/eu-funding-2007-2013/peace\\_iii\\_programme\\_2007-2013.htm](http://www.dfpni.govuk/index/finance/european-funding/eu-funding-2007-2013/peace_iii_programme_2007-2013.htm)

During the years of sustained economic growth in the UK and Ireland that traversed the new millennium it was not inconceivable to expect the British-Irish intergovernmental partnership to assume responsibility for sustaining the multitude of local community 'peace and reconciliation' initiatives in the event of EU funds being directed elsewhere. That expectation was given some foundation by the Irish government's National Development Plan for 2007-13 which detailed support for infrastructural programmes in Northern Ireland. Dermot Ahern, then Ireland's Minister for Foreign Affairs (subsequently Minister for Justice), envisaged a more 'hands on' approach by the Irish and British governments when he commented, 'If international attention begins to wane then the two governments will be critical in making sure that they step in to make sure that the cross-border, cross-community activities continue right across the spectrum'<sup>34</sup>. However, with the global economic crisis beginning in 2008 and the subsequent steep slide into severe economic recession it became increasingly apparent that the expectation of British-Irish intergovernmental support for sustaining cross-border initiatives was founded in an entirely different economic context.

The political context for cross-border co-operation may also have shifted. The post-Paisley leadership of the DUP has engaged in rhetorical recidivism regarding the border with the NSMC a particular object of scorn. In his New Year message for 2009, DUP Leader and Northern Ireland First Minister Peter Robinson asked 'is it [the NSMC] really the most effective use of our time and resources?' while lauding that fact that differing exchange and VAT rates on either side of the border had benefited businesses north of the border<sup>35</sup>. A month later DUP chairman Lord Morrow went one step further in calling for the suspension of the NSMC: 'Economically there would be a good reason why this North-South stuff shouldn't continue. At least suspend it for a while until we get the country up and going again economically and demonstrate to the people at large that

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, 22 May 2007.

<sup>35</sup> *Irish Times*, 2 January 2009.

this waste will not continue' (Irish Times, 10 February 2009). These remarks were made in the run up to the 2009 election to the European Parliament. With the hard line (ex-DUP) Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Jim Allister now competing with the DUP in the election it may be hypothesized that these combined remarks represented an exercise in rhetorical border recidivism to the end of recapturing the seat from new hard line unionist competition. After recapturing the seat with a much reduced percentage of the vote the DUP appointed Nelson McCausland (a leading advocate for Ulster-Scots) as Northern Ireland Culture Minister. On appointment McCausland engaged promptly in rhetorical cultural recidivism by publically stating his opposition to the Catholic Church, the GAA and the Irish language<sup>36</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

By examining key cultural bases for national identity – religion, sport, language, and historical legacy – this paper refutes the thesis articulated by Marcus Heslinga that the Irish border is a 'natural' cultural divide. After the partition of the island in 1921, unionist politicians and cultural entrepreneurs set about buttressing the new territorial divide by creating a narrative of north/south cultural difference. Heslinga's book was called 'the most comprehensive presentation of a pro-unionist point of view' (Whyte 1990, p. 146) and spoke directly to this project. However, the fact is that, in the context of the Irish national identity, these cultural bases and their component parts extend across the Irish border and, in some instances, across the ethno-national divide.

After the republican and loyalist cease-fires of 1994 the EU initiated its Peace programmes for Ireland. The cross-border measures of these programmes were innovative policy instruments some of which were directed at developing an Irish border region culture space

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<sup>36</sup> *Irish Times*, 9 July 2009.

wherein cross-border, cross-community communication and interaction on issues relating to conflict and culture has taken many forms.

The evidence presented suggests that an Irish border region cultural space for small group encounters and interaction helps to address the political culture of threat and insecurity, downgrade communal antagonism towards 'the Significant Other' and leads to the articulation of cultural difference and commonality in a constructive way. Such an articulation is embedded in an approach which challenges the reified and homogeneous conceptions of culture articulated by Marcus Heslinga and associated with nationalist and unionist communities, conceptions forged in a long history of political and violent conflict.

For many involved in cross-border, cross-community encounters the Irish border region cultural space has become synonymous with culture as a figurative site of communication and contestation wherein meanings are continually negotiated through communication rather than challenged by violence. However, the development of these physical and figurative spaces depends on favourable economic circumstances and a sustained political will on both sides of the border and among unionist and nationalist political leaders. Economic recession and rhetorical border and cultural recidivism emanating from unionist political elites limit room for future development and may result in a contraction of the Irish border region cultural space with unpredictable results, not least across Northern Ireland's innumerable internal ethno-national borders.

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