

“The Most Hopeful Time”: A Contextualization and Evaluation of
Northern Irish Student Activism on the Cusp of the Troubles

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Abstract

Many Americans are familiar with the history of student riots in the U.S. in the late 1960s—from marches against the Vietnam War, to those advocating civil rights for African Americans. Far fewer Americans, however, realize that nearly the entire western world was concurrently embroiled in similar student-led movements, most of which converged in 1968. Northern Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom that seems to defy definition as a political entity (particularly among its own people, who may describe it as a country, region, or province, depending on their respective political ideologies), was not immune to this trend. The Catholic civil rights movement—which swept through Northern Ireland in the late 1960s—was, in many ways, both a culmination of centuries’ worth of sectarian tensions and a pivotal ‘flashpoint’ for the ensuing civil conflict known as the Troubles. Student activists involved in this campaign were primarily affiliated with a radical political organization called People’s Democracy (PD). Though PD’s role in the Catholic civil rights movement was short-lived, and is often overshadowed by both the preceding years’ turmoil and the more widely-studied activities of contemporary community-based pressure groups, its significance to the movement is unmistakable. PD ultimately gave rise to ‘household name’ leaders like Eamonn McCann, Michael Farrell, and Bernadette Devlin, and contributed to the swift polarization of moderates that set the tone for the next thirty years of civil violence.

**“The Most Hopeful Time”: A Contextualization and Evaluation of
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In the early 1840s, the French traveler Gustave de Beaumont published this rather sweeping observation: “Ireland is a small country where the greatest questions of politics, morality, and humanity are fought out.”¹ This ‘fighting out’ of such fundamental questions continued long past de Beaumont’s lifetime and into the twentieth century—first in the Easter Rising of 1916 and the Irish War of Independence in the early 1920s, and later in Northern Ireland’s Troubles, which lasted from roughly 1968 to 1998. The violence of the latter conflict was born from mounting sectarian tensions, especially inflamed through the commencement of the Catholic civil rights movement in the late 1960s. Though initiated by a number of community-based interest groups, this movement quickly came to include a large number of *student* activists, as well, who were predominantly affiliated with Belfast’s Queen’s University and a socialist-leaning, student-based organization known as People’s Democracy (PD). Ultimately, the origins of this civil rights movement can be traced to the beginnings of Northern Ireland’s existence as a polity; thus, to understand both the late-twentieth-century movement *and* the preceding decades-long sectarian conflict, one must first turn to the preexisting context of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland.

A Brief History of Northern Ireland

It is important to first note that the dissension between Catholics and Protestants throughout the majority of Irish history was more political than religious.² Nevertheless, Irish

¹ Gustave de Beaumont, *L’Irlande: Sociale, Politique, et Religieuse* (Paris, France: Librairie de Charles Gosselin, 1839), quoted and translated in Richard Rose, *Governing Without Consensus: An Irish Perspective* (London: Faber, 1971), p. 5.

² Michael Farrell, *The Struggle in the North* (Belfast, NI: People’s Democracy, 1970), 5.

political divisions historically *have* been drawn very closely along denominational lines—lines that can be traced back to 1534, with King Henry VIII’s split from Roman Catholicism and the establishment of the Church of England. Shortly after the schism, “the English monasteries were dissolved,” historian G.A. Hayes-McCoy writes. “The attempt to repeat these changes in Ireland was part of the policy of Anglicization of the country...[but] ultimately the Reformation had little success in Ireland,” where both Catholicism and pro-independence patriotism retained strong footholds.³

In an attempt to diminish these footholds, one of Henry VIII’s successors, King James I, implemented the plantation of Ulster: the organized colonization of Ireland’s northernmost province, incentivized by the English government and focused on the confiscated lands of native Gaelic chiefs. Historian Aidan Clarke explains James I’s reasoning:

To take [land] from the Irish Catholic and give it to Protestant immigrants would at once weaken resistance to English rule and bring into being a Protestant community sufficiently numerous and sufficiently powerful to keep the peace in Ireland. If the Irish would not become Protestant, then Protestants must be brought to Ireland.⁴

In this way, the ‘planters’—largely English or Scottish—brought with them not only Protestantism but also an entirely new way of life, making Ulster markedly distinct from other provinces of the island. Nevertheless, “the supposedly Protestant area was riddled with native Irish Catholics—embittered and degraded, awaiting their chance to strike back.”⁵ Hence, it was

³ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, “The Tudor Conquest: 1534-1603,” in *The Course of Irish History*, 5th ed., eds. T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, Dermot Keogh, and Patrick Kiely (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2012), 156-7.

⁴ Aidan Clarke, “The Colonisation of Ulster and the Rebellion of 1641: 1603-60,” in *The Course of Irish History*, 5th ed., eds. T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, Dermot Keogh, and Patrick Kiely (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2012), 164.

⁵ Clarke, “The Colonisation of Ulster and the Rebellion of 1641: 1603-60,” 166.

during this time that the fundamental political differences between Nationalists (desiring an independent Ireland and, later, a *united* independent Ireland) and Unionists (desiring continued union with the United Kingdom) were created, aligning squarely with the religious divisions separating Catholics and Protestants.

This seventeenth-century Plantation of Ulster, in many ways, marks the genesis of sectarian conflict in the land that would, in the twentieth century, become Northern Ireland. In the intervening centuries, sectarianism certainly ebbed and flowed but remained a significant and continual problem, one exacerbated by often-contentious British involvement. The ‘seed’ of disquiet and distrust was watered, so to speak, by events including the Rebellion of 1641, in which thousands of Protestants were massacred by their Catholic neighbors; the Cromwellian conquest, in which thousands of Catholics were killed by Protestant subjugators from 1649-53; the failure of the Jacobite uprisings, when the Protestant King William of Orange defeated the Catholic, Irish-backed James II; the United Irishman’s Rebellion of 1798, which saw a unique unification of both Protestants and Catholics for a united Ireland, but ultimately heightened Nationalist *and* Unionist fervor with its failure; and—significantly—the Great Famine of 1845, when the British government’s lack of response or care for the Irish people intensified senses of animosity and betrayal.

Thus, through the tensions caused by such rebellions, uprisings, movements, and tragedies, a more sweeping tension between Catholics and Protestants steadily intensified. Ultimately, as James W. McAuley and Neil Ferguson write, “Behind the sectarianism which enveloped...[this] society was the construction of the dangerous ‘Other,’ which...saw the

development of a society based on ‘us’ and ‘them’ stereotypes.”⁶ Hence, the commencement of both the Catholic civil rights movement and the Troubles can only be understood within this context of Northern Irish history and the mutual resentment that it encapsulates between Catholic and Protestant communities—an accumulation of grievances, mistrust, and fear, engendered through centuries-old political and social divisions.

A watershed in this sectarian division came with a profound political change in Ireland: partition. The partitioning of Ireland, predicated on the aforementioned sociopolitical divisions that made Ulster distinct from the rest of the island, significantly changed the manifestation of partisan strife between the Catholics and Protestants *within* Ulster. According to Paul Arthur, the British Government viewed partition as “the only possible way of reconciling the rival aspirations of the two Irish parties”—subsequently passing the Government of Ireland Act of 1920: “the constitutional vehicle for such inauspicious beginnings.”⁷ This legislation, enacted in the wake of the Easter Rising of 1916 and in the midst of the Irish War of Independence (1919-21)—was the first time that today’s Northern Ireland was administratively separated from the rest of the island, paving the way for the ultimate partition of Ireland under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. Essentially, the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 created a separate parliament for six Ulster counties, which comprised “the largest possible geographical area in which a majority of the population in favour of a partition could be reasonably expected.”⁸

⁶ James W. McAuley and Neil Ferguson, “‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Ulster Loyalist Perspectives on the IRA and Irish Republicanism,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28, no. 3 (2016): 562.

⁷ Paul Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73* (Belfast, UK: Blackstaff Press Limited, 1974), Prologue, n.p.

⁸ Patrick Lynch, “The Irish Free State and the Republic of Ireland: 1921-66,” in *The Course of Irish History*, 5th ed., eds. T.W. Moody, F.X. Martin, Dermot Keogh, and Patrick Kiely (Lanham, MD: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 2012), 285.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which eventually concluded the Irish War of Independence, solidified this political and administrative division. This separation was, in turn, incredibly divisive among both Irish leaders and citizens, and prompted the Irish Civil War between pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty forces, which ended in 1923 with the defeat of the anti-Treaty forces. The Treaty was ratified, and the partition of Ireland became an official, political reality—much to the dismay of the Catholic, Nationalist minority of Northern Ireland. This development “created conditions of turbulence which were to be endemic during the first fifty years of the State” of Northern Ireland.⁹ Thus, the partition became the lynchpin, so to speak, for both the Unionist and Nationalist platforms: the former determined to uphold partition and remain unified with the United Kingdom, and the latter determined to see Irish reunification within an independent, 32-county republic. In this way, the partition of Ireland and the ensuing political climate of Northern Ireland set the terms for the Catholic civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The Catholic Civil Rights Movement

“Political and Social Grievances”

The abovementioned political landscape of post-partition Northern Ireland was a fraught one, characterized by the volatile mixing of an unyielding majority and a sizable and dissatisfied minority. That is, because the boundaries of Northern Ireland also encapsulated Catholic-majority counties (Fermanagh, Tyrone, and Londonderry), there existed in Northern Ireland “an unreconciled, unhappy, large Catholic minority,”¹⁰ with a distinct political ideology “dominated

⁹ Arthur, *The People's Democracy: 1968-73*, Prologue, n.p.

¹⁰ Stewart Weaver, “100 Years On: The Partition of Ireland Explained,” *University of Rochester*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/partition-of-ireland-explained-477342>.

by the consensus that the state was illegitimate and that Ireland should be reunited.”¹¹

Furthermore, the Parliament of Northern Ireland, established under the aforementioned Government of Ireland Act, ultimately failed to maintain any semblance of proportional representation, effectively excluding minority Nationalist parties and severely limiting more moderate Unionist parties from governance. As Michael Farrell described it, “when the Northern State was established the Unionist bosses were at last masters in their own house.”¹²

Hence, Northern Ireland was essentially “a Protestant Unionist one-party state, which governed with a heavy hand, to say the least. The Ulster Unionist Party...wrote into law rampant discrimination against Catholics—in housing, employment, education, and job opportunities.”¹³ Simultaneously, the Irish Republic, which “was also effectively a one-party state,” was governed by a constitution that essentially enshrined Roman Catholicism into law, heightening Ulster Protestants’ resistance to any possibility of Irish unification.¹⁴ Thus, there existed a sectarian tension predicated, on one hand, on “a widespread sense of political and social grievances for long unadmitted and therefore unredressed by successive Governments of Northern Ireland, and on the other sentiments of fear and apprehension...of risks to the integrity...of the state.”¹⁵ Such ‘political and social grievances’ were the crux of the Catholic civil rights movement.

¹¹ Niall Ó Dochartaigh, “Northern Ireland,” in *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977*, ed. Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 138.

¹² Farrell, *Struggle in the North*, 6.

¹³ Weaver, “100 Years On: The Partition of Ireland Explained.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: Report of the Commission Appointed by the Governor of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, N.I.: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1969), 1.6.

The allocation of public housing was perhaps the most obvious area in which Catholics were the targets of injustice, as “even the statistics gathered by the government condemn the situation as discriminatory.”¹⁶ One of the foremost instances of housing-related discrimination occurred in June 1968, when the Unionist-dominated Dungannon Rural Council evicted the Goodfellows, a Catholic family, from their government-provided home—and then allocated the neighboring house to a woman who was single and childless, gainfully employed, and nineteen years old. Many felt that “by no stretch of the imagination could [she] be regarded as a priority tenant,”¹⁷ particularly since there were over 250 others on the waiting list for housing in the Dungannon rural district, with arguably greater financial need.¹⁸ The critical distinction about this young tenant was that she was Protestant,¹⁹ a fact that many viewed as evidence of significant bias and corruption in the council and housing allocation process.

Additionally, beyond sectarianism, bias, and a societal tendency toward Protestant-Catholic segregation, Unionist governments evidently had political motivations for manipulating housing allocations. Essentially, illogical and unjust housing “arrangements were deliberately made, and maintained, with the consequence that the Unionists used...the electoral majority thus created to favour Protestant or Unionist supporters in making public appointments.”²⁰ As Ronnie Munck explains more succinctly, “for the Unionist government, the incentive was that non-

¹⁶ Ronnie Munck, “The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 2 (Apr. 1992): 213.

¹⁷ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 3.28.

¹⁸ RTÉ Archives, “Civil Rights in Northern Ireland: Caledon Protest,” *Raidió Teilifís Éireann*, n.d., <https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1031-civil-rights-movement-1968-9/1032-caledon-protest>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

householders could not vote, so housing Catholics was not good business.”²¹ In 1963, Enniskillen Alderman George Elliott, a Unionist, said as much in an almost shocking moment of candor: “We are not going to build houses in the [Catholic] South Ward and cut a rod to beat ourselves later on.”²²

Catholics found themselves at a disadvantage in the job market, as well, experiencing disproportionately high unemployment.²³ British sociologist Christopher Hewitt was highly dubious of Northern Irish Catholics’ claims to discrimination, but he nevertheless acknowledges in his 1981 article that “above half the Catholics live in areas where the unemployment rate is above the average for the province as a whole, as compared to about one quarter of the Protestants. In *both* the high unemployment areas and the low unemployment areas Catholics...are twice as likely to be unemployed as Protestants.”²⁴ Furthermore, many Catholics alleged that the Northern Ireland government’s response to these unemployment levels was similarly disproportionate, channeling more aid and “funds for economic development in the heavily Protestant areas” of eastern Northern Ireland than it did for the more-Catholic west.²⁵

Similarly, the need for franchise reform was twofold; the first problem was that of gerrymandering electoral districts to concentrate and diminish Catholic communities’ representation. Though Queen’s University lecturer and writer for *The Times*, R.J. Lawrence,

²¹ Munck, “The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland,” 213.

²² The Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland, “Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth,” February 5, 1964, Ulster University CAIN Archive.

²³ Ó Dochartaigh, “Northern Ireland,” 143.

²⁴ Christopher Hewitt, “Catholic Grievances, Catholic Nationalism and Violence in Northern Ireland during the Civil Rights Period: A Reconsideration,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 32, no. 3 (1981): 368-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 364.

asserts that the evidence for gerrymandering was “more elusive than critics generally allow,”²⁶ constituency statistics from the time certainly present a strong case for electoral malpractice. One site of evident corruption was County Fermanagh. Home to almost 3,000 more Nationalist voters than Unionist voters in 1964, the County Council in that year’s term was nevertheless comprised of twenty Unionist and only six Nationalist councilors.²⁷ The discrepancies were more conspicuous in Derry (or Londonderry): of the city’s total electorate, 10,500 Unionist voters were represented by twelve seats in the municipal Derry Corporation, while 19,500 Nationalists were represented by *eight* seats.²⁸ There, the gerrymandering method implemented was “to concentrate [Nationalist] votes in as few constituencies as possible...the other party [then won] many more seats with slim but comfortable majorities.”²⁹

The second problem surrounding the vote was the restriction of enfranchisement to the taxpaying heads of households and their spouses; this ‘ratepayer’ policy had been the standard in Great Britain, as well, until 1945—but conservative Unionist leaders maintained it in Northern Ireland until 1973, when more progressive policymakers succeeded in enacting universal adult suffrage. In a ‘ratepayer’ electoral system, adults who rented their homes or lived with family members were disenfranchised in local elections. This policy further limited representation for

²⁶ R.J. Lawrence, “Remedy for Ulster Would Be End to Single-Party Rule,” *The Times*, January 10, 1969, Gale Primary Sources.

²⁷ The Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland, “Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Paul Mitchell and Gordon Gillespie, “The Electoral Systems,” in *Politics in Northern Ireland*, ed. Paul Mitchell and Rick Wilford (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 70.

Catholic households, which were typically larger than Protestant ones and more likely to include non-property-taxpaying (and thus disenfranchised) adults.³⁰

Lastly, the freedoms of assembly and political expression were yet additional realms in which the Northern Irish government maintained discriminatory policies toward Catholic, Nationalist communities. For example, as Munck writes, “While the nationalist symbols of the 1916 Easter Rising were made illegal, the Unionist rituals of affirmation...were promoted regardless of their overt sectarian content.”³¹ Unionist policymakers and leaders similarly impeded Catholics’ freedom of assembly, especially as the Catholic civil rights movement gained traction and began to hold more frequent demonstrations. For example, the Minister of Home Affairs for Northern Ireland, William Craig, issued a public order two days before a planned protest in Derry on October 5, 1968, prohibiting “any public processions or meetings in certain parts of the County Borough of Londonderry [that] may give rise to serious public disorder.”³² No such prohibitions were enacted against Protestant counter-protests that proved to be *more* prone to causing such ‘disorder.’

The Birth of the Movement

Given this list of grievances, a few civil rights ‘pressure’ groups began to form in the early 1960s. The first among these was the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland (CSJ), founded in 1964 by Dr. Conn and Patricia McCluskey and “inspired in particular by resentment against what they regarded as the sectarian bias of Unionist Councils in the

³⁰ Lawrence, “Remedy for Ulster Would Be End to Single-Party Rule.”

³¹ Munck, “The Making of the Troubles in Northern Ireland,” 212.

³² Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, Appendix VI.

Dungannon area.”³³ The group’s objective was to ‘document and expose’ government discrimination against Catholic populations and to “gain attention from audiences outside of Northern Ireland, particularly from politicians in Britain.”³⁴ The primary means through which the CSJ accomplished this was through the publication and dissemination of different statistics-dense pamphlets, first the widely-circulated *Northern Ireland: The Plain Truth* and later *Londonderry One Man, No Vote*.³⁵ As Conn McCluskey himself describes, a good deal more poetically, “we were deeply conscious of how the quiet drip of discrimination had...dampened the fires of dissent in our community. Someone declared, ‘We must do everything we can to get the people up off their knees.’ Obviously this was to be one of our main aims.”³⁶

Another civil rights organization formed in 1967, one that went on to spearhead the subsequent movement and eventually subsumed the CSJ: the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). NICRA—which was, interestingly, initially bipartisan and enduringly committed to “not deal[ing] with the question of the partition of Ireland in any way”³⁷—had, by 1969, defined their demands to include the following: “One man one vote with each vote of equal value...introduction of anti-discriminatory legislation...introduction of a compulsory local authority housing points system...[and] a disarming of the RUC,” or the Unionist-dominated

³³ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 1.12.

³⁴ Melissa Baird, “The Campaign for Social Justice’s Legacy of Social Housing Reform in NI,” *Raidió Teilifís Éireann*, January 23, 2024, <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2024/0123/1428120-campaign-for-social-justice-northern-ireland-social-housing-reform-patricia-conn-mccluskey>.

³⁵ Conn McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees: A Commentary on the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Galway, Ireland: Irish Typesetting & Publishing Co., 1989), 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

(and often ‘trigger-happy’ in cases involving Catholic Nationalists) Royal Ulster Constabulary.³⁸

With its objectives and ideology established, NICRA executives met regularly for the eighteen months following the organization’s inception, but actually accomplished very little within that time apart from “rather unrewarding leaflet campaigns and meetings in church halls.”³⁹

This period of relative inactivity changed on June 20, 1968, with a watershed event that quickly became known as the ‘Caledon affair.’ This incident took place in Caledon, County Tyrone, in response to the Dungannon Rural Council’s aforementioned eviction there (which, notably, was televised) of the Catholic Goodfellow family and subsequent housing allocation to a Protestant, unmarried young woman named Emily Beattie. On June 20, 1968, before Beattie took up residence in the house, Nationalist member of the Northern Irish Parliament Austin Currie protested the actions of the Council by, essentially, squatting:

[He] formally occupied Miss Beattie’s house with two others...until in the presence of policemen, a few hours later they were evicted by Miss Beattie’s brother who, himself a policeman, was to become a resident in the same house. Quite apart from the real merits of Mr. Currie’s case against the allocation, he scored thereby a major propaganda success.⁴⁰

Thus, though this incident produced no immediate changes in government housing policies, it ultimately served as a catalyst for a more widely-supported movement, calling increasing attention to the matter of Catholic civil rights.

It became clear that “a head of steam was...gradually building up all over Northern Ireland” when the Caledon affair prompted the first of many civil rights marches, proposed by

³⁸ McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees*, 105.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁰ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 3.28.

Currie and organized by NICRA.⁴¹ The march was planned for August 24, 1968, to start in Coalisland and end in Dungannon’s Market Square—and though the RUC initially posed no objections to the march or its route, an announcement by the Ulster Protestant Volunteers (a loyalist, or extreme Unionist, paramilitary group) proposing a public meeting *in* Market Square made both the possibility of violence decidedly more likely and the situation more fraught.⁴² Thus, the RUC re-routed the march, in which over 2,500 people ultimately participated, and the event proceeded without incident. As expressed in the Cameron Report (which was drafted by a 1969 Government of Northern Ireland commission investigating the civil disturbance that was, by that point, rampant throughout the country), “there was a hope among many participants that something new was taking place in Northern Ireland, in that here was a non-violent demonstration by people of many differing political...convictions, united on a common platform of reform.”⁴³ With this spirit of bipartisan, nonviolent optimism, the Catholic civil rights movement was born.

The Early Course of the Movement

As Conn McCluskey later wrote, “would it not have been a wonderful world if the authorities had said, ‘These are sensible people, these are sensible requests, let us grant them without delay.’ That would have been the end of the civil rights movement.”⁴⁴ This swift resolution was not to be, however, and the hope that had pervaded the August 24 Dungannon march was short-lived. That very night, in fact, a number of the lingering protesters—drawing

⁴¹ McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees*, 107.

⁴² Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 3.31.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.34.

⁴⁴ McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees*, 105.

inspiration from the ‘sit-ins’ of the African-American civil rights movement in the United States⁴⁵—“made a detour to Market Square and attempted to ‘sit down.’ They were batoned by the police.”⁴⁶ This police pushback, combined with increasingly belligerent protests and counterprotests, created the fraught dynamic that ultimately characterized the movement.

The next turning-point of the civil rights movement occurred a few months later, on October 5, with the commencement of an ill-fated march in Derry. Before the march began, Minister of Home Affairs William Craig denied NICRA’s proposed route through the city—“but left-wingers in Derry would not countenance any change in plans,” and they persuaded the NICRA leadership to preserve the march’s initial route and ‘break the ban.’⁴⁷ Thus, when the march began, “all started forward singing their way up Duke Street where they were stopped by the police,” who began clubbing the protesters.⁴⁸ “Reports say police tried to disperse the protesters by using their batons indiscriminately and spraying water from hoses on armoured trucks,” the BBC broadcast reported that day.⁴⁹ Additionally, some individuals evidently unaffiliated with the march—whom the Cameron Report interestingly refers to as a mix of ‘Young Socialist Alliance’ members and “hooligan elements”—began rioting, throwing stones at the police and even attempting to erect barricades in the Catholic Bogside neighborhood of

⁴⁵ Margot Gayle Backus, “‘Not Quite Philadelphia, Is It?’: An Interview with Eamonn McCann,” *Éire-Ireland* 36, no. 3 (Winter 2001): 185.

⁴⁶ McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees*, 108.

⁴⁷ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 1, n.p.

⁴⁸ McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees*, 111.

⁴⁹ BBC, “Londonderry March Ends in Violence,” *On This Day*, October 5, 1968, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/5/newsid_4286000/4286818.stm.

Derry.⁵⁰ Ultimately, just under ninety people, including police, bystanders, and protesters, were hospitalized for injuries sustained in the violence.⁵¹

The ‘air-time’ the BBC gave to this event was indicative of a profound change in the Anglo-Northern Irish dynamic, as Britain’s eyes had turned to Northern Ireland. As F.S.L. Lyons writes in 1973, prior to 1968 Westminster had “devoted very little time to the affairs of the six counties—in one period of just over a year in 1934-5 the time spent was one hour and fifty minutes, and that seems, until very recently, to have been about the average.”⁵² October 5, 1968, however, marked a swift departure from this *laissez-faire* attitude. Moreover, another significant effect of the event was that Craig’s ban on the march and the subsequent violence “brought into the civil rights movement opposition [members of the Northern Irish parliament]...and a large number of Catholics who up till then had been tepid about civil rights.”⁵³ As Niall Ó Dochartaigh effectively summarizes, “From the moment that the RUC baton-charged the march in Derry in October 1968 repression of protest became the central mobilizing issue” for the civil rights movement.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the thwarted Derry march galvanized a population that has, historically, seemed to be the world’s most consistent revolutionaries and agitators: students.

⁵⁰ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 4.52.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.53.

⁵² F.S.L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (London, UK: Fontana Books, 1973), 700.

⁵³ McCluskey, *Up Off Their Knees*, 111.

⁵⁴ Ó Dochartaigh, “Northern Ireland,” 41.

Student Involvement in the Catholic Civil Rights Movement

‘Stirrings’ of Activism Before 1968

Northern Ireland’s Education Act of 1947 was a landmark, distinctly bipartisan piece of legislation, guaranteeing free secondary schooling for *all* students—Catholic and Protestant—over eleven years old; introducing grants for university education; raising the school ‘leaving age’ to fifteen; improving teacher training; and even increasing funding for Catholic ‘Voluntary’ (or private) schools.⁵⁵ University students in the late 1960s were among the first to have *only* experienced the accessible schooling and higher-education opportunities that this legislation provided, and many observers at the time asserted that students’ activism was a clear product of increased education in the post-war Welfare State.⁵⁶ As NICRA proclaimed in their *History of the Struggle for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland 1968-78*, referencing the increase in student-led protests and belligerence, “the chickens hatched under the free Education Act of 194[7] had come home to roost with a vengeance.”⁵⁷

It should be noted that, though a sizable student population did not begin to contribute to the Catholic civil rights movement until 1968, there were nonetheless ‘stirrings’ of student activism beginning in the early 1960s, particularly among the Marxist-leaning few. That is, while Queen’s University, a generally non-sectarian institution, “had no real tradition of radical dissent,” it did house a ‘small clique’ of “self-consciously activist and socialist” students—members of an association called Queen’s University Independent Left, who founded “the

⁵⁵ Parliament of Northern Ireland, *Education Act (Northern Ireland) 1947*, March 27, 1947, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apni/1947/3>.

⁵⁶ Backus, “‘Not Quite Philadelphia, Is It?’: An Interview with Eamonn McCann,” 174.

⁵⁷ Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, *“We Shall Overcome” ... The History of the Struggle for Civil Rights in Northern Ireland 1968-78* (Belfast, N.I.: Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, 1978), n.p.

‘Working Committee on Civil Rights in Northern Ireland’ of April 1964, one of the first bodies to concern itself with demands for social justice within Northern Ireland.”⁵⁸ In the early 1960s, these students, most of whom were affiliated with the socialist-leaning Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP), “concentrated on a programme of propaganda and education,” canvassing for NILP candidates and fostering connections with other Labour associations and social-democratic parties (both in the Republic of Ireland and in Great Britain).⁵⁹

Arguably the most active period of student activism in Northern Ireland (before 1968, that is) was in March of 1967, when the Minister of Home Affairs William Craig outlawed Republican Clubs—‘cover’ organizations, essentially, for the banned, anti-partition, and staunchly Nationalist Sinn Féin party. Queen’s University students openly defied this censorship and formed their own Republican Club on March 8, holding two consecutive protest marches on March 10 and 11, and then another on November 15, after the Queen’s University Academic Council refused to recognize the campus’s club.⁶⁰ The latter march marks the first time that a wider population of Queen’s students—between 1,500 and 2,000 of them—participated. Though “the protest appeared to be uneventful and relatively unimportant,”⁶¹ and Craig’s ban itself proved ineffective, these developments nonetheless “had the effect of stirring up student opposition to the Unionist administration and to Craig himself, and this was to prove an important factor when the civil rights campaign got underway.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 1, n.p.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, “*We Shall Overcome*,” n.p.

⁶¹ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 1, n.p.

⁶² Martin Wallace, *Drums and Guns: Revolution in Ulster* (London, UK: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 101.

Interestingly—around the same time that Craig banned Republican Clubs—the more-moderately Unionist Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Terence O’Neill, launched his ‘Programme to Enlist the People’ to forge ‘the new Ulster.’ In doing so, he praised Northern Ireland’s younger generation as “irreverent, yes, questioning certainly, but also full of energy and idealism which we do not harness often enough...All over Ulster, I believe that there are young people who want to be committed, and who lack only the opportunity.”⁶³ It is ironic, now, that this ‘energy and idealism’ which O’Neill then hoped to ‘harness’ were shortly thereafter aimed *against* his party, government, and policies, as the civil rights movement began to accelerate.

“Leaders of Calibre and Tenacity”

In the midst of the aforementioned events—the birth of NICRA, the Caledon affair, and the gradual galvanization of Northern Irish university students—a young Derry man, Labour Party socialist, and former Queen’s University student named Eamonn McCann, was living and working as a tree transplanter in London. He returned home to Derry for what he intended to be a week-long family visit; however, he later wrote that during his time there, he “bumped into people—old friends—who were squatting people into houses and involved in agitation, and...I began to help out doing that. And I postponed going back...and the momentum developed and I never did go back to London.”⁶⁴ It was in the swing of this ‘momentum’ that McCann helped found the Derry Housing Action Committee, the organization that ultimately partnered with NICRA to facilitate the October 5 march in Derry.⁶⁵

⁶³ Terence O’Neill, *Ulster at the Crossroads* (London, UK: Faber, 1969), 152.

⁶⁴ Backus, “‘Not Quite Philadelphia, Is It?’: An Interview with Eamonn McCann,” 182.

⁶⁵ Eamonn McCann, *War and an Irish Town* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1980), 34.

At about the same time as McCann’s arrival back in Derry, a Queen’s University psychology student named Bernadette Devlin was working at her uncle’s pub for the summer, attempting to keep her family afloat after her mother’s death earlier that year.⁶⁶ That summer, she read in the newspaper of plans for a civil rights march in Dungannon, slated for August 24, 1968, and she “set off to join it with [her] brother and a friend.”⁶⁷ To understand Devlin’s political leanings, one need only read the first chapter of her autobiography, *The Price of My Soul*—in which she recalled, “the first nursery rhyme I remember learning was: ‘*Where is the flag of England? Where is she to be found? Wherever there’s blood and plunder, they’re under the British ground.*’”⁶⁸ With such a song as the refrain of her childhood, it comes as little surprise that, as a young university student, Devlin was enormously unhappy with the state of Northern Ireland. However, she was similarly displeased with the politics of the Republic of Ireland, and had subsequently “moved away from Republicanism to concern for nonpolitical social justice” by the autumn of 1968.⁶⁹ Thus, “when the next march, to be held in Londonderry on October 5, was announced, [she] welcomed it” and participated.⁷⁰

In the subsequent days, the Queen’s University term commenced, and both Devlin and McCann participated in a ‘mass meeting’ on campus on October 7, to discuss the calamitous events of the Derry march. “Feelings were high; anger at the police attack on the marchers mingled with pent-up indignation at all that had been happening in Europe and America

⁶⁶ Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, *The Price of My Soul* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 90.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96-7.

throughout 1968 and had now arrived on their doorstep. This was their Prague, their Sorbonne, their Chicago.”⁷¹ At this meeting, the students planned a march from campus to the Belfast City Hall on October 9. The Cameron Report describes the event:

Dr. Paisley [a Protestant and staunch Unionist who frequently led counterprotests] had about 1,000 supporters in Shaftesbury Square when the march moved off. Eventually the marchers accepted a re-routing by the police, but they thought that the re-routing included permission to reach the City Hall. In fact, a number of Paisleyites had assembled at the City Hall and the police halted the march. The students then sat down and blocked Linenhall Street. This sit-down continued for over three hours.⁷²

Dejected over an undeniably thwarted march, the students then returned to the university.

Shortly thereafter, a recent Queen’s University graduate named Michael Farrell, who had led much of the aforementioned socialist student activism of the early 1960s, arrived on campus and convened the remaining, gathered students for a large meeting. As Bernadette Devlin recalled, the student group called “People’s Democracy [PD] was born...that night at a discussion which lasted till one o’clock next morning.”⁷³ Similarly, Paul Arthur recounted that “at that meeting...PD emerged as a spontaneous, militant, democratic group working within the Civil Rights Movement.”⁷⁴ Interestingly, the students also decided that the group would be open to former students, enabling Farrell and McCann to retain an active role. These two young men, along with Devlin, ultimately rose as the most prominent leaders—“leaders of calibre and tenacity”—of the newly-formed People’s Democracy.⁷⁵ Their influence far outlived that of PD

⁷¹ Michael Farrell, “Reflections on the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement Fifty Years On” (Speech, George Mitchell Institute, Queen’s University, Belfast, N.I., December 12, 2018), <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Research/GRI/mitchell-institute/FileStore/Filetoupload,864825,en.pdf>.

⁷² Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 5.58.

⁷³ Devlin McAliskey, *The Price of My Soul*, 103.

⁷⁴ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 1, n.p.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

itself: Devlin served as a Member of Parliament in Westminster, McCann was elected to both the Northern Ireland Assembly and later the Derry City Council, and Farrell was eventually appointed to the Republic of Ireland’s Council of State.

The People’s Democracy

At the foundational October 7 meeting, the students of People’s Democracy decided to pursue six core aims: one man, one vote; an end to gerrymandering; freedom of assembly and speech; a repeal of the Special Powers Act, which provided that the RUC remain largely unchecked; and a fair allocation of housing and jobs.⁷⁶ The students’ first orders of business were to elect leadership, design posters and leaflets, organize additional marches, and spread their ideals throughout Northern Ireland. Devlin writes, “we thought it would be a good idea to spread [our contact] by going into the provinces of Ulster and setting up local organizations...we wanted the oppressed people to become involved in making the decisions which affected their own lives.”⁷⁷ They sought to accomplish these aims primarily through mass leafleting, but also through open-air meetings promoting the further establishment of civil rights groups in different Northern Irish towns. Many such meetings devolved into violence when met with the resistance of followers of Reverend Ian Paisley, known as Paisleyites.⁷⁸

Perhaps the most famous instance of counterprotest violence against People’s Democracy was the Burntollet Bridge incident. After Prime Minister Terence O’Neill had announced a reform program on November 22 that left activists unsatisfied—since the government failed to deliver on the movement’s most foundational demand for ‘one man, one vote’—the students of

⁷⁶ Devlin McAliskey, *The Price of My Soul*, 104.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

PD decided to march in protest from Belfast to Derry, beginning on January 1 and reaching Derry on January 4.⁷⁹ Though the group made the roughly 68-mile trek relatively unscathed, at Burntollet Bridge, just six miles outside of Derry, “an organised ambush rather than a rowdy counter-demonstration was waiting. Several hundred people wearing white armbands for identification and armed with cudgels fell upon the marchers.”⁸⁰ Ultimately, after making it either across the bridge itself or wading across the river, the marchers reconvened and—urged by Farrell—continued their march to Derry. There, on the outskirts of the city, further violence awaited the marchers, but this time many responded to the counter-protesters in kind.⁸¹ The beaten and disorganized group eventually reached the Derry Guildhall in the center of the city. As Paul Arthur writes, “the ‘Long March’ was seen by many Protestants as a series of arrogant invasions of their territory; the ambush at Burntollet bridge was their answer to it.”⁸²

As the Cameron Report later notes, “for moderates this march had disastrous effects. It polarized the extreme elements in the communities in each place it entered.”⁸³ The march’s widespread publicity, the outrage toward the Burntollet Bridge incident, and the subsequent radicalization of former-moderates marked this ‘Long March’ as the ‘apex’ of PD’s achievement; in fact, the ‘Long March’ “established PD’s separate existence within the civil rights movement, giving it a sense of self-importance and helping to create a division between

⁷⁹ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 9.89.

⁸⁰ Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland’s ‘68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt, and the Origins of the Troubles* (Newbridge, Co. Kildare, Ireland: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 210.

⁸¹ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 9.100.

⁸² Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 1, n.p.

⁸³ Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland*, 9.100.

itself and the more moderate groups.”⁸⁴ The following months were equally eventful for the student organization and the Northern Irish government. O’Neill established the Cameron Commission to investigate the ‘civil disturbances’ of the past year; he called for a General Election on February 24; *eight* candidates stood for election from People’s Democracy, obtaining no seats but an impressive 23,645 popular votes; and PD issued its political manifesto.⁸⁵

It was with the release of this manifesto that the socialist underpinnings of the organization began to overshadow its original civil rights-oriented goal, creating ‘a left-wing elite’ within its leadership structure that “alienated more moderate students.”⁸⁶ Indeed, in the PD pamphlet *Struggle in the North* published just a year later, Michael Farrell reveals the increased radicalism that had begun to characterize PD mere months into its existence: “the contribution of the P.D. throughout the campaign was...to continually drive home the message that there should be no compromise with the Unionist regime and no let-up in the [civil rights] campaign without the total dismantling of the whole apparatus of discrimination, gerrymandering, and repression.”⁸⁷ Moreover, Farrell asserted “that the only real solution to the Northern problem [is] the creation of an Irish Socialist Republic.”⁸⁸

Thus, by mid-1969, PD had made itself what Paul Arthur calls the “ginger-group and gadfly”⁸⁹ of the civil rights movement—facing a deteriorating relationship with NICRA, who had

⁸⁴ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 1, n.p.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Farrell, *Struggle in the North*, 13.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 2, n.p.

become “embarrassed by its unwanted radical offshoot.”⁹⁰ To many, it seemed that PD had lost sight of the initial, reformist nature of the movement in its pivot toward ‘Connollyite Socialism’ (so named after James Connolly, the founder of the Irish Socialist Republican Party and one of the executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising)—which, in all fairness, was arguably a *return* to the socialist roots of Queen’s University student activism of the early 1960s. With its commitment to revolutionary socialism, the organization “had lost mass student support and it had not found a working-class base. It floundered around seeking a role, reacting to events and government policy rather than initiating radical alternatives.”⁹¹

Furthermore, in their mission to unite Northern Ireland under the theoretically non-sectarian banner of socialism, the young leaders of PD failed to acknowledge that “‘religion [was] more important than they thought it was, and that historically-formed suspicions and animosities are not quite so easy to dispel—even in themselves—as they [had] assume[d].’”⁹² That is, PD’s goal of revolutionizing Northern Ireland to form a socialist “Workers’ Republic” evoked (and failed to answer effectively) the same, centuries-old question faced by any Northern Irish government: would it be Irish or British? Distilled to its most fundamental issue, the war that became known as the Troubles was essentially a ‘working-out’ of this divisive, deeply-rooted dilemma.

The Disintegration of the Movement and Its Legacy

It was not long before the reformist, reasonable, and non-partisan goals of the Catholic civil rights movement were obscured by the increasingly sectarian dynamic of protest, counter-

⁹⁰ Arthur, *The People’s Democracy: 1968-73*, Chapter 2, n.p.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., Conclusion, n.p.

protest, and ensuing violence. Many Protestants perceived the civil rights movement as a “Trojan horse for the IRA” and Republican insurgence, intensifying fear among Protestant communities and hampering any willingness to make concessions to the Catholic civil rights groups.⁹³ Thus, as actor and film director Kenneth Branagh recalls of his childhood in Belfast, by “the hot summer of 1969, violence [had] spread onto the streets...and life got very surreal.”⁹⁴ The most infamous instance of this violent rioting was the ‘Battle of the Bogside’ in Derry on August 12. Ronnie Munck succinctly describes the ‘Battle’ and subsequent disintegration of the movement:

The British army eventually came into Derry to restore order: to assist a demoralized police force and to assuage a thoroughly disenchanting nationalist population... Two days later, on 14 August, the British army moved on to the streets of Derry and Belfast, thus momentarily quelling the violence... [but] out of the crisis of August 1969 the IRA was reborn and the terms of the present conflict were set.⁹⁵

Most scholars agree that these developments—the introduction of the British army and the renewal of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—mark the start of the Troubles.

This ‘rebirth’ of the IRA and the resurgence of paramilitarism became arguably the most enduring and devastating biproducts of the civil rights movement. Paramilitarism, in a fashion similar to the protest and counter-protest dynamic, intensified during this period through a cyclical, reactionary ‘ratcheting up’ of violence. As James W. McAuley and Neil Ferguson write, “the use of political violence has been a long-standing feature in Irish politics. Both Northern

⁹³ Munck, “The Making of the Troubles,” 226.

⁹⁴ Kenneth Branagh, “Kenneth Branagh on ‘The Troubles’ That Rocked Belfast During His Childhood,” interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, November 12, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJgzWyqAeyI>.

⁹⁵ Munck, “The Making of the Troubles,” 226.

Ireland and the Republic of Ireland were born in violence.”⁹⁶ In the Republic of Ireland, paramilitarism “had all but ‘exhausted’ itself” by the end of the Irish Civil War; in Northern Ireland, however, the fundamental, post-partition differences between Unionism and Nationalism proved fertile ground for continued political violence.⁹⁷

By the end of 1969, the Provisional IRA emerged as the dominant faction of the reincarnated IRA and the ‘face’ of Irish republicanism,⁹⁸ while Ulster loyalism “gave rise to a multitude of [paramilitary] organisations springing up amongst the Protestant working class, membership of which drew heavily on existing narratives of community and constitutional defence.”⁹⁹ In this way, paramilitary activities escalated in the final months of the 1960s, ultimately coming to define and perpetuate the violence of the Troubles—not necessarily in the initial commencement of the sectarian conflict, but certainly in the guerilla warfare that characterized it for the subsequent three decades.

Conclusion

Though People’s Democracy was not dissolved until 1996, its role in the Catholic civil rights movement was clearly short-lived. Nevertheless, its significance to the movement is unmistakable—giving rise to household-name leaders like Eamonn McCann, Michael Farrell, and Bernadette Devlin, and contributing to the swift polarization of moderates that, tragically, set

⁹⁶ Bernadette C. Hayes and Ian McAllister, “Public Support for Political Violence and Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4 (2005): 613.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Julian O’Neill, “The Provisional IRA: How 1969 Sparked Deadly Campaign,” BBC News, August 14, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-49299060>.

⁹⁹ McAuley and Ferguson, “‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Ulster Loyalist Perspectives on the IRA and Irish Republicanism,” 562.

the tone for the next thirty years of civil violence. Ultimately, those years of the Troubles, it seems, tend to overshadow much of the idealism and optimism of the early civil rights movement. It is thus important to remember that, as Eamonn McCann himself observed, the movement encompassed a “period when people thought of themselves as casting off the categories of the past and relating to the wider world. The civil-rights movement...that was the best time, really, and that was the most hopeful time.”¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Backus, “‘Not Quite Philadelphia, Is It?’: An Interview with Eamonn McCann,” 186.

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