

Book Reviews

Devolution and Pluralism in Education in Northern Ireland

Edited by

Caitlin Donnelly, Penny McKeown and Bob Osborne

Manchester University Press, Manchester 2006

ISBN: 0-7190-6868-1

Pp. 219, £55 (hbk)

Reviewed by

Alan Smith

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It is nearly a decade since the signing of the Belfast Agreement (1998) as part of the peace process in Northern Ireland. However, the establishment of a devolved 'power sharing' administration has been problematic.

A key element of the Agreement was the creation of a NI Assembly with 108 politicians (MLAs) elected from a range of local parties. The plan sat well alongside UK government plans for devolution to Scotland and Wales and authority was first devolved to the NI Assembly on 2 December 1999. Since then the Assembly has been suspended on four occasions and the region has been under direct rule from Westminster for longer than it has been under devolved administration.

It is ironic that most local politicians declare the need for the return of devolved authority, but have yet to find a way of making it work in practice and it has been under the direct rule that some of the most significant policy changes in Northern Ireland have taken place in recent years. This is particularly the case in education and this book represents a welcome addition to the literature by examining how pluralism in education has evolved under intermittent periods of devolution in Northern Ireland.

The introduction (Donnelly, Osborne and McKeown) highlights some of the policy paradoxes in education within a post-Agreement Northern Ireland, such as a statement from the Catholic Bishops 'that Catholic schools are 'for

everyone' and not just Catholics', suggesting that a more diverse intake of pupils would be welcome, but raising questions about the extent to which this would require changes to the ethos and practice within Catholic schools to accommodate diversity if such a development were to become a reality in the longer term.

More controversially, the authors draw attention to 'the only area of state education and funding where religious discrimination is legal in the recruitment of teachers'. This refers to the teachers' exemption from Fair Employment legislation that contributes to the situation whereby 'Catholic schools employ almost 100 per cent Catholic teachers while state schools employ around 85 per cent Protestants' (p.8).

Byrne and Donnelly then provide a general introduction to some of the current policy issues - reorganization of education administration; proposals to end academic selection; significant changes to the curriculum; and debates surrounding segregation and integration within a highly differentiated system. Their overview of the system is aided significantly by statistical appendices that include comparative data from areas of England, Wales and Scotland (Brady).

This is followed by more detailed chapters on a number of themes – the role of human rights legislation (Lundy), inclusion and special needs (Kilpatrick and Hunter), exclusions (Kilpatrick and Barr), pre-school education (Sutherland), gender stereotyping (Leith and Gray), the education market (McKeown), equality in higher and further education (Osborne), changes to the curriculum (Gallagher).

Each contribution is important in its own right, but they do represent a rather eclectic collection. Each is written more from the perspective of a distinctive theme, rather than with a view to how the theme might deepen our theoretical understanding of 'pluralism' as a concept. Pluralism is indeed multifaceted, but it is not always easy to see the linkages between the various dimensions represented here, nor is it always evident what the implications of devolution have been.

The particular impact of devolution and at times, failure of devolution, is addressed more explicitly in two contributions. McKeown and Osborne present two case studies of the way that the devolved Assembly addressed two education policy areas (arrangements for finance of students in higher education and a review of the funding formula for schools) and conclude that

‘devolution was accompanied by a much more participatory and accountable process of policy making’ (p.136) despite some of the cumbersome arrangements from cross-party involvement. In contrast, Gallagher presents two case studies – one on the funding of Catholic schools arising from research commissioned by the Standing Advisory Commission of Human Rights (SACHR) during a period of direct rule in the 1980s – the other on the debate about academic selection that gained considerable public attention during the initial period of devolved administration. Both are controversial areas, but he concludes that the latter has been much more problematic in terms of policy change, partly because the debate about selection has taken place in the public domain rather than ‘behind closed doors’, but also because the direct involvement of local politicians has polarized the debate to a large extent along sectarian lines.

A fascinating aspect of this book is the contributions from those representing different ‘sectors’ within the system (the Catholic authorities, the Protestant Churches, the Council for Integrated Education and Irish Medium schools). Collectively they reflect the tension within the current debate in Northern Ireland about what various stakeholders mean when they declare a commitment to ‘pluralism’. For some a commitment to ‘pluralism’ clearly means the provision of diverse schools with equal funding from government. For others the emphasis is on integration through common rather than separate institutions.

This resonates with the current debate in the UK following the establishment of a Commission on Integration and Cohesion by Ruth Kelly. Does a government policy of funding separate, faith-based schools help or hinder social integration or should government be encouraging more integration within a system of common schools? Ultimately, the determining factor may be the pervasive values that operate within schools, whether separate or common - the issue of values and ‘ethos’ is explored in more detail in a later chapter by Donnelly. However, it would be naïve to suggest that values and ‘ethos’ are unrelated to school mission, arrangements for governance and structural characteristics such as internal demography and degree of exclusivity.

O’Coinn’s contribution on Irish Medium Education is particularly thoughtful. He reflects on ‘the Irish language, as an expression of heritage, culture and belonging, valid equally in the context of allegiance to an Irish state or a British state’ (p.164). His contribution represents an aspiration for de-politicization of the Irish language – idealistic perhaps, but a refreshing

shift away from the mindset of defending the territory around particular education sectors. Of necessity, Irish medium education has had to pursue multiple strategies to secure greater provision for the Irish language, rather than rely only on the establishment of more Irish medium schools.

There may be something to be learned here for integrationists. How might it be possible to achieve greater integration within the education system, without relying solely on the establishment, consolidation and expansion of an integrated schools sector? Establishment of a 'sector' runs the risk of replicating power struggles about governance and control of schools that has characterised the historical discourse about education in Northern Ireland and, ultimately, it is a competitive discourse about school ownership and defence of territory.

This book was published before the Bain report (2006) on the future of schooling in Northern Ireland that highlights challenges for the education system. These include a projected decline in student numbers (10% decline at primary level and 15% at post-primary over the next 10 years) and 53,000 unused school places in 2005/06 (15 per cent of total capacity). This raises questions about the economic viability of so many schools for such a small population. In addition government has also declared a commitment to *A Shared Future*, whereby all government policies should promote 'sharing over separation'. Together these might imply that a combination of changing demography and market forces will naturally lead to greater integration through sharing of scarce resources. However, based on current trends, it is just as likely that there will be rationalisation *within* existing sectors, resulting in further 'balkanisation' and a 'tripartite' system in which integration plays a minor part.

Overall then, a very helpful addition to the literature and essential reading for anyone wishing to gain a grasp of debates about pluralism that have ramifications beyond the idiosyncrasies of education in Northern Ireland.

Written in Stone: The History of Belfast City Cemetery

by
Tom Hartley

The Brehon Press, 2006
ISBN-13: 978-1905474073
Pp.224, £14.99 (hbk)

Reviewed by
Eamon Phoenix

To the student of Belfast's modern political, industrial and cultural history few sites in the city are as rewarding as the City Cemetery. Located in the heart of the Falls Road, this sprawling burial ground on the edge of Divis Mountain is both a product and a symbol of Ireland's only industrial city.

In this fascinating and meticulously researched book Tom Hartley, West Belfastman, Sinn Fein councillor and passionate local historian, takes the reader on a guided tour of Belfast's first municipal cemetery and unmasks the flesh and blood figures behind its Gothic tombs and terse inscriptions. They include politicians and businessmen, inventors and industrialists, Orangemen and Republicans, the privileged and the paupers. Not a few stand out as 'the movers and shakers' of Belfast's commercial 'golden age.'

As Hartley shows, the City Cemetery is a product of Belfast's Victorian industrialisation. By the 1860s, owing to the vast post-Famine influx from the Irish countryside, the town's traditional burial-grounds of Friar's Bush and Shankill were excessively overcrowded. Consequently, in 1866, Parliament passed the Belfast Burial Ground Act permitting the Corporation to purchase 101 acres in the townland of Ballymurphy for use as a park and a cemetery. The new God's-acre was designed by William Gay of Bradford, an expert in Victorian graveyards. Initially the project was conceived as a cross-community one with a separate section allocated to the town's one-third Catholic minority. The Catholic sector was physically separated from the Protestant one by a sunken wall. However, due to a dispute between the Catholic bishop and the Corporation over the burial of suicides and stillborn

babies in consecrated ground, the bishop withdrew from the arrangement and opened a separate Catholic cemetery at nearby Milltown. As the author remarks, the underground wall still snakes its way through the cemetery, a silent memorial to Belfast's deep-rooted sectarian divisions.

Hartley makes the point that the Catholic community in West Belfast always enjoyed a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the City Cemetery. Until the 1980s it catered almost exclusively for the city's Protestant population and, more especially, for the Protestant-Unionist elite. Ironically, until the Troubles British military and Orange funerals were a common enough sight on the Falls Road. Hartley explains how, growing up on the Falls Road, he felt 'no sense of ownership' towards the City Cemetery. This was to change in the late 1980s when his political engagement with the unionist community 'opened the door of their history' to him and the wider nationalist population.

Over the past twenty years Tom Hartley has opened up the rich history of the cemetery –and indeed that of Milltown- to the citizens of Belfast in a series of walking tours, notably during *Feile an Phobail* each summer. This book is the distillation of that infectious enthusiasm and painstaking research.

The book is arranged in the form of five walking tours of the graveyard. The author's profiles of the *dramatis personae* harness a range of sources–newspapers, obituaries and secondary histories. He has an eye for the unusual or the ironic adding greatly to our insights into his subjects.

Foremost amongst those interred in the City Cemetery are many of the industrialists and entrepreneurs who transformed Belfast from the market town of 1800 to the 'Linenopolis' of 350,000 by 1901. Here lies, for example Sir Edward Harland, the English-born entrepreneur who arrived in Belfast in 1854 to managed Robert Hickson's modest Queen's island shipyard. Within four years he had joined with the German engineer, Guvtav Wolff, to establish the biggest shipyard in the world. Also buried here is WJ Pirrie (1867-1924), shipbuilder extraordinaire. Pirrie, who joined Harland and Wolff as a gentleman apprentice, was the architect of the yard's success at the turn of the 20th century. A Unionist Lord Mayor of Belfast in the 1890s, Pirrie converted to Home Rule and in 1912, to the ire of the 'Islandmen', hosted the visit of Winston Churchill, then a member of Asquith's pro-Home Rule Liberal Cabinet. Yet Pirrie was virtually alone among the Belfast business class in embracing a Dublin parliament. Most of his contemporaries looked not southwards to Dublin but eastwards to Britain and the great free trade area of the British empire for their markets and raw materials.

In his profile of Thomas Gallaher, the Co Derry-born ‘Tobacco King’, Hartley reminds us that the cigarette magnate had a mixed reputation in his adopted city. He was the first major employer to grant his workers an annual paid holiday, yet was to lead the Belfast capitalists against Jim Larkin during the bitter Belfast Dock Strike of 1907.

Most of these captains of industry held office in political Unionism down to 1914. One leading Unionist buried here is the eccentric Colonel Fred Crawford (1861-1952), the mastermind of the UVF gun-running of 1914 and a close confidant of Craig and Carson. As Hartley reminds us, Crawford, a Belfast factory owner, even planned to kidnap Gladstone in order to thwart Home Rule!

But those detailed in Hartley’s book also reflect the rich tapestry of northern Irish life in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. The early Protestant involvement in the revival of the Irish language in the north is demonstrated in two of the City’s memorials. Rev RR Kane (1841-95) combined his roles as Grand Master of the Orange Order and a firebrand anti-Home Rule preacher with his patronage of the Gaelic League. Kane, who once declared, ‘I may be an Orangeman but I can never forget I am an O Cathain’, is described on his gravestone as ‘a loyal Irish patriot’. This confirms the sense of Irish identity among many Ulster unionists before partition.

Another Protestant Gaeilgeoir interred here is Dr John St Clair Boyd, a surgeon in Belfast’s Samaritan Hospital who was elected first President of the Belfast Gaelic League in 1895. A liberal Unionist in politics, Boyd described Irish –then spoken in the Antrim Glens and Tyrone– as ‘a beautiful and noble language’.

Nor is the fourth estate neglected in the litany of dead in the City Cemetery. Perhaps the most colourful journalist interred here was Robert A Wilson, a native of Donegal who wrote under the pseudonym, ‘Barney Maglone’. Wilson worked on a series of newspapers including the Nation and the Boston Republic before becoming correspondent for the Belfast Morning News in the 1860s. His popular ‘Letter to Me Cousin in Amerikay’ penned in the Ulster-Scots dialect pushed the penny Morning News to the forefront of the Belfast press.

Another pressman is Robert Lynd (1879-1949), the Belfast-born Protestant nationalist and essayist. The son of a Presbyterian Moderator, Lynd was a Gaelic enthusiast and early supporter of Arthur Griffith’s non-violent Sinn Fein after 1905. A close friend of James Connolly, Michael Collins and James

Joyce, Lynd moved to London where he wrote for the News Chronicle. Though Hartley does not mention it, his funeral in 1949 was unique in that it was attended by an Irish government Minister and William Lowry, a former Unionist Attorney General and Lynd's brother in law.

The field of education is represented by the tombs of the Anglo-Irish philanthropist, Vere Foster (1819-1901) who devoted his fortune to assisting Famine emigrants and improving elementary education. He is remembered today as the founder of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation. This selfless social reformer died in grinding poverty in a Belfast garret in 1901. Nearby is the grave of Mrs Margaret Byers, a Co Down woman who pioneered the education of girls in Ulster and made her mark as a leading Irish suffragist.

The author sheds fascinating light on some of the more exotic figures engaged in popular entertainment in Belfast's past including Clara ('Ma') Copley, a Lithuanian woman who operated a circus and 'boxing booth' in the Chapel Fields in the Markets district in the 1920s and 1930s.

Hartley has much to say about the (sadly vandalised) Jewish burial ground in the city and the 'Cross of Sacrifice', erected in 1927 to commemorate the military dead of World War One. The cross reminds us that some 50,000 Irishmen from both traditions perished in 'the war to end all wars'.

Though many of those resting here belong to the political and social elite, the cemetery also has its Poor Ground which includes the victims of the 'Spanish 'Flu' pandemic of 1918 and twenty-one US soldiers drowned when their troop ship sank.

One of the strengths of his book is the author's ability to link personalities with events in Irish and international history. For example, a reference to a submarine allows him to recall that the first submarine was invented by an Irishman in the 1860s for use by the Fenians. For Tom Hartley, *Written in Stone* has been demonstrably a labour of love. Written in a clear and accessible style and lavishly illustrated, it unlocks the story of Belfast in the 19th and early twentieth centuries for the general reader. To the teacher it suggests possibilities for promoting mutual understanding. It is a riveting read and deserves to be read widely in this divided society.