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Deirdre NUTTALL

Keeping Their Heads Down: Shame and Pride in the Stories of Protestants in the Irish Republic

ABSTRACT: This study draws on a number of in-depth interviews to explore the ethnic aspect of Protestantism in the Republic of Ireland. We explore themes of shame and pride around issues of identity, together with a sense of loss of a minority rapidly losing cultural distinctiveness. Following Ireland's division, the ordinary Protestants of the south, comprising a range of religious denominations bound by history, intermarriage and culture, found themselves in a society in which their story was rarely told. The dominant narrative was one of a Catholic people, long oppressed by a wealthy Protestant minority. The story of ordinary Protestants, including those in rural and urban poverty, went largely unheard. Today, ordinary Protestants – small farmers, shop keepers, housewives – tell the story of Ireland as seen through their family's narratives. Themes of pride and shame, often intertwined, form a thread that binds their testimony, drawing on family, personal and local history, folklore and statements of identity.

KEYWORDS: Protestantism; Republic of Ireland; Memory; Narrative; Minorities

Deirdre NUTTALL did her doctoral thesis at the Department of Irish Folklore, UCD, and her MA in Social Anthropology at the University of Durham. Her doctoral research focused on a survey and analysis of migratory legends of the supernatural in Newfoundland and south-east Ireland. She has conducted fieldwork in Ireland, Newfoundland, and Guatemala. A self-employed researcher and writer, she is currently engaged in research into the ethnic aspects of Protestant communities in the Republic of Ireland.

Introduction

This paper explores issues of identity among Irish Protestants of the major denominations in the Republic of Ireland, considering them as an ethnic, rather than simply religious, group. Drawing on my own background in folklore studies and anthropology, it focuses on a number of matters that are typically discussed in the context of the emotions they elicit, which coalesce around the opposing feelings of pride and shame.

The primary material used here comes from lengthy interviews conducted with Protestants of varying denominations in all parts of the Republic of Ireland. To date fifty individuals, aged from twenty to over ninety, and from denominational backgrounds including the Church of Ireland, the Society of Friends, Presbyterians and Methodists from urban, small town and rural areas, and from a range of educational and socio-economic backgrounds, have been interviewed; the material used here is a representative selection. Subjects were mostly interviewed in their homes in a very informal way, with open-ended questions about memories of childhood, stories that were told in the family when they were growing up, and knowledge of local and community history and traditions. In recruiting interview subjects, an emphasis was placed on the need for "ordinary" Protestants' voices to be heard; a sentiment that most interview subjects agreed with heartily.

In the 2011 census in the Republic of Ireland, 208,899 self-identified as belonging to one of the major Protestant denominations, with the Church of Ireland the largest group at 129,000 or 2.8% of the population (www.cso.ie). While once the relative numbers were higher, between 1911 and 1926 the number of Protestants fell by 34% (Bowen 1985, 20) when the comparative fall for Catholics was 2% (Bielenberg 2000, 199). There are still many fewer Protestants in the Republic of Ireland than before independence. The explanations for the dramatic change in the number and percentage of Protestants in the Republic of Ireland are complex, somewhat controversial, and beyond the scope of this paper.

The term "Protestant" encompasses a range of varied denominations that are often very different. Yet intermarriage between the various Protestant denominations, including the Church of Ireland (a division of the Anglican Church), Presbyterianism, Methodism, The Society of Friends (Quakerism), Plymouth Brethren and more, in Ireland has been generally accepted and they recognize each other as kindred despite their numerous doctrinal differences; thus, we can understand "Protestant" in the context of the Republic of Ireland as an ethnic marker as much as, or more than, a religious one.

Protestant worship in Ireland has changed a lot in recent years, perhaps especially because of the influx of immigrants who have injected

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new life into many congregations, as well as founding new churches. These "new" congregations are a fascinating addition to the religious landscape of modern Ireland. At issue, however, is the identity of those who might or might not be actively religious, but whose cultural identity was formed in Ireland over the past three to four hundred years, and has gone through a series of shifts over the last century or so. These are the "old" Protestants of the Republic of Ireland, united across the various denominations by shared experiences, intermarriage and, often, a feeling that they don't quite belong in their homeland, are not altogether welcome, and that the stories that they hear about the shared past of the Irish people are not entirely relevant to them. This feeling is often manifested in the complex, sometimes competing, emotions associated with the stories they tell to and about themselves; stories that are often little heard outside family or community circles.

The narratives of ordinary Protestants in the Republic of Ireland are often overlooked, largely because their stories do not fit neatly into the country's dominant narrative of a Catholic people oppressed by a Protestant upper class, and the heroic struggles that ultimately led to their independence and the triumph of their faith. The largely unheard stories of ordinary Irish Protestants are typically about people picking their way through life, trying to maintain a sense of cultural identity in the context of what they often experience as indifference or even a degree of hostility from the majority. They are told by and about people for whom maintaining distinctiveness has sometimes been at the expense of their material and even physical well-being.

The Story of the Irish People and the Story of Irish Protestants in the Republic

It is easy for most in the Republic of Ireland to recall what they have heard about the lives, beliefs and values of wealthy aristocrats in Big Houses, and of the well-to-do Protestant communities of Dublin's leafy suburbs. But the only people who really know the stories of "ordinary" Irish Protestants, especially those in rural isolation and in urban working class contexts, including those who have lived with poverty for many years, are themselves. This is a population that has been in decline for generations. They have witnessed the dilution of their traditions and the reduction of their numbers. As Ireland becomes more secular and the religious buildings and calendar customs around which their lives once revolved less important, this is a minority whose stories are rapidly disappearing.

Protestants in Ireland really started to make their mark in the 1600s. By the 1630s, there were 30,000 Protestant colonists in Ulster alone.[1] Government policy was to increase the Protestant population, "planting" Protestant families on land that had been seized from Catholics and trying to convert the local population. Planter families could buy land cheaply, with the agreement that they would improve the properties. Others came as tenants of the new landowners (Barnard 2008, 14) and over the years some came for work, or because they had married into an Irish family, and so forth. There were also influxes of Protestants fleeing oppression in continental Europe.

Historians tell us a lot about where Irish Protestants came from, but what stories do *they* tell – and which do they choose not to tell?

Stories of Origin

Many Protestants arrived in Ireland at the time of or in the wake of the Cromwellian wars in the mid-1600s (when Ireland was conquered by the forces of the English parliament). It's reasonable to assume that many, if not most, old Protestant families have at least some ancestors among them. However, even in families that can proudly trace their ancestry through the centuries, many are reluctant to countenance this possibility and quite a few vehemently deny any ancestral link to the plantations, even when they haven't been asked about it. Many appear to feel that contemporary Irish Protestants are invited to assume a collective sense of shame for the terrible things that happened a long ago, such as the massacre carried out by Oliver Cromwell in Drogheda in 1649, or the subsequent clearance of Catholics to be replaced with "planters", and to apologize for or express this shame. Some have even been explicitly told, at school or in conversation with their friends and neighbours, that they *should* be ashamed, because they are descended from the villains of Irish history. One of the first things that many Protestants in the Republic of Ireland say when they start telling the story of their family is "We have nothing to do with the planters".

Thankfully, history also offers a range of ancestors who are considered shame-free – the German Palatines, the French Huguenots and relatively humble ancestors who came to work on the big estates or in businesses later on. When ordinary Irish Protestants tell stories about their families' pasts, these are often the people they claim; these are the stories that give them a sense of pride.

The Palatines were a group from Germany who were suffering religious discrimination. In 1709, 3000 were invited to settle in Ireland, and about 1000 did so (Blume 1952, 172). Today, descendants of the Palatines

[1] At a time when there were just 8000 in Virginia and New England (Tanner, 2003, 123).

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maintain a website dedicated to preserving their history (http://www.irishpalatines.org).

The Huguenots were a group of French Protestants, similarly oppressed (Caldicott et al, 1987). They were also invited to settle in Ireland and, even though some Huguenot regiments fought for William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne (a seminal moment in Irish history), they seem to be popularly remembered primarily as refugees who made a positive contribution to Irish society.

One man, a retired teacher, is hugely proud of his Palatine heritage, saying that his ancestors came to Ireland in 1702 as refugees, fleeing religious persecution at the hands of Louis 14th in the Rhineland. Right up until the 1850s, he says, they were still speaking some German and marrying exclusively within the Palatine community. Another interviewee, from a farming background, told me with huge pride that her family, also Palatines, had come to Ireland with nothing, as refugees, but had brought their superior, more scientific knowledge of farming, enriching the whole island. A woman in her seventies, a teacher from a farming background, told how her Huguenot ancestors had "washed up" as refugees on a windy beach and built a humble but productive life as small farmers in that area – where her family still is today.

While it is undoubtedly true that many Protestants of Ireland *are* descended from Huguenots and Palatines, these stories of origin are also the stories that people choose over others that are just as true. Ancestors who might have come to Ireland as opportunists, who might have been involved in clearing Catholics from their land, or among the troops that marched under Oliver Cromwell, are rarely mentioned, even as possibilities. An exception was one gentleman, now in his seventies, whose family has been living on the same farm in the south-east since they were granted land for their service in Cromwell's army. He offered in mitigation that they had served the wider community as traditional healers until recently. They had, he said, saved the monks' knowledge of herbal remedies and had used it for "the betterment of everyone". For this family, their role as traditional herbalists in their community was the most important thing about their past.

Stories about ancestors who arrived in Ireland as a result of shipwrecks appear to be relatively common among rural Irish Protestants in coastal areas; in the case of one family that has lived in a rugged part of the Irish coast for over three hundred years, they trace their ancestry to three brothers, all of whom are said to have arrived when their ship was destroyed in a terrible storm many years ago, around the time of the Cromwellian wars. To this day, the descendants of those brothers form the core of the small, diminishing local Church of Ireland community. A woman in her sixties tells me that her family also arrived in Ireland

because, "They were bound for America and something happened to the ship they were travelling on, it didn't get going, and they ended up in West Limerick and south Tipperary" (also in the mid-seventeenth century). One man tells me that his surname, which evokes the sea, was given to his ancestors because they had been with the Spanish Armada when it was wrecked in 1588 and subsequently integrated with a Protestant community in Ireland, settling in a particular area shortly after the Cromwellian wars.

While many seem to choose the less troublesome story about their family background in a not entirely conscious way, others are more deliberate in the strategies they take to avoid confessing to shameful origins. One man says that some of his ancestors arrived during the years of the great plantations and had done well, in part because of their loyalty to Britain, but that the ones he chooses to remember and tell people about were Quakers, who came to Ireland later and whom he could discuss without shame "because they did not steal land from anyone and treated the native people much better." Another says, "Well, all we Protestants try to distance ourselves from Cromwell, but in our case we *are* reasonably sure they came somewhat after that time."

Exceptions to this "distancing" can be found in the border areas, where the Protestant population is higher, links to cultural artefacts such as Orangeism (which celebrates the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne and is characterized by particular cultural, historical and musical traditions), and to Unionist communities in Northern Ireland more entrenched, and where some take an almost defiant pride in being descendants of the Ulster Plantation, despite what they see as the Irish state's desire to write them out of history. As one man said: "I am descended from planters and Orangemen and nobody can make me ashamed to admit it."

Dublin is home to a relatively large population of prosperous Protestants who have worked in the areas of business, law, medicine and so on for generations. Many are proud to identify with the Anglo-Irish and comment that many of Ireland's feted writers and artists come from this background and are gladly claimed as true Irishmen. Yet even within this confident community, embedded in the capital's commercial, educational and artistic life, themes of shame and pride emerge.

One woman in her seventies, living in a leafy suburb, recalls how her mother-in-law traced her descent to one of the great Gaelic tribes that had converted to Protestantism in the 1600s. This lady was immensely proud of her Gaelic heritage, and bitterly ashamed of this conversion. She tried to compensate by speaking Irish and wearing hand-woven tweeds. By becoming "more Irish than the Irish themselves" she made a daily apology for her ancestors' treachery.

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Stories of Identity

Despite frequent protestations to the contrary, many Irish Protestants *do* report family memories of a sense of Britishness, or having lived through a transition in which their family shifted towards an increasingly "Irish" identity. This occurred in the context of educational and political efforts to steer Ireland towards a national identity predicated on the use of the Irish language, Catholicism, and "Gaelic" traditional culture grounded in "representations of nineteenth-century ethnic nationalism… incorporated into the 1937 Constitution as the moral core of the Irish state" (Graham 1997, 193) and "a powerful and exclusive ideology that—particularly through its Catholic ethos—imposed a startling degree of culturally manipulated homogeneity upon the twenty-six counties" (Graham 1997, 8). In this context, "Faced with this ideological victory in which everything Irish was sequestered as Republican and Catholic, Protestants – even those opposed to unionism – increasingly lost, abandoned or were excluded from any sense of being Irish" (Graham 1997, 197).

A middle-aged woman in a border county recalls her grandfather's struggle when he remembered his days in the First World War from the distance of the 1970s: "Granddad served in the First World War… when partition came in it affected their lives and it wasn't encouraged to speak of… having British links or to speak about your war experiences…. [now] it was a different place to be living, with different rules of engagement."

For many, a growing sense of Irishness or, more specifically, not-Britishness, developed between independence and the Second World War; in others even before independence.

A man in his sixties recounts his father's comment on how this transition had occurred in their family: "My dad would say that as a family we very quickly became nationalist when the time came. And we also lay low and lived our lives more quietly afterwards."

A woman of a similar age, who grew up in an area that is home to a relatively large, socially diverse Protestant community says:

> So the queen was the head of state if not in actual terms certainly in my parents' imagination and they had a photograph of King Billy at the Boyne on his white horse. I remember that when I was growing up. I think it's long since thrown out since my brother took hold. Now it's gone to the dump.

A woman in her fifties remembers that, "The king and the queen were up in our living room but my mother took them down… We were very much Irish in our house."

Some families continued to feel a degree of pride in their British heritage for longer than others, particularly when they were part of a larger, more well-to-do community. Children in a Dublin secondary school were given time off their lessons in 1973 to watch the marriage of Princess Anne on television. One of those children, now grown and working in the Church of Ireland, remembers his family's transition:

> Well, it says on my mother's passport… "These children are not British subjects" so we were aware from an early age that we were not British subjects, and I think my father was quite happy with that, really. What had the crown ever done for him? But I think he had a sense of exile, having been so close to the British time, having been born in the British time, himself. And grandfather having died for King and empire, and King and empire having then deserted him…

Most Protestants in Ireland today strongly reject any suggestion that they might be British, although this perception seems to linger in the general population. They are typically very vocal on the issue and like to stress how proud they are to be "100% Irish", "not English at all – I *hate* it when they say that." A young woman from the south-west who attended a community school was immensely offended when her Religious Education teacher asked, "And do you still pray for the Queen every week?"

Nonetheless, a few people do report a certain fondness for the "British" elements of their heritage even now. For those Protestants in the Republic who still have a sense of Britishness (mostly, it seems, in Dublin, and a group that is steadily diminishing and rarely, if ever, comfortable in admitting to these sentiments in public), this feeling is often discussed in terms of absence and lack. One Dublin man in his fifties described his distress when he was confronted with the 2011 census which asked him to classify his ethnicity. "In the end," he said, "I wrote 'NOTHING' in block capitals, because that is what the Irish state thinks people like me, the Protestants of the South, are." He is more upset than defiant, is even slightly tearful when he talks about going for drinks with his colleagues and feeling unable to voice his views on a wide range of political, religious and social issues. He worries that if his real views were known he would face censure and tells me that talking to me about these matters now, in confidence, feels good and is providing him with a sense of release. He is proud of what he sees as his British heritage, but he seems a little ashamed too, either of the identity itself, or because he does not feel strong enough to admit to it very often.

Stories of the Past

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Like many families and communities in the Republic of Ireland, Irish Protestants have stories about important historical periods in the country's shared past. These are often difficult to talk about, because they can run counter to the dominant narrative of Irish history. In the history of the popular imagination, Irish Protestants are often conceived of as "goodies" or "baddies". The baddies are the bad landlords and their employees, who had land that was stolen from Catholics, treated their tenants abominably and, during the Great Famine of the 1840s, left them to starve or sent them to America in "coffin ships" that often sank. The goodies made their mark in nationalist politics or uprisings or by excelling in some other way that is seen as reflecting sufficiently well on the Irish that their Protestantism can be overlooked.

One woman grew up in a border area with a large Protestant population. It was rich in tradition and community spirit, but everyone was poor and few were educated. When free secondary education came in in the 1960s, the Protestant community quickly fell behind because there were free Catholic secondary schools in the area, but no Protestant schools. Many Protestant families were too proud to send their children to schools that had been set up for "the others" and nobody could afford to send their children to a Protestant boarding school. As late as the 1960s, "The only running water in our house was down the walls." Growing up, she heard that her community had been devastated by the potato famine in the 1840s, and she had seen for herself the huddled remains of old, ruined cottages that suggested that the area had once been more densely populated. In secondary school, she was taught that this could not possibly be true. Her teacher assured her that the famine had been visited upon the Catholics by the Protestants and that the stories of her community's past were lies. Years later a local historian gave a lecture in her area about the famine and she learned that the region *had* suffered badly at that time. This was not recognized by her teacher because it was inconsistent with the story he knew of evil Protestant landlords who treated their Catholic tenants so badly, and which did not entertain the possibility that some of the peasants who had suffered so badly might have been Protestant.

Depending on the political bent of their history teacher, studying history in school has not been a happy experience for some Protestants and sometimes it seemed as though the curriculum had been written specifically to make them feel ashamed. A woman whose secondary education took place in the early 1980s remembers:

> I started to puzzle and it really bothered me that I couldn't find one positive line about Irish Protestant people. And that saddened me. I thought, "Where am *I*?" and all you could find were the Anglo Irish and the big houses and the way they behaved in the

> Famine and the way they did this and the way they did that and I thought, "Where's *my* people?" because they weren't there.

Some older Protestants today remember being told that their parents were taught Irish history from special history books prepared specifically for the Protestant school system in Ireland. These books taught the history of their ancestors in a much more flattering light than the texts used in Catholic schools.

In their own stories about the past, many Irish Protestants endeavour to associate their family with the "goodies" and disassociate themselves from the "baddies". They might boast proudly of an ancestor who took part in a nationalist uprising, or qualify a story about a grandfather who felt loyal to Britain or maybe served in the police or the colonial bureaucracy by asserting, "But he felt more Irish than anything else" or "Lots of people felt the same way at the time, even Catholics."

But while many Irish Protestants comb their family histories for stories about ancestors who played an important role in Ireland's various nationalist movements, for some families the association between Protestantism and nationalism has been considered shameful rather than a legitimate source of pride. Sometimes the reigning emotion shifts from one generation to the next.

A woman from the west of Ireland, retired from the public sector, remembers that while the adults in her family knew that the history of Irish nationalism and the history of Protestants in the Republic of Ireland were closely intertwined, "it wasn't acceptable… you were just told not to say it and that's it." Douglas Hyde served as president from 1938 to 1945 and is a very important figure in the story of Ireland's cultural revival. His presidency is a source of great pride to many Irish Protestants, but he was considered a turncoat in her community: "There was no pride in him and his achievements. He would have been very unacceptable."

In other families and communities, the fact that some Irish Protestants had taken on important roles in the Irish Republic is a source of great pride. This is sometimes tempered with resentment and a feeling that any positions they attained were really "window dressing."

Even today, some Irish Protestants are aggrieved that the role of their group in Ireland's history is not recognized as they would like it to be. One man in his forties remembers a sense of frustration in secondary school when his classmates did not seem (to him) to recognize or respect the seminal role of Irish Protestants in the history of the Republic of Ireland:

> I loved history and knew more Irish history than anyone else in the class. I also knew not just the Unionist story but the Nationalist story was led… by Protestants. The uncrowned King of Ireland, Charles Stewart Parnell. And almost every revolution, all the way

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> down, with the exception of 1867, was all Protestant-led, and I knew this, and most of my schoolmates didn't.

Several people have described a feeling of having been written out of "the only acceptable version of Irish history". Many feel that the history, and the stories about the past, available through popular channels do not really apply to them. A woman in her sixties, living in the midlands, who recently did a course in local history says, "They've been looking at the Troubles [around the period of independence, in 1922] and that sort of thing, and I find myself removed from it. It's not *my* history."

Others feel that the role their families played in those troubled times is often overlooked because it makes people feel uncomfortable. An obvious example is that of the massacres that took place in Dunmanway, Cork in April 1922 shortly after the War of Independence.[2] A number of local Protestants were killed, causing huge fear among the rest of the community. One elderly man from Cork remembers his own family's part in this story:

> In 1922 my father was compelled to leave his farm in Dunmanway. He had married into my mother's farm and in 1922 a chap came up to him in the railway station, the train coming in from Cork, and said to him, "Bill, boy, if you are not gone by tomorrow morning you'll be shot dead." And that night there were twelve people shot dead in Dunmanway so he was gone and my mother followed.

He is very proud of the fact that although his parents were compelled to leave Ireland for a number of years, they returned and resumed farming in the same area. He says that many of the Protestants didn't return, or remained very bitter and angry for the rest of their lives, giving the example of an uncle who chastised any Protestant he knew who bought an important item, such as a horse, from a Catholic. ("He would say, 'Do you *know* what you just did?'") However, he is vastly proud when he remembers his father's attitude towards those who had sent him away and who had been involved in the deaths of his acquaintances and friends:

> I remember the day well, he had to go on the train to Cork from Skibbereen and he was called to the Bon Secours hospital to see this farmer who lived only two miles away from him in Castletownsend and the man said to him … "I want to confess to you that I killed a whole lot of your people. Will you forgive me?"

[2] There are varying opinions about the prime motivations for the killings. A major book about the episode was published in 1999 (Hart 1999).

> And my father said, "Of course I will. You only did what you thought was right."

A woman in her forties, in the south-west, tells me a story of her great-grandfather during the War of Independence, passed down through the subsequent generations of her family:

> He was working up in the field and a priest came running by. He went one way at the crossroads. The Black and Tans[3] came later and they said, "Which way did he go?" and he pointed the wrong way, because nobody liked the Black and Tans… and because he was a Protestant and had sent them off the wrong way the priest came back afterwards and said he was going to bless him for three generations. Now, that missed my generation, but they were blessed for three generations.

One man in his forties, who grew up in the midlands, told me of a great-uncle who had served with the Old IRA in the War of Independence. For his family, still loyal to Britain, this was shameful, but at least their house would not be raided by the IRA. After independence, he married a local Protestant girl and returned to the farm. His escapades were never mentioned again. When he died in the 1980s, an old man from the village requested permission to give him a military funeral with full honours. Permission was denied and the funeral passed quietly in the local graveyard. Then, as the family walked away, a number of very aged men quietly emerged from the crowd to make a volley of shots over the grave. They were the deceased's few remaining IRA comrades giving him the military send-off they felt he deserved, against his family's wishes and despite his Protestantism. For the older generation, this uncle's decision to fight with the IRA was still shameful; for the younger, who had not known about it until now, there was a sense of pride, of redemption, and of having finally been accepted in the community in which they had always lived.

Stories of Difference

Many Protestants have heard stories from their parents and grandparents about how different they felt when they were growing up; how it often seemed that all of Irish society was conspiring to make them feel that they didn't fit in. Even today, some Protestants feel that public space – streets, parks, shops – in Ireland "belongs to" Catholics and Catholicism more than it "belongs to" them and that they inhabit a sort of psychosocial

[3] Forces sent over by the British government to contain the insurgency and so called because of their distinctive uniforms.

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fringe of society: "Ireland was very definitely a Catholic country. Everybody said it. We said it, the Catholics said it. Everybody knew Ireland was a Catholic country and we were slightly misfits."

A Eucharistic Congress was held in Ireland in 1932. The main event was held in Dublin on the 22nd-26th of June, but it was a very important and exciting year for Irish Catholics. The Congress was a huge deal, a matter of great pride to most Irish people, and an exuberant celebration of Catholicism when the Republic's independence was still very new. Objectively, it seems unlikely that most Irish people gave much thought, in this context, to their Protestant neighbours. After all, it had nothing to do with them. But apparently some of the Protestants who experienced the celebrations as outsiders, spectators, remembered them as "rubbing in" the fact that they were in an independent Ireland on sufferance. These feelings were mirrored in actions taken by clergy and scholars in the Church of Ireland at the time. A history of the Church of Ireland was commissioned to coincide with the Eucharistic Congress, with the idea of cementing the church as an important aspect of Irish life (Barnard 2006, 256). However, the reality for many in the Church of Ireland, its congregants and the members of other Protestant denominations in Ireland at that time was "the erosion of standing, income and leisure" (Barnard 2006, 257).

One man recalls a friend of his parents who had been a young boy in 1932, walking home in his uniform from a Boys' Brigade meeting (the Boys' Brigade is a bit like the Scouts, but with a much bigger Scriptural element). As he walked, he came across a large group of people going en masse to some event that was part of the Eucharistic Congress. In his uniform, clearly therefore a Protestant child, walking in the opposite direction to everyone else in his community he felt, he said, that he was "running the gauntlet". In the story that he told, he experienced no hostility, but he still remembered that moment as a definitive one in his childhood, when he realized that he would never really belong. He was still telling that story in the 1970s, when my interviewee himself was a child.

A man in his late eighties, who grew up in a town in the southwest of the country, remembers that when he was a child the landscape was still scarred by the events during the War of Independence, including "the burning of Protestant houses and farmhouses." He was born three years before the Eucharistic Congress took place, so he doesn't remember it, but he does remember feeling very "different" throughout his childhood. He says:

> From the age of seven I had stones thrown at me, and horse manure from the sidecars. And when I was going home from school I had to hurry out at three o'clock and get as far down the

> road as I could, before the boys from the monastery… these boys, twelve or fourteen of them, they'd walk abreast down the road and they'd be calling out names and threatening me with castration. One of them had a penknife and he was going to cut me up.

Later on, as an adult, this man had a conversation with a Catholic contemporary from the area who, he says, told him that "the parish priest used to get up every Sunday in church and he would denounce the Protestants and he would encourage us to burn them out."

Looking back on his childhood now, this elderly man is especially upset because, he says, his family had been very nationalist for as long as he can remember and in no way deserved the anger that he experienced because they had "never" been English or unionist. In fact, theirs was the first local business to put the name of the shop over the door in the Irish language. His father was "an armchair Republican" and very much in favour of Irish freedom. They were not members of the gentry but "in trade" and had to work hard. All of this made it doubly upsetting when their neighbours refused to accept them as real Irish citizens. Today, near the end of his life, these memories bring him close to tears.

Many Protestants of diverse ages and social backgrounds report having been bullied at school by classmates who accused them of being "English", which may be partly why they are often very hostile to the notion that Irish Protestants are a bit "British" and so keen to stress their pride in their Irishness. Ironically, this bullying seems to have been more often experienced by Protestants from poorer families rather than those from wealthy backgrounds, resentment towards whom is easier to understand.

A man now in his seventies, who grew up in "widows' almshouses" because his father had died and his mother had few resources, remembers a childhood in the rough end of his home town: "Somehow the children in the area knew that we were Protestants and they used to stand outside the gate and shout in at us: 'Proddy woddy ring the bell, all the soupers[4] go to hell'." Although this name-calling was a frequent occurrence, he and his siblings didn't find it all that upsetting and today he remembers it as "a formula, a mantra," and "not terribly aggressive." A woman of a similar age, who grew up in a rural community in the west of Ireland remembers having to be walked home from Sunday School by the teacher, because otherwise the local Catholic children threw stones at her, an experience that made her feel deeply ashamed for being singled out.

[4] "Soupers" is a reference to people supposed to have converted to Protestantism during the Famine of the 1840s in exchange for food.

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One man in his early forties, who grew up in social housing in Dublin, was frequently beaten by his classmates who wanted to see his butler, because they thought that every Protestant had one, because Protestants are English and all English people have butlers. "The worst thing about it," he says, "is that they probably had more money than we did because we had nothing." This man belongs to the much-diminished group of working-class Protestants from Dublin. At the start of the 19th century, the city had a substantial population of inner-city, poor Protestants (Maguire 1995, 195). Today, this interview subject lives in housing provided at a subsidized rate by one of the inner city parishes identified in the late 19th century as home to a substantial number of extremely poor Protestants (Maguire 1995, 198). In the early years of independent Ireland, this demographic declined dramatically and rapidly; at a far greater rate than the decline in numbers of rural Protestants (Maguire 1995, 202). Life is still often hard for those who remain, almost a century later. While this man attended a Protestant primary school, he went to a Catholic secondary school where, he says:

> They thought all sorts of things. They thought you worship the devil… just absolute madness that I couldn't get my head around. I was bullied for the first year or two and it wasn't a nice experience… I told them: 'If I am English then you must be Italian, because you are Roman Catholic,' but it didn't seem to register with anybody!"

He is keenly aware of suffering because of the anger some people still have towards affluent Protestants in the city and their failure to understand that Protestants are not all privileged, "because of what they have been taught in school."

A woman in her forties, who also grew up in social housing in Dublin and now lives on disability benefits, remembers feelings of overwhelming shame whenever, as a young person in the 1980s, she had to tell someone her name, which she believes to be distinctively Protestant:

> Protestants have funny names. I would go to discos and things and it was hard to shout my name over the music. They thought I was saying something else… they would say 'That's a funny name!' And if you told them you were Protestant then you wouldn't see them again. They'd be scared off. They would say, 'Oh, you're one of *them*!'

Even today, she says that she doesn't want her neighbours in the housing complex where she lives "to know what I am." When she was a child, she says, it was easier for her parents to socialize almost exclusively within their working-class Protestant demographic. Her father attended

an all-Protestant men's club where he watched football and felt more comfortable cheering for the Glasgow Rangers, his favourite team. In his local pub, however, he was teased about being a Rangers fan, because Irish people are not supposed to support the Rangers.

Another woman in her forties, who grew up in a rural area, reports that her parents kept her so exclusively within Protestant circles that it was not until she graduated from secondary school and went to university in 1989 that she even realized that she was a member of a small minority. Somehow, she had reached the age of eighteen without ever having had a long conversation with a Catholic. A defining moment occurred when she went to the Gaeltacht (an Irish-speaking part of Ireland, offering Irish language immersion and courses) with a group of classmates from university and the *bean an tí* (landlady) of the house in which she was staying announced that she hoped that there were neither "pagans nor Protestants" among them. "I realized," she said, "that this was the Catholic equivalent of my mother." She kept her head down for the rest of her stay at the Gaeltacht and to her relief the landlady never found out "what I was." Self-imposed isolation seems to have been a family tradition. Her mother, who was born in the 1930s, grew up in a deeply religious family in a working-class area of Dublin, "going to church three times every Sunday." When her primary school announced that an optician was going to inspect the children's eyes, her father refused to let her be seen unless he could be guaranteed a Protestant optician, saying that he didn't want any Catholic touching his daughter. As a result, an eye condition that could have been resolved was left undiagnosed until she reached the age of thirteen, by which stage it was too late.

It seems that many Protestants did feel different, and behaved in a range of ways that underlined their separateness, even while they proudly asserted their Irishness. For example, for many years after independence in Ireland, before modern equality legislation, many businesses (perhaps especially in smaller communities) employed "their own": "There were Protestant shops and there were Roman Catholic shops. The customers didn't matter, but [if you wanted a job] you could apply but you wouldn't get it."

To what extent do Irish Protestants consider themselves separate and different today? Most assert their Irishness very proudly, while equally proudly enumerating their many differences. One rural woman from the west describes herself as "100% Irish" but asserts that the Protestants were an ethnic minority before "the Muslims" ever came and should have been as forward in asking for their rights as she believes the Muslim community has been. She says of a report she read about Irish Travellers requesting recognition as a distinct ethnic minority that "if they have a right to it, so do we." In fact, she thinks that the Irish Protestants are even more different, as the Travellers are Catholics. She comments that

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"the Irish will accommodate the new minorities but find it very hard to do anything for the old minorities in their community". However, while she feels that someone ought to make the case to government for the Irish Protestants achieving recognition as a separate ethnic group, she certainly wouldn't want to be the one to do it. She would prefer to keep her head down, for fear of upsetting or offending the people she knows and respects.

While there is a general impression of ever-more integration, some younger Irish Protestants continue to have feelings of not belonging, or of not quite being accepted as "real" citizens. One young woman, a college student in Dublin, describes her experience of being a Protestant as like being from a dysfunctional family. She says, "It's as though you were from a dysfunctional family and you turned up at someone's house for Sunday dinner. Everyone is smiling and being polite and you think, 'this is odd'".

A man in his early forties, who grew up and remains in a working-class, inner-city environment says that the arrival of a wide range of immigrants in recent years has "taken the heat off" him and the other Protestants he knows in inner city Dublin because now there are so many people who are more different than they are.

Many Irish Protestants experience pride around aspects of their life that they identify as particular to them. Protestants are: better at growing daffodils ("I can drive around Tipperary in the springtime and tell the Protestant gardens straight away"); able to make a decent meal out of anything ("Catholics would watch my mother cooking to learn from her"); more frugal ("I remember Mum showing them how to live on a smaller income"); more honest ("To me it's inconceivable that a more civilized country would have some Taoisigh [Prime Ministers] that we've had in recent times, who have been so manifestly corrupt… things might have been different if the Protestant community had been more present in the civil service and in politics"); harder workers, ("The work ethos was very strong in the Protestant community. Now there were hard-working Catholics as well… but generally speaking the Protestants were hard workers"); and more reliable ("The Protestants always seem to end up looking after money [in community organisations]. They trust us more. We're not going to abscond with the funds!")

Many Protestants in the Republic of Ireland proudly state that their group has long been more liberal about important social issues (while some state, equally proudly, that Protestants tend to be stricter about the issues that matter) and see the growing liberalisation of Ireland as the Catholics finally realising that they were right all along: "Our attitudes," says one man, "have now been adopted by the mainstream of Irish society." Vatican Two was a watershed moment when, one man recalls,

"We took great pride in it because suddenly the Catholics were becoming protestantized."

For Protestants with a strong attachment to the faith element of their heritage, the perception that their way of living and worshipping is closer to the ideal than the Catholics' is an important source of pride. Many rural Protestants still observe very strictly the ruling of not working on Sunday, or have many stories from their childhoods and from their parents' childhoods about the great lengths that were gone to so as not to work on Sunday. Cattle and sheep had to be fed, of course, but the women's work in preparing the Sunday dinner was mostly carried out on Saturday, and non-essential tasks on the farm or in the business were set to one side on Sunday, which was reserved for activities including attending church and Sunday School and spending quiet time with the family. One man commented that this rule had done huge damage to him economically; it was often painfully difficult to sit indoors with the sun blazing down and "all the neighbours busy saving their hay" knowing that the forecast was for rain on Monday. Nonetheless, he never broke it because, "What sort of a Protestant would I be then? Who would I be?"

This observance is more complex than it first appears. On the one hand, it follows the religious ruling about not working on the Sabbath. On the other, it has been described as a "convenient excuse" to facilitate many rural Protestants' active participation in their own exclusion from their local communities. Many rural Protestants who came of age in the fifties, sixties, and even seventies and eighties, describe being tremendously isolated because of their adherence to the rule that they should not work or play on Sunday, which ruled out taking part in the sporting and other activities typically held on Sundays. Without risk of offending Catholic friends and neighbours, the Sabbath rule enabled communities that were already very anxious about intermarriage and other ways in which their cultural and religious integrity might be compromised to stay away from activities including the Gaelic Athletic Association[5] and local dances and to keep their heads down and remain by themselves.

Despite what they see as legitimate sources of pride, many Protestants feel that they can only praise their community quietly and definitely never in "mixed company" (by which they mean "when there are Catholics present"), even when they are convinced that their attitudes towards social issues have been a progressive force for good: "There's an atmosphere of not putting ourselves forward, of, you know, being well-behaved, good members of society and not attracting special attention to ourselves".

[5] An organisation that coordinates Irish sporting activities and that has historical links to nationalism.

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Stories of Love and Marriage

After Ireland achieved independence, and with the steady decline in numbers, the matter of finding a spouse within the Protestant community seems to have caused considerable anxiety. People who were lucky met and fell in love with their future spouse at school or in another all-Protestant environment, but not everyone was lucky in that way.

The bogey-man of Protestants was the *Ne Temere* decree and many Protestant families have stories about the direct impact of the decree and inter-faith marriages on them as a family and on the wider community. From 1785, the Vatican had been prepared to recognize marriages performed by the Church of Ireland or before the civil registrar (Gregg 1943 (orig. 1911), 3). In 1908, this ruling was withdrawn when, on Easter Sunday, April 19th, the *Ne Temere* ruling came into force. The *Ne Temere* decree, which ruled that when a Catholic and a Protestant married (a "mixed marriage") their children would have to be raised as Catholics. The Catholic Church would not recognize marriages that had been performed by anyone other than a Catholic priest. The effect was that, so far as the Catholic Church was concerned, if one of its members married someone from another faith without a Catholic priest officiating (with permission from the Vatican directly or through the Bishop of the diocese), the marriage was considered null and void, and the couple to be "living in sin". The Decree was replaced in 1970 by the less stringent *Matrimonia Mixta* ruling (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19700331_matrimonia-mixta_en.html).

Marrying outside the umbrella of Irish Protestantism was also taboo for other reasons until relatively recently, and still is in some areas and in some families. Many Protestants of middle age and older have stories about the great lengths gone to to encourage marriages within the Protestant community (with few caring much about which denominations married each other, the main issue being the avoidance of marriage with Catholics).

The *Ne Temere* decree is still remembered in Protestant circles with huge bitterness. One woman, who grew up in the west of Ireland in the 1950s and 60s, was told "the Pope told them that they had to repopulate and take over" and remembers that "The Protestant getting married had to sign that any child born to that relationship was brought up in the Roman Catholic people faith." She attributes the *Ne Temere* degree in great part with "bringing our people down."

For many Protestant families in Ireland, their children's choice of spouse could be either a source of shame or pride, or even both. Partly because of the *Ne Temere* decree and partly because of strong taboos within the community against marrying out, there were huge social penalties to pay for those who did.

A woman from the west of Ireland, now in her seventies, remembers that, when she was growing up, she often heard stories about people who had married out and converted. Many such people were ostracized for the rest of their lives. "Marrying out was understood by us to be on par with committing a crime," she explained:

> People talked about what their expectations were for how their family should handle it, which was to put out the same family member, as they would do if there had been criminal activity… the family would feel that the person who offended would have expected that. They would go to England or something.

A man of about sixty from a border area tells me of a Protestant woman who married a Catholic and was disowned by her family. She wrote letters to her mother, but her father tore them up and threw them in the fire.

A woman in her seventies who grew up in a town in the midlands remembers the awful scene that took place shortly after her brother married a Catholic. Despite the *Ne Temere* decree, he did not change his religion, but the marriage was still a great source of shame. This woman was working as a shop assistant in a local business at the time and, shortly after the marriage, a local clergyman came in on purpose to see her "and he absolutely devoured me. Well, he just pulled me aside and gave out about our family and everything. It was awful. I can remember leaving that evening going home…" Ashamed and upset, she was not able to go to work for two days. She is no longer ashamed, "given the way things have gone subsequently" [mixed marriages having become commonplace and largely accepted], but it's still a very upsetting memory.

Certainly, until relatively recently young people growing up in many Protestant communities, particularly in rural areas, understood that "marrying out" was something they must never do. Families that were Protestant, rural and landowning felt compelled to seek spouses that were not only from the right faith background, but also rural and of a mind to keep the family land not just within the family but within the faith. "The idea is," one man says, "that you just don't want the land to go to someone of the *other sort*." This tradition has declined in recent generations but has remained surprisingly intransigent among some communities and families, even in the face of the rapid social change of recent decades.

"The way it was," one middle-aged woman recalls, "all my childhood my parents told me, 'One day you will grow up and you will

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fall in love with a handsome Protestant farmer'. Nothing else was presented to me as possible."[6]

For people in rural isolation, especially with lower levels of income and education, finding a spouse could be difficult until the taboo and problems associated with mixed marriage receded and car ownership become more common. Because communities in many rural areas were extremely dispersed, young people often had to travel for miles to attend parish "socials" or choose from among a small local selection, many of whom were relatives. A woman who grew up in the 1970s and 80s describes her rural community: "In our union of parishes there were three big families… Now we're not all first cousins but we're related. The other two are first cousins but we're second or third. In the actual church everyone was related to somebody."

In some areas, arranged marriages among Protestants occasionally occurred until the 1970s, especially where communities were dispersed and incomes were relatively low. This was in response not only to the relative scarcity of potential partners, but also to the perceived need to keep land within the Protestant community and away from "the other sort".

An elderly man from the southeast remembers of his own young days that arranged marriages were still common:

> Protestant farmers in particular wanted their children to marry Protestants because they didn't want the farm to become Roman Catholic owned. I knew two or three cases where the parents on both sides got together and said, "I think our Willie should marry your daughter".

While "there was nothing stopping us going to the ordinary dances", many young Protestants seem to have felt that the "ordinary" dances were for Catholics, as most public space was, and that it would be better for them to stick to their own. Keeping the socials Protestant-only was considered very important in many areas. After all, one of the main purposes of the social (if not the main purpose) was to introduce young Protestants of marriageable age to one another, and the whole system might break down if Catholics were invited. A man in his sixties remembers that, "There were men on guard on either side of the door in case any Catholics tried to come in… not that they ever did," and a woman in her seventies remembers that "sometimes someone would invite a Catholic friend or neighbour to a social, which was frowned upon. It would be all over the parish afterwards."

[6] She did grow up and fall in love with a handsome Protestant farmer; they have a large family and are still living happily in an old house that has been in his family for generations.

There are a lot of stories of elderly men and women (more often men, left at home with the land) who never married at all because they lived in rural areas where there were few "of their kind" and there simply were no Protestants to marry. For some, dying alone was considered preferable to marrying someone "of the other sort". A woman from a rather poor rural area says:

> The women got opportunities to go off to nurse or whatever and they took those opportunities. And the men stayed on the farms. There was no money for education. These men I'm talking about are 70s, 80s, there's quite a lot of them about. They had a very limited outlook, they were anti-Catholic and they had little money. They didn't want to travel. They were not very educated or very open to different ideas. And there they sat. And there they sit today.

Given the extent of intermarriage now, and the fact that it is accepted by most people, it's almost surprising to hear stories about how strongly marriage between Protestants and Catholics was opposed even quite recently. One man tells me about bringing home a girl, "not a girlfriend, just a friend," in the late 1980s. His mother "put two and two together and got 57 and went absolutely berserk… into an overload…" A woman who brought her Catholic boyfriend home in the 2000s had to deal with the fact that the relationship (which led to marriage) was shameful and embarrassing to her mother, "even though she could see that he was a really nice guy". Her mother did not want to acknowledge the relationship and was horrified at the thought of her friends knowing that her daughter was marrying out.

Some people know of families in which intermarriage with relatives "happened too often", leading to health problems for their children. One woman in her sixties remembers her dad saying of a particular Protestant community in an isolated rural area "that they were all intermarried up that way to keep land in the family…" and explains that intermarriage to this degree "was a Protestant thing rather than a Catholic thing because there were fewer people to choose from and people didn't have cars."

One man in his early seventies told of his father's introduction to science and his realisation that the many health issues that had troubled his family may have been due to excessive intermarriage. For this family, memories of marriages that had been long and happy had become tainted with shame.

Finding a partner was, of course, easier in areas like Dublin, where the Protestant population was relatively large and much of it was relatively affluent. A man in his fifties tells me that the disco run by the Rathfarnham parish was known to the teenagers as "Marry a Prod". Because the Protestant community in Dublin was reasonably large, most

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people report that they and their parents and grandparents found love and married within the community easily. But the same man tells me that "Marriage between cousins was a feature of many Protestant families in Dublin," and that "It was regarded by people like my father, who was a scientist, with some suspicion because he felt it wasn't wise for cousins to marry cousins too closely." This man had been warned, as a child, against marrying a cousin and given the example of a wealthy family in the Dublin area that had married within the family partly because of their minority faith and partly because they were aristocrats and needed to wed within their social class, with the result that they gave birth to "imbeciles," one the heir to the estate, who needed to be cared for by attendants all his life.

I should stress that, while stories of excessive levels of intermarriage among some Protestant communities are common, along with stories about resulting health problems, I do not actually know if there is a high degree of consanguinity related health problems among Irish Protestants, and it is possible that there isn't (this would be a fascinating topic to research). However, the *perception* of this being a major issue for Irish Protestants in the Republic is widespread, is a source of shame for at least some of the people who mention it, and provided as an element of proof for the widely held perception that "we" (the "old Protestants" of the Republic of Ireland) are constantly on the verge of extinction.

Stories of the Future

Today many Irish Protestants in the Republic report seeing the things that once defined their distinctiveness steadily eroding. In many rural areas, churches and parish halls are closing down. In urban areas such as Dublin, and in some more populous rural parishes, numbers are currently steady and even growing slightly, but older people in the city can remember the incremental decline of their numbers, and seeing one church after another being deconsecrated. Declines are continuing in most rural areas, along with the closures of churches and parish halls and the merging of distant parishes.

Whether or not people go to church, and even if congregations in urban areas are recovering somewhat, the steady decline of Irish Protestantism as an *ethnic* subgroup in the Republic of Ireland, with its shared stories and common history and experiences, seems to be a *fait accompli*. This is not just about Ireland becoming more secular in general, although that is part of it. A Catholic who drifts away from their religious identity will not stop feeling like a true Irish person, because the default

culture is the majority one, and they will continue to participate even if they don't go to Mass. For Protestants in the Republic of Ireland, the tendency towards growing secularism impacts on their cultural identity differently. The Irish Protestant who drifts away from their religious identity also drifts away from their community's traditions and shared memories. Their cultural identity can become tricky to pin down in the process.

For many Protestants in the Republic of Ireland, the gradual disappearance of a distinctive Protestant way of life is a source of sorrow and shame. There are stories about Protestant couples in the recent past who had very large families specifically to address the issue of declining numbers in their community, although it must have been very evident that they were fighting a losing battle.

Today, most people can accept the new reality of a more secular society, and the necessity of "mixed marriages", but seeing their community diminishing, or at least losing its distinctiveness, is hard. To some Protestants in the Republic of Ireland, it often seems as though their heritage is being deliberately passed over and ignored by a government and dominant majority that is going through its own debate about what religion means for its ethnic identity.

The visit of US President Barack Obama in 2011 is identified by a number of people as typical of mainstream attitudes towards their group today. Obama's remote ancestor, Falmouth Kearny, from the small village of Moneygall, was a member of the local Church of Ireland before his emigration in the mid-nineteenth century. The connection was unearthed by the local rector. But, a number of people lamented, Obama's Irish *Protestant* heritage was hardly mentioned. Politicians and local dignitaries lined up to have their photographs taken with the illustrious visitor and proudly claimed him as Irish, without acknowledging that he was descended from a group that has become a tiny minority in the area that Falmouth Kearny left many years ago. For some, this was more than just an oversight; it was another example of the Irish state's view that the contributions of Irish Protestants to the Republic don't really matter; some even read the omission as a deliberate, calculated slight and believed that local dignitaries were "relieved" that Obama's distant relatives, who still live in the area, are Catholic because of a long-ago conversion.

While some Irish Protestants, especially in bigger urban areas, express optimism about their faith's future, many still see their cultural group, with its shared history and its many shared stories, as one that is dying out. There are too few people to move into the future as a discrete community. Even if the Protestant faith in Ireland ultimately thrives, their story is drawing to a conclusion. Some rural people express sorrow about their feeling that they are finally accepted in their communities now, when it is "already too late".

The integration of Irish Protestants with the wider Irish population is increasingly the status quo. As this small group diminishes, they are steadily losing the qualities that made them different. Even this gradual loss of identity gives rise in many to a complex blend of shame and pride; shame in having failed to assert themselves in time, and pride in seeing the writing on the wall and making the pragmatic choice to relinquish the behaviours, traditions and shared memories that once made them unique.

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