

"Instead of saying: what is your identity and are you willing to die for it, you said: what could you live with? What kind of thinking about identity would be ok so that you can actually get back to some kind of normal life. And what it came up with was a very, very brilliant, delicate, complex arrangement which said: Everybody in Northern Ireland has a right to be – and this is the quotation from the Good Friday Agreement – The birthright of everyone in Northern Ireland to be Irish or British or both, as they may so choose. Very radical rethinking of what identity means. Your identity might be multiple; it's a matter of choice – so therefore it's in your head – and because it's in your head, it could change. It's contingent. It's open."

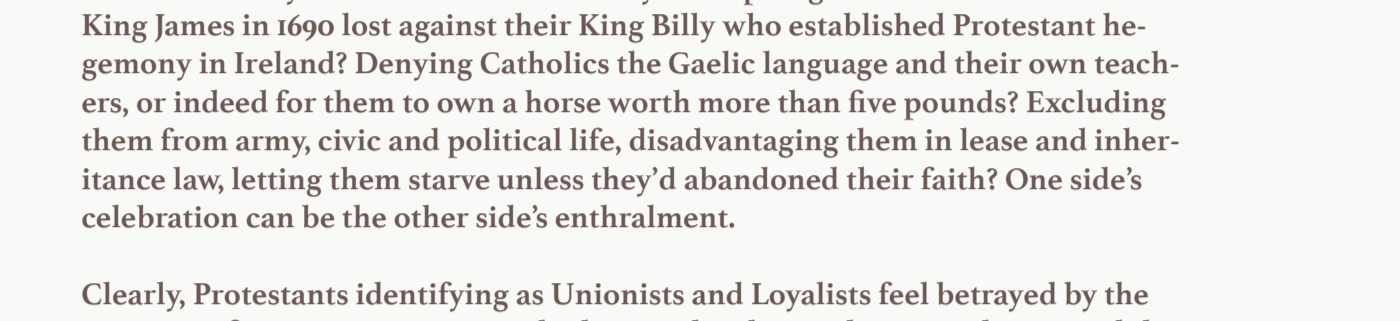
Fintan O'Toole, 2018



Joe, Ardoyne

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

It's summer in Belfast, Twelfth of July, the streets unusually deserted. On a bench in Royal Avenue sits a middle-aged couple, the man's head on the woman's shoulder, asleep or crying or just hungover, I don't know. To their feet lie a few union flags. The night before England has lost against Italy and instead of 'coming home', victory went to Rome. Now and then you hear the roaring of a Lambeg drum and some militaristic flute-tunes. The usually never ending number of loyalist marching bands, Orange Order dignitaries, Unionist representatives and hundreds and thousands of spectators parading away on this day of the year is reduced to a few scattered bands and a sleeping couple. Despite the pandemic, the unionist community felt the need to take to the street. Controlled – and vehemently underpinned with ridiculously huge structures for bonfires and over-diligent flying of flags in all sorts of districts. It's still the biggest celebration of the year. But –

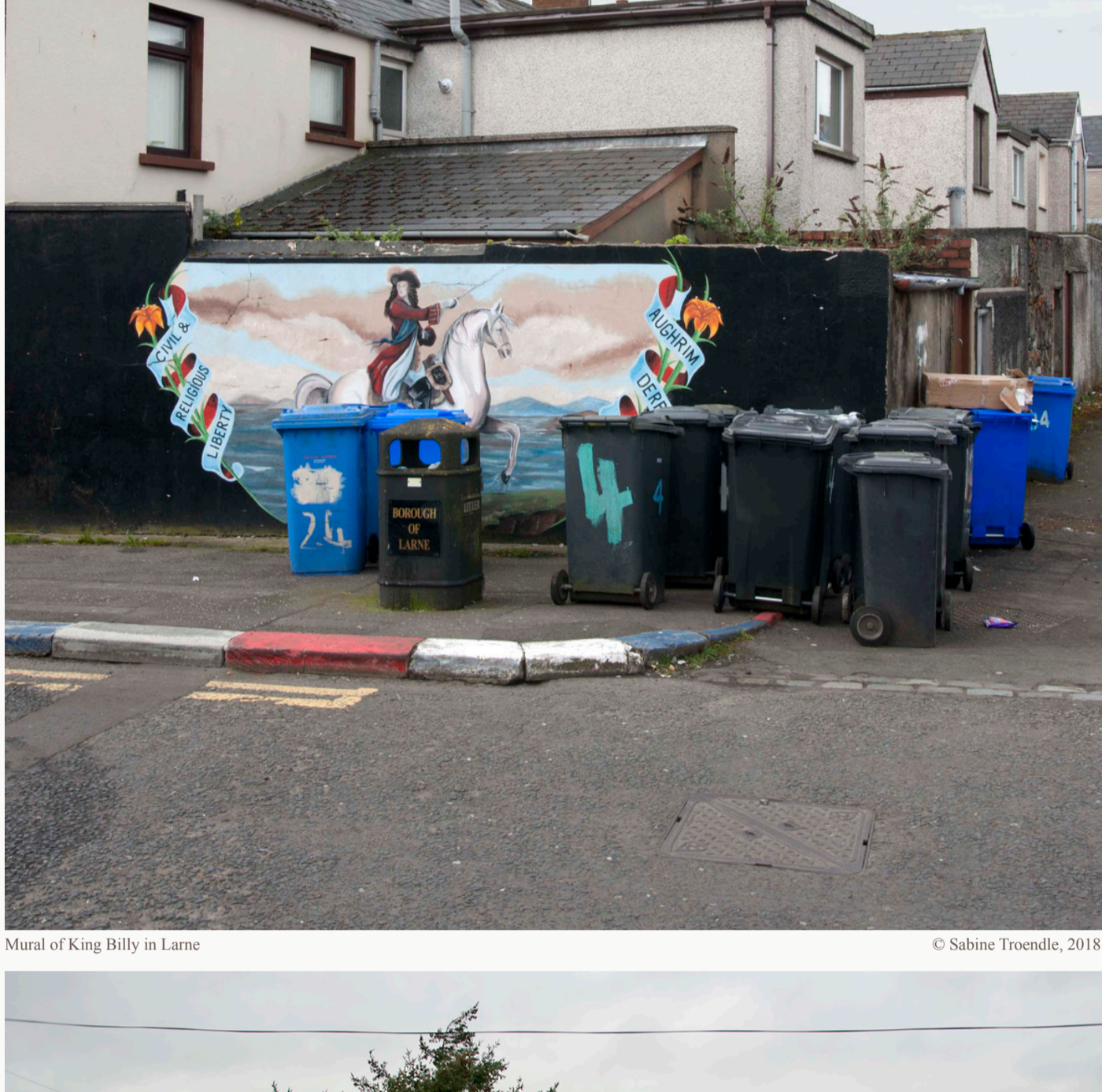


Orange Order celebrating the Twelfth of July

© Sabine Troendle, 2018

In a country which has suffered invasion, famine, political struggles, civil war, massive emigration and deprivation of all kinds, celebrations can either unite or divide, depending on why and how you celebrate. Do Protestants this time of year celebrate their culture? The survival of their community that perceives itself constantly under threat? Or are they triumphing over the Catholics whose King James in 1690 lost against their King Billy who established Protestant hegemony in Ireland? Denying Catholics the Gaelic language and their own teachers, or indeed for them to own a horse worth more than five pounds? Excluding them from army, civic and political life, disadvantaging them in lease and inheritance law, letting them starve unless they'd abandoned their faith? One side's celebration can be the other side's enthrallment.

Clearly, Protestants identifying as Unionists and Loyalists feel betrayed by the outcome of Brexit negotiations which sees a border not between the EU and the UK but between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. They feel abandoned by a prime minister who doesn't care all that much about their part in the Union. They see demographics shift, Catholics and 'Others' showing for a clear majority and they dread any discussion about a united Ireland. Their superiority affirmed in a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people' clearly belongs to the past, even if this hasn't entered the psyche of die-hard Unionism whose mindset meanders between 1998 pre-Good Friday Agreement, 1969 pre-Civil Rights Movement, Partition in 1921 and the Siege of Derry in the seventeenth century. The problem with the siege-mentality is that it leads to defensive thinking.



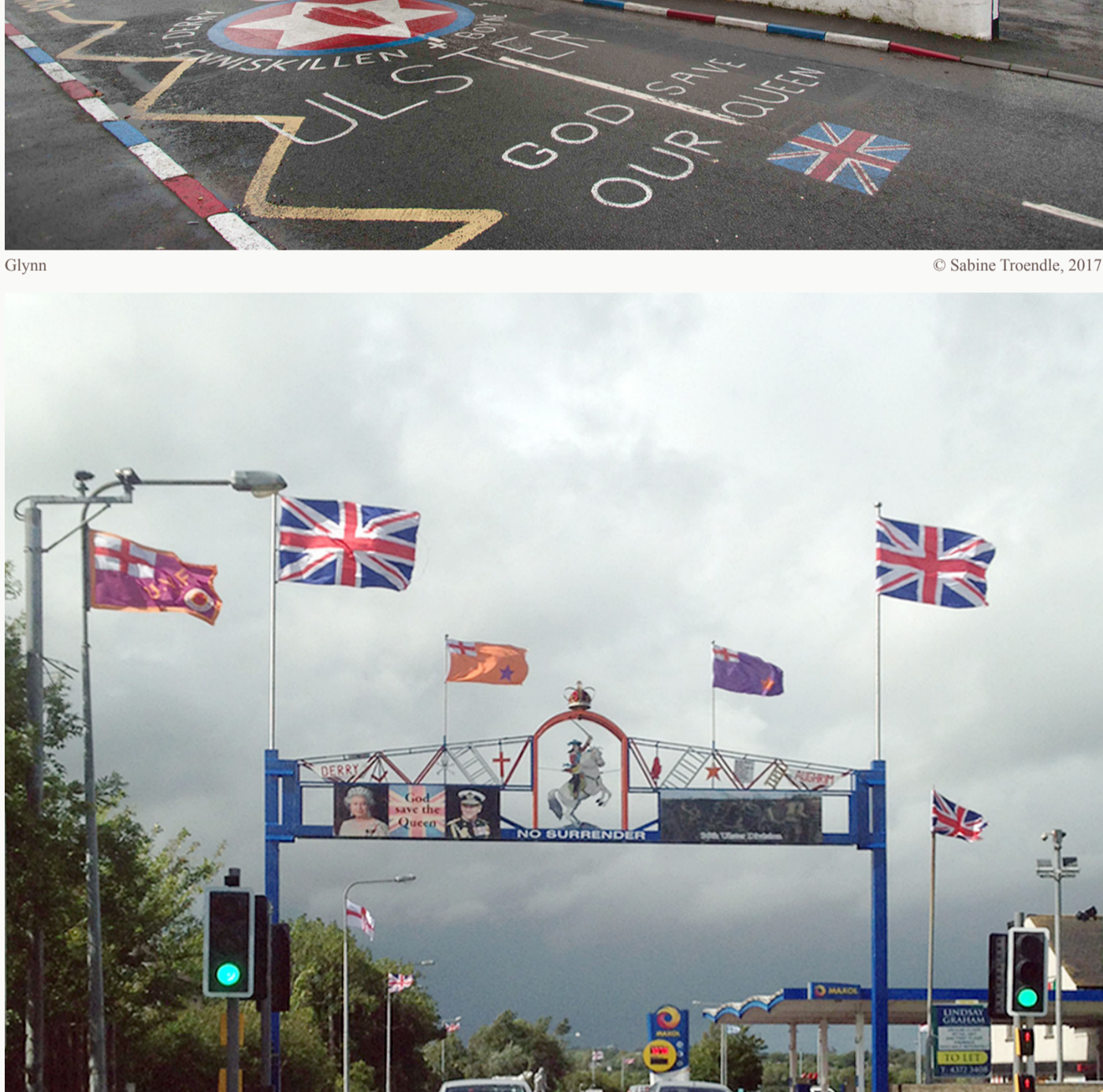
Mural of King Billy in Larne

© Sabine Troendle, 2018



Glynn

© Sabine Troendle, 2017



Clough

© Sabine Troendle, 2020

Unionism seems to have a problem with the idea of a shared and equal society. It fears conceding the existence of Others. The proliferation of unionist and loyalist flags, banners and painted kerbstones assert the superior position of Britishness within mixed residential areas and shared spaces in general. In the view of the majority of people it's an eye-sore, it brings down the value of property and it's intimidating, as a resident explains,

"This is deliberately done so that certain sections of the community can mark out their territory and to intimidate that part of town, especially nationalists [and therefore most probably Catholics] who are moving into that part of town. This has only started within the last few years." Irish News, 21 June 2021

The claim that shared space doesn't have to be neutral space has led to families fleeing their homes under threat from loyalist foot soldiers, to riots, destroyed property, injuries and fed up citizens. Because this marking out of territory has the support of paramilitary groups, neither police nor government are particularly keen on doing anything about it and even though Northern Ireland has enjoyed relative peace for over twenty years, demand for single-identity housing remains steady. So called paramilitaries still create a culture of fear.



"LA": Loyalist Area. Entrance of Catholic Holy Cross Primary School for Girls, Ardoyne

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"No Tags" (Catholics) in a new shared space project in loyalist area, Tiger's Bay

© Sabine Troendle, 2020

The PSNI refuses to project in loyalist areas as long as there is no concern for public safety and no criminal offence has occurred. But in Northern Ireland, what flag is flown where, when and how is a sensitive issue, provoking a range of strong reactions. When in 2012 the City Council reduced the days of flying the Union flag on City Hall, all hell broke loose, with thousands of loyalists taking to the streets, protesting and rioting. The protests got smaller in numbers but not in persistence. A handful of dedicated objectors still make a weekly appearance, hanging up their paraphernalia at the gates of City Hall.



Flag protest

© Sabine Troendle, 2018

For mainstream Unionism, the union trumps all. That's the one thing you've got to be firmest on. Questioning it feels like a threat. Alas, no volume of drum-beats, no muscular displays of paramilitary strength, no rallies or flags will prevent Unionism from becoming an ever bigger minority in the north of Ireland. Looking to the past and holding on to far gone values isn't going to persuade a younger, more open-minded, better educated and less sectarian generation to follow them into the drenches of the 'US' and 'THEM' battlefields. They might rather shout 'OTHER!' or even 'BOTH!' The narrative of monolithic identity – Irish/Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and British/Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist – doesn't reflect Northern Irish society anymore. According to the latest NORTHERN IRISH LIFE AND TIMES SURVEY, some 42 per cent of the participants define themselves as neither unionist nor nationalist and 36 per cent identify as Northern Irish (compared to 29 per cent British and 25 per cent Irish). If this trend will be reflected in next year's election, is yet to be seen.

On a simplistic notion, Unionism is on the defensive, backwards and narrow minded. It dreads modern ideas or to compromise. Being at loggerheads with Nationalism comes as the natural comfort-zone default-position. But challenged from within their own is betrayal, the challenger a 'Lundy' – according to Robert Lundy who in 1688 or so almost gave in to Catholic King James. In that politics, Lundy is still a very alive insult. But the 'Lundies' within Unionism start putting their heads over the parapet, as Susan McKay experienced during researches for her new book NORTHERN PROTESTANTS ON SHIFTING GROUNDS,

"Several people were not able to use their own names, because their opinions are not committable with the no surrender attitude. But still, there are more people who are willing to identify as being Lundies. Who are willing to say we CAN compromise. Who say, look, it's not all no surrender, fight or be beaten. There is no going back to an era where one people dominated the other and they just have to put up with it." Susan McKay

Unionist left-wing dissenters are advocating values like social solidarity, economic justice, outward looking internationalism. Not necessarily deviating from Unionist values, they see themselves as a bridge over to Catholic and secular republicanism. Of course they're going to threaten the real kind of die-hard Unionist and is less reflective of working-class areas, where monolithic identity allegiances pretty much prevail.

An outspoken Lundy at the moment would be Toni Ogle who's father last year has been beaten to death by people of his own community. In these working-class communities the attitude would be to stay quiet. It's Omertà. Silence. Don't talk to the police. You don't tout on your own people. Though 'Tou' and 'Lundy' is not exactly the same thing, they both refer to somebody who is challenging hegemonic power structures from within and this can put you in a vulnerable if not dangerous position.

"Tou was a bad word. It stank of shame and brutal retribution. It sprawled obscenely across gable walls, inviting trouble, turning nods and smiles to cold glares of suspicion. Tou could stick to you like wet tar." Jenny McCartney

Robert Lundy was able to escape before the mob could get him, during the Siege of Derry. Many today's 'touts' weren't that lucky, they had been kneecapped, banished, tarred and feathered and tied to a lamppost, humiliated and for everybody to see what can happen to you if you stray off course. However, on INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY Toni spoke out. She said that if fighting for justice for her daddy makes her a tout, then she is a tout. It's a brave thing to do, speaking out against your community. And it's happening more and more, especially amongst working-class women.



New Lodge

© Sabine Troendle, 2017



Justice for Ian Ogle, Cluan Place

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Emma de Souza, Irish Times, 18 June 2021
Chris Donnelly, Sluggie O'Toole, 30 May 2018
The Irish Celebrating, 2008
Jenny McCartney, The Ghost Factory, 2019
Susan McKay and Claire Mitchell, Interview with Mark Caruthers in Red Lines, 5 May 2021
Martin O Muilleoir, Irish News, 1 July 2019
Fintan O'Toole on Brexit, Youtube, October 2018

Belfast Telegraph, Irish News, Irish Times

Special thanks to the Ireland-based Swiss journalist Martin Alioth for sharing some of his extensive understanding of Irish politics and culture over a delicious meal back in 2018.