The weight of Anglo-Irish history – much more than an external affair

by Diarmaid Ferriter

Britain and Ireland Lives Entwined

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On 6 September 1997, I stood with my closest friend, fellow Irishman and London resident Kevin Maher, as the funeral cortege of Princess Diana made its way along Hyde Park.

An English funeral

What on earth was I doing there? It was both by accident and design; an accident because I had booked a trip to London to see Kevin well before Diana's death; by design because we could not resist the funeral spectacle given the enormity of the reaction to the death of the princess. We were fascinated by the extent of the public emoting and the apparently deep grief of those who openly cried, even sobbed for a woman they had never met but seemingly loved. Kevin and I, as far from royalists as you could get, and grandsons of staunch and active republicans during the Irish War of Independence, were not disrespectful, but we did exchange some bemused glances.

The atmosphere was extraordinary; the much-vaunted stiff upper lips of the Brits were loosened beyond recognition. It was quite a day out; we moved into the park where the funeral service was relayed on a giant screen; we watched and listened intently as the princess's brother Charles Spencer took aim at the way the royal firm had treated Diana. Later that evening we imbibed in pubs where the

customers decided they would drink generously in memory of Diana and became increasingly loud; it was starting to look more like an Irish than an English funeral day.

For me, there was also a professional interest. As an undergraduate in 1990 I greatly enjoyed the lectures of University College Dublin (UCD) historian Fergus D'Arcy on 20th-century Britain and he gave a particularly absorbing lecture on the impact of the British monarchy. It was a subject I was to return to at various stages as a historian, partly because of all the factors that contributed to the civil war in Ireland in the early 1920s, the section of the Anglo-Irish Treaty requiring members of the Irish parliament to swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown seemed the most emotive and divisive.

But symbol was one thing and practice another. Over the years we seem to have managed to combine a deep-rooted republicanism with a fascination with the activities of the House of Windsor. There was always going to be a curiosity about a family that was deemed responsible for presiding over the historical oppression of the Irish; the royals inevitably became a focus for nationalist resentment and their visits to Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries galvanised political militants to object and form protest groups. The interest has always been there; historian James Murphy, who wrote about the relationship between nationalism and monarchy in Ireland during the reign of Queen Victoria in his book *Abject Loyalty* (2001) made the point that the increasing hostility displayed by nationalists towards monarchy in 19th-century Ireland was partly based on fear 'of the undoubted popularity of monarchy among large sections of the Irish Catholic nationalist population and fear of the uses to which that popularity might be put'.

Despite the protests, many Irish were not going to deprive themselves of keeping up to date on the glamour, romances and spectacle of the royals, particularly when they did not have their own royal family to gossip and read about. During bleak times economically and politically, there was light relief, frivolity and titillation to be enjoyed by following the scandals and developments at Buckingham Palace. In an Ireland where a strict Catholic and moral code was being imposed from the 1920s, the decadence, extravagance and colourful love lives of the Protestant House of Windsor were far too intriguing to ignore, a reminder of British–Irish differences but also shared cultural interests. In 1999, the Irish Benedictine monk Mark Hederman

recalled his mother's preoccupation with the Wallis-Simpson/King Edward VIII abdication crisis of 1936. She was well informed about the scandal despite something of a news blackout in Ireland:

> *When my mother began to tell people at parties in Dublin they thought she was off her head. Being a conscientious Catholic she asked a Jesuit priest whether it was libel, detraction or scandal to be spreading news that was common knowledge in America but completely unknown over here. "I'm not quite sure which it is," he said, "but it's very interesting. Tell me more!"*

In tandem, military service by Irishmen under the royal insignia was a constant from the time they were allowed to join crown forces after the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century and by 1830 they were estimated to represent 42.2 per cent of the regular British Army, amounting to 40,979 soldiers. By 1878 a fifth of all British Army officers were Irish. More than 200,000 Irishmen fought in the First World War and were volunteers rather than conscripts. The Irish also made a significant contribution to the British Army during the Second World War; at least 60,000 Southern Irish citizens served and men of Irish origin won eight Victoria Crosses during that war. Joining the British Army was a family tradition for many, and was not seen by them as either pro-British or anti-Irish.

But that became an inconvenient truth. Because of the events of the War of Independence, the phrase 'crown forces' came to represent something abhorrent in the Irish republican narrative. The hatred of the brutal Black and Tans, the targeting of the Royal Irish Constabulary by the IRA and events such as Bloody Sunday in November 1920 when crown forces massacred 14 civilians in Croke Park at a Gaelic Athletic Association match, did much to cement that narrative.

Kevin and me

On a previous trip to London two years before the death of Diana, I experienced anti-Irish sentiment when I was prevented from getting on a flight at a London airport for the simple reason that I was a young Irishman travelling alone and the police did not like the look of this Paddy. I was interrogated in an airport room and because I was unsure of the exact number of Kevin's apartment, it gave them licence to string out the inquisition; eventually they phoned Kevin and he confirmed where I had been, but I still missed my flight. The rage in me took a long time to subside.

I wrought a revenge of sorts in 1999 when Kevin married a Kensington woman from a wealthy Tory-supporting family. As his best man I read a fictitious telegram during my speech from the IRA, announcing that Kevin had been expelled from the organisation for his treachery. The Irish guests laughed; the English guests tittered nervously. In bad taste, perhaps, but it was also about me suggesting that in the post-IRA ceasefire and new peace process era of Anglo-Irish relations there could be a semi-humorous acknowledgement of the lifting of some of the weight of historic tensions and a swipe at particular toffs who were inclined to assume all the Irish were either latent or blatant terrorists.

Maybe I was also asserting that the Irish would not be playing second fiddle at an opulent Kensington wedding; after all, the pews in the church for the English guests were individually labelled with their names (and titles) while the pews for the Irish guests were sectioned off under one label: 'The Irish'. But it was also the case that we middle-class Dubliners, despite living 90 miles down the road, had always been a world removed from the Northern Irish Troubles and the IRA.

Camaraderie of pain

I offer these personal memories and experiences to underline that Anglo-Irish and Irish North–South conundrums, ties, distances, absorptions, rejections and misunderstandings are not just matters of politics; they are economic, social, cultural, personal and profoundly emotional. Looming over them all is emigration and all the layers and entwinements it signifies. Over the last 30 years I have spent more time in London than Belfast and that is not unusual for my peers. Many of the emigrants of my generation, Kevin included, were graduates who thrived in London (Kevin is now chief film critic for *The Times*). Cheap airfares, a large labour market and mostly ease of movement facilitated the continuance of a centuries-old tradition of exodus from an economically troubled Ireland. The historic Irish forays to Britain have been remarkable in their volume; over three million Irish-born people have emigrated to Britain since 1600; in the 20th century alone, 1.6 million Irish left for Britain, more than twice as many as went to North America. One in three people under the age of 30 in 1946 had left the Irish Republic by 1971 and during the 1980s emigration again became inevitable for many young Irish people with 70,600 emigrating in 1989 alone, the year I left school.

For something so pervasive and such an obvious safety valve, there was a reluctance to speak about it. In February 1946, Fine Gael leader Richard Mulcahy, then leading the opposition, was accused by the governing Fianna Fáil party of being 'an emigrating agent or recruiting sergeant for another country' because he had dared to describe some of the attractions England offered to Irish citizens. The use of such loaded and militaristic language harked back to the traditional nationalist response to emigration and was regarded by an *Irish Times* editorial writer as indicating there were members of the government 'who resent any public mention of emigration. That attitude is both wrong and unhelpful. The labourers and the unemployed of this country know perfectly what Great Britain has to offer them and there is no point in any effort to conceal the facts.' But the dislocation nonetheless caused pain; in the words of Irish writer and emigrant Donal Foley in the 1950s, many emigrants that decade had to cling to 'the comradeship of adversity'.

An Irish psychiatric nurse working with some of the older Irish in Britain in 2004 commented 'we're finding deep wells of sadness in ordinary human lives' and I would have seen some of those characters when Kevin lived for a time near Camden or when I was in the vicinity of Kilburn Road. I once spoke to Ultan Cowley, who interviewed Irish immigrants about the impact of alcoholism for his book *The Men Who Built Britain* (2001). One of them responded simply:

> *I never felt that I fitted in. I took drink to make me fit in, to make me feel that I belonged. Who I belonged with was other Irish people living in the same shit-holes and there was a camaraderie of pain there, of knowing another man's pain.*

But many others did well; the hierarchy of the London–Irish always created conflict and frustration, partly because the Irish were just as capable of exploiting and ill-treating their fellow natives as the English, and partly because of the belief that the term 'Paddies' was a liability. These fault lines were brought out strongly in Jimmy Murphy's raw play *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2000). Yet despite the title of Cowley's book, the emigration was far from a male phenomenon; more women than men emigrated from Ireland in the late 1940s; one of them, Ethel, interviewed by Irish historian Mary Muldowney for her oral history *The Second World War and Irish Women* (2007), recalls

being proud of her service in a British uniform, and said of a later reunion with her former colleagues: 'I wasn't anybody's wife or anybody's daughter or sister. I was me and it was really marvellous. It's nice to be yourself once in a while'.

Fifty years later, my generation of Irish in London, highly educated, flourished in many areas, including in business and the media: I remember discovering an acronym about some of them: NIPPLES (new Irish professional people living in England), an illustration of a new chapter of the Irish emigrant story.

Pawns in the game

Many also left Northern Ireland due to the Troubles or lack of opportunity; most went abroad, but some over the border in Ireland. Whatever the opportunities that mobility created, it did not solve problems of dislocation and lack of understanding or just plain prejudice. The Irish in England were still often treated as objects of suspicion, while for the Northern Irish in the Republic, there could be a curious muteness. Journalist Susan McKay, who grew up as a Protestant in Derry and came to Trinity College Dublin in 1975, referred to the 'strange silences' on the part of those who had lived through the early years of the Troubles and then moved to Dublin, and she felt that 'many in the Republic were oblivious'.

As a student of history I was certainly not oblivious; the themes of a divided Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations formed a core part of my historical education and continue to. Ronan Fanning in UCD ran a popular course on Anglo-Irish relations that I took in 1989–90 and it was a course with an edge due to the ongoing Troubles in Northern Ireland. From the 1970s, Fanning had skilfully mined the British and Irish archives to elaborate on this subject; his 2013 study, *Fatal Path*, made it clear, in looking at the attitude of Prime Ministers Herbert Asquith and David Lloyd George during the Irish revolutionary decade, that they were much more preoccupied with how the Irish question would impact on their own party and British politics than on Ireland, with Ireland as a pawn in the game of their career advancement. That theme was to endure and there were serious consequences for Ireland as a result.

Fanning was fond of reminding his students of the declaration of Desmond FitzGerald, the Southern Irish state's first Minister for External Affairs, that 'England is our most important external affair'.

Fanning added that for the first 20 years of the state's existence, 'England was not so much our most important external affair, as Ireland's only important external affair'. But the English influence was also relevant to the Southern Irish state's internal affairs, as evidenced by the extent to which, after the revolution, the new state mirrored so much of the ethos of British governance.

Fanning was also particularly interested in Ireland during the Second World War because:

> *No state can claim to be truly independent unless it is in control of its own foreign policy. One measure of the depth of the British dimension is that, for Ireland, independence in this sense has meant independence of British foreign policy … if Irish neutrality was in fact something of a sham, Irish foreign policy was never publicly perceived as subservient to British and that was what counted politically.*

When British wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill insisted that the Irish had a genius for conspiracy rather than government he was engaging in wishful thinking. He had previously paid tribute to Irish valour, soldiery and antiquity: 'Ireland is not a daughter state. She is a parent nation. The Irish are an ancient race'. But there is also an abundance of correspondence and speeches that suggest, in historian Paul Bew's words in his book *Churchill and Ireland* (2016), 'the Irish were beyond his comprehension'. He read up on Irish history to a greater extent than most of his contemporaries, but he also saw the Irish as a people who needed to be 'managed' and dealt with 'according to the consciences and conviction of the English people'.

He more than met his match in facing the obduracy and firm dignity of Éamon de Valera in his quest to maximise Irish sovereignty. But neutrality was not just political, and this was something British politicians could not understand. The observations of the Anglo-Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, who compiled wartime reports for the British government, are worth noting in relation to such misreckoning. In November 1940 she communicated the following:

> *It may be felt in England that Éire is making a fetish of her neutrality. But this assertion of her neutrality is Éire's first free self-assertion: as such alone it would mean a great deal to her. Éire (and I think rightly) sees her neutrality as positive, not merely negative.*

British attention

The failure to appreciate that and other priorities endured. During the mid-1980s, with the distressing backdrop of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Fanning noted wryly of the need to confront British–Irish realities: 'Britain looms larger in the Irish consciousness than Ireland in the British; this has always been and will remain, among the most significant of these realities'. He also underlined 'the perennial difficulty of commanding British attention'. European Economic Community (EEC) membership offered a certain relief. Back in the 1960s, Europhile Garret FitzGerald, a future taoiseach whose father fought in 1916, was adamant that joining the EEC, far from being a betrayal of the 'ideals' of 1916, was the logical culmination of the Irish struggle for independence, as it was about 'rejoining once again the Europe from which for so many centuries she was cut off by the imposition of British rule'. In 1978, a senior Irish civil servant, Dermot Nally, privately informed Taoiseach Jack Lynch: 'It would be no harm, if a suitable opportunity arises, to bring out once more again the fact that we are not an appendage of the British in the European communities'.

The following year there was reference in a file (released by the National Archive in London in 2009) to Queen Elizabeth's 'alleged dislike of the Irish'; an assertion made by a civil servant in the British Foreign Office looking at the possibility of a state visit to Britain by Irish President Patrick Hillery. Concern was expressed about diplomatic protocols and the activities of the IRA, but a longer report about the queen's supposed personal attitudes was withheld from the released file. In any case, the British ambassador in Dublin at the time made it clear that the diplomatic difficulties involved in an invitation to Hillery would be too great to overcome, including unionist opposition to an Irish president, whose country formally claimed the North of Ireland in its constitution, being received by the queen. Two years later, President Hillery was refused permission by Charles Haughey's Fianna Fáil government to attend the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Diana in July 1981 because of the turmoil in the North and the H-Block protests.

British ambassadors to Ireland during that era regularly sent their impressions of the Irish to ministers in London and could be insightful. In 1983 the ambassador suggested many in the Republic had little interest in seriously engaging with the idea of a united Ireland, but

that there was 'a raw nerve which never sleeps' in relation to British misgovernment, and events like Bloody Sunday in 1972, when 13 unarmed protestors were shot dead in Derry by British paratroopers. This was true; Bloody Sunday had created great anger in the Republic. On the evening of the slaughter in Derry, a distraught Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, rang his British counterpart, Edward Heath, Conservative Prime Minister since 1970. Lynch began by apologising for ringing at a late hour, 'but you will probably have heard the unfortunate news about Derry this afternoon'. Heath replied, 'It is very bad news, yes'. That was about all they agreed on.

The conversation was tense as an emotional Lynch grappled with the enormity of what had happened and the potential fall out. He told Heath:

> *From reactions received around the country it looks as if a very serious point has now been reached and the situation could escalate beyond what any of us would anticipate at this stage. I am told that, according to reports I received and checked on the spot, the British troops reacted rather beyond what a disciplined force might be expected to, and, as you know, there were 13 killed and as many again injured.*

Heath was terse and defensive in reply:

> *Well, now, as far as any accusations are concerned I obviously cannot accept that…I must also point out that this arose out of a march which was against the law. Now the people therefore who deliberately organised this march in circumstances which we all know in which the IRA were bound to intervene, carry a heavy responsibility for any damage which ensued.*

Yet in the same year, when asked by the British ambassador at that stage about how the Irish people felt about unification, Jack Lynch gave a response that, in the ambassador's words, 'amounted to saying that they could not care less'. Another British diplomat was also accurate in identifying in the aftermath of the republican hunger strikes in 1981, during which ten men died, 'the real fear of the Irish that violence could erupt here and destroy their institutions'. Stability of the Republic, it was fairly surmised, was more of a preoccupation than Irish unity.

But these files also reveal that British diplomats, especially in malevolent memoranda on Irish diplomats, could lapse into crude racial stereotypes that, it seemed, had not changed much since the *Punch* cartoons of the 19th century. One of the staff members of the British Embassy, referring to one of the most senior Irish diplomats in the Department of Foreign Affairs, complained about his anti-Britishness, which was apparent when he drank to excess: 'Many Irishmen become bellicose with drink and bellicosity here has only one direction'.

There was also the ongoing reality, suggested by Lord Salisbury, a senior Conservative in the early 1920s, that the average English voter had 'little interest in, and less understanding of, Irish affairs'. But the same was true of North–South relations. As veteran Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) politician Seamus Mallon has demonstrated in his recent memoir, *A Shared Home Place*, the SDLP by the late 1970s was 'depressed, even despairing', not helped by a 'Berlin wall of indifference between north and south'. How ironic it was that it was at Westminster that this Irish nationalist felt safest, 'even if I was not safe coming or going there'. In London, Mallon could talk freely with some unionists, partly because it appeared all Northern Irish politicians there were regarded as irritating Paddies and at the bottom of British politicians' list of priorities.

As a result, British interest in Ireland was never as deep as Irish politicians would have liked. William Shannon, US Ambassador to Ireland from 1977 to 1981, remarked acidly in 1986 that when in 1984 there was a debate in the House of Commons on the New Ireland Forum, which committed Irish nationalists to recognising the validity of both nationalist and unionist identities and the need for both to be reflected and protected in any future agreement, 'as usual most members of parliament chose a debate on Northern Ireland as the time to go answer their mail or have a drink with a constituent'. The parliament 'dwindled to the usual hard core of Northern Ireland members and the few English members who interest themselves in the matter'.

An era of agreement

The peace process was, therefore, partly about rectifying historic neglect but it was about much more, including legitimising new definitions of Irishness and British–Irish citizenship and emphasising the need for consent, power sharing, and the eradication of territorial claims. In 1998, at the time of the endorsement of the Belfast Agreement, journalist Fintan O'Toole observed that 'Northern Ireland is now a place that is arguably unique – a place that nobody claims and nobody owns, a place that is free to become whatever its people can agree that they want it to be.' There were obvious benefits to a previously strife-torn Northern Ireland, but also underpinning the changes was a significant thaw in Anglo-Irish tensions which was encapsulated in Taoiseach Bertie Ahern's words at the Palace of Westminster in 2007 when he addressed a joint session of parliament: 'We are now in an era of agreement – of new politics and new realities ... reconciliation has brought us closer'. The undisturbed playing of 'God Save the Queen' at the Ireland/England rugby match at Croke Park the same year prompted more assertions about the 'normalisation' of relations.

By the time of Queen Elizabeth's state visit to Ireland in 2011 the atmosphere had transformed. The defining image of the visit was powerful in its dignity and simplicity. Head bowed, Queen Elizabeth did in the Garden of Remembrance in Dublin what she has done countless times in many countries at national shrines. But this was different; because of all that had happened in Anglo-Irish affairs in the 100 years since her grandfather, King George V, was in Dublin, and because she was there to pay respect to those who had died fighting against the British Empire, not to be received by loyal subjects as her grandfather was. That it happened was an indication of confidence on the British and Irish sides that both were ready for a gesture of this significance. It was moving, even emotional, and was inevitably and justifiably regarded as historic.

There was some far-fetched speculation about the possibility of an apology during the queen's visit, ignoring the fact that the monarchy does not any more intervene directly in politics; the contentious issue of articulating apologies for the sins of forefathers is for the politicians to deal with. What the queen did instead, when she spoke at Dublin Castle, was to maintain that it is 'impossible to ignore the weight of

history' and she acknowledged, 'With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all'. Much drafting must have gone in to that sentence.

While the rhetoric of reconciliation was full blown, there was also an assertion by President Mary McAleese of pride in 'Ireland's difficult journey to national sovereignty' and 'how we have used our independence to build a republic'. This was about diplomatic equality; that the queen was received in the historic centre of British rule in Ireland by the president of the Irish Republic underlined that emphatically.

This seemed to be the icing on the peace process cake on the back of a workable solution to the Anglo-Irish dilemma shared by London, Dublin and Belfast. Nearly 100 years previously, Irish republicans had emphasised the importance of the assistance and support of 'our gallant allies in Europe' when seeking to wrestle free from British colonisation. But such gallantry seemed open to question in 2011 given the financial crash and what the Irish Republic was being forced to do in accepting a bailout and making Irish private bank debts a public debt in the interests of the stability of the European project. In contrast, it was frequently asserted at the same time that Ireland had 'firm friends' in London.

The theme of shared or intertwined histories continued to be nurtured. In December 2013, Taoiseach Enda Kenny and British Prime Minister David Cameron spent a few hours together in the fields of Flanders in Belgium, visiting war graves, laying wreaths and paying homage to the dead. It was the first joint visit by a taoiseach and prime minister to honour the British and Irish men killed in that war as soldiers of the British Army. When he made the first official state visit of an Irish president to Britain in April 2014, President Michael D Higgins also took the opportunity to underline the historic ties that bind the two countries as a result of the war by invoking the memory of Tom Kettle, Irish nationalist politician and poet and one of the best-known Irish victims of the Battle of the Somme. Higgins suggested Kettle had died 'an Irish patriot, a British soldier and a true European'.

Such joint gestures and language marked a complete transformation in the attitude of the Irish state to the memory and legacy of the war. The same year, a report from a committee of the British–Irish Parliamentary Assembly asserted, 'relations between Britain and Ireland have never been stronger or more settled.'

Commemorating the Easter Rising

I was back in London in early 2016 just before the centenary of the April 1916 rising to record a programme for BBC radio on a century of Anglo-Irish relations. It was an opportunity to underline the progress that had been made and therefore had an uplifting conclusion. But the same year, I was deeply sceptical of the idea of a royal presence in Dublin for the centenary.

During President Higgins's British visit Queen Elizabeth had announced in her speech at the State Banquet in Windsor Castle: 'My family and my government will stand alongside you, Mr President, and your ministers, throughout the anniversaries of the war and of the events that led to the creation of the Free State.' This followed the suggestion of Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore when speaking to the British–Irish Association in Cambridge in 2013 that 'if we are true to the lead' that President McAleese and the queen demonstrated during the state visit in 2011, 'then I would hope that we can host representatives of the royal family and the British government, along with the leaders of unionism, in Dublin in three years' time in remembering the Easter Rising'.

That would have been too much of a contrivance. The centenary of the 1916 rising offered an opportunity to emphasise the fundamental difference between a republic and a monarchy and why Irish republicans a century ago did what they did. Such a focus did not have to involve ignoring those who served in crown forces; we were long past the stage of just a single, heroic nationalist narrative of Irish history, and the state was fully committed to remembering the Irish who died in the First World War. But too much focus on what Britain and Ireland shared might have prevented an appreciation of what divided them, and it was correct to ensure reflection on those differences was not sidestepped or bullied out of existence.

None of these assertions are a criticism of the very welcome improvement in Anglo-Irish relations, the importance of the peace process and the numerous courageous compromises it has involved, but it was surely legitimate to suggest that a distinction be made between history and current politics in 2016, and that historical understanding would be best served by keeping the focus on the origins, development and nature of the Irish Republic rather than the peace process politics of every commemoration shared. Having royals at the table of all the Irish state's commemorations, I surmised,

could look like the state desired some kind of British approval, which smacked of a postcolonial inferiority complex.

I was also irritated in early 2017 on receiving a bizarre invitation from the British ambassador to Ireland to a reception in the British Embassy in Dublin 'to congratulate those who delivered the remarkable 2016 commemorations'. I found that idea inappropriate and patronising, so I did not attend, and that is just as well, because it was subsequently reported that at the reception a letter was read out from the British Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson.

In it, he praised the commemorations as they 'struck exactly the right note', with 'the utmost tact and delicacy combined with a profound understanding of the past and its relationship with the present' as well as 'an abiding sense of reconciliation'. Johnson also wrote that it was 'entirely fitting' that President Michael D Higgins had attended events to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Indeed he did, but perhaps Johnson missed the speech by President Higgins in 2016 when he referred to the 'violent, supremacist and militant imperialism' of Britain a century ago.

Johnson had been centre stage during the Brexit referendum campaign and trumpeted all sorts of lazy noise about making Britain great again, 'getting our country back' and insisting 'now is the time to believe in ourselves, and in what Britain can do, and to remember that we always do best when we believe in ourselves'. We, of all people, were always going to baulk at this, given the record of British imperialism in Ireland and other colonies. Britain's romantic and selective historical view of itself was manifest in numerous other dishonest declarations during the Brexit campaign, including the Conservative MP Liam Fox's risible assertion that 'the UK is one of the few countries in the EU that does not need to bury its 20th-century history'. As Ireland commemorated 1916, a YouGov survey revealed that 43 per cent of the British public believed the empire was a 'good thing' with only 19 per cent seeing it as a 'bad thing'; 44 per cent believed it is 'something to be proud of' with only 21 per cent seeing it as 'something to regret', a stark reminder of the need for a proper history of British imperialism to be taught in British schools.

With the Brexit referendum result in June 2016 the historian in me could only think of crisis, disunity and the extent to which Ireland and the border in Ireland had been relegated to not even an afterthought. As I have observed elsewhere big questions came tumbling fast: was

Irish unity now more likely? Was it the case that with Northern Ireland outside the EU, those northerners who wished to remain European citizens would be required to claim Irish citizenship, even if they saw themselves as British? The Belfast Agreement had included assertions about not changing the status of Northern Ireland without its peoples' consent and the right of the Northern Irish to be Irish or British citizens or both. While the issue of choice about status was framed in relation to the options of remaining part of the UK or Irish unification, the Brexit vote nonetheless raised legitimate, related concerns about self-determination and allegiance. The negotiated settlement of the late 1990s had done much to underwrite self-determination regarding status and citizenship in Northern Ireland as well as the idea of the British government as an 'honest broker' in dealing with the North. The prospect of those factors being diluted or undermined obviously had serious implications.

'Holding our breath again'

Over the course of the next three years there was a return of Anglo-Irish distrust, coarse rhetoric and anger, undoing much of the progress that had been made. My most recent visit to London, in September 2019, to do research in the Parliamentary Archives in Westminster, coincided with the judgment of the Supreme Court that Prime Minister Johnson had acted unlawfully in proroguing parliament. I was conscious of an irony; the archive includes the papers of some Tories who genuinely believed a century ago that the Irish were not fit for self-government. But the archive also offers a reminder of how seriously that generation of politicians took the business of politics and statecraft and roaming through the intensity of the personal and political correspondence of two political giants like Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George underlines that emphatically. I was looking at how the two men responded to the bloody birth of the Irish Free State in 1922 and the parallel strife in the new Northern Ireland; the internal and Anglo-Irish communications were suffused with a sense that the stakes were enormously high for both countries.

What is striking is the volume of correspondence from politicians and civil servants on both sides as they sought to calm troubled waters, pre-empt potential flash points and manage expectations and bottom lines. In a letter to Lloyd George in September 1922 Churchill pointed out that it was not enough for politicians to just 'muddle through...

I am very much against a policy of scuttle'. Churchill also wrote to WT Cosgrave as head of the Free State government the same month to remind him 'personal relationships between high authorities are very important' and essential for smooth Anglo-Irish relations. Boris Johnson should spend a few weeks in this archive.

Whatever the big constitutional questions, it was the people living in the vicinity of the border in Ireland – a border that had become almost invisible over the previous 20 years owing to the Belfast Agreement, free trade and North–South co-operation in a whole host of areas – who had to endure the most uncertainty after the Brexit referendum. Belfast-born actor Stephen Rea narrated a short film by Clare Dwyer Hogg in September 2018, *Brexit: A cry from the Irish Border*, in which he spoke of the border progress of the previous 20 years:

> *Roads that start here and end there, somehow allowing a wound to heal … a gentleness in the mundanity … daily travel across political lines; work, school, grocery shops, back again … there, but not there; a line of imagination that needed imagination to make it exist while unseen … we live here and we're holding our breath again.*

Watching the British political meltdown of recent times has been fascinating and frightening in equal measure because of the enormity of what is at stake for Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations. Fifty years on from the outbreak of the Troubles, there seemed to be a reversal of British–Irish roles, with more coherence on the Irish side and a reliance on rallying cries and emotion rather than intelligent strategy on the British side. The context in 2019, of course, is very different as the Irish dilemma has become an EU one; in that sense the Irish question has been internationalised in a way that was not achieved in 1969. But there are still relevant lessons today from the critical phase of Anglo-Irish relations that began 50 years ago.

Solutions cannot be formulated without direct and meaningful channels of communication, which require willingness on two sides, some degree of flexibility and soft diplomacy. Despite the contemporary stridency and the wilful ignorance displayed by some senior British figures in relation to the border in Ireland, Anglo-Irish relations need to be repaired and managed carefully to try and dilute the current-day version of what Hugh McCann, the Secretary of the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, described to the British ambassador in 1969 as the 'momentum of disorder'.

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