

Dealing with the Past:
Historians and the Northern Ireland Conflict

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In 1998 Northern Ireland's Troubles came to an unexpected halt. Since then there has been a series of 'historic' breakthroughs in Belfast. Bitter enemies have shaken hands, shared public platforms and even shared jokes. Northern Ireland has been marketed so energetically as a model for international peace-makers that it is easy to forget that for three decades it was a byword for intractability. The Troubles – variously interpreted as an ethnic conflict, an anti-colonial war, or a struggle between 'democracy' and 'terrorism' – left around 3,700 dead and 47,000 injured in a population of just over 1.5 million. The conflict provided the dismal background against which a whole generation grew into middle age. In the weeks before the Good Friday Agreement, even the most seasoned experts and commentators agreed that there was little chance of bringing the 'men of violence' in from the cold.¹ The Northern Ireland problem was apparently insoluble. And yet just two years later the 'terrorists' were being released from prison, and their political representatives were preparing for government in the same state they had fought for three decades to destroy.

The Good Friday Agreement was rightly hailed as a political miracle. The institutions established in 1998 have proved to be impressively resilient, enabling unionists and nationalists to co-exist peacefully with each other and with their neighbours in Britain and the Irish Republic. But the external forces in London and Dublin that propelled the peace process forward have been unable or unwilling to impose an official interpretation of the causes of the conflict. What *was* it about? Who bears most responsibility for the destruction of so many lives? Northern Ireland is trapped in a state of recurrent paralysis, intensely preoccupied by these questions but unable to find agreed answers to them. Politicians have repeatedly declared their commitment to tackling 'legacy' issues, most recently in the Stormont House Agreement of December 2014. But there is no consensus on *how* to protect political stability from the implacable ghosts of that long, multi-faceted conflict known euphemistically as 'the Troubles'. In the following essay I hope to illuminate one aspect of this debate which has received more attention since the Stormont House Agreement but, to my knowledge, has not been the subject of any serious exploration: what is the proper role of *historians* in the process of 'dealing with the past'?

¹ Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Paul Teague, *Between War and Peace: The Political Future of Northern Ireland* (London, 1997), p. 215; Richard English, 'Challenging Peace', *Fortnight*, 362 (June, 1997), pp. 24-25.

Before addressing this question, however, it is worth sketching some of the more salient features of the Northern Irish situation. In both public discourse and academic writing, Northern Ireland has often been categorised as a post-conflict or transitional society, with South Africa as the almost inevitable comparison. But the differences between the two cases outweigh the similarities. Indices of social inequality point to one obvious contrast. In socio-economic terms, settlers and natives in South Africa inhabit different continents, as Mahmood Mamdani has graphically pointed out. If *white* South Africa was a separate country, he observes, its per capita income would place it 24th on a global league table, just below Spain; *black* South Africa, meanwhile, would be ranked 123rd, just above the Democratic Republic of the Congo.² In Northern Ireland, meanwhile, the social profiles of the two communities have steadily converged since the 1980s, partly as a result of fair employment legislation first enacted under Margaret Thatcher. In the 1970s Catholics were twice as likely as Protestants to be unemployed, and were concentrated in the lower reaches of each occupational sector, while Protestants were almost twice as likely to occupy professional or managerial positions. Significant traces of these imbalances still remain today. But Catholics now occupy managerial and professional positions in proportion to their percentage of the population – which has risen from around a third to around almost half. Revealingly, the one exceptional area of under-representation that still exists is the security services, which expanded dramatically between the 1970s and 1990s. Even in the new police service, however, more than 30% of personnel comes from the Catholic community.³

To capture the uneasy mixture of continuity and change in constitutional structures that has taken place since 1998 is more difficult. Against all the odds, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness steered the Provisional IRA towards conventional politics without making significant progress towards their declared aims. There is no convincing reason, after all, to think that a united Ireland is any more likely today than it was in the 1960s. But these constitutional realities are partially offset by the general direction of political and cultural developments, which has seen the progressive empowerment of the nationalist community at the expense of unionists. The tone of public life in Northern Ireland – the flags and emblems it displays, its media and cultural policy – is increasingly Irish and correspondingly less British or ‘Protestant’. The rough convergence of economic prospects noted above has thus

² M. Mamdani, ‘There Can Be No African Renaissance without an Africa-Focused Intelligentsia’, in M. W. Makgoba (ed.), *African Renaissance: The New Struggle* (Cape Town, 1999), p. 129.

³ Jennifer Todd and Joseph Ruane, ‘Beyond Inequality? Assessing the Impact of Fair Employment, Affirmative Action and Equality Measures on Conflict in Northern Ireland’, in G. Brown, A. Langer and F. Stewart (eds.), *Affirmative Action in Plural Societies: International Experiences* (London, 2012), pp. 182-208.

been accompanied by an equalisation of political power under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement – most importantly in the institutionalisation of power-sharing between the two dominant parties, the Democratic Unionist Party (formerly the most intransigent unionists) and Sinn Féin (formerly the political wing of the IRA).

Unionists might be forgiven for feeling that the tide of history is against them. It is true that republicanism as a revolutionary project has collapsed, and the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom seems secure. But Protestants seem to lack either the ideological resources or the cultural confidence to match the younger, more dynamic representatives of northern nationalism. One of the peculiar features of the memory wars in Northern Ireland, moreover, has been the withdrawal of the state from the battlefield. As the Brexit referendum emphasised, ‘the state’ inhabited by the Northern Irish is still the United Kingdom, capable of removing them from the European Union against their wishes. But the overriding priority of the British state has always been to insulate itself from the violence of the six counties; and the processes of insulation have been so successful that even those British politicians who care most about the Anglo-Scottish union seldom speak about the other union, that of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Consequently, the most powerful actor in Northern Irish politics has demonstrated little interest in constructing an official narrative of the ‘war’ or trying to control the meaning of the disputed events whose anniversaries matter so much to the people of Belfast or Derry.

Earlier I commented that the communal divide in Northern Ireland bears little relation to the racial divisions in South Africa. It is nevertheless true that the communal division in Ulster originates in an unusual form of settler colonialism that began in the early seventeenth century. There have been fierce disagreements among scholars about the applicability of colonial and post-colonial paradigms to Ireland. But it is worth considering how far the disorientation experienced by Ulster Protestants might be understood as a form of decolonisation, albeit an unusually cushioned one. The historical battles commemorated by Ulster Protestants – the siege of Derry, the Battle of the Boyne, the Covenant of 1912, and even the carnage suffered by the Ulster Division on the Somme – advertise their past loyalty to the British state and the sacrifices they have made for it; but the remembrance of these struggles is bound up with the claim that loyalty is the exclusive property of Protestants, preserved against the unchanging threat posed by Catholic or nationalist rebellion. To resist that threat was the fundamental purpose for which Northern Ireland was created. That is why so many unionists feel that they no longer belong in their own country. The British state to which they owe their complex and conditional loyalty has steadily turned its back on them.

1. The Problem Stated

On the day this paragraph was written, the front page of the *Belfast News Letter* featured not one but three stories relating to the Troubles, including the announcement of a new inquest into the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974, in which 21 people were killed. Five other pages – a large proportion of domestic news, in fact – were taken up with ‘legacy’ issues.⁴ Controversies concerning the violence of the Troubles have repeatedly produced crises in the power-sharing executive at Stormont. In August 2013, for example, relations between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin broke down following an IRA commemorative parade held in the small town of Castlederg, County Tyrone, a reminder of the symbolic and territorial antagonisms still generated by the annual ‘marching season’. The DUP retaliated by withdrawing support for an ambitious conflict transformation centre planned for the Maze prison site outside Belfast, long denounced by unionist groups who claimed that the result would be a ‘shrine’ to IRA terrorism.⁵ Six months later, unionist resentment erupted again, this time when the trial of suspected IRA bomber John Downey collapsed, after it was revealed that ‘on the run’ paramilitaries had received so-called comfort letters, privately assuring them that they were not wanted for prosecution.⁶ But the most spectacular threat to the peace process was the four-day interrogation of Gerry Adams in May 2014, in connection with the abduction and killing of Jean McConville by an IRA unit forty-two years before. Adams angrily protested his innocence—not only of the murder of Jean McConville, but of IRA membership.⁷ Since there is no amnesty in Northern Ireland, successive governments have colluded in the fiction that Gerry Adams the peace-making president of Sinn Féin is not quite the same Gerry Adams who helped create the Belfast IRA during its most lethal phase, who devised the ‘long war’ strategy in the Long Kesh prison camp, and who eventually established effective control over the IRA leadership during the 1980s.⁸

⁴ *News Letter*, 2 June 2016, pp. 1, 5, 6, 11, 13, 19.

⁵ See ‘Shared Vision for Long Kesh Site’, *An Phoblacht*, 2 Nov. 2006; ‘Maze “shrine” row in Assembly’, *News Letter*, 26 Nov. 2011.

⁶ Downey was on trial at the Old Bailey in connection with the Hyde Park bombing of 1982, in which four soldiers were killed.

⁷ Gerry Adams, ‘The Jean McConville Killing: I’m completely innocent. But what were my accusers’ motives?’, *Guardian*, 7 May 2014.

⁸ The account of Adams’s career in Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA* (London, 2003) is widely accepted. See also the interviews with Brendan Hughes in Ed Moloney, *Voices from the Grave: Two Men’s War in Ireland* (London, 2010).

As the cases just outlined suggest, the most divisive issue in the debate over the Troubles has been the question of the legitimacy of the IRA's campaign. (Loyalist paramilitaries have attracted less public attention, in part because neither the Ulster Defence Association or the Ulster Volunteer Force has been able to convert itself into a significant political movement.) This question was side-stepped by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. On the one hand the 'principle of consent' was fundamental to the agreement, that is, it was confirmed once more that Northern Ireland cannot be transferred from the United Kingdom to a united Ireland without the consent of a majority of its people – a clear repudiation of basis of the IRA's campaign. The agreement also contained a pledge of office committing ministers in the new Stormont executive to 'non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means' of pursuing their political goals. These were humiliating concessions for republicans, and a vindication of the long-term British position on Northern Ireland, accepted with increasing conviction by Dublin governments since the 1980s.⁹ But they were overshadowed by the provisions relating to the early release of paramilitary prisoners, an implicit retreat from the British and unionist position that convicted IRA members (and other republican and loyalist paramilitaries) were not political prisoners but simply criminals.¹⁰

Hostility to the IRA is not the only obstacle to truth and reconciliation. Attitudes to republican violence are underpinned by attitudes towards the existence of Northern Ireland itself, which was never accepted as 'democratic' by the nationalist minority.¹¹ The republican position is summarised in the following statement by Tom Hartley, who was twice imprisoned during the 1970s, was part of the republican leadership in the 1980s, and eventually Lord Mayor of Belfast 2008-09.¹²

I was raised as a northern Catholic. It's more a political constituency than a religious one. So I was raised with the idea that the state was never legitimate, okay? And I understood dispossession and second-

⁹ Jennifer Todd places more emphasis on changes in the British position in 'Thresholds of State Change: Changing British State Institutions and Practices in Northern Ireland after Direct Rule', *Political Studies* 62:3 (2014), pp. 522-538.

¹⁰ This was a particularly unpopular aspect of the agreement, supported in polls by only 34% of Catholics and 7% of Protestants. See Geoffrey Evans and Brendan O'Leary, 'Northern Irish Voters and the British-Irish Agreement: Foundations of a Stable Consociational Settlement?', *Political Quarterly*, 71:1 (Jan.-Mar. 2000), p. 93.

¹¹ Richard Bourke's *Peace in Ireland: The War of Ideas* (London, 2003), provides the most sophisticated analysis of republican and unionist ideological positions, both of which appeal to 'democracy' for legitimacy.

¹² Interview with Tom Hartley, 2 June 2012.

class citizenship. I came from a community that didn't in any way recognise the right of the northern state to exist but also felt deeply traumatised, and angry and seething about the morass that they found themselves in. It was also deserted by the southern state. So I think the psychology by the time my generation comes along, the psychology was, you know, this place, it's a mess, and it isn't going to work, okay? Out of this psychology comes the IRA of my generation.

There is no sense that Unionists even recognise that. That Unionist rule *created* that psychology. That the treatment of northern Catholics – politically, socially – really created that way of thinking, that we've tried everything, there's nothing else.

This larger question of the legitimacy of Northern Ireland itself – created by the partition of the island in 1921 against the wishes of its nationalist majority – has receded since 1998, when republicans began to take up ministerial positions in the political entity they previously claimed was inherently sectarian and repressive. The fundamental principle of republican rhetoric since then has been to realign the narrative of armed struggle with the wider grievances felt by northern Catholics (most of whom, most of the time, disavowed the IRA's violent methods). The central themes of this revised republicanism are the resilience of a subaltern people in the face of discrimination, resistance to the harsh and sometimes arbitrary repression of the state forces, and the gradual achievement of a deeper political consciousness in the shape of Sinn Féin.

The most active and sophisticated campaigning groups in Northern Ireland's memory wars – such as Relatives for Justice and the Pat Finucane Centre – are focused entirely on inquiries into *state* abuses, of which there are an alarming number. Perhaps the most prominent is currently the subject of legal proceedings: the 'Ballymurphy Massacre', a three-day period in August 1971 when ten civilians were shot dead by British soldiers. (An eleventh victim died of a heart attack, having allegedly been subjected to a mock execution.)¹³ There have also been persistent allegations about collusion between various branches of the security forces and loyalist paramilitary organisations. To republicans, collusion is how 'the British state wants to operate in an area where it can't be seen to operate; so what it does, it creates these arm's-length companies called loyalists to do the work'.¹⁴ Evidence of collusion has been found in a number of investigations, including an inquiry into the

¹³ *Irish News*, 14 Dec. 2016.

¹⁴ Interview with Tom Hartley, 2 June 2012.

killing of the Belfast solicitor Patrick Finucane, denounced by critics as ‘unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA’. Finucane was shot dead by masked loyalists while he ate dinner with his family in 1989.¹⁵

Unionist fears about the recent ‘rewriting of history’ in Northern Ireland provide one indication that they are losing the battle to control the public memory of the Troubles. Their fundamental complaint is that the moral distinction between ‘the service and sacrifice of members of the security forces’ and those ‘who were setting out to plan murder’ has become blurred.¹⁶ One of the more moderate voices in Unionist politics is Jeffrey Donaldson, a Westminster MP who speaks for the DUP on victims’ issues:

There has to be some moral line that you create here, because if you don’t create that moral line what you say to future generations that, well actually it’s okay to go out and kill people, it’s okay to engage in criminal and terrorist activity because eventually you’ll be almost absolved of it, and you yourself are a victim.¹⁷

If acknowledgement is what happens when a previously denied injustice is accorded official recognition, then the unionist experience, since the 1990s, has been the opposite of acknowledgement. The state security forces were responsible for less than a tenth of all deaths during the conflict, and they suffered twice as many losses as the republican and loyalist paramilitaries added together. There is nothing absurd or unreasonable about Donaldson’s determination to remember ‘the enormous price paid by the military and the police in standing in the gap during the period of the Troubles, protecting the community and enabling the space to be created wherein political progress could be made’.¹⁸ Although there are memorial windows to the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Ulster Defence Regiment in Belfast City Hall, however, mourning for members of the local security forces has mostly been confined to closed spaces – to plaques in parish churches or Orange Halls.¹⁹ During

¹⁵ *The Report of the Patrick Finucane Review* by Sir Desmond de Silva QC can be found at: http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/collusion/docs/desilva_121212_full.pdf. The quotation is from remarks made by Douglas Hogg MP in the House of Commons on 17 January 1989. Hogg did not name Finucane specifically.

¹⁶ Cheryl Lawther, ‘Denial, Silence and the Politics of the Past: Unpicking Opposition to Truth Recovery in Northern Ireland’, *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, (2012), p. 11.

¹⁷ Interview with Jeffrey Donaldson, 8 December 2010.

¹⁸ Interview with Jeffrey Donaldson, 8 December 2010.

¹⁹ ‘Crossgar murder victim remembered by plaque at his place of worship’, *Down Recorder*, 22 Nov. 1995; ‘IRA victims remembered’, *New Letter*, 19 April 1996; ‘Troubles Memorial’, *Belfast Telegraph*,

the last twenty years, conversely, the commemoration of IRA volunteers has been transformed. Public monuments honour republicans killed ‘on active service’, the stories of their lives and deaths sometimes re-narrated as if their goal all along had been the extraction of concessions from the British state rather than its violent overthrow.²⁰

Sinn Féin’s remarkable success in taking ownership of the peace process is one reason why surveys consistently find that Protestants are more suspicious of mechanisms for ‘dealing with the past’ than Catholics (see table 1). When the cross-community project Healing Through Remembering carried out a public consultation exercise on commemoration in 2002, a number of submissions expressed hostility to all attempts at ‘truth and reconciliation’, including one blunt suggestion that the most appropriate memorial to the victims of conflict would be to ‘build more jails’.²¹ More dignified voices have delivered a similar message. One poignant example is June McMullan, whose husband, the reserve police constable John Proctor, was killed in 1981 as he visited her and their new-born son in hospital. McMullan was immediately informed that the killer was the IRA man Seamus Kearney, who lived around a mile from her home; over the next thirty years, before new DNA evidence eventually led to his conviction for murder, she would periodically encounter Kearney in the street. Even life sentences are restricted to a two-year period under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, but McMullin was nevertheless comforted by the verdict: ‘Surely everyone deserves their day in court. ... Now we can move on with our lives.’²²

27 Oct. 1997; ‘Banner painting “fitting tribute to murdered soldier”’, *News Letter*, 3 Feb. 2009; ‘Order pays tribute to Troubles victims’, *News Letter*, 22 Sept. 2010.

²⁰ One example is the unveiling of a portrait of Martin McCaughey by the mayor of Dungannon council. McCaughey, one of two IRA men ambushed at a Country Armagh farm by the SAS, and praised by Sinn Féin for ‘bringing equality to the heart of this chamber’: ‘Outrage over function for IRA man’, *News Letter*, 21 Oct. 2010.

²¹ The original submissions are held by Healing Through Remembering, on the Ormeau Avenue in Belfast. I am very grateful to Kate Turner, director of HTR, for permitting me to read them in an anonymised form.

²² *News Letter*, 30 Nov. 2013.

Table 1: Support for Dealing with the Past: Attitudes among Victims²³

	Protestant %	Catholic %	No religion* %
Truth Commission	34	70	44
Public Inquiry	21	48	33
Police Inquiry	59	65	57
Public Apologies	68	77	66

*Those who describe themselves as having 'no religion' are disproportionately from Protestant backgrounds.

It is sometimes tempting to conclude that the the two communities in Northern Ireland inhabit parallel moral universes. One particularly interesting poll, carried out in the aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement, neatly illustrates their opposing interpretations of the Troubles. Readers of the *Belfast Telegraph* were asked about their views on the causes of the conflict in an attempt to identify the practical concerns that had to be addressed if the peace process was to succeed (table 2).

Table 2: Perceptions of Causes of the Conflict²⁴

	Protestant %	Very Significant	Catholic %	Very Significant
1 st	The IRA and its use of violence	87	Lack of equality and continued discrimination	71
2 nd	All paramilitary groups and their use of violence	67	The sectarian division of Northern Ireland politics	66
3 rd	The failure of the government to deal with terrorism	56	The failure to provide a police service acceptable to all	62
4 th	The Irish Republic's territorial claim on Northern Ireland	53	The failures of Northern Ireland politicians	59
5 th	Loyalist paramilitaries and their use of violence	53	A lack of respect for the people of the 'other' tradition	57

At first glance Protestant and Catholic attitudes seem diametrically opposed. The IRA was clearly perceived as the main obstacle to peace by Protestants. The

²³ Source: John D. Brewer and Bernadette C. Hayes, 'Victimhood and Attitudes towards Dealing with the Legacy of a Violent Past: Northern Ireland as a Case Study', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17:3 (2015), p. 518. (Figures rounded.)

²⁴ Colin Irwin, *The People's Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 38.

strikingly high figure of 87% was no doubt influenced by the fact that the decommissioning of IRA weapons and the release of paramilitary prisoners were the most controversial topics of the decade between 1997 and 2007. Indeed, Protestants tended to conceive of the conflict almost entirely in terms of terrorism (the territorial claim to Northern Ireland contained in the Republic's constitution features because it was regarded as providing justification for the IRA campaign). In sharp contrast, the first five Catholic priorities focused overwhelmingly on perceived inequalities and injustices. A little more digging, however, reveals some areas of common ground (table 3). Protestants are remarkably unified in their attitudes towards the IRA campaign (and also towards the British Army); but Catholic opinion is split more or less down the middle, with 45% regarding IRA violence as a major cause of conflict. When Catholics respondents were asked about paramilitary violence in general, without singling out republican organisations, that figure rises to 56%. Finally, a majority on both sides believed that loyalist paramilitaries bear a large degree of responsibility for the Troubles – 53% of Protestants and 57% of Catholics. While Catholics do not share the conviction of most Protestants in the moral superiority of the security forces over anti-state organisations, a large number nevertheless defend the rule of law and regard paramilitary violence as morally wrong. As one victim of a loyalist assassination attempt commented, 'I know that we have to move forward but not at the cost of giving all to the Perpetrators and **fuck all** to Victims'.²⁵

Table 3: Perceptions of Causes of the Conflict

	Protestants	Catholics
IRA violence	87% (1 st)	45% (11 th)
Loyalist violence	53% (5 th) 6% (19 th)	57% (6 th) 48% (10 th)
British Army violence		
All paramilitary violence	67% (2 nd)	56% (7 th)

Dealing with the past thus presents complex challenges. The issues to be confronted include not only the lives taken by republican paramilitaries (59% of the total

²⁵ HTR, Belfast, 2002 submissions, S062 [bold in original].

number of fatalities) and by their loyalist counterparts (29%); but the 10% of killings, some of them unlawful, carried out by the security forces, and the fact that all illegal organisations had been extensively infiltrated by agents and informers working for RUC Special Branch, the British Army and the British intelligence services. Who, then, is best qualified to investigate these interconnected patterns of violent activity? This question was included in the *Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey* for 2004. The results make sobering reading.²⁶ When asked who they would trust to run a truth commission in Northern Ireland, the negativity expressed by respondents was quite astonishing, even for an era when respect for established institutions has slumped. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 99% of people felt that it would be unacceptable for republican paramilitary organisations to run a truth commission, and the figure for their loyalist counterparts was exactly the same. But conventional politicians performed almost as poorly as ‘the men of violence’, whether in London or Dublin or in the locally elected Northern Ireland Assembly; and an extraordinary 75% of those polled replied that they would not trust ‘ordinary people’ to do the job either.

Table 4: Who should be trusted to run a truth commission in NI?

	No
republican paramilitaries	99%
loyalist paramilitaries	99%
Irish government	97%
British government	92%
Northern Ireland Assembly	89%
judges	95%
victims groups	93%
community groups	90%
Churches	88%
‘ordinary people’	75%

This is hardly a propitious environment in which to raise the question that forms the focus of this essay: what about academic historians? Isn’t it their business to sort

²⁶ Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern, ‘Attitudes towards a Truth Commission for Northern Ireland in Relation to Party Political Affiliation’, *Irish Political Studies*, 22:3 (2007), p. 331.

out the real history from the myth and propaganda? Isn't it the job of history to correct what Tony Judt once called 'mis-memory'?²⁷

2. History and the Stormont House Agreement: Some Background and Comparisons

In the Stormont House Agreement (December 2014) Northern Ireland's political leaders renewed their commitment to dealing with the legacy of the Troubles. This latest agreement proposes the establishment of an Oral History Archive relating to the conflict, and envisages that academics will be involved in producing 'a factual historical timeline and statistical analysis of the Troubles' to accompany it. Academics will cringe at the suggestion that their role involves producing a 'timeline'. The Stormont House Agreement further provides that, after five years, 'independent academic experts' will be commissioned to write a report on any 'patterns and themes' that emerge from the various legacy mechanisms designed to examine Troubles-related deaths. Of the two main bodies investigating killings, it is proposed that a Historical Investigations Unit takes over the existing criminal investigations relating to the Troubles, or what have become known as 'historical cases'; if sufficient evidence can be found the Director of Public Prosecutions will then decide whether prosecutions should follow. A second body, the Independent Commission on Information Retrieval, will be set up by the UK and Irish governments to enable the relatives of those who lost their lives to seek information from paramilitaries, on the understanding that any such information will be inadmissible in either criminal or civil proceedings.

In Northern Ireland, the difficulties of dealing with the past have been explored in a series of consultation exercises over the last fifteen years. These include the reports of the Healing through Remembering project (2002), the Northern Ireland Affairs committee of the House of Commons (2005) and the Consultative Group on the Past (2009) chaired by Lord Eames (former Anglican Archbishop of Armagh) and Denis Bradley (at different times a Catholic priest, a journalist, and vice-chair of the police board). History features in all of them – if only because many sections of Northern Irish opinion fear that history is being 'rewritten' to exclude their own experiences and perspectives. It has been alleged by some unionists and representatives of the security forces, for example, that republicans seek to exploit public inquiries to portray the British state as the chief aggressor in the conflict and to legitimise their own resort to violence. Republicans and nationalists, on the other hand, often point

²⁷ Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (London, 2008), p. 198.

to the resources deployed by the British state throughout the conflict to ensure that media coverage did not diverge significantly from the official line. Another common suggestion is that clashing perceptions of history are fundamental to communal divisions in Northern Ireland, and that the healing of those divisions will require a shared understanding of the past, perhaps promoted by a Troubles museum, by storytelling projects or an agreed textbook to be taught in schools.

The role of academic historians was given more serious consideration in *Making Peace with the Past* (2006), an extensive report on truth recovery written by Professor Kieran McEvoy for Healing Through Remembering. As an alternative to a Truth Commission, *Making Peace with the Past* discussed the idea of a Commission of Historical Clarification – a panel of specialists in Irish and British history whose job would be to devise ‘an independent, authoritative, historical narrative’ about the Northern Ireland conflict and thereby ‘to encourage a broader sense of collective (rather than individual) responsibility for what happened.’²⁸

The obvious strengths of this option, as McEvoy presents them, are that (i) a historical commission would be comparatively inexpensive; (ii) an objective history of the Troubles would challenge the simplistic, monocausal explanations of communal violence advanced by the main individual and institutional ‘players’; and (iii), a Historical Commission would generate public debate about the mistakes and abuses of the past. The main disadvantages suggested are twofold. First, a scholarly report might appear remote from the concerns of ordinary people and in particular from the needs of victims. Secondly, any attempt to assess individual and organisational responsibility for violence would be hampered by the absence of legal powers of investigation.²⁹ An examination of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggests that these are justified concerns. The impact of the Truth and Reconciliation (as of the Bloody Sunday inquiry) depended more on the theatre of testimony, acknowledgement and apology than on the detailed findings in its report; the commission had only limited access to ANC documents, while the Military Intelligence records of the Directorate of Special Tasks and other covert agencies appear to have been shredded.

In 2013 the idea of a Commission of Historical Clarification was taken up by Arkiv, a group of scholars in Northern Ireland who sought to challenge the politicised narratives of the past that they believed were being used to glorify past violence. A key aim of this collective initiative was to counter the structural biases and historical

²⁸ Kieran McEvoy, *Making Peace with the Past: Options for Truth Recovery regarding the Conflict in and about Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2006), p. xv.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-92.

inaccuracies they detected in recent debates over the legacy of the conflict. Arkiv has argued that the demands being made on the British state are not balanced by the investigation of paramilitary organisations. In part this disparity results from applying models derived from South Africa or Latin America where the state was the major perpetrator of violence. In their submission to the Panel of Parties (2013) Arkiv called for a commission of 'independent, professionally trained historians' to produce a comprehensive and balanced account of the past.³⁰ In a post entitled 'Towards an Historical Clarification Commission' Arkiv captures neatly the difference between legalistic and historical approaches:

Courts offer judgments on whether the law was upheld or broken and hand down penalties in the case of the latter; historical inquiry offers assessment of the choices that were made or deferred, the socio-cultural triggers, and the power-relationships that drove conflict.³¹

Academic analysis of the past has already played a part in conflict resolution in a variety of divided societies. In Northern Ireland itself both the Bloody Sunday Inquiry (1998-2010) and the De Silva Report (2012) appointed historical advisers whose role was to provide background and context to Bloody Sunday and to the killing of the Patrick Finucane on 12 February 1989. In other parts of the world, historians have helped societies to confront past injustices and divisions, often employing their expertise to deal with highly technical questions or specialised forms of evidence. Examples include the employment of historians by the Waitangi Tribunal in New Zealand, established in 1975 to make recommendations on claims brought by Māori relating to Crown actions which breach the promises made in the Treaty of Waitangi; the vital role of historical research in the 1997 report into Australia's 'Stolen Generations' – the Aboriginal children who had been removed from their parents between 1910 and 1970; and in the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation which investigated abuse in residential schools (2008-2015). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa employed historians and sociologists as researchers between 1996 and 2001. Their brief was to provide 'as complete a picture as possible' of the human rights violations that took place before the end of Apartheid, including the 'antecedents, circumstances, factors and contexts', as well as the perspectives of victims and the motives of perpetrators.³²

³⁰ 'Submission to the Panel of Parties' (25 Oct. 2013), <https://arkivni.wordpress.com/submission-to-the-panel-of-parties-in-the-ni-executive-on-behalf-of-arkiv/>.

³¹ 'Towards an Historical Clarification Commission' (26 Nov. 2013), <https://arkivni.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/towards-an-historical-clarification-commission/>

³² See Elizabeth Stanley, 'Evaluating the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 39:3 (2001), pp. 525-546.

A number of the scholars involved in these projects have published valuable reflections on the challenges they encountered.³³ Not surprisingly, one shared theme is frustration: in each case it seemed that the characteristic concerns of historical scholarship were subordinated to the methods and style of legal investigation. Academics felt that nuance and complexity were sacrificed and that they were not given opportunities for theoretical reflection. John Milloy, who was Special Advisor (History) to the chair of the Canadian commission into residential schools concluded that the mandate for the project was too large, the time frame too short and the budget completely inadequate.³⁴ One historian employed by the Waitangi Tribunal objected that the issues were too narrowly focused, allowing her no room to explore the complexity of colonial relationships in New Zealand.³⁵ The best documented case is that of South Africa, where historians and social scientists found themselves producing quasi-legal ‘findings’ based on conclusive evidence, a process that ‘did not easily accommodate difference, debate or complexity’.³⁶ The violence of the Apartheid era was interpreted primarily as the product of individual choices rather than structural forces, and reconciliation was similarly conceptualised at the level of individual experiences.³⁷ For the leading South African historian Deborah Posel, the report of the TRC has ‘little explanatory and analytical power’; it reads less like history than ‘a moral narrative about the fact of wrongdoing across the political spectrum’.³⁸

While none of the historians mentioned here regretted their involvement in truth recovery their collective experience underlines the tensions involved in translating academic research into the language of the public inquiry. What was missing from

³³ Deborah Posel, ‘The TRC Report: What kind of history? What kind of Truth?’, in Deborah Posel and Graeme Simpson (eds.), *Commissioning the past: Understanding South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (2002); Janet Cherry, John Daniel and Madeleine Fullard, ‘Researching the “Truth”: A View from Inside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, *ibid.*, pp. 17-36; Alan Ward, ‘History and Historians before the Waitangi Tribunal: Some Reflections on the Ngai Tahu Claim’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 24/2 (1990), pp. 150-167.

³⁴ John Milloy, ‘Doing Public History in Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, *The Public Historian*, 35:4 (2013), p. 13.

³⁵ Giselle M. Byrnes, ‘Jackals of the Crown? Historians and the Treaty Claims Process in New Zealand’, *The Public Historian*, 20:2 (1998), pp. 9-23.

³⁶ Cherry, Daniel and Fullard, ‘Inside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, p. 23.

³⁷ Adrian Guelke, ‘Commentary: Truth, Reconciliation and Political Accommodation’, *Irish Political Studies* 22:3 (2007), pp. 363-366.

³⁸ Deborah Posel, ‘The TRC Report: What Kind of History? What Kind of Truth?’, in D. Posel and G. Simpson, eds., *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Johannesburg, 2002), p. 148.

the TRC's report, for example, was an examination of the 'socio-cultural triggers' and the 'power-relationships' that Arkiv sees as essential to historical analysis.³⁹ It is hardly encouraging, in this light, that the Stormont House Agreement envisages that a major task for its academic experts will be the construction of a 'factual historical timeline'.

3. *How Historians Think*

The time has come to return to the jaundiced citizens of Northern Ireland and to try and put ourselves in their shoes. Bearing in mind the bitter divisions that result from the legacy of the Troubles, let's contemplate the following question: can *historians* be trusted to deal with the past? Are their specialist credentials any more impressive than those of judges, community groups or clergymen?

The curious layperson might be wise to approach the historian in something like an anthropological spirit, rather as we would approach a sixteenth-century witchcraft trial or an eighteenth-century food riot. To begin with, perhaps, they might consult one of the standard books in which experienced scholars have reflected on the character of the discipline, and in particular on the knotty question of objectivity. They would quickly discover, unfortunately, that a dominant theme of recent scholarship has been the inescapably subjective and constructed nature of historical writing. It is increasingly rare to encounter the view, once so common, that doing history means finding out 'the truth' about the past, by way of contrast with memory, myth or propaganda – at least in any simple or straightforward sense. To express the matter in terms of eliminating 'bias', as we were taught to do at school, no longer seems helpful. The point is rather to recognise that all our thoughts are shaped by an accretion of historical experiences in ways that are not always clear to us.

An obvious if somewhat demanding starting-point would be Peter Novick's superb study, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (1988), the most ambitious attempt so far to investigate the development of academic history in a given country. In a brilliant chapter entitled 'The Centre Does Not Hold', Novick provided one of the clearest accounts yet of the various strains of postmodernism and the challenges they posed to the ideal of disinterested scholarship that had inspired the first generation of professional historians between the 1880s and the First World War, and that had been triumphantly reasserted in

³⁹ The only exception seems to be Comisión para Esclarecimiento Histórico in Guatemala: Greg Grandin, 'The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History, and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala', *American Historical Review*, 110:1 (2005), pp. 46-67.

the Cold War era when objectivity was touted as ‘one of the West’s distinctive values and institutions’.⁴⁰ His epic survey of the development of historical studies within American universities concluded that, by the 1980s, professional historians in the United States were no longer united by a sense of common purpose, and that the idea of historical objectivity was hopelessly naive and confused and always has been so – although, as reviewers observed, Novick nevertheless set out the arguments for and against objectivity with scrupulous fairness. Paradoxically, then, as one friendly critic argued, Novick’s practice as a historian seemed to be at odds with his own theoretical position.⁴¹

For some reassurance, perhaps, we might direct our confused novice towards the most obvious British counterpart to Novick’s study, *In Defence of History* by Richard Evans, a leading historian of modern Germany who went on to become regius professor at Cambridge between 2008 and 2014. Here is a scholar who seems rather more certain of his ground. Evans too was preoccupied with postmodernist theorists, and in particular by Hayden White’s infamous declaration that historical narratives are ‘verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences’.⁴² By the 1990s it was becoming fashionable to analyse – or ‘deconstruct’ – the writings of historians to reveal just how far the results of their purportedly impartial research techniques were in fact determined by their ideological presuppositions. Against this view, Evans sought to explain in common-sense language how historiographical disputes can, after all, be resolved by recourse to the evidence, so much so that we are justified in saying that ‘the sources do indeed “speak for themselves”’.⁴³

Unfortunately, Evans’s faith in the transparency of source material conflicts with positions taken up elsewhere in the book with the same bullish confidence, and the resulting tensions are never satisfactorily explored. He freely admits, for example, that all history has ‘a present-day purpose and inspiration which may be moral or political or ideological’.⁴⁴ But there are profound disagreements about our present-

⁴⁰ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 314.

⁴¹ Thomas Haskell, ‘Objectivity is not Neutrality: Rhetoric vs. Practice in Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream*’, *History and Theory*, 29:2 (May, 1990), pp. 129-57.

⁴² Hayden White, ‘The Historical Text as Literary Artifact’, in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), p. 82.

⁴³ Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London, 1997), p. 116.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

day moral and political priorities, and this is precisely the problem. More interestingly, and certainly more entertainingly, *In Defence of History* contains damning criticisms of a succession of established authorities – particularly E. H. Carr and Geoffrey Elton – whose works, Evans tells us, have been distorted by their subconscious political or moral preferences. Inadvertently, his survey of British historians confirms the position he sets out to demolish, that our allegedly ‘scientific’ research into the past is deeply and unavoidably infected by our preconceptions and value judgements, or by what another prominent historian of Germany calls ‘all the partially visible philosophical, sociocultural, and strictly political baggage historians bring with them into the scholarly arena’.⁴⁵

Any of our Northern Irish laity who managed to make it this far must now be shaking their heads in despair. On the one hand, we have an irenic American who has lost faith in objectivity but nevertheless writes an impeccably judicious and balanced book; and on the other we have a combative Welshman who believes that history is based on objective standards of evidence but controverts his predecessors and contemporaries with such gusto that we begin to wonder why so few historians manage to live up to his ideals. How can we make sense of these contrasting and confusing portrayals of the historian’s work?

All historical writing embodies assumptions about the nature of political and social life. But a fundamental part of the training of historians consists of adjudicating between competing accounts of the same event or phenomenon, and defending such judgements on the basis of rational, evidence-based argument. Most historians would recognise Mark Bevir’s description of objectivity as resting upon ‘a combination of agreement on certain facts, an extensive use of criticism, and a comparison of rival views in relation to clearly defined criteria’. These include the traditional criteria of accuracy, comprehensiveness, and consistency, but also – and crucially – a refusal to avoid uncomfortable facts.⁴⁶ Bevir is a philosopher who teaches Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. But his views correspond closely to those of Mary Fulbrook, a historian of modern Germany based at University College London. In her book, *Historical Theory* (2002), Professor Fulbrook identifies three essential precepts of good historical practice:

- commitment to basic honesty and integrity rather than deceit;

⁴⁵ Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Michigan, 2005), p. 5. See more broadly Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Mad History Disease Contained? Postmodern Excess Management Advice from the UK’, *History and Theory*, 39:2 (2000), pp. 218-229.

⁴⁶ Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge, 1999), ch. 3, esp. pp. 80 (quotation), 101, 104.

- absence of wilful distortions or omissions;
- commitment to accepting the possibility of revision of particular interpretations in the light of further evidence.⁴⁷

It will be apparent that these principles resemble a code of ethics more than a scientific procedure for determining the truth. The cultivation of detachment is vital to all of them. A similar picture emerges from a series of interviews I conducted with historians in connection with this essay. All were eminent academics who had in a variety of ways reflected upon the connection between scholarship and the public sphere: Ludmilla Jordanova, author of the influential guide, *History in Practice* (2006, 2nd edition); Peter Mandler, author of *History and National Life* (2002) and currently president of the Royal Historical Society; Pat Thane, a founder of the *History & Policy* network and adviser to the UK government in the contentious area of family policy; and Graeme Davison, adviser to the National Museum of Australia when it opened in 2001, whose books include *The Use and Abuse of Australian History* (2000). What is striking is that the self-image of all those I interviewed turned on a value system learned intuitively on the job and sustained by peer review. No doubt the traditional techniques of source criticism were taken for granted. But it was rather the quality of ‘judiciousness’ that Jordanova put at the centre of historical inquiry. In dealing with the past, she suggests, the contribution of the historian would not be gathering information so much as passing evidence through the variety of analytic grids and processes that characterise how historians think.⁴⁸

It is revealing that the historian with most experience of advising ministers and civil servants, Pat Thane, was also the least troubled of my four interviewees by philosophical debates surrounding the concept of objectivity. Following the publication of her *Happy Families? History and Family Policy* (2010), Thane was invited to lead a series of history seminars for civil servants at the Department for Education. These events were so successful that the inclusion of historical perspectives became one of five new ‘policy tests’ drawn up by the Department of Education in 2013. Thane had helped found the History & Policy network in response to the facile or misleading references to past experience frequently made by prominent politicians. When politicians invoke history, Thane complains, it is often ‘an invented history that suits whatever narrative they are trying to put across. That was what really annoyed us.’ Historians, on the other hand, ‘have to try to be

⁴⁷ Mary Fulbrook, *Historical Theory* (London, 2002), p. 50.

⁴⁸ Interview with Ludmilla Jordanova, 27 April 2010.

as objective as possible'.⁴⁹ That means enforcing a rigorous separation between our identity as a feminist or a member of the Labour Party (it is clear that many of contributors to *History & Policy* are left-of-centre) and what do in the archives or the library.

No doubt the public sphere is not the best place for the acknowledgement of ambiguity and complexity, the conscientious examination of countervailing evidence, or soul-searching about the epistemological status of our discipline – the qualities we surely look for in our best postgraduates. Graeme Davison has surveyed a number of legal cases in which historians appeared as expert witnesses.⁵⁰ They include the famous Sears case (1986), in which two feminist historians clashed over allegations that the American retail chain had discriminated against women in its employment practices. Davison's general conclusion was that lawyers tend to call upon historical expertise only to reinforce arguments already constructed upon other grounds. One major exception was the Mabo Judgement of 1992, in which the doctrine of *terra nullius*, extinguishing pre-colonial land titles, was overturned by the High Court of Australia. The judgement was influenced by Henry Reynolds' study *The Law of the Land* (1987), which had demonstrated that earlier British settlers in Australia had consciously violated the native title of Aboriginal peoples to possession of their lands. Davison observes, however, that Reynolds advanced his arguments rather like a lawyer, so that nuance, ambiguity, and the serious examination of conflicting evidence were all kept out of view. As Davidson comments, Henry Reynolds is not the kind of historian to agonise about 'how we know what we know'.⁵¹

Like all academics, professional historians are – or at least aspire to be – beneficiaries of political stability and economic growth, the conditions in which universities have flourished. Only one academic from Northern Ireland has been convicted of a terrorist offence.⁵² It is sometimes suggested that historians tend to be complicit with the power structures that guarantee their career progression and their pensions, and that the narratives they produce unthinkingly legitimate the dominant norms of the political societies they inhabit. No doubt this accusation is as true of historians as it is of other professional groups with job security and good

⁴⁹ Interview with Pat Thane, 19 April 2010.

⁵⁰ Graeme Davison, 'History on the Witness Stand: Interrogating the Past', in Iain McCalman and Ann McGrath (eds.), *Proof and Truth: The Humanist as Expert* (Canberra, 2003), pp. 53-67.

⁵¹ Interview with Graeme Davison, 22 August 2010.

⁵² Or at least only one case that I am aware of. See David McKittrick, 'The Irish bombers: what sort of people are they?', *Independent*, 26 Sept. 1996.

pension schemes. But, in contrast to politicians, judges or church leaders, the critical training of historians involves an explicit confrontation with how history has been distorted by the nation-builders of the past.⁵³ The more the historian becomes a professional, the more she or he becomes conscious that what was previously taken for ‘history’ was not just amateur, but often something else altogether – myth, romance, invented tradition, or – as we would now say – memory. All four of my interviewees shared view that – as Graeme Davison put it – ‘the role of the professional is always to be alerting people to how the past is manipulated by political elites’.⁵⁴

At the same time, my experienced historians all urged caution and restraint in making moral judgments. As Peter Mandler commented, historical scholars have a responsibility ‘to be hard on themselves, to question our own heartfelt positions, to make ethical choices as hard as they really are’.⁵⁵ Both points deserve further exploration. First, scholars understandably fear that in state-sponsored enterprises the complexities of past experience are liable to be sacrificed in the interests of political expediency or therapeutic goals. One of Ireland’s most respected historians, David Fitzpatrick, has warned us ‘to avoid the use of simplistic and exclusive dichotomies, or facile attributions of motive’; the task of the historian is rather to ‘raise awkward issues and, above all, seek to broaden the terms of debate’.⁵⁶ Writing about the current ‘decade of commemorations’ in Ireland, Fitzpatrick sees the most useful task of professional historians as that of correcting the distortions and fatuities circulating in the media and in official discourse. ‘Far from avoiding all forms of judgement’, however, Fitzpatrick concludes that we should try ‘to add *moral intensity* to the ways in which we commemorate and comprehend the past’.⁵⁷ What bothers historians is facile judgmentalism rather than moral judgments *per se*.

⁵³ A major theme of historical study since the 1980s: see Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History* (London, 2009), esp. chs. 5 and 7.

⁵⁴ Interview with Graeme Davison, 22 August 2010.

⁵⁵ Interview with Peter Mandler, 18 May 2010.

⁵⁶ David Fitzpatrick, ‘Historians and the Commemoration of Irish Conflicts, 1912–23’, in John Horne and Edward Madigan (eds.), *Towards Commemoration: Ireland in War and Revolution 1912–1923* (Dublin, 2013), p. 129.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127 (my italics). For a discussion of these commitments see Richard T. Vann, ‘Historians and Moral Evaluations’, *History and Theory*, 43:4 (2004), pp. 3–30.

4. *Some Conclusions*

The Stormont House Agreement has become a fixed feature of the political landscape. In any future discussions of 'truth and reconciliation' in Northern Ireland it will most likely be assumed that both oral history and archival research will form a key part of that process. As this essay suggests, however, the greatest difficulties Northern Ireland faces do not derive from deficiencies in academic understanding of the Troubles. In 90% of cases, as one submission to Healing Through Remembering commented, we know which organisation was responsible for the killings that took place and why they were carried out: 'What many people are actually seeking is to be able to apportion blame.'⁵⁸ Previous attempts to deal with the past have been obstructed by fundamental differences over the legitimacy of the campaigns of paramilitary organisations, with most attention focusing on the IRA. Attitudes to paramilitary violence are in turn shaped by differences over how far Northern Ireland was 'undemocratic' or incapable of peaceful reform. No amount of archival research or academic analysis will resolve those disagreements without changes in the wider political and social environment. The problem is rather that both unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland regard themselves as victims, and correspondingly find it difficult to accept that they have been responsible for injustice, suffering or atrocity.

Disputes over the nature of the conflict exist within the academy as well as in the Stormont Assembly or the local media. The most important concepts and categories that historians work with have an inescapably political dimension. One outcome of academic training is precisely the realisation that there is no neutral definition of the political concepts we all employ. In all societies the meaning of key political terms – democracy, nation, self-determination, terrorism – is contested. As the historian and literary critic Stefan Collini has observed, 'all attempts to understand aspects of human life, no matter how disciplined they may be in their analysis of concepts and their handling of evidence, will reproduce some of this fundamental lack of agreement'.⁵⁹

Consequently, it is vital to distinguish between the kinds of public questions historians can answer satisfactorily and those they cannot. One way of making this distinction, perhaps, is to consider three separate levels of inquiry, the first of which is straightforward empirical research. Even at this fundamental level there is much

⁵⁸ HTR, Belfast, 2002 submissions, S097.

⁵⁹ Stefan Collini, *What are Universities for?* (London, 2012), p. 69.

valuable work to be done. The Stormont House Agreement does not itemise the the 'themes and patterns' likely to form the subject of academic inquiry. But it is widely anticipated that they will include longstanding allegations about collusion between the British government and paramilitaries, the operation of a 'shoot to kill' policy by the security forces and the mistreatment of detainees and prisoners. The release of archival material by the Ministry of Defence and the British intelligence services might serve to to restrict the spectrum of opinions on this subject, just as the Saville Inquiry has produced a widely shared narrative of what happened on Bloody Sunday, albeit one that leaves many important questions unanswered. This might be an appropriate moment to recall Michael Ignatieff's famous remark: 'the function of truth commissions, like the function of honest historians, is ... to narrow the range of permissible lies'.⁶⁰

Perhaps historians should confine themselves to basic empirical research, as Henry Steiner has suggested, recording 'who did what to whom and when, period'. Steiner, Director of Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School, argues that the more academics talk about structural explanations the more they become 'just another voice in a world of disputed opinions and theories'.⁶¹ Surely it is also part of the historian's job, however, to test the concepts and categories employed by public figures, particularly where they depend on simplified or distorted representations of the past. One of the most nebulous concepts in current Troubles debate is collusion, which can mean any of the following: (1) the failure by the security forces to investigate loyalist attacks, for a variety of reasons; (2) the existence within the security forces of individuals who were also members of loyalist organisations; (3) the involvement in terrorist offences of loyalists who were simultaneously agents or informers of the intelligence services; (4) the deliberate manipulation of paramilitary groups as proxy agents in a dirty war.

At this second level of historical inquiry, the analysis of 'themes and patterns' will force the historian to make judgements about the relative weight to be attached to a variety of causal factors. Achieving a consensus among a team of scholars will certainly be harder (and ought to be). Another example addresses the flipside of collusion: how far was the extensive infiltration of the IRA by the security services responsible for redirecting the republican movement towards the peace process? The events that interest historians at this level will often be mental events: they ask not only what happened, in other words, but how contemporaries understood their actions, and how far the meanings of those actions changed over time. But that

⁶⁰ Michael Ignatieff, 'Articles of Faith', *Index on Censorship*, 25:5 (1996), p. 113.

⁶¹ Quoted in Cherry, Daniel and Fullard, 'Inside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission', pp. 24-25.

doesn't mean that progress is impossible. On some contentious issues – such as the extent of discrimination that existed under the old Stormont government – academic research has achieved a measure of consensus.⁶² Even in the more heated debate concerning the role of sectarianism in the IRA's campaign, academics have brought the key issues into sharper focus and reduced the scope of disagreement.⁶³

The third level brings us finally to what two political scientists have called the 'meta-conflict', that is, the 'conflict about what the conflict is about'.⁶⁴ At this level we might find ourselves pondering Richard Evans's admission that all historical inquiry has a moral or political purpose formulated in the present; and we might find ourselves unable to share his confidence in the capacity of the sources to select and organise themselves. This is also the arena where history – 'analytic, critical, attuned to complexity, and wary about generalisations' – clashes with memory, as depicted on gable walls and banners, embodied in commemorative rituals and rehearsed in the graveside oration.⁶⁵ Purists will stay clear of this confrontation altogether, and perhaps they are wise to do so.⁶⁶ The typical historian is probably happier being a lie detector than some kind of truth finder. As we have seen, however, some of our most admired scholars believe that historical writing has a moral dimension. Ludmilla Jordanova takes the view that we have a 'professional obligation' to see that every story has many different sides. Graeme Davison elaborates:

One of the consequences of historical inquiry might be not only that you become alert to mechanisms of exploitation but you also become very conscious of human weakness. So part of the education is to

⁶² J. H. Whyte, 'How Much Discrimination was there under the Unionist Regime?', in Tom Gallagher and James O'Connell (eds.) *Contemporary Irish Studies* (Manchester, 1983), available online: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/discrimination/whyte.htm>.

⁶³ Henry Patterson, 'Sectarianism Revisited: The Provisional IRA Campaign in a Border Region of Northern Ireland', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 22:3 (2010), pp. 337-356; Robert W. White, 'Provisional IRA Attacks on the UDR in Fermanagh and South Tyrone: Implications for the Study of Political Violence and Terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 23:3 (2011), pp. 329-349.

⁶⁴ John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford, 1995), p. 1.

⁶⁵ Saul Friedländer, 'History, Memory, and the Historian: Dilemmas and Responsibilities', *New German Critique*, 80 (Spring - Summer, 2000), p. 13.

⁶⁶ For a severe reaction to the 'instrumentalisation' of historians consider the French historian Henri Rousso, who refused to act as expert witness in the 1997 trial of Maurice Papon, the senior civil servant under Vichy regime who had order deportation of Jews to the death camps in eastern Europe: 'Moralism does not mix well with historical truth. In order to maintain its edifying power, it ends up cutting corners with the facts and slipping into a narrative divorced from reality.' See Henri Rousso, *The Haunting Past: History, Memory, and Justice in Contemporary France* (Philadelphia, 2002), pp. 22, 53.

alert citizens to past injustices that have to be confronted and dealt with, but the other is to approach those with a due sense of humility and compassion, towards peoples whose, values, understandings, whatever, are different from our own. I'm not suggesting that to understand all is to forgive all, but if you are working towards some process of reconciliation it can only happen to the extent that people on one side are able at least for a moment to stand in the shoes of people on the other side. And maybe if we are good historians we're cultivating the imagination to be able to see the world through the eyes of people of a different era or with a different set of values from our own.

As this essay suggests, historians – or at least the sort of historians I admire most – are caught in a delicate balancing act. As specialists in dealing with the past, they jealously protect their scholarly autonomy from political pressure, while acknowledging that the post-war notion of historical research as a science has been exploded. Their fervent desire to communicate with the public is matched by disdain for the debasing or dumbing down of history. In the final analysis, they believe that the responsible study of the past imposes moral obligations on its practitioners, yet they dread the simplification of historical narratives to produce a series of bland moral lessons. The dilemma they face has been described neatly by Quentin Skinner, whose work over the last twenty years has challenged the dominant liberal conception of freedom by rediscovering the republican or 'neo-Roman' idea of liberty which flourished in Renaissance Italy and in seventeenth-century Civil-War England. He has thus sought to reconnect historical investigation with the concerns of contemporary political philosophers:

I admit that I am walking a tightrope. As with all tightropes, moreover, it is possible to fall off on one side or the other. It seems to me that most historians fall off on the side of worrying too little about the point of what they are doing. I am more in danger of falling off in the direction of sacrificing historicity. If the choice is between historical impurity and moral pointlessness, then I suppose that in the end I am on the side of the impure. But I see myself fundamentally as an historian, so that my highest aspiration is not to fall off the tightrope at all.⁶⁷

Skinner has always written for an academic audience; naturally the trade-offs and compromises involved in addressing the wider public will be all the more difficult.

⁶⁷ Petri Koikkalainen and Sami Syrjämäki, 'Quentin Skinner on Encountering the Past', *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*, 6 (2002), p. 55.

To recognise that professional historians are subject to conflicting pressures is not to call into question their trustworthiness, but simply to encourage a measure of realism about the social and political utility of their research. A large part of the historian's training, as we have seen, involves the critical evaluation of conflicting accounts of a particular event or process. The historian's job also entails the verification and contextualisation of documents, the labour of compiling data, the ups and downs of frequent dead ends and the odd serendipitous discovery, the artistry involved in synthesising results and in the nuances of observation and characterisation, the effort to achieve comprehensiveness, the bringing to bear of new concepts and perspectives, and the positioning of final results in relation to the existing narratives of the conflict. In making judgements about the plausibility of an interpretation, the cogency of an argument, or the helpfulness of a concept, historians strive for objectivity by observing the sorts of protocols identified by Bevir and Fulbrook. This essay suggests that many scholars believe that good historical writing is also a matter of imagination, empathy and moral sensibility. Although this view is rarely expressed with philosophical sophistication it is nevertheless both widespread and persistent.⁶⁸

If Northern Ireland is to engage with its past these these skills and qualities will be necessary, albeit not sufficient. The alternative is to continue with two antagonistic histories running along parallel tracks, one anti-republican and one anti-British. If that happens, we will lose sight of the areas where the experiences of unionists and nationalists intersected and overlapped. We will fail to do justice to those individuals and groups who struggled during the thirty years of the conflict to maintain a moral space in which the pressures of communal solidarity could be weighed against other commitments. And finally, we will have to abandon the hope, so central to the making of the Good Friday Agreement, that the two main political blocs in Northern Ireland might achieve an agreed framework of values that would enable them, for the first time in their long history, to engage in creative dialogue with each other.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ David Fitzpatrick's position, quoted above, resembles that of Herbert Butterfield, a major influence on an earlier generation of Irish historians. Butterfield's essay 'Moral Judgments in History' begins with the view that moral indignation is an obstacle to historical writing, then moves to the rejection of 'pseudo-moral judgments' and 'impetuous adjudicators' before concluding that the refinement of imaginative sympathy by the historian will reveal a 'deeper kind of truth' capable of 'healing the wounds of mankind. See his *History and Human Relations* (London, 1951), pp. 101-128.

⁶⁹ The research for this essay included a series of interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, with Prof. Graeme Davison (King's College London, 22 August 2010); Prof. Ludmilla Jordanova (King's College London, 27 April 2010); Prof. Peter Mandler (Royal Historical Society, London, 18 May 2010); Prof. Pat Thane (King's College London, 19 April 2010); Jeffrey Donaldson, MP (Westminster, 8 Dec. 2010); Tom Hartley (Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, Belfast, 2 June 2012).