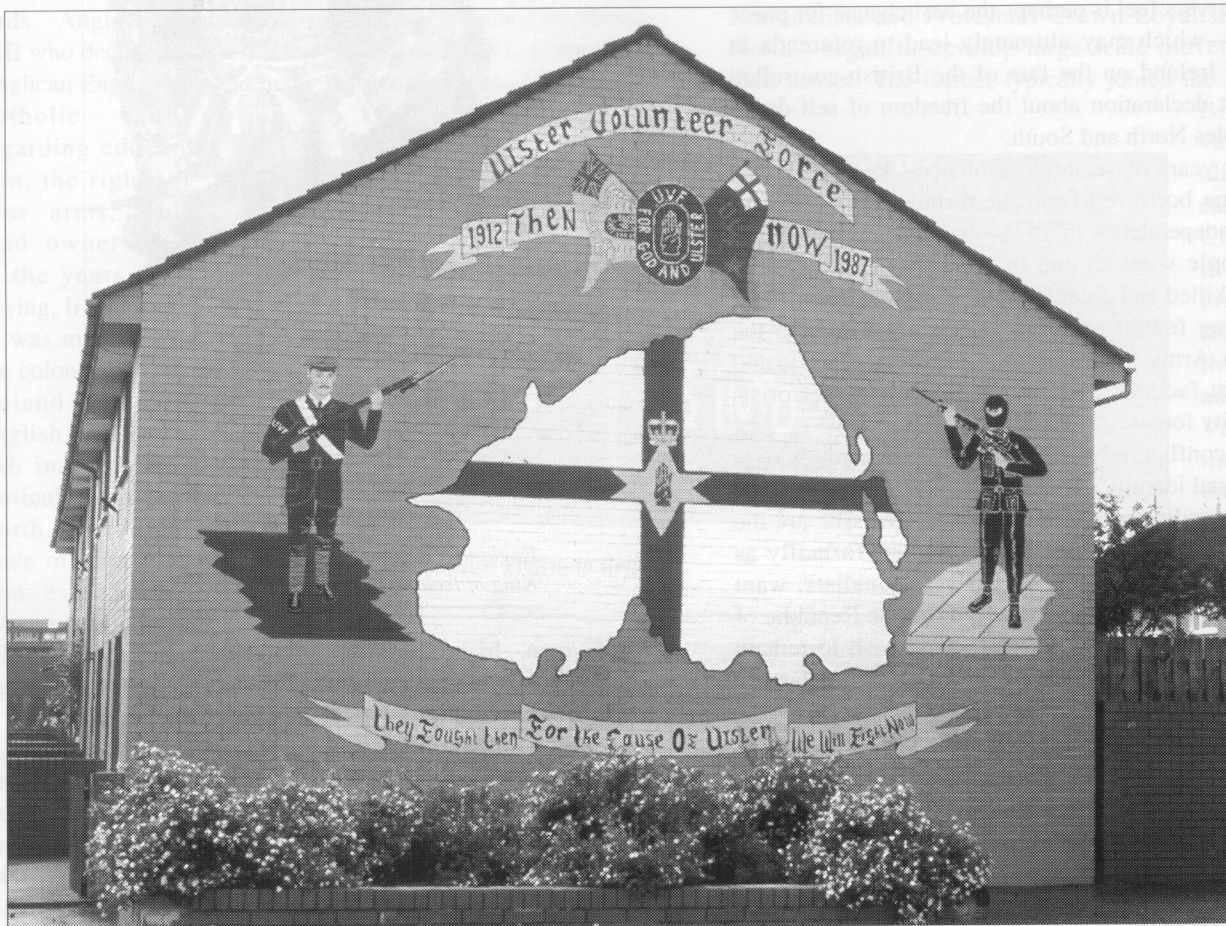


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## Fighting for Peace in Northern Ireland

Among the last remaining sites of long-standing violence in the Western world is Northern Ireland. Politicians have struggled for years to end the fighting in this small section of the Emerald Isle, but they are straining against centuries of history marked by terrorism and sectarian passions. In December, 1993, filled with hopes of creating a lasting peace, the English and Irish Prime Ministers signed a joint declaration engineered to bring all conflicting parties to the bargaining table.

by Steven Bright

**T**he cycle of violence continues to drain the lifeblood of the people in Northern Ireland. In October of 1993, an IRA bomb exploded in a crowded Belfast market, killing nine Protestants and injuring 57 others. One week later, in retaliation, two Protestant terrorists operating as part of the Ulster Freedom Force walked

*Steven Bright recently received his M.A. in Journalism from the University of Western Ontario. His fascination with Ulster comes from a trip through Belfast and reading Leon Uris' Trinity.*

into a Catholic pub on Halloween and murdered seven people with automatic weapons. Yet, amidst some of the bloodiest sectarian violence Northern Ireland has seen in the last twenty years—where 23 civilians died in one week at the hands of extremists of both religions—politicians were drafting a proposal for peace to end this destructive pattern.

In December, 1993, British Prime Minister John Major concluded a deal with his Irish counterpart, Albert Reynolds, which many observers feel is perhaps the best chance for peace ever. The deal—which may ultimately lead to referenda in both sections of Ireland on the fate of the British-controlled North—is a joint declaration about the freedom of self-determination of peoples North and South.

The past 25 years of sectarian violence—known as “the Troubles”, a name borrowed from the turbulent time leading up to Ireland’s independence in 1921—has left the population war weary. People want an end to a conflict that has seen more than 3,000 killed and countless others injured since 1968. It is a “war” being fought not only among terrorists like the Irish Republican Army (IRA), related Catholic groups, and various Protestant factions, but also between these terrorists and British security forces.

The modern conflict in Northern Ireland is essentially over politics and national identity, though these issues are inextricably tied to long standing religious divisions. At issue are the six British counties known as Ulster, or more formally as Northern Ireland. Republicans, or Irish Nationalists, want Northern Ireland to unite with the heavily Catholic Republic of Ireland to the south. Loyalists, or Unionists, wish to remain part of Great Britain; they are loyal to the Crown and largely Protestant.

The ultra-Republican IRA seeks a reunited, Catholic Ireland and has chosen to wage a campaign of violence towards that end. Though this dream is shared by the Irish Catholics living in Northern Ireland, the IRA’s terrorism and murdering of innocents draws condemnation from the vast majority of its



*England's Henry VIII proclaimed himself King of Ireland in 1541.*

countrymen. Irish Catholics, too, live in fear of the IRA, who murders suspected police informants and has made the revenge tactic of “kneecapping” a virtual art form.

At one time the IRA concentrated on “military targets”—British soldiers and symbols of the British presence in Northern Ireland. However, it has long since abandoned these limited targets. Children and other innocent civilians are regularly killed by IRA operations—a strategy intended to force the

British government to concede to its demands. IRA bombing targets may include anything from Belfast shops or British pubs, to the busy London Underground. Loyalist paramilitaries, as Protestant terrorists are called, have demonstrated an equally cold-blooded willingness to kill and maim, though with a very different goal in mind: keeping Ulster under British control. The outlawed Ulster Freedom Force is one such group, though others exist.

The recent December accord, reached in such a turbulent climate, underlines two important features of Irish history. First, it shows the degree to which terrorism and politics are inextricably connected. Political change invariably results in violence, which in turn forces politicians to act. Second, reactions to the agreement highlight the “zero-sum” nature of negotiations about Northern Ireland: all parties involved consider that concessions granted to one



*Urban war zone: motorists must pass through a checkpoint to enter central Belfast.*  
[Wally Thiessen]

side come at the expense of the other. Since the remaining options are either complete victory or utter defeat, neither side has ever been satisfied.

## The Seeds of Violence are Sown

The burden of history, it has been said, lies heavy upon the Irish. England first sent troops across the Irish Sea with Henry II in 1170 to establish a strong presence among feuding Irish lords. Anglo-Irish relations were further strained by Henry VIII who declared himself King of Ireland in 1541, ushering in Anglican English rule and many restrictions on members of the Catholic faith regarding education, the right to bear arms, and land ownership. In the years following, Irish history was marked by the colonization of Ireland with English and Scottish immigrants, particularly in the North. This large wave of immigration established the predominantly Protestant Northern Irish population.

Struggles to overthrow English rule were not long in coming. One of the most famous uprisings occurred in 1798 when Wolfe Tone, a Protestant lawyer, sought to break Ireland from the shadow of Britain in an age that also witnessed the American War of Independence and the French Revolution. Tone's uprising failed, and he himself died in jail after cutting his own throat. Yet despite its ignominious ending, the uprising is viewed by historians as a seminal event in the movement toward Irish liberty from Britain. As analyst Edgar Holt wrote, "Tone's unsuccessful revolt had a profound effect on the development of Irish history, for it established a tradition of revolutionary violence which became a permanent feature of Irish life."

## The Islands United: A Battleground Forms

In 1801 the British Parliament passed the Act of Union between England and Ireland. Union was intended to defuse the potential for nationalist uprisings by allowing Irish MPs participate in the House of Commons. However, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, many Irish MPs in Westminster supported a new idea for Anglo-Irish relations known as "Home Rule." Proponents of Home Rule called for Ireland to have its own government with control over all domestic affairs, leaving imperial defense and foreign policy in the hands of

London. Two Home Rule bills, in 1886 and 1892, failed to become law. The majority of British MPs and peers in the House of Lords felt Ireland should remain completely under London's purview. Yet while the politicians bargained and made speeches in Parliament, much stronger forces were mobilizing in the streets of Ireland.

In the late nineteenth century, and often in response to Home Rule debates, the two communities—Irish Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Crown Loyalists mainly in the North—began to develop large-scale movements to further their causes. The former typically joined the Irish Republican

Brotherhood, or various other populist leagues dedicated to promoting Catholicism. At the same time, Protestants massed their numbers in the face of the anti-Britain, pro-Vatican tide which they feared was a threat to 300 years of Protestant supremacy. Their rallying cry was "Home Rule is Rome Rule." Lord

Randolph Churchill phrased it succinctly in 1886 when he told a huge Protestant crowd that, "Ulster will fight, and Ulster will be right."

When the passage of Home Rule appeared to be imminent in the years leading up to World War I, Loyalist opposition to the idea was formidable. It galvanized in the form of the Ulster Covenant, a petition signed by more than 400,000 men and women dedicated to keeping Ireland fully under British control. Out of the Covenant they formed the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1912, a paramilitary group designed to give bite to loyalist bark. In what was becoming a potentially explosive situation, Catholics formed their own paramilitary group, the Irish Volunteers, and in the summer of 1914 began to build up arms. Ireland

seemed destined for civil war until Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot, pulling Europe into the "War To End All Wars". The problems in Ireland were at least temporarily averted.

## Revolution Bears Fruit: The Easter Rising and Sinn Fein

Thousands of Irishmen, both Catholic and Protestant, joined the British war effort in the fall of 1914. Left behind were radical Irish Nationalists who saw any attempt to help Britain as counterproductive to their cause. On Easter Monday, 1916, a



*Territorial passions: Loyalist graffiti in Belfast.*  
[Wally Thiessen]



*Publicizing the Republican cause internationally.*  
[Metro Toronto Reference Library]

rebel faction marched through Dublin and declared the birth of the Irish Republic on the steps of the General Post Office.

British troops quickly moved in, and after five days of heavy fighting more than 1,800 Irish rebels were interned without trial. In a show of British supremacy over insurgents, the ringleaders were summarily executed. Yet in the aftermath of the uprising many innocent civilians suffered as well. The heavy-handed government tactics only served to blow oxygen on a smoldering fire. Executed rebels quickly became martyrs and the Republican cause grew stronger. Irish poet William Yeats immortalized the landmark event in his poem "Easter, 1916": "I write it out in verse/ MacDonagh and MacBride/ And Connolly and Pearse/ Now and in time to be/ Wherever green is worn/ All changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born."

By 1918, Irish Nationalists had united under the banner of the recently formed political party, Sinn Fein, to seek complete independence from Britain. Seventy-three Sinn Fein Irish MPs were elected in December, 1918, who then boycotted the London Parliament and instead created the Assembly of Ireland—the Dail Eireann—in Dublin in 1919. Eamon de Valera, the only surviving commander of the Easter Rising who had spent the previous few years in jail, escaped to become president of the new, illegal and unrecognized "Republic". In de Valera, Republican aspirations found a leader with political aptitude and strong ties to rebel fighters. The increased pressure from Irish demands, and the continued refusal of the British government to recognize Sinn Fein's Dail, set in motion two years of



Irish Nationalist Eamon de Valera: armed insurrection and politics intertwined. [Embassy of Ireland]

## IRELAND AND THE UNITED KINGDOM



[Electromap, Inc.]

intense violence. Once again, underlying the political activity was a powerful undercurrent of guerrilla muscle.

In 1918-19, Nationalist might was applied by the Irish Republican Army, newly formed from the Irish Volunteers. The IRA's activities were guided by an effective underground network which was an extension of Sinn Fein's cabinet and the Irish Republican Brotherhood. According to scholar J. Bowyer Bell, the IRA's chief strategy as the military might of the Dail was "assassination in the cities and ambush in the country." The main targets were symbols of the Crown, and Irish policemen who were employed by it.

A similar relationship continues to this day—despite the IRA's status as an illegal terrorist organization—whereby the IRA wages its campaign of violence while Sinn Fein acts as the political arm of the movement for a united Ireland. The two are married, though Sinn Fein claims legitimacy as a political and democratic force.

To counter these guerrilla activities, the British government reinforced the increasingly powerless Royal Irish Constabulary with former soldiers (1919). The latter force became infamous as the Black and Tans, named for the colors of their uniforms. These men were so embittered and traumatized by their time in the trenches that they could not integrate into civilian life, and lacked respect for the lives and property of ordinary citizens. Notorious for their cruelty and bloody reprisals, they were virtually impossible to control. The atrocities committed by the Black and Tans were considered by the

British public among the worst committed by any of the terrorists these soldiers were commissioned to confront.

## "Troubles": The Irish Free State Created and the North-South Divide

As a full-fledged guerrilla war tore through the hills and streets, politicians searched for ways to end the violence. The British government attempted to institute a compromise to heal the divided nation. In 1920 a bill was drafted which called for separate Northern and Southern Irish parliaments and the representation of all-Ireland MPs in London. Not surprisingly, elections produced a largely Unionist Northern Parliament and a Nationalist Sinn Fein Assembly in the South. But while the Protestant Unionists accepted the two Parliament plan with some hesitation, the Catholic Sinn Fein unequivocally rejected it, demanding no less than complete independence.

The pressure was great on the British government to resolve the conflict, and finally, in 1921, a treaty was signed which recognized the Dail Eireann as the official government of the Irish Free State, composed of 26 southern counties. The Northern Parliament and its remaining six counties were exempt from the laws of the new state, thus retaining their ties to England. One stage of "Troubles," at least, had ended.

In the eyes of many, the partitioning brought to a close a centuries-old chapter in Anglo-Irish relations. The Protestants in the northern counties maintained their links to the Crown, and the Catholics in the South gained freedom from London. But there remained an obvious wound in the belly of the new province of Ulster: the Catholics in the North were made a minority in their own land. Many of the Protestant Unionists who held the reigns of power were just as anti-Catholic as the signatories of the Ulster Covenant.

## From Old Troubles to New: 1922-1968

The new province of Northern Ireland, which bound together two communities with a bellicose history, was plagued by religiously-motivated violence beginning in the mid-1930s. Trouble began to flare up in 1932 when de Valera's newly formed Fianna Fail party won the Dail election in the South. De Valera was firm on his intent for a united Ireland. His victory sparked Unionist concern that the IRA, which had close connections to de Valera though they had

been declared illegal 1931, would start to rekindle terrorist tactics in Ulster.

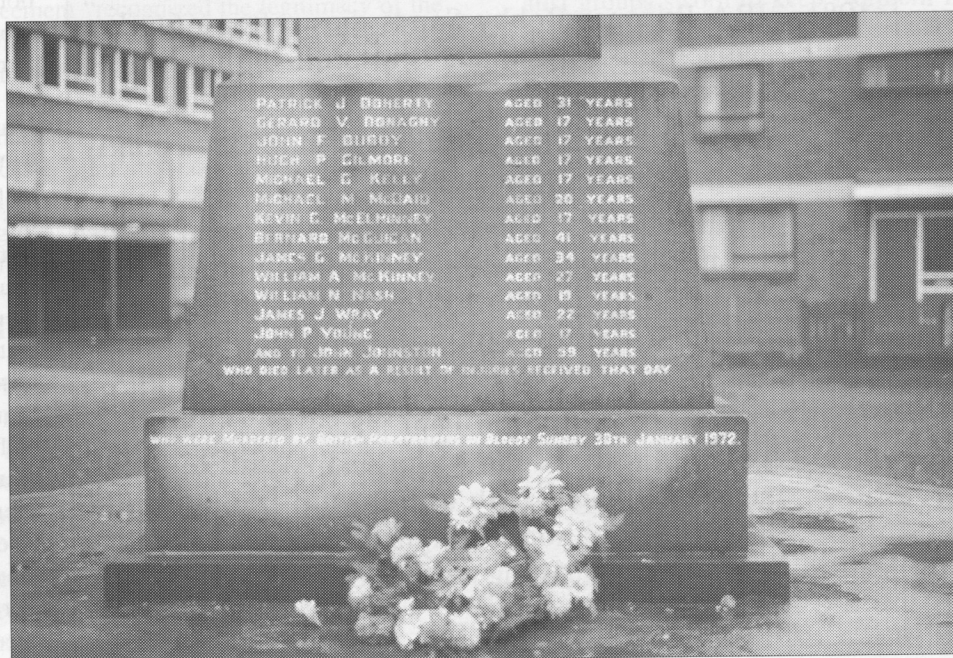
In an effort to bolster Loyalist strength to counter the apparently surging Catholic storm, the Protestant government regulated the labor force according to religion. As a result, many Catholics in Ulster were trapped in poverty—already dire from the protracted depression of the early 1930s—by highly selective hiring and firing practices. The situation deteriorated rapidly, and by 1935 widespread sectarian riots were ravaging the streets of Belfast. Tensions grew worse two years later with de Valera's declaration that the Irish Free State had become the Republic of Ireland, thereby denouncing loyalty to the English crown. In the articles of the newly created Republic's constitution, de Valera made claims to the whole island of Ireland, an act which inflamed Ulster Protestants.

After a relative calm during World War II, there was a return of heightened Catholic-Protestant anxieties. Once again the impetus came from the South when the Republic formally dropped the Union Jack in favor of the Irish tricolor flag, and then withdrew from the British Commonwealth. The 1950s ushered in more violence, primarily in the form of a prolonged IRA border campaign which hit hundreds of targets between 1956 and 1962.

## "The Troubles"

The sectarian pressures in the six counties finally blew up in the summer of 1968 when hundreds of Catholics took to the streets. In American-style civil rights protests, they sought an end to institutional discrimination against the Catholic minority. A police attack on the march brought widespread media attention and shocked the world. Under pressure from London, the Unionist government gave a few concessions to the Catholics with the hope of averting a civil war.

But this political move, like several others before it, only led to increased anxieties on the street. Any concession given to the Catholics was seen by some Protestants as a surrender to the Republic. Thousands of Unionists marched in protest in August of 1969; the IRA and Ulster Defense factions re-mobilized. Finally, British troops were deployed in Northern Ireland to curb a cycle of violence which victimized Catholic and Protestant civilians alike. Though British security forces were introduced to quell insurgency, their



A tragic reminder: memorial to those killed by British soldiers on "Bloody Sunday".  
[Wally Thiessen]

presence only exacerbated the explosive situation, and by 1971 the IRA was in a bloody shooting war with British troops.

In 1972 the most violent years of "the Troubles" began on "Bloody Sunday" (January 30), when 12 unarmed men were killed by British soldiers. That same year the British government dissolved the Northern Irish Parliament and installed a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to govern the province directly from London. [This remains the situation in 1994]. The lot of the Ulster Protestants did not change dramatically: they lost their Belfast-based government, but remained under the rule of Britain. For the Catholics, however, replacing Belfast with London did introduce a new challenge. Direct British rule seemed more damaging to the dream of a re-united Catholic Ireland. Ulster fell into another seemingly endless wave of violence.

Throughout the 1970s the IRA waged a particularly vicious campaign of "no warning" bombings on civilian targets in several English cities. The many lives claimed in these attacks won the IRA worldwide notoriety for its blatant disregard for human life. In the wake of 19 deaths in the infamous Birmingham pub bombings in 1974, the British government toughened its Prevention of Terrorism Act so that suspects could be held without charge for up to seven days. In that same year, another notorious "no warning"

explosion rocked a Guildford pub. Public outcry following these murderous events demanded that the British government

act swiftly to stop the terror and find the bombers. Ironically, those convicted for the bombings—the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four—

were innocent people who went to prison branded as horrifying terrorists. They remained in prison for many years before the truth of their innocence was made public. Many argue that they were used as scapegoats by a government that was desperate to appear in control of IRA terrorism.

In 1981, the IRA once again basked in the global media spotlight with the death of Bobby Sands, a jailed IRA member who conducted a highly publicized hunger strike. Sands lasted 66 days before he died. Nine others also went on hunger strikes and died. While these deaths of IRA prisoners drew a good deal of media attention, they accomplished nothing for the cause. The British government stood firm in its intention not to make concessions to convicted terrorists.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who came to power in 1979, was especially firm in her resolve never to deal with terrorists. She sought political agreements only with democratically elected MPs—with the exception of Sinn Fein. In fact, one of her last acts of government was to make it illegal to broadcast the face and/or voice of any Sinn Fein representative. Her determination hardened after she and members of her Cabinet

narrowly avoided death in 1984, when a massive IRA bomb attack killed four people in Brighton. Shaken but not seriously

### **A Brief History of Ireland**

- 1541 England's King Henry VIII proclaims himself King of Ireland.
- 1690 Protestant King William of Orange (later King William III) defeats English Catholic King James II in the celebrated battle on Irish soil.
- 1801 Constitutional Union of England and Ireland.
- 1916 The Easter Uprising of Irish nationalist rebels in Dublin, led by Eamon de Valera, is crushed in a bloody crackdown by British soldiers.
- 1921 Ireland is split into the Irish Free State (an independent Catholic state) and the British province of Northern Ireland, (also known as Ulster).
- 1931 IRA declared illegal in Irish Free State.
- 1949 The Irish Free State becomes the Irish Republic.
- 1968 The modern "Troubles" begin with the police storming of a civil rights march calling for an end to discrimination against Catholics.
- 1969 Britain deploys troops in Northern Ireland.
- 1972 The most violent year of "the Troubles" begins with "Bloody Sunday", when 12 unarmed men are killed by soldiers. Direct Rule from London is introduced.
- 1973 IRA begins vicious bombing campaign.
- 1981 IRA Prisoner Bobby Sands dies after a 66 day hunger strike. Nine others also die during hunger strikes.
- 1983 Gerry Adams elected leader of Sinn Fein, a political party with ties to the IRA.
- 1985 Breakthrough Anglo-Irish agreement signed, giving the Republic a voice on the future of Northern Ireland. This is followed by riots set off by Loyalist hatred of the accord.
- 1993 Moderate nationalist leader John Hume comes to agreement with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams. Prime Ministers John Major and Albert Reynolds sign new Anglo-Irish agreement—the Downing Street Declaration—designed to begin talks that will result in a lasting peace for Northern Ireland.



*In The Name Of The Father*—a cinematic portrayal of the Guildford Four: wrongfully imprisoned for a horrifying crime. [Universal Pictures]

injured, the Iron Lady vowed that "all attempts to destroy democracy by terrorism will fail."

Yet the violence forced her to take political action, and in 1985 Thatcher and Irish Prime Minister Dr. Garret Fitzgerald signed the Hillsborough Agreement. The deal gave the Republic a voice in Ulster's political, security and legal affairs through an intergovernmental committee. It also promoted cross-border co-operation. In the words of historian J.J. Lee, the Hillsborough Agreement "recognized the legitimacy of the Republic's concern with Northern Ireland and its political contribution to the resolution of the Ulster question."

Not surprisingly, Protestant Ulster MPs in London vociferously condemned the deal. They felt that any attempts to include the South in Ulster's affairs was a step towards realizing the Republic's ultimate goal of a re-united, Catholic Ireland. With such rigidity in place on either side, political compromise appears far from reach.

### What lies ahead?

Late in the fall of 1993, John Major secretly embarked on the journey to peace by launching three sets of talks: discussions between London and Belfast, London and Dublin, and amongst the various Belfast parties. The Downing Street Declaration, publicly agreed to and signed by Major and Albert Reynolds, represents the fruit of these labors.

Though the agreement is sound in theory and spirit, no amount of political cooperation can guarantee that the terrorists will lay down their considerable arsenals. Extremists on both sides have yet to show explicit support for the declaration. As part of the accord, the outlawed Sinn Fein will be allowed to enter directly into negotiations if the IRA agrees to

renounce violence for at least three months. Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Fein, has a good deal of influence over the actions of the IRA, though to date it has not dropped its bombing campaign. Adams himself recently added another element to the negotiations by demanding that all IRA political prisoners (approximately 1,600) must be released in order to ensure a cease-fire.

Hopeful though the political process towards peace may be, it has met with violent opposition from Loyalists in Northern Ireland. The Loyalist paramilitaries, for their part, have made it clear that they will not stand

idle while the Republic is given any more influence over the future of the North. What is perhaps most troubling about the Loyalists is that there is no Protestant equivalent to Gerry Adams—someone who speaks for the extremists, and at the same time can temper their terrorist activities.

The head of Ulster security forces has admitted that the Loyalist threat is becoming a grave concern of both the province and the Republic. In fact, in the last 18 months, Loyalist groups sworn to keep Northern Ireland part of Britain have killed more people than Republican groups. The possibility of "the Troubles" moving south in the form of Loyalist attacks on Dublin is yet another possible burden to be born by those living Irish history today. ●

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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