

# Labouring towards the space to belong: place and identity in Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of belonging in place acquires particular intricacy in the context of Northern Ireland, where strong territorial imperatives come into intimate conflict. This paper aims to unfold some of the complexities of imagining the province as a place, and the difficulties involved in claiming belonging there, drawing attention to the apparently ongoing refusal to share the ownership of spaces. Theories attempting to resolve this conflict from cultural and political perspectives will be examined, in addition to looking at practices at various levels of community which evidence different understandings of place and belonging. Some aspire to revision of established myths, others aspire to operate beneath or beyond these myths, and each are successful to varying degrees. The intention is not to suggest that these practices are a solution to Northern Ireland's sectarian geography, but rather to recognise that despite the predominantly defensive attitudes to place and belonging, fallible but important efforts are being made to revise or open out this thinking.

**Key index words:** place, belonging, Northern Ireland, sectarian geographies.

*'To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper...'* (de Certeau.1984:103)

## Introduction

It is clear that remembered and current geographical insecurities play a significant part in the Northern Irish conflict. Constructions of place there are often burdened with bitterness, and the ways in which Unionism and Nationalism traditionally construct their claims to the territory of Northern Ireland are centred on absolute ownership and mutual exclusion. The desire to establish a natural and indisputable belonging in place among both communities seems to underpin the (sometimes violent) defence of territory in the province. Place has played a central and powerful role in Irish Nationalism since the late-nineteenth century, crystallising in a vision of essentially Irish place which explicitly rejects the urban, the industrial, and the non-Gael and non-Catholic. This has contributed to the difficulties in a coherent understanding of Northern Ireland in terms of place; although it exists on the island of Ireland and many of its landscapes conform to the Irish ideal, as a polity it was founded in overt opposition to the professed characteristics of the Irish Free State. Northern Ireland's place-identity is confused, fitting neatly into neither Britain nor Ireland, both of which find their own dominant place-identities increasingly challenged. This paper aims to examine some of the complexities of belonging in place in Northern Ireland, and the theories that surround it, in conjunction with looking at certain efforts to expand the narrow and conflicting definitions of belonging most evident in the province's political and cultural life. These include attempts to sublimate disparate national belongings into a network of regional belongings, to validate a sense of belonging in place which does not depend on race, language or religion, and to focus on shared belonging to local place. A look at the significance of place for identities is followed by a consideration of the specifics of the Irish and Northern Irish

context. The paper then moves on to appraise the various theories offered as potential resolutions of conflicted belonging, testing these against actual practices in Northern Ireland itself.

*'Unfinished at the Skin'* (Barry Lopez in Whelan, 1992: 20)

### **Place, Identity, and Nation**

An awareness of the role of place in constituting identities is a significant step towards some understanding of subjectivity. In fact, 'subjectivity and place cannot be separated without foreclosing an understanding of the located subject and the agency and identity of place' (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 28). To live, work and experience society within a place entails familiarity, dependence, attachment and understanding, and a preoccupation with belonging in place has gained theoretical currency particularly over the last few decades, as rapid, widespread cultural and environmental changes provoke anxiety over displacement. Nora imagines memory, another important constituent of identity, as 'something rooted in the soil' (1996: 11), making explicit the perceived interdependence of remembering and belonging in place. In fact, place can be viewed as having been constituted in remembering, 'built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of work' (Schama, 1996: 7). It may be said that place, like subjectivity, is neither unified nor singular, having as many permutations as there are people for whom it exists. Individuals and collectivities may construct place from a selection of memories and myths, mantling its physical properties with metaphysical meanings which gradually become naturalised as innate characteristics. The further this familiar mantle stretches back into the past, the more secure is likely to be the sense of belonging. In as much as individuals and small collectivities maintain a dynamic relationship with their environment, one of mutual constitution, it is important to recognise the implications of this for identity at the level of the Nation. It is clear, in fact, that a particular vision of place often underpins the discourses of Nationalism, Schama pointing out that 'national identity . . . would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition' (1996: 15). National self-determination requires geographical territory in order to find full expression, a fact which Lefebvre expresses obliquely in the query: 'what is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space it describes, whose vocabulary . . . it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?' (Lefebvre, 1991: 44). In turn, this territory becomes a vital component in the construction of a coherent, unitary collective identity. This idea acquires especial potency in societies which have been complicated by some form of colonialism, in which an initially more or less alien group has assumed land ownership, displacing the indigenous population to some extent. In addition to geographical displacement, both groups may experience a cultural displacement, no longer able to exclusively control and manipulate the imagery of the landscape in its relation to identity. The attempt to recuperate a coherent identity from colonial ravages can lead to a limited notion of belonging in place, the positing of a 'natural' affinity with the land, defined racially. Nash argues that it is not a simple matter to censure such concepts of authenticity when put to this use (1994: 238), although as Dixon and Durrheim point out, 'it is precisely because places, and the identities they uphold, appear self-evident that a critical perspective must be adopted' (Dixon and Durrheim, 2000: 36). In the context of Nation States and nationalisms, as local attachment to place becomes reified, rigidified and exalted, intimacy and feeling are often paralleled by a dogmatic belief in a natural right to ownership, and used to justify hegemonic differentiation between groups.

*'We thought that . . . all we said or sang, must come from contact with the soil'*  
(W.B. Yeats, *The Municipal Gallery revisited*)

### **The representation of place in Ireland**

In Ireland, the iconic and hegemonic representation of place is based on its western landscape, imagined in both British and indigenous discourses as the pure site of Irish 'Otherness'. For the planters of the seventeenth century, the Ireland beyond the Pale area surrounding Dublin was an untamed wilderness; colonisation was initially metaphorised as violent conquest by rape, which gradually softened to talk of agricultural husbandry as the planters' position stabilised. By the nineteenth century the west was believed to have been largely unaffected culturally and linguistically by the British presence, and also constituted the landscape of greatest difference to what was seen as the archetypal landscape of 'Englishness'; the gently rolling green fields of the south-east. In the age of industrialisation, with its increased stirrings of anxiety over displacement and loss of tradition, the supposedly untouched western landscapes became what Gibbons refers to as 'a primitive Eden, a rural idyll free from the pressures and constraints of the modern world' (Rockett, Gibbons and Hill, 1988: 194). Visitors largely ignored the wretched poverty and congestion so typical of the western seaboard, in addition to its various social and cultural influences, preferring to imagine contact with majestic nature and simple, antiquated cultural purity. Meanwhile, within Ireland, the surge of intellectual interest in native matters focused on the inevitable symbols of landscape and peasantry, which did little to alter the discourses of the British. The west came to function in Ireland as its primitive 'Other', the symbol of the Irish Ireland that had been eroded during centuries of colonisation, but could now be recovered by throwing off British rule. The rural landscape was almost always favoured over the urban in the test of authenticity, and the west favoured over the more thoroughly planted east. When it is taken into consideration that the inhabitants of Ireland believed to be untainted by foreign culture were from areas experiencing Ireland's highest emigration rates, the problematics of this thinking become clear. As Nash points out, 'true' Irishness was 'leak[ing] away through "treacherous" emigration' (1996: 439). The west as 'that quintessential repository of collective memory' (Nora, 1996:1) so necessary to national self-belief was as vulnerable to change as the rest of the country. In fact, it was an area that had consistent and long-term links to various parts of Scotland and England, due not least to seasonal migration in search of work, in addition to links created with America and other countries due to long-term emigration; its figuration as isolated and culturally pure cannot be sustained.

*'My native language but not my mother tongue'.*  
(W.B. Yeats, in Brown, 1992: 39)

### **The challenge of Northern Ireland**

A problematic concept in itself, the lacunae, fictions and discrepancies of Ireland's mythic west are brought into sharp relief by the difference of the north-east of the island, later becoming the separate State of Northern Ireland. For a long time it was the most heavily industrialised and urbanised part of Ireland as a whole, and because of this, was largely ignored in the landscape imagery of a nation that maintained rhetorical entitlement to its governance. Smyth acknowledges the tendency within Ireland to elide actualities that would give the lie to the national myth, declaring, 'we rewrite history selectively and embed the myth in landscape' (1985: 6). The power of this practice resides in its ability to construct an

image of belonging which smooths over real confusions and contradictions in identity, simplifying and acting as a symbol for the self-definition of the dominant collectivity. The problems of these imaginings of place are symptomatic of a wider truth which is recognised by Morley and Robins, who warn that '[homeland] is an ominous utopia . . . drenched in the longing for wholeness, unity, integrity . . . [it] is a mythical bond rooted in a . . . past that has already disintegrated' (1993: 7). Northern Ireland was brought into existence in self-conscious refusal of the cultural and political identity of the Free State. However, the power of the Nationalist sense of place, and the statelet's existence on the island of Ireland, made difficult any separate and distinctive place-based imagining of Northern Ireland. The confusions have affected both Nationalist and Unionist communities, but with the waning of Unionist hegemony and security, Unionists and Protestants are now more evidently struggling with their identity and place on the island.

One of the most enduring and cohesive factors in Unionist commitment to Northern Ireland has been territorial. Many regard themselves as 'the legal and proper claimants' to their lands since plantation times, believing 'that the Province [is] theirs because of the hard work and sacrifice of their fore-fathers' (Raymond Ferguson, in Crozier, 1990: 42). Smith mentions Unionism in 'Ulster' as one of the heirs to a 'covenantal' ethnic mythology, differing slightly from traditional Irish Nationalism. This type of mythology, whose blueprint is laid out in Israel's ancient history, manifests itself in Northern Ireland as:

*vivid shared memories of the vicissitudes of the first settlements, and memories of earlier golden ages after the Battle of the Boyne and the siege of Londonderry . . . coupled with a deep-rooted belief in ethnic election as God's covenanted people . . . [producing] a powerful attachment to Ulster as the ancestral and promised homeland of the Protestant settlers. (1999: 273)*

This does not provide the Unionist community with a stable presence in the landscape, however. Northern and southern Nationalists have fiercely contested the borders, and even the existence, of Unionist territory. What is sometimes seen as a hostile foreign State has laid explicit claim to the counties within Northern Ireland until very recently, in Articles Two and Three of the Irish Republic's constitution, and planter ownership of land within Ireland and Northern Ireland has always been vulnerable to at least rhetorical challenge. There is a strong current of feeling among Catholics and Nationalists in the North that they have a moral right to the land that was taken from their ancestors.

Furthermore, Graham makes the salient point that the Unionist Government brought into existence after partition neglected to address the need for a lucid and securely anchored cultural identity, relying almost entirely on a clear-cut 'Irish' Otherness and contractual adherence to 'Britishness' to define the Protestants it represented. Taking into consideration its territorial claims:

*the selective history, centred on largely sectarian events, which the Unionist state chose for itself, was not only irrelevant to the Nationalist population, but was more generally inadequate as a means of legitimization, principally because of its lack of congruence with place. (Graham, 1994: 267)*

One section of the community cannot reconcile itself with its geographical location in Ireland, perhaps because it lacks an alternative vision to that of Gaelic, Catholic, rural Ireland; the other section clings to that very vision, their professed identity being unaccommodated by any dominant imagining of Northern Ireland as opposed to the Republic or the island as a

whole. Stewart emphasises the vital importance of each community's relationship to the land, sharing as they do 'the same homeland' (1977: 180-1), given that the struggle is centred around rights to a geographical area. This imperative has divided Northern Ireland up into an intricate maze of sectarian localities, which in the absence of an overarching unifying narrative of place, prevents people from identifying with it as a whole.

*'We are not native here or anywhere... so we are bitter...'* (Hewitt, 1992: 58)

### **Imagining Protestant belonging**

An attempt to rectify the situation has led to a strain of Unionism which strays into what may be called 'Ulster Nationalism'; that is, the separation of the six county 'state' from both Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Adamson, a well-known proponent of the non-Gaelic Ulster identity, reaches back into prehistory for its origins, theorising that the Gaels displaced a more primeval race, the Cruthin; although the 'ancient British' (1982: 3) Cruthin had always had extensive links with tribes populating the western coast of what is now Scotland, the aggressive advance of Gaelic peoples eventually forced a mass emigration to those parts. Because of this, the settlement of Scots in the north of Ireland in ensuing centuries may be seen 'in the light of homing birds' (Adamson, 1982: ix). The primary characteristic of these schemes of Ulster history is a naturalisation of the present division of Ireland into North and South, arguing that the existence of the border is not in itself a political construct but rather 'immemorial and uncontrollable' (Foster, 1988: 78), although its exact placing may be arbitrary.

Although he justifiably draws attention to the long-standing cultural links between the north-east of Ireland and the west of Scotland, Adamson's grasp of history is questionable, there being no specific material record of the existence of the Cruthin. He himself seems confused, at times claiming that Ulster people are more Irish than the Irish, and at other times that they are more Scottish than the Scottish (Adamson, 1982: x: 76), and he fails to theorise how the descendants of the English (or any other racial group represented) may fit into modern Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, the attempt to construct an 'origin-legend' (Graham, 1997: xi) comparable to that invoked in support of Irish Nationalism is highly significant. It implies a perceived lack of authenticity within the Protestant community, a need for this kind of legitimisation which has been developed to a sophisticated level elsewhere. The role of remembering is once again underlined. The further back an ancestral presence in the landscape can be traced (or imagined), the better the claim to belonging. One potential alternative to this model exists in the work of poet and critic John Hewitt. The descendant of English Protestant planters, Hewitt struggled throughout his life with the notion of belonging. While deeply rooted in Northern Irish place, he was also aware of Northern Ireland's historical complexities, which denied him any unreflective sense of identity and security. He wrestled with his awareness of the oppressions visited upon Ulster's Gaels and subsequently Catholics, but fought for acknowledgement of planter investment in and attachment to Northern Ireland. Wilson Foster expresses the difficulty at the heart of Hewitt's work, saying he is 'conscious of having an alien heritage in his own country, and is yet determined to have it recognised that it is his own country' (1985: 142), a trope which occurs time and again in Hewitt's poetry. In lines like 'this is my home and country. Later on / perhaps I'll find this nation is my own' (Hewitt, 1992: 9), and 'So I, because of all the buried men / in Ulster clay, because of rock and glen / and mist and cloud and quality of air / as native in my thought as any here' (Hewitt, 1992: 21), there is a pleading quality, a recognition of the exclusions of

discourses of Irish belonging, alongside the need to be included. A major element of Hewitt's theorising on planter identity is the notion that the land itself, the geographical space of Ulster, has moulded 'raw levies' into 'co-inhabitants' (Hewitt, 1991: 79). In places he suggests that the mere fact of living on shared ground should be commonality enough between Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland; this led to a more thorough working-out of the concept of regionalism, mooted as an alternative to Northern Ireland's conflicting belongings at national level. Hewitt later declared the idea a failure, acknowledging 'Ulster is not one region, it's several regions . . . My concept of regionalism was trying to bring together incompatible pieces' (McDonald, 1995: 45).

In the context of this study, however, Hewitt's evenhanded, persistent, and at times poignant efforts to articulate a Protestant, Unionist or planter need to belong, and to envisage what a more permeable sense of belonging might entail, may be appreciated. Part of the power of this endeavour is the acknowledgement of past wrong – 'fear quickened by the memory of guilt / for we began the plunder . . . / we took the kindlier soils . . .' (Hewitt, 1992: 77) – combined with the insistence that the same dogmatic colonial model cannot apply any longer:

*for we have rights drawn from the soil and sky;  
the use, the pace, the patient years of labour,  
the rain against the lips, the changing light,  
the heavy clay-sucked stride, have altered us;  
we would be strangers in the Capitol;  
this is our country also, nowhere else;  
and we shall not be outcast upon the world.* (Hewitt, 1992: 79)

As Seamus Heaney describes it, '[Hewitt's] cherishing of the habitat is symptomatic of his history, and that history is the history of the colonist . . . [who] had grown to be native to his fields through the accretions of human memory and human associations' (1980: 147). This is a responsive and open definition of belonging; although modelled again in rural terms, it may be applied with equal resonance to urban-dwellers.

### **The parish and the cosmos: searching for local belonging**

John Hewitt's advocacy of regionalist belonging in Northern Ireland has recently been more extensively and practically theorised in the light of the current struggles, tensions and connections between local and global contexts across the world. Escalating global accessibility and homogenisation is paralleled by a growing concern with the local, the familiar and the distinctive. Increased mobility (forced or voluntary) and the standardising impulse of global capitalism, may combine to create a sense of dislocation, loss and anxiety, rather than of freedom, progress and choice. Addressing the dichotomy and necessary dialogue between the global and the local in Ireland, Kearney muses on the possibility of a 'fifth province', envisaged as supplement and other to Ireland's existing four, and located at 'the swinging door which connects the "parish" . . . with the "cosmos"' (1997: 100). This concern with opening out a blinkered vision takes into account the apparent need to be rooted somewhere, to have an idea of home and belonging, but warns against what Ascherson terms a 'black, locked up, excluding sort of provincialism' (1990: 16). Kearney's notion of the fifth province evolves specifically within the framework of a partitioned Ireland torn by ethnic and religious battle, and is pertinent to many other geographical conflicts. Nation States can no longer be defined in terms of a unified ethnicity or linguistic profile, displacing the central

tenets of many nationalisms. This may give rise to theorising such as Bhabha's (1994) on the radical cultural challenges presented by the existence of hybrids or exiles, but it has also given rise to virulent conflict along racial and linguistic lines as certain groups seek to secure homogeneous national cultures congruent with state borders. Europe, with its long history of racial violence, and its more recent attempts at integration, at some levels is spoken of increasingly in terms of regions rather than of Nations, in order to soften the rigidity of borders across the continent. John Hume interprets the drive for European unity to suit both Nationalist and Unionist aspirations for Northern Ireland; Nationalists may 'take comfort from the fact that an ever closer union applies to both parts of Ireland within Europe', while Unionists may focus on 'an ever closer union . . . between Britain and Ireland' in the same framework (1996: 126). Pointing out that in this new Europe of 'multiple' peripheries, and 'diverse' centres (Hume, 1996: 131), Nationalism and Unionism are somewhat anachronistic, he hopes that emphasis on Northern Ireland's wider connections will alleviate its stifling conflict.

This thinking may seem appropriate in terms of contributing towards a shared sense of belonging in Northern Ireland, but the province presents the idea with peculiar challenges. From within postcolonial theory, Bhabha's idea of 'the third space' (1994: 218) with its complementary figure, the hybrid or migrant, attempts a similar deconstruction of the national. Bhabha's writings centre on the marginalised, the transient, the creolised, both spaces and persons. He highlights the desire within Western culture for clear-cut definition and difference and absolute categories of Self and Other, and by contrast develops recuperative readings of mixing and migration. He considers that borderline sites and permeable, mongrel identifications implicitly critique the purifying drive of nationalisms and the homogenising impulse of global capitalism. The challenge is described thus:

*the migrant culture of the "in-between", the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability; and in so doing, it moves the question of culture's appropriation beyond the assimilationist's dream, or the racist's nightmare, of a "full transmissal of subject-matter"; and towards an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference.* (Bhabha, 1994: 224)

This restorative project presents certain problems when contextualised in actuality. As Mitchell points out, 'the disingenuous move of the "third space" is to occupy a position "beyond" space and time, and beyond the situated practices of time and the lived experience of history' (1997: 534); she believes Bhabha's premise almost to re-essentialise liminal spaces and characters, in that he supposes them inevitably to enshrine resistance. Mitchell argues that these spaces, given their existence in 'real' geography and history, could as easily become spaces of 'closure and cultural homogenization' (1997: 537); in addition, cross-culturally, there has been almost no widespread opening out towards hybridity and uprootedness, despite such redefining – rather, the instinct is to re-entrench, particularly when established personal and national identities are jeopardised.

Northern Ireland may be described as a hybrid, borderline area, but this context has resulted more often in fossilisation of identity and difference than any kind of acceptance and celebration of ambiguity. The province's sectarian politics historically extend to geography, and the last thirty years in particular have been characterised by further polarisation of settlement. Areas which may at first glance seem to be mixed often simply break down into more and more intricate segregation, which is reinforced time and again in response to violence. Stewart sums up the problem as follows:

*the two communities are not intermingled . . . but they are interlocked . . . This gives rise to a situation in which the "territorial imperative" is extremely insistent . . . the war in Ulster is being fought out on a narrower ground than even the most impatient observer might imagine, a ground every inch of which has its own associations and special meaning . . . locality and history are welded together. (1977: 181-182)*

This difficulty is most evident in urban areas. Belfast's localities are in frequent and at times vicious conflict, the most recent examples being violent disputes during 2001 and 2002 between Glenbryn and the Ardoyne in the north of the city, and the Short Strand and the Lower Newtownards Road in the east. Yet neither is the locality an inevitable focus of confrontation and attempted exclusion. A more inclusive understanding of the locality and its importance for belonging is in evidence in the campaign to preserve Northern Ireland's townlands. The townland is the most basic legal unit of land division in Ireland, 'the most intimate and enduring' (Ó Dalaigh, Connell and Cronin, 1998: 9), and the Ordnance Survey recorded 62 205 of them throughout Ireland, of which around nine thousand are now within Northern Ireland, across rural and urban areas. Until 1972 the townland retained its historical function in administrative and legal circles, its position confirmed as the principal element of rural addresses. In that year the Post Office initiated the now current system of using road names, numbers, and postcodes. Townland names were not banned, but were considered 'superfluous information' (Kirk-Smith, 1993: 46), and people were requested not to include them on addresses. The Federation for Ulster Local Studies was established to coordinate community protest, declaring the threatened loss of the townland names and boundaries a matter for Unionist and Nationalist concern. The townlands have anchored generations of memories, and the campaign's emphasis has fallen upon the intimate and mingled nature of belonging across both communities in one place. Kavanagh writes that 'parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals' (1973: 283), and Heaney ventures the opinion that his poetry touches most people more deeply for its very lack of allegiance to 'Ireland' as a concept, a nation, a mythological figure (1980: 139); perhaps this thinking applies to the townland. As Estyn Evans supposes has happened in Irish culture more frequently than we might admit (see Evans, 1967), the townland framework has assimilated the planter population, its structure and names becoming simply the legacy of rural dwellers in Northern Ireland. Nash writes of the Townland Campaign as a refreshing rethinking of attachment to place in the Northern Irish context, as people unite against the 'common threat' (1999: 469) of bureaucratised nomenclature and construction of place. It should, however, be acknowledged that Unionists and Nationalists were able to unite in certain times and certain places in their desire to protect the townland perhaps because it was a non-constitutional question, its outcome having no effect on the geography of the border, or the existence of Northern Ireland. The campaign's impetus has decreased over the last decade, the full restitution of the townland's former status still not achieved; it has suffered from the lack of a functioning Assembly and local politicians with the motivation and power to effect changes. In addition, the positive and inclusive uses of the townland have been almost entirely confined to rural areas, with towns and cities being noted rather for their intensified segregation and exclusion. Yet the campaign continues in various local forms. In Mullaghbane in South Armagh, the predominantly Nationalist community is in the process of raising granite markers on the townland boundaries in the parish of Forkhill. A concerted effort has been made there to interest the local children in the preservation in memory of the townland names and positions, and the project coordinators cite at least one instance in which the severely diminished local Protestant community has also been involved (personal

communication from Una Walsh, 24 June 2003). Seamus Heaney, among others, considers the meaning of townlands, the sense of belonging they engender, and the shared concern to preserve them, to extend beyond their immediate geographical and temporal significance:

*the associations of the word [townland] are rural, of course, but I suspect that its talismanic power is felt by city people also ... it connotes a totally uninsistent sense of difference, a freely espoused relation to an idiom and an identity that are regional, authentic, uncoerced and acknowledged. It is a minimal but reliable shared possession, the kind of word that could provide the right verbal foundation for talks about talks.* (Heaney, in Canavan, 1991: xi)

‘That Determined Place’  
(W. R. Rodgers, in McDonald, 1995: 58)

### Conclusion

It is evident from this brief overview of place and belonging in Northern Ireland that the understandings involved are deeply complex and often fraught. The imagining of the province as a place to which some of its inhabitants belong is characterised by confusion and antagonism, and imaginings in which all might belong are rare and restricted. Heaney points to the difficulties caused by the disunity of Northern Ireland’s geographical and political status, and the habitual turn towards their respective guarantors within both Unionist and Nationalist communities:

*the fountainhead of the Unionist’s myth springs in the Crown of England but he has to hold his own on the island of Ireland. The fountainhead of the Nationalist’s myth lies in the idea of an integral Ireland, but he too lives in exile from his ideal place.* (Heaney, 1984: 5).

This dual geographic understanding of Northern Ireland has been an integral part of its conflict. Resolutions have often been couched in terms of being able to prove prior possession and hence authenticity; the Nationalist and Republican movements have until recently gone unchallenged in their use of the Irish-Ireland myths. Now some Unionists and/or Protestants are beginning to reciprocate, attempting to vindicate their presence in Northern Ireland through prehistory, language and naming place. Longley (1991) tries to dissolve, rather than resolve, the question of who belongs through her image of Northern Ireland as a cultural corridor, permeated and enriched by both British and Irish cultures. She considers that our literature reflects this state of affairs, even if our politics do not, writers and artists articulating ‘the strain [and the potential] of being in two places at once’ (Heaney, 1984: 5). However, as Longley acknowledges, Unionism and Nationalism tend to ‘block the corridor at one end . . . [or] the other’ (Longley, 1991: 144). Clyde, referring to Hewitt’s efforts to theorise and validate belonging on behalf of an ‘unsettled’ (McKay, 2000) Protestant people, imagines the poet as a farmer:

*clearing away the undergrowth of lies and amnesia back to the Ulster radicals of the eighteenth century or the local poetry in the vernacular of Burns and the Rhyming Weavers, setting forgotten boundary markers like Alexander Irvine and William Drennan back in their places, defending the independent tradition of his own native place; but all as groundwork for the future, a way of clearing weeds and encouraging healthy growth.* (Clyde, 1987: viii)

This paper attempts a similar approach to the thorny issue of belonging in place in Northern Ireland. Despite extensively theorised solutions to the territorial conflict between Nationalist and Unionist, community practices are still predominantly defensive and exclusive. The paper identifies some of the endeavours to redress or dissipate this embattled situation, but none provides a complete solution. However, as Clyde suggests, value should be placed on the persistent exposure of the real (if limited) multiplicity of Northern Ireland's history and geography, if only to contribute even minutely to a time and place where belonging is not so jealously and narrowly defined.

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