

## The 'War on Terrorism' and Protestant Parading Bands in Northern Ireland



### Introduction

Historically Ireland has witnessed Protestant and Catholic sectors of the community adopting strategies of violence and of cultural preservation in order to maintain and advance their cause. With the onset of the current 'Troubles' in 1969, violence - instigated primarily by paramilitary groups - has dominated Northern Ireland on both sides of the sectarian divide. However, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, the United States declared a so-called 'war on terrorism', and this policy spread rapidly to many other Western countries. In the new climate, terrorism is no longer being tolerated as a means of demonstrating political discontent, and the Northern Irish situation has become a critical target in the terrorism debate, most notably in the British Isles. Thus, the 'war on terrorism' has forced paramilitary groups in the Province to rethink their strategies, and to seek alternative methods of demonstrating their

continued existence and potential manpower. In light of these new trends, it is especially interesting to note that as paramilitary activity has become less acceptable, there has been a rapid rise in the parading band traditions, particularly within the Protestant community. Therefore, as condemnation of terrorism has increased, parading bands have become critical battlefields in the demarcation of Protestant religious and political identity in Northern Ireland, and the unique characteristics of the bands and their practices have contributed to their current success.



### The Parading Tradition in Northern Ireland: Historical Overview

According to Thomas Fraser (2000), the catalyst to the establishment of the Protestant parading tradition in Northern Ireland was the foundation in 1795 of the Orange Order, an interdenominational Protestant organisation, formed after a skirmish between Protestants and Catholics known as the Battle of the Diamond. Protestants were victorious at this event, which is still remembered and commemorated by the Orange Order today. The name of the Order was derived from Protestant King William of Orange

in commemoration of his victory over Catholic King James II in 1690 at the Battle of the Boyne.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries the Orange Order was seen as the main voice for political discontent among the Protestant working classes. It was initially formed among working class agrarian groups, and it came to be seen as the main voice for the expression of Protestantism (Jarman, 1997). Its legitimacy resided precisely in its links to the Church and its Protestant outlook. The Education Committee of the Grand Lodge of Ireland states:

The Orange Order is fundamentally a Christian organisation, as the *Basis of the Institution* states: 'The Institution is composed of Protestants, united and resolved to the utmost of their power to support and defend ... the Protestant Religion.' (ECTGOLI, 1997)

As the success of the organisation grew it received support from sections of the rural gentry and middle classes. (Jarman 1997:46)

1796 was the first year in which parades were organised by the Orange Order. The main date in the parading calendar for the Orange Order has become established as the 12th July to commemorate the victory at the Battle of the Boyne. Up until then Protestant middle classes had used parading as a political instrument. The Orange Order mimicked the middle class parading displays to highlight their political, economic and religious rights (Jarman, 1997).

Parading bands developed from within the Orange Order especially during the 19th century. Early accounts of Orange Order processions note that members led the parade by playing a drum and/or fife. Then lodges began organising larger groups of musicians into bands. By the 1870s these bands were introducing brass and flute, and eventually a wide diversity of band types developed, including pipe, accordion, brass/silver and flute. These

ensembles are still an integral part of the Protestant parading tradition today, particularly in rural areas (Fraser, 2000).

Orangemen have stated that before the Second World War band membership was drawn from the ranks of the Order, but from 1945 onwards bands slowly became increasingly independent of the lodges, recruiting their own members, extending their activities beyond Orange Order parades and managing their own finances. Dominic Bryan notes that in the 1960s outdoor band competitions became a growing activity of the Protestant parading tradition (Bryan, 2000). Parading bands hosted parades in their local areas, and judges (who were normally members of the hosting band), marked each band around the parade route. At the end of the evening the results were read from a platform to the visiting bands and trophies would be awarded to the best drum corp. section and overall band, for example. These competitions established clear identities for the bands, and this contributed significantly toward the separation of the bands from the Orange Order. These ensembles recruited members from young Protestant males, as this group was attracted by the opportunities for sociability of the banding world.

### The Troubles

The emergence of the Troubles in 1969 and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) terrorist campaign in Northern Ireland created a sense of insecurity within the Protestant community. The Orange Order, which up until then had been the main organisation defending Protestantism, now seemed unable to cope with this new kind of threat. As a result, the Orange Order appeared weak and impotent to working class Protestants, and they no longer saw the organisation as an effective representative of their interests. This led to the formation of Loyalist vigilante/ paramilitary groups (Ulster Defense Association [UDA], Ulster Volunteer Force [UVF]), who took on the role of defending their communities against the IRA. While many young males joined the ranks of the paramilitary organisations, others sought alternative outlets to voice their grievances. Thus, parading bands became particularly attractive to working class youths and quickly

evolved into politico-musical ensembles, becoming the dominant form of expression within Protestant communities throughout Northern Ireland (Bell, 1990).

In this climate the so-called 'Blood and Thunder' flute bands began to emerge, and ultimately became the dominant band type in Northern Ireland, particularly in urban areas. These hard-line, male-dominated flute bands received this title due to the loud thundering drums, the playing of which often causes the hands of bass drummers to bleed – you can often see this blood on the drum skins during parades. This established, with the sharp whistle of the flutes, a genre known as 'rough' music, and it was seen as a musical and political response to the threat of an All-Ireland State. They were - and continue to be - seen as a context for the display of masculinity within the Protestant community (Bell 1990), and thus they have helped fulfil the social, cultural and political needs of young threatened working class males.

## **Flute Bands**



Given these associations, parading flute bands gained considerable support within their communities, and this was at a time in which the new paramilitary groups were also receiving the support of the working class Protestant communities. Indeed, these two types of organisation engaged in a parallel mission: the defence of Protestantism and the union with Britain. While the paramilitaries defined their roles through violence and the threat of violence, and therefore had to operate in a somewhat covert fashion, bands maintained and advanced Protestantism through highly visible public displays, which notably did not wane during the ‘Troubles.’

But despite their complementary roles, the degree and nature of the links between bands and paramilitary organisations have varied widely across the Province. It could be argued that what facilitated the infiltration of paramilitary control over bands, at least in some areas, was the absence of an over-arching organisation linking the various bands to one another. Upon defining their independence from the Orange Order each band existed more or less as a freestanding neighbourhood association. Therefore, in some instances paramilitary groups (UDA, UVF) were able to exploit this leadership vacuum with a number of parading bands whose internal leadership may have been weak. It has undoubtedly been strongest in Protestant enclaves and border areas, where the Protestant community has felt most vulnerable.



Desmond Bell (1990) discusses this link between bands and paramilitaries when he notes that in some cases, 'the use of paramilitary symbolism in the forms of flags and banners is an act of male bravado.' However, a limited number of parading bands have received financial support from the paramilitaries in their neighbourhood, often as payment for carrying paramilitary insignia on parade. But even where links are strong, bands and paramilitary groups have remained distinct organisations and they have preserved separate identities within their local communities. It could even be argued that many parading bands provided one of the few positive outlets for the expression of political discontent during the 'Troubles', a time when many young men were joining paramilitary organisations. Yet for many young Protestant males the parading band tradition was - and still is - primarily a social activity, a place to meet up with their mates, while also providing them with a sense of belonging in their community and Province.

### The Peace Process

In 1998 Northern Ireland witnessed the beginning of an established peace process with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Though this period saw a decline in organised sectarian violence throughout the Province, violence at interface areas did in some cases increase. However, Loyalist paramilitary violence now shifted from the defence of the Protestant community to internal community violence. This, in turn, led to a shift in the communities' views of the paramilitary groups, and to a decline in the support they received in their areas. The Protestant communities now began to see the local paramilitaries as little more than bullies, extortionists, and even criminals. Their very presence seemed to hinder the development of these areas in the post-conflict society. Thus, pressure has been placed on paramilitaries to rethink their roles within their districts.

With paramilitary activity losing support, the Protestant community started to shift its focus from violence to the revival and strengthening of its cultural heritage as a means of asserting its potential position in Northern Ireland. This has translated into a continual growth of parading bands, especially within the flute band genre. There are a number of

reasons why flute bands – and particularly ‘Blood and Thunder’ bands – have become the most popular band type within Northern Ireland. While they are associated with displays of masculinity and aggressiveness it is also worth noting that it is relatively cheap to set up a flute band as compared to, for example, an accordion or silver band. Furthermore, the flute is a fairly easy instrument to learn, and within approximately one year a beginner can generally play well enough to participate with their band on parade.

Although bands provide an essentially peaceful political weapon, they have had to contend with their association with paramilitary groups, even when direct links between them do not exist. Male bravado and excessive drinking at parades have also tarnished their image. Thus, bands also found themselves losing support within their communities. There have, of course, been some bands that have simply disregarded community views, and have proceeded to flaunt their paramilitary associations and masculinity. Other bands have been unable to sever their links with paramilitaries and ended up folding under paramilitary pressure. Today, the dominant trend is for bands to opt for the strategy of re-creating themselves in the new era. These bands are striving to become ‘respectable’ as a means of regaining community support. They have initiated a process of ‘band development’, which basically entails the development of musical competence among band members and a curtailment of loutish behaviour, particularly during public performances. Some bands have taken the extreme stance of completely banning alcohol while their members are on parade. There are also some innovative flute bands that are attempting to entirely change the general atmosphere of their parades from fundamentally aggressive contexts to more carnivalesque and family-orientated environments. These parades often include band members dressing up in cartoon character outfits and handing out toys and sweets to the children.

Bands opting to take the ‘band development’ route are being offered a number of grants from both government and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) sources. This has reduced band economic dependence on paramilitaries, and indeed band development has proved all round to be an extremely effective, covert and non-confrontational strategy for

sidestepping paramilitary pressure. Thus, with the onset of the peace process bands have found it easier to disentangle their identities from that of the paramilitaries.

It is also important to note that bands have been increasing their power through the development of institutional links between them in the form of federations such as the 'Ulster Bands Association.' This association is an outcome of the competition culture that has developed within the banding world since the 1960s. Increasingly, competitions are emphasising the performance competence, particularly in the realm of music, of the bandsmen, while also assessing the orderliness of their marching. Indeed, one of the most successful and respected bands in terms of competition achievement has been the Mourne Young Defenders flute band. The heightening of competitiveness between bands shifted the focus away from sectarian concerns to an intra-Protestant musical battlefield.

### Conclusion

What impact has the 'war on terrorism' had on the parading band world in Northern Ireland? The main result of the 'war on terrorism' is that it has hastened and legitimised what was already underway in Northern Ireland following the onset of the peace process. Paramilitary organisations have become less acceptable over the last number of years as defenders of Protestantism. As a result of this, flute bands have by default adopted the role of defenders of these communities, a defence that stresses culture preservation rather than direct violence.

However, it is significant that Loyalist paramilitaries have not felt the same pressure to desist from terrorism as have Nationalists, as their political representation is extremely limited.



Votes for parties that support paramilitary activity is very low among Protestants (1% of the local government vote in 2005) in comparison to the Catholic community, who have selected Sinn Féin, generally assumed to be the political arm of the IRA, as their main political representative (24% of the local government vote in 2005). As Sinn Féin is now the main Nationalist party, it has placed the IRA under increasing pressure to give up their weapons. The recent historic IRA statement on 28th July 2005 may lead to new pressures on Loyalist paramilitaries to follow suit.



In the mean time, the marching season, which runs from April to September, is each year bringing an ever-increasing number of bands and band parades out and onto the streets of Northern Ireland in both rural and urban contexts. These ‘peace process soldiers’ are very visibly and audibly defending Protestantism, demarcating Protestant territories and demonstrating their potential manpower.

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