



8 An Age of Conservative Modernity: Belfast 1914–1968

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Between 1914 and 1968, sweeping cultural and economic changes transformed the tapestry of Belfast life. Suburban development and the re-planning of inner-city districts changed the city's social geography radically. The local economy also underwent transition, as once booming industries went into long-term decline. This caused hardship for many families, particularly during the 1930s. The Second World War, and the years thereafter, brought greater affluence to the city, even though pockets of inequality and poverty hung on stubbornly. In each of these respects, Belfast's story bears comparison to that of numerous industrial cities in Britain. Where it differed was in the continued significance of ethno-sectarian conflict and identity, which remained important in many aspects of everyday life.

The analysis that follows is distinct from that offered in earlier chapters, because it is possible for the first time to explore the period through the voices of ordinary men and women. Testimony gleaned from autobiographies and oral histories can enrich our understanding of the cultural, social and economic life of twentieth-century Belfast.¹ This chapter also examines a number of individual streets and communities, to provide insights into how the tides of historical change affected the city. The chapter begins by exploring housing and community in the city, probing, in turn, inner-city working-class communities, the development of suburbia and the impact of public housing estates. The focus then shifts to the topic of work, through discussions of work and welfare, and the social composition of the labour force. The final sections of the chapter explore the broad area of consumption, via discussions of spending and leisure.

Working-Class Life in Inner-City Belfast

Belfast was home to many districts that exhibited the features of the 'traditional working-class community' which became the object of sociological investigation in the 1950s. How did that cultural framework operate in a city

A sad departure? A family pictured as they were about to emigrate in 1929. Persistently high unemployment produced a steady stream of migrants through Belfast docks for much of the twentieth century.

See page 291 for details.

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beset with sectarian tensions? Autobiographical accounts and oral histories of working-class Belfast frequently offer positive accounts of neighbourhood life, even though community often had to be chiselled out of adversity. John Young Simm's account of growing up on Shankill Road, in the 1930s, is one example:

But there was humour in the streets [...] And it was this humour, plus the friendliness and tenaciousness, that made for survival. Who on Saturday night, when out walking amongst the bustle and the talk of the Shankill Road, could believe that life for many in the throng was perpetual grind [...] Hoots of laughter would often rise above the din, for Saturday night on the road was a relaxed and happy occasion. But in times of trouble, or when a death was dutifully recorded in the daily papers by a bereaved family, or when the horror of an impending eviction for non-payment of rent to some unknown landlord was near to crushing the spirit of a struggling family, then tears would be understood and absent friends would join with neighbours and help to dry those tears by door to door collections.

Cynical readers may dismiss this as rose-tinted reminiscence, but Simm provided the example of how a neighbourhood collection saved his own family from eviction for non-payment of rent. The motivations of those involved in this generosity are unclear, although it is possible that there was a degree of reciprocity stemming from the significant role Young's father undertook in the community: 'One thing my da was good at was putting a letter together, and he was much in demand when it came to communicating with officialdom. People would come from near and far to have letters written or to get advice on dole matters, or to trace dates of birth when seeking a pension.'²

According to May Blood, moments of crisis united Catholic and Protestant neighbours. She recalled women, in the Donegall Road district, engaging in reciprocal arrangements around childcare or financial crises.³ The traumatic events of the Second World War also feature in accounts of mutual support crossing the religious divide. During the Belfast Blitz, New Lodge Catholic Terry O'Neill took refuge in a stranger's house: 'The people's houses we were in were Protestant and my only reason for stating this is to illustrate the way old sectarian and political divisions were set aside as folks tried to comfort one another during that fearful night [...] God if it only had stayed that way!⁴ In his view, this nascent community unity was broken after the war by political interlopers:

In 1945 they came round our district – the Protestants – waving red flags saying 'Vote Labour'. And they put a guy called Downey in. Well, the next election came four years later [...] The same people were out with the Union Jacks, shouting 'Vote Cole. Keep the Fenian bastard out!' They wrote on the walls 'Downey's a Fenian – vote Cole.' Of course the Catholics started writing 'Don't vote Cole he's as black as your hole!' What happened is a man called Paisley come in and

Public houses were frequently targeted during sectarian violence, as in this scene photographed in 1935. Widespread Catholic ownership of bars in Protestant districts made them an easy target, while civil unrest provided an opportunity to loot alcohol. Photograph © R. Lock / Hulton Archive / Getty Images.



offered to be Cole's election agent and he went round and spoke to the people and reawakened old sectarian fears and sectarian hatreds and the people naturally voted for Cole.⁵

Others offer alternative, less politicized interpretations of community relationships. Helen, an east Belfast Protestant, recalled working in the Ulster Spinning Company in the 1930s: 'on St Patrick's Day we all wore shamrocks and there was always a bit of a wee party and they called it drowning your shamrock'. She had equally positive memories of the Twelfth, in the years after the Second World War:

When we lived on the Cregagh Road, my friend lived on the Ormeau Road, and she used to bring folding chairs, one for me and one for Joe – my husband – and we sat at Shaftesbury Square to watch the Orangemen. She was a Roman Catholic, and we were Protestants, and they went out to see the Orangemen and like it was just a day out. Times have changed terrible.

Kathy, an Ardoyne Catholic, also remembered going to watch the Twelfth:

Him and I – on the Twelfth Day – would have went out and looked at the Orangemen. Took the two childer with us, down to Agnes Street and watched the Orangemen coming up and then went down to the chip shop and took the childer in with us and that was a great Twelfth Day. There was no fighting in them days, like, when the bands were coming home at night. The kids thought that was great. I don't know how many more [Catholics] went, but I went.⁶

While these accounts remind us of the danger of assuming that a total religious apartheid existed, analysis of residential segregation is sobering. In the period under consideration, Catholics made up around one-quarter of Belfast's population. In 1901 almost 60 per cent of Belfast's population resided in streets that were more than 90 per cent either Protestant or Catholic. By the late 1960s the figure was 67 per cent.⁷ This segregation reinforced both cultural and political divides between Catholics and Protestants and made religion 'a considerably more potent force for social segregation than was social class'.⁸ Even in the few working-class districts that were 'mixed', micro-level segregation was significant. Dock Ward, home to large numbers of carters, dockers, labourers and millworkers, had a Catholic population of just under 40 per cent in 1911 and 45 per cent in 1937. Analysis of one of its thoroughfares, Vere Street, provides rich insights into a number of aspects of Belfast life at this point. Catholic families occupied only three addresses between numbers 1 and 34 in the street. Patrick Quinn, a spirit grocer, lived at Number 1. Catholics predominated in this trade, as Protestant involvement had been reduced by a vociferous temperance campaign. In 1911 640 Belfast publicans were Catholic, while only 137 were Protestant.⁹ At Number 3 was Susan Grant, a Catholic linen weaver, and her two children. Sharing this address was Elizabeth Hill, another Catholic widow, with her children. There was then a long gap to the next Catholic residence, which was at number 29. Number 35 was home to a Belfast rarity, a 'mixed marriage'. It was the only one on the street and it was perhaps no coincidence that this household marked a transition point between Protestant and Catholic predominance. Of the 41 households between numbers 36 and 77, 31 were Catholic.¹⁰

Residential patterns such as this ensured that Vere Street, and others with similar demographic profiles, featured prominently in the sectarian violence that scarred the years 1920–22 and 1935. Newspapers reported the violence and provided insights into the motives of those involved. They also offered glimpses into other aspects of community life. In July 1921 Maltida Ferran told a court that her Vere Street home was attacked by a group of up to fifty men shouting 'We will rid the Fenians and rebels out of the street', during what police acknowledged was a long passage of conflict in the street.¹¹ The following month a Catholic man was shot dead and another man was wounded. There were also arson attacks on several houses.¹² In September Sarah Dunlop and Jane Carol were wounded and Eva Blair and Maggie Ardis were killed by gunmen. John Corr, a Catholic labourer, was charged in connection with the fatalities.¹³ Despite the fact that this neighbourhood, and many others like it, was experiencing extraordinary times, what a later generation would call 'ordinary decent crime' continued. When a suspected burglar failed to appear at Belfast Custody Court in November, his wife explained that he could not attend because shooting was continuing in

Vere Street. She had to 'creep through the holes in the walls in order to get to the court'.¹⁴

This sense of a community besieging itself re-emerged in the testimony of Mrs Rafferty who, in 2002, recalled events in Grove Street, adjacent to Vere Street, eight decades earlier:

The very first day there was a man shot outside our door – a man called Ned Burns. He was leaving his wife up at his mother's – she lived facing us. And he come over and he said to my mam 'I'll put on your shutters.' And he put on the shutters – and he was shot. That man lay in my house from five o'clock that day to nine that night, for they couldn't carry the corpse up to his mother's house [...] I seen him dying on our floor. We had to stay off [work] for them couple of days, until it all ceased and I remember we had to dig the holes in the walls in the kitchens. We had holes in the walls – that was a coalhole and this was a cupboard and you had to dig into the woman's coalhole. Everybody had the right to a coalhole, for to let the people walk out. You see, there was Protestants at the back of us. Earle Street – they were all Protestants there and we had to dig out holes in the kitchen [...] They used to come from Tiger's Bay to Spamount Street. That's as far as ever they got. Because the next street was our street [Catholic] and the next street was Grove Street and then Brougham Street and then Sussex Street. And there were Protestants at the bottom of the street and that's why we had the big holes in the walls. We had them for years.¹⁵

Grove Street and Vere Street featured again when, in the fevered atmosphere that surrounded the celebration of George V's Silver Jubilee in 1935, violence erupted once more. On 9 May two hand grenades were thrown into Vere Street and there was sporadic gunfire. An orgy of shootings, looting and arson led to numerous arrests and the press coverage again provided insights into more mundane aspects of community life. One case hinted at inter-communal flirtation. On 2 June Grove Street's Robert Lenaghan admitted shooting and wounding 15-year-old Annie Quinn, who was on her way to chapel. Eighteen-year-old Brigid Corr identified Lenaghan as the gunman. She claimed to know him from the Henryville Dance Club, 'which she used to frequent'.¹⁶ Dance halls were one of the few social spaces in the city where there was a good deal of mixing across the sectarian divide, as this case illustrates. Etiquette dictated that no young woman could refuse an invitation to dance, ensuring a degree of inter-denominational mixing under the ballroom lights.

The precise dynamics of Lenaghan's transformation from dance hall charmer to violent assailant remain unexplained. However, historian Tony Hepburn identified a number of factors explaining the involvement of individuals in the 1935 violence. He concluded that the desire to avenge an earlier attack was a common motive. Others, driven by the shortage of housing, took the opportunity to seize a home. A court was told that the battle cry

'Whoever throws out the furniture will get the house' was issued, in July 1935, by Henry Cahoon, a 26-year-old unemployed Protestant father of two. For others, being at the centre – or the fringes – of violent disorder provided macabre entertainment. Schoolboy Sam McCaughtry 'was there in the crowd' and recalled being 'excited to hear that a Fenian was being burned out' of a Tiger's Bay house. His excitement dimmed when he discovered 'that it was my poor uncle Thomas, a dock labourer, who used to give the children his pennies when he came home, full of beer, singing, up the street'. For the majority of those involved in violence, however, the primary driving force was 'fear or a perceived threat'.¹⁷

Religious affiliation was not, of course, the only marker of difference. Belfast was home to small Italian and Jewish communities. The former settled initially in 'Little Italy', around Little Patrick Street. Many skilled Italians assisted in the construction of new Catholic churches, while others were involved in the forty-plus Italian ice cream and fish and chip shops that were operating by 1914. The Jewish community, which was 1,500 strong in 1951, was centred on the upper Antrim Road. Overall, immigration was insignificant. Between 1926 and 1971 the proportion of Belfast residents born outside Britain or Ireland did not rise above 1 per cent.¹⁸

Various forms of economic and cultural hierarchy created more commonplace forms of distinction between families. During the 1930s Sam McCaughtry's family moved from a house in Cosgrove Street, in Tiger's Bay, to Hillman Street, off the New Lodge Road. He recalled that the 'distance involved in the move wasn't any more than a couple of hundred yards or so, in a straight line, but in terms of progress on the social scale it was a vertical take-off of a good half mile'. The new home had 'a parlour, and [...] front and back attics. And as if that wasn't heady enough, the back attic had been converted into a bathroom.' The parlour offered a room in which guests could be entertained. It was off-limits for normal family activities, which took place in the back of the house and 'respectably' away from the public gaze, unlike the prized best furniture in the parlour. Status and respectability came at a cost and the McCaughtrys' weekly rent climbed from 4s 6d to 8s. This increased outlay was made possible when several of the McCaughtry children entered employment and began contributing to family finances. McCaughtry associated the physical move with a degree of social mobility also: 'My mother joined the Mothers' Union soon after [...] She used to come back from the meetings and tell us about the addresses that the bishop's wife and the rector's wife had given.'¹⁹

Mrs McCaughtry's outings to the Mothers' Union were a sign of increasing respectable status, at a time when notions of the 'rough' and 'respectable' were central aspects of identity formation. John Boyd grew up in Chatsworth Street, off Templemore Avenue, in a 'parlour house with a kitchen and scullery at

the back, a back yard with a water closet and two bedrooms'. The 'respectable' nature of his home was symbolized by 'the musty parlour, which was seldom used except on Sundays'. The bookish Boyd, and his father, regretted their proximity to the less respectable Lord Street. Boyd got 'little peace to do my homework' because these neighbours were always 'gossiping, shouting and laughing' and the 'corner boys' played 'noisy games of marbles' or got 'drunk on a Friday or Saturday night'. Boyd's father labelled them 'good for nothing' and instructed his son not to go near them.²⁰ Respectability was linked strongly with religious observation and the donning of Sunday best outfits. May Blood recalled that each year 'my sisters and I got new coats and hats, while my brothers each got a new suit. This shopping excursion usually took place at Easter, and you wore the new outfit through to the following Easter.'²¹

Middle-Class Suburbia

While the Blood, Boyd and McCaughtry families kept up appearances in their working-class neighbourhoods, middle-class families pursued new suburban lifestyles. Interwar suburban development centred on the middle classes, exacerbating the physical buffer zones between them and inner-city communities. Housing styles and standards articulated economic disparities. Suburban homes built between the wars often followed the vogue for the 'Tudorbethan' style common in England, with features such as half-timbered gables. These houses were much smaller than the villa houses associated with Victorian suburbs and were built for middle-class salary earners. Semi-detached suburban homes brought new forms of living, which involved embracing labour-saving devices that replaced live-in servants. Middle-class housewives were encouraged to turn to new magazines, such as *Good Housekeeping*, for advice on managing their homes.

While sectarian mayhem took place in Vere Street, a few minutes' walk away leafy Somerton Road was witnessing the arrival of new suburbanites to a series of semi-detached houses, completed in 1922. Running parallel to the upper Antrim Road, Somerton Road was part of a neighbourhood that was home to some of Belfast's finest Victorian villas. The area hosted an affluent population that included the families of businessmen and lawyers, and that was now being augmented by salaried workers and their families. In 1951 Protestants made up four in five of the area's residents.²² Many among the area's Catholic minority worked for the more affluent families that still employed servants. An advertisement in the *Irish Times* in 1948 sought a 'general servant' for 116 Somerton Road, which was – the prospective employee was told – 'near Catholic church'.²³ The placing of the vacancy in a Dublin-based newspaper indicated that female employment opportunities in Belfast were extensive enough to allow local women to avoid low-paid and low-status domestic

service. Any young woman taking the post at Number 116 would have been invited to the local Catholic Girls' Club. This was set up in 1933 to provide 'girls resident as domestic servants in the vicinity' with 'safe surroundings and legitimate recreation'. Its meeting times – Wednesday and Sunday afternoons – indicate the limited leisure time these domestic servants received. As the 'members of the local branch of the Legion of Mary were asked to take charge', the servants taking part did not escape middle-class supervision in their free time, with the authority of a Protestant mistress being replaced by that of a middle-class co-religionist.²⁴

The local parish was St Therese's, which opened in 1937, and was one of several churches built in the suburbs to minister to female domestic servants and 'the emerging Catholic professional and business class'.²⁵ Its presence, and that of the Catholic bishop of Down and Connor on Somerton Road, signifies that residential segregation by religion did not operate in the same way among the middle classes as it did among the working classes. Instead, divisions were 'more effectively measured by membership of ethnic associations, schooling and kinship links'.²⁶ Thus, Somerton Road was one of the 'good residential areas that used to be exclusively Protestant' where, a journalist noted in 1958, 'well-to-do Catholics have been moving'. The article was part of a series on the 'Northern Catholic' by the writer Desmond Fennell, for the *Irish Times*. Fennell claimed that to purchase a home in such an area, a Catholic family engaged a Protestant solicitor and only revealed their faith 'when it is too late for anything but Protestant dismay'. While this suggested sectarianism with a bourgeois slant, Fennell also quoted a middle-class Catholic living in a 'mixed' area who had told him there was 'hardly a flag put out now on the Twelfth'. It was claimed that 'Catholic and Protestant children built bonfires' together and that 'if the Catholic children didn't go to see the bonfires, their share of the hand-out of lemonade and cakes was delivered to them in their homes'.²⁷

Thus, the average suburbanite was unlikely to encounter naked sectarianism and was more likely to meet his or her maker as the result of a car accident than through inter-communal violence. In 1929 Somerton Road resident Helen Newel, the widow of a tailor, was killed by a car at a local tram stop. Six years later, her neighbour, businessman Alan Carswell, was seriously injured when his car collided with a bus carrying Linfield supporters.²⁸ The car symbolized mid-twentieth-century suburban living. As well as increasing road casualty figures, the arrival of middle-class motoring gave rise to another modern scourge, the car thief. The term 'joyrider' was used first in Belfast when 24-year-old mechanic Anthony Bradin stood accused of the larceny of his former employer's car. Bradin had been spotted, at Christmas 1912, driving up the Newtownards Road with a woman and two men. He maintained that he did not intend to steal the car and the judge remarked that 'probably the prisoner was taking what was called on the other side of the channel a "joy ride"'. He was

The interwar years witnessed the rise of mass motoring, with car ownership extending into the middle classes. In this photograph from 1918, Mr Pyper proudly poses with his car in 1918.

Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland. Collection Ulster Museum. BELUM.Y2692.



found not guilty, because there was no intent to deprive the car's owner of his property permanently.²⁹

It took the introduction in 1930 of a new offence (taking a vehicle without the owner's consent) to empower the courts to deal with this phenomenon. By the mid-1930s, when there were 27,000 private vehicles registered in Northern Ireland, one in every hundred was stolen each year for 'joy rides'. Offenders came from a range of social backgrounds. In 1930 16-year-old message boy Arthur Peacham, from inner-city Lindsay Street, was sent to borstal for three years for a number of car thefts. Prior to his arrest, up to two cars a night were being stolen in the city. He returned to car crime on his release and, despite several subsequent prison sentences, was involved in all the activities that late twentieth-century Belfast came to associate with the joyrider. Peacham was the quarry in a number of high-speed chases, was fired on by the RUC, and was injured in his final, 70 mile-per-hour police pursuit in 1938. Ironically, he later became a Dublin taxi driver. While Peacham journeyed from the inner city to the suburbs to steal cars, other offenders were themselves from well-heeled families. In 1933 18-year-old Alfred Mandale Fisher, a stockbroker's stepson from Myrtlefield Park, was one of a group of teenagers arrested for the theft of a series of high-performance sports cars, including a Riley and an MG. Unlike Peacham, Fisher avoided prison initially, due to his family background and expensive legal team. He did receive a month's imprisonment when he re-offended later in the year. Thereafter, his family despatched him to South Africa. He returned to serve – and die – in the RAF during the Second World War.³⁰

The car's attraction to young car thieves reflected its increasingly important role as a signifier of status in a middle-class hierarchy that was highly stratified and based on rich cultural codes. Observers, occupying very different positions on the social scale, offered contrasting perspectives on the Belfast bourgeois lifestyle. Caroline Blackwood, who preferred London's bohemia to life in the aristocratic Ulster circles in which she was raised, was scathing of Belfast's suburbia:

And day after day – post-war, just as they had pre-war – in the wealthy suburbs of Belfast the wives of industrialists went on reading the Bible, drinking their sherry and eating scones [...] In those days all those houses were meant to contain that most curious of rooms known as the 'parlour'. The parlour was always musty and unused [...] with plaster Peter Scott geese, which were nailed so they appeared to be flying past the photograph of the Royal Family in a freedom arc up the side of the wall. Sometimes one had the feeling that these status-symbol geese themselves secretly knew that their flight was an illusion and they were just as static as their owners, that they would never fly out of the stifling, expensive interiors.³¹

In his short story 'The Land of High Hedges', Sam McCaughtry narrates the tale of a working-class boy delivering messages to houses with names such as 'Penmawr and Oakdene', and with 'long drive ways, high hedges, and extensive well-kept gardens'. These were the homes of 'school principals, senior civil servants, bank managers, and area heads of insurance companies' and their 'self-assured and cool' wives. On reaching adulthood, and after fighting the Nazis and becoming 'a diligent, semi-skilled worker', he learns that 'houses in the land of high hedges that he loved rarely went up for sale and when they did, the price was hopelessly out of his reach'. Instead, he borrows the money to buy a 'cramped semi-detached house' built to 'minimum specifications', and proudly christens it 'Shangri La', with a name-plate purchased from Smithfield Market, 'where they were selling in their thousand'. He decorates it every two years and when his daughter brings her fiancé home he is 'quietly pleased that she had not had to bring her young man to the kitchen house in the old street'.³²

While this tale encapsulates the warmth that many felt towards suburban living, academics have not always responded as positively. One architectural historian argues that the special features that had set some Edwardian villas apart 'from the normal red brick monotony of the city' were adopted later 'on a more widespread scale, but at a debased level'. For example, houses were constructed with 'a minimal amount of half-timbering in their gables' in a 'dilution and commercialisation of earlier Edwardian Arts and Crafts ideals' that 'brought its own monotony to the suburban housing scene'.³³ Even worse, for some commentators, was the onset of suburban sprawl, which saw villages lose their original character as residential development took place along the

city's major arterial routes. Glengormley provides an example of this process. Its development as a suburb originated with the arrival of the electric tram in 1913. Its population rose from 500 to 2,200 between 1911 and 1951, at which point it was said to 'exhibit all the worst attributes of piecemeal suburban development', being made up of a 'haphazard conglomeration of detached and semi-detached houses and bungalows' created by speculative building.³⁴ In 1901 it had a public house, a smithy and a police station. Half a century later it had a number of shops, two doctor's surgeries, a post office, a primary school, several churches, branches of the British Legion and the Women's Institute, a social club and a Ratepayers' Association. These were signs of a new community taking shape, but the fact that a large number of Glengormley's residents chose to worship in their former areas indicates that community often functioned differently in suburbia.³⁵ Glengormley's growth was symptomatic of population dispersal. In 1951 Belfast had 443,671 citizens, with around 94,000 living in the 'urban area' outside the city boundary. Twenty years later the city's population had dropped to 362,082 and the suburbs had boomed. The number living in Andersonstown, Dunmurry, Lisburn, Newtownabbey, Castlereagh and Hollywood was over 220,000.³⁶

Re-housing the Working Classes

Vast new public housing schemes were partly responsible for these population shifts. They also promoted an alternative form of suburban development. No local authority housing was built in Belfast until 1917, but the political environment after the First World War appeared to offer the prospect of a more dynamic approach. The Westminster government promised 'homes fit for heroes', and the proportional representation system by which the city council was elected in January 1920 radically altered the political landscape. Of the 60 seats contested, Labour candidates, who rode the tide of socialist sentiment created during a bout of industrial conflict in 1919, won 12 and claimed a new political influence. However, the Unionist government established after Partition swiftly passed legislation ending the PR system.³⁷ This ensured the return of Unionist hegemony to the council in 1923. One result was an unwillingness to follow the example of those cities that built corporation houses to be rented for moderate sums. A combination of Unionist philosophical antipathy to state intervention, the stagnation of the local economy and a financial scandal ensured that Belfast's house-building programme got off to a lamentable start. In 1926 a report on the Housing Committee's activities found that inferior materials were being used in construction, and that contracts had not been put out to tender. The city solicitor and members of the Committee had financial interests in sites that were selected on the basis of 'profit to the vendor and not suitability

for working-class housing'. Thereafter, housing schemes proceeded limply. Only 2,187 corporation houses were available by 1930, compared to the 28,450 houses constructed by the private sector in Belfast during the interwar decades.³⁸

The best-known private estate built in this period was Glenard in north Belfast. In summer 1935 it consisted of 1,477 houses of 'superior working class type', in various stages of completion. The developer's intention was to create 'a 100 per cent Protestant colony'. However, when violence erupted in July, the estate's proximity to the nationalist Ardoyne transformed it into a safe haven for Catholics forced from their homes elsewhere in the city. Around 200 Catholic families began squatting on the estate, many in uncompleted houses. In a typically pragmatic Belfast solution to the problems fomented by sectarianism, the estate's developer accepted most of them as tenants, while the Catholic Church bought the 48 homes squatted by persons deemed unacceptable. The developer's decision followed the Church's offer to guarantee the safety of Protestants already living in Glenard, in the wake of threats that they had received.³⁹ This guarantee did not prevent Protestant drift out of the estate and a large part of it eventually became known as 'new Ardoyne'. In the years after 1935 further Catholic families moved in. Kathy's family was one of these and she recalled their move from the Markets: 'my mummy went and she got a house up in Glenard. It's Ardoyne now, it was Glenard then. There was a bathroom in it and it was great and there was a wee fire and wee boiler at the back. You got hot water and it was great, that was



Second World War air raid shelter. Many shelters were constructed only after the attacks of April and May 1941 had produced widespread destruction and loss of life. Photograph © William Vandivert / Time & Life Pictures / Getty Images.

Surviving against the odds. This photograph was taken in North Derby Street, off York Road, two days after the air raids on Easter Tuesday, 15 April 1941. The poignant note on the back of the photograph reads: 'The tears were still falling when this was taken at the loss of all our homes'. It is signed Grannie Kernaghan. Mrs Kernaghan's husband, an Air Raid Precaution warden, stands behind her in his overalls.

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luxury then.'⁴⁰ The Glenard affair was an early indication of how the sectarian cultural politics of the inner city could transfer to the new suburban housing estates.

Belfast's housing problems were exacerbated by the Luftwaffe's savage bombardment of the city in 1941. In a few short weeks, during April and May, there was a series of shattering air raids. The first, on 7 and 8 April, killed 13 people. It targeted the docks and the shipyard but also destroyed numerous homes and other buildings in adjacent neighbourhoods. This rocked a city that had long assumed it was beyond the range of German bombers. Rancour and recrimination followed, amid bitterness at the authorities' failure to prepare adequate air raid shelters and other precautions. More traumatic still was the Easter Tuesday raid of 15 and 16 April that took the lives of 900 Belfast citizens. On the night of 4 and 5 May German bombers returned, this time dropping incendiary devices that were designed to create a maelstrom of flames in industrial and commercial areas. Finally, on the following evening, a further raid led to 14 more deaths.⁴¹

The Impact of the Blitz

Personal testimony best indicates the impact the Blitz had on individuals, both on the nights of terror themselves and in later years. Terry O'Neill spent the night of 15 April 1941 at home in the New Lodge. He remembered that, having previously gone through a series of mock air raid drills, 'we started being a little contemptuous of them and making fun of the "oul eijts" doing their A.R.P. drill'. As a result, the first air raid took us a bit by surprise. When the sirens went off we just sat back to wait as usual for the all clear and the lights to come back on. Instead there was the boom boom of anti-aircraft guns being fired from Victoria Barracks [...] and the blasting sound of bombs not far enough away for comfort [...] I can truthfully say that I have never had another frightening experience to match that night. The thunder of the bombs and the anti-aircraft guns combined with the drone of the bombers never ceased until the following morning. The most frightening of all was the 'whistling bombs', so called because they had holes specially designed in their fin-tails that produced a high-pitched screeching noise like an approaching train whistle as they came down seemingly just over our heads. So the object of the raid was, not just to destroy strategic targets like the shipyards, aircraft factory and docks etc, but to terrorise and destroy the morale of the civilian population.¹

Florence was a young married woman, living in Ainsworth Pass, when the bombers struck. Her account reveals the painful, long-term impact of the Blitz. It changed Florence's life irreparably:

Well that just wrecked everything. I was the oldest of ten – and the youngest was only two weeks old and I was left to rear her because of the night the Blitz happened in Ainsworth Pass. I lived on one side and my mother lived on the other side; and she lived in number thirteen and that was the house was hit. They were all in it when the house was hit and my mother was killed. I had a brother killed; my husband was killed. I had twin brothers and they both had fractured skulls and the wee one, well, I reared her she had shrapnel. And all I got was a finger cut to the bone with shrapnel, you know, that's all I got. There was a sister seventeen – and we thought she was going to lose her leg. We thought she was going to lose her hand too, it was so badly mangled. And because my father died soon after, and because of that Blitz, I was left with twin boys of ten-year old, a girl of seventeen and that wee one to rear and I was only twenty-six years of age. I'd been married five years, just, and I had no family, which was a good thing, you know, because they say God works in mysterious ways. It just was to be, you know.²

1 Terry O'Neill, 'Raining Bombs', *Belfast Magazine*, 14, p. 13.

2 Interview with Florence (born 1915), 12 February 2003.

German bombing destroyed 3,200 houses in Belfast, aggravating what was already a serious problem of poor conditions and overcrowding. It was calculated that of the city's 114,995 houses, 18,440 lacked basic amenities and/or required serious repair work.⁴² Writing in 1960, an academic described one badly affected district:

the highest densities in the city are to be found in some of the small streets which are sandwiched between mills and warehouses in the grid-patterned streets on either side of York Street; the generous width of the main streets in this area belies the squalor of the streets behind them; most of the comparatively few bigger houses which had been built here are now grossly overcrowded, and the whole area constitutes a slum. These high densities extend northwards into an area of small nineteenth-century byelaw houses, some extending along the side of the docks.⁴³

Joan, who married in the late 1950s, faced a long struggle to find decent housing for her husband and four children. She lived in a dilapidated two-bedroom millworker's cottage. The house, in Legoniel, was also home to her father-in-law. It lacked an indoor toilet and electricity and – as the row of terraces behind it had been knocked down – 'when it rained, believe it or believe it not, it rained in the inside of the house. The water ran down the inside of the house.' Joan, a Protestant who converted to her husband's Catholic faith at the time of their marriage, felt that her inability to secure a corporation house was due to discrimination, particularly as some of her sisters and brothers 'were getting offered houses and flats and they weren't even married'.⁴⁴ Joan was not alone, as many families struggled to acquire corporation housing. In 1956 the corporation was instructed to deliver a programme of slum clearance, but it built only 470 houses per annum between 1945 and 1972. This tardy housing programme did have one positive outcome in that fewer high-rise flats were built than in comparable cities.⁴⁵ Belfast did experience schemes such as Unity Flats (at Carrick Hill) and the Weetabix Flats (on the Shankill Road), which were demolished after short lifespans. More successful were the city's first high-rise flats, built on the Cregagh estate in 1961.⁴⁶ In that year Belfast's housing density levels were lower only than those of Liverpool and Glasgow. Furthermore, a good deal of the housing that was built was 'not built to the generally recognized standards of the day'. The limited success of post-war public housing schemes is revealed by the fact that almost 30,000 houses were still deemed unfit in 1974.⁴⁷

It has been stated that where possible the corporation 'mixed tenants of both religious groups'.⁴⁸ Ballymurphy is often cited as an example of this attempt at social engineering and there was some inter-communal engagement on the estate. For example, in March 1969 work began to clear a site for a community centre. Funds had been raised by a tenants' association, set up in

1962 and chaired by Mrs Frances McMullan, a Presbyterian. Digging the first sod, the high sheriff of Belfast felt the centre could 'blaze a trail that would do away with the necessity for marches and counter-marches, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations'. However, by that point only 1 per cent of Ballymurphy residents were Protestant.⁴⁹ Even by the late 1950s it had been identified 'whether by accident or design' as 'a sort of clearing house for Catholic Belfast'.⁵⁰ Families making the move from traditional working-class areas to new public housing estates demonstrated what one geographer called 'a tendency to sector movement'. Those who associated themselves with either the Shankill or the Falls, for example, made 'axial movements along these roads' to new homes.⁵¹ What this dry academic language did not reveal was the extent to which re-housing and population movement aroused controversy. Potential electoral change in corporation wards was the most obvious debating point, but there were often others. In the late 1950s plans for the redevelopment of Carrick Hill created some interesting alliances. It was proposed that the overcrowded and poor-quality housing in Upper Library Street, Millfield and Carrick Hill be replaced by an estate consisting of four blocks of multi-storey flats, maisonettes and terraced houses that would re-house most, but not all, of the area's residents. A number of Unionist councillors and aldermen united with the Eire Labour Party in Dock Ward, the Independent Labour Group of Falls and Smithfield, and a local residents' campaign group to oppose the plans. Ranged against them were the majority of councillors and the Belfast Trades Council.

Those Unionists campaigning against the plan were 'not unconnected to the coal trade' and did not object to redevelopment per se. They wanted the new homes to be in the form of terraced housing with fireplaces, 'something the people have always been used to'. There were charges and counter-charges about gerrymandering. The Unionists accused the Independent Labour Group of being motivated by concerns to protect the Central Belfast seat it held at Stormont. The Unionists were suspected of planning to shift Catholic voters out of Carrick Hill, as part of a wider programme of electoral musical chairs devised in the aftermath of their defeats at the hands of the Northern Ireland Labour Party. The residents' main objection was that they did not wish to live in the 15-storey-high flats that were included in the plans. They also feared that community bonds would be shattered by redevelopment.⁵² In subsequent years, a number of adjacent communities experienced this process of dispersal and destruction. Ron Weiner's *The Rape and Plunder of the Shankill* reflected local resentment about the way in which that community was redeveloped, while the Sailortown Local History Project's website laments the loss of a colourful dockside neighbourhood. Former residents of both these communities felt they were subjected to 'piecemeal dismemberment', as their homes made way for the Belfast Urban Motorway and the Westlink during the 1970s.⁵³ The

Domestic idyll? One of the better examples of public housing built in Belfast after World War Two.

Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland, Collection Ulster Museum, BELUM.Y3973.



Carrick Hill scheme eventually produced Unity Flats. Their name, as well as their design, was a triumph for the planners' misplaced ambitions.

The poor quality of Unity Flats indicated that Carrick Hill residents were right to be distrustful of the re-housing plans. Unity Flats were, like many of the corporation's estates, 'laid out solely with an eye to accommodating as many people as possible', with densely packed homes that were far from spacious.⁵⁴ A combination of poor accommodation and repeated rent rises led to the formation of the Amalgamated Tenants Committee in 1961, to represent families on over fifty 'Catholic, Protestant and "mixed" estates'. Their campaign won some sympathy. The *Belfast Telegraph* cited Ballymurphy as an example of 'houses rushed up' to accommodate families 'who had been bombed out in the war'. With nowhere 'for the young people to amuse themselves or the older ones to meet socially', there was 'boredom and vandalism' at one end of the age spectrum and 'frustration and loneliness' at the other.⁵⁵ Despite the unattractive characteristics of some estates, housing demand exceeded supply and while Belfast Corporation's housing allocation was not as controversial as that of other authorities in the North, there were allegations of unfairness. In 1961, for example, one councillor stated that only 1,860 of 11,000 corporation houses were home to Catholic tenants.⁵⁶

The Northern Ireland Housing Trust (NIHT) was also active in the city, building 21,000 houses between 1944 and 1968.⁵⁷ Its homes were more spacious and of a higher standard than corporation housing. However, rents of around 14s per week meant that less affluent workers could not afford these homes.⁵⁸ This ruled out many Catholic families due to factors associated with income,



The controversial Unity Flats development in west Belfast.

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as well as family size. However, the historian Marianne Elliott, who spent her childhood on the White City estate, observed that the NIHT allocated affordable housing without discrimination: 'In our corner of the estate there were three Catholic families and five Protestant.' In her view, 'sectarianism impinged rarely enough to be truly memorable', although children 'knew the codes of behaviour and said nothing to upset in mixed company'. She recalls friendships between children that dwindled in teenage years, as new bonds were formed with 'classmates of the same religion'. As Elliott grew older, she noted that her family's difference was signified by choice of newspaper, doctor and holiday destination (the south of Ireland). Those holidays were taken in July, when the estate 'took on a new character' and was 'festooned with Union Jacks'.⁵⁹

Although the NIHT's stated policy was to seek low-income tenants who could afford its rents, 8.6 per cent of its renters in 1957 were in professional or commercial occupations (such as civil servants or clerks). Similar surveys in Liverpool and Sheffield found no public housing tenants in these categories. This illustrated the strong pent-up demand for housing, further emphasized by the fact that 54 per cent of tenants had previously been living with relatives.⁶⁰ The clamour for homes was such that some individuals tried unusual methods to secure one. In 1953 an enquiry investigated allegations that a Belfast woman had been taking payments of up to £36 to use her 'influence' with officials at City Hall to secure houses. One of her methods was to direct her 'clients', both Catholics and Protestants, to doctors who assisted with false declarations about tuberculosis.⁶¹ The presence of tuberculosis in a family, along with the loss of a home in the Blitz or a record of war service, ensured that individuals gained maximum points in the housing allocation system. Before the war, Belfast had the highest TB-related death rates in Britain or Ireland.⁶²

Once a home was secured, experience of life on the new estate depended on a number of factors. These included the quality of the housing and amenities on the estate, its proximity to the tenant's former neighbourhood and family, and whether or not they had moved willingly or felt pushed out by a slum clearance programme. Estates varied markedly. In 1960 Ballymurphy had 700 homes built around a small central square that featured a few shops and accommodated a doctor and dentist. There was no playground or primary school and a report noted that its amenities 'are very poor for an estate of this size'. In contrast, Flush Park estate had access to the existing amenities of Rosetta.⁶³ There were also contrasting experiences on NIHT estates. The Dundonald estate had no shops, while at Suffolk there were waits of up to three hours for the bus. Better facilities were available at Castlereagh (a large hall, shops, two churches and a school) and at Andersonstown (a small hall, shops and churches and a primary school). The Finaghy estate benefited from pre-existing facilities in this suburb, such as its cinema.⁶⁴

A survey of housewives on NIHT estates, in 1953, indicated that only 15 per cent were in any way dissatisfied. The most common concern was the cost of 'keeping up'. Of those surveyed, 44 per cent admitted having hire purchase agreements to pay for the furniture and consumer goods with which they augmented their new homes.⁶⁵ The researchers found mixed evidence when they assessed whether or not social relations on the estates were as strong as in the tenants' former communities. Asked whether they provided help to neighbours, 69 per cent replied yes. Of these, a third reported helping with 'messages', and 20 per cent with child minding, while 7 per cent admitted to assisting in terms of the more delicate matter of 'lending or borrowing'. However, one-quarter reported that they had no contacts with neighbours.⁶⁶ The researchers divided respondents into four groups, 'the superior', 'the respectable', 'the ordinary' and 'the rough', and speculated that those in the first and last categories were more likely to remain aloof. They felt this was most probable if they lived 'in a street where their standards are noticeably different from their neighbours'. Large numbers also retained strong bonds with their former neighbourhoods, with 59 per cent of the women questioned visiting relatives in their old communities at least once a week. Meanwhile, the NIHT prohibition of public houses on its estates prevented the development of particular forms of communal activity and indicated the form of respectability that it expected of tenants.⁶⁷

There were differences also in household size on various estates. In 1960 the Flush Park average figure was 3.9, at New Barnsley it was 4.8, and in Ballymurphy it was 6.8. This factor clearly brought the greatest economic challenges to families on the latter estate. It might have been offset by the fact that the average weekly wage of male householders in Ballymurphy was £12 14s, compared to the £10 18s recorded for the men of New Barnsley. However, only

50 per cent of the Ballymurphy householders were in employment, while only one New Barnsley male (of 32 surveyed) was out of work. It is not surprising that Ballymurphy had the greatest number of tenants in arrears.⁶⁸ The Catholic Church's moral teaching on sexuality and birth control was clearly a factor in this. For example, Catholics marrying in 1936 went on to have an average of 4.5 children, compared to 2.69 in Protestant marriages.⁶⁹ However, inequalities in the city's labour market also left many families in economic difficulty and these issues are addressed next.

Work and Welfare

Myriad factors created a patchwork of workplace conditions across Belfast. The city was home to large-scale textile, shipbuilding, engineering, rope-making and aeronautical industries, as well as significant transport and commercial sectors. It also fulfilled major educational and administrative functions. Its workers thus experienced a wide range of employment opportunities and conditions. There were also markedly differing experiences between those in the professional, commercial, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled categories. Entrance to each of those categories was often heavily dependent on an individual's gender and religious denomination.

Economic historians have employed the concept of an inner and outer Britain to describe the different economic experiences of the UK's regions during the interwar years. Inner Britain, which included the English south-east and midlands, benefited from the development of new consumer-based industries, such as motor manufacturing. Much of northern England, Wales and Scotland struggled economically as their traditional industries stagnated. Belfast's economy fell into the latter category. Moreover, despite the fillip it received during the two world wars, it lagged behind the rest of the UK for the whole period between 1914 and 1968.

The First World War presented the city's employers and workers with a series of challenges and opportunities. New types of demand boosted industries that had been in recession in 1914. The textile industry struggled to cope with order books swollen by the need to supply military and hospital equipment. The numbers of textile workers who were tempted to move to more remunerative war work complicated the task. As military conscription was not imposed in Ireland, women workers had fewer new openings than were available in Britain. Nevertheless, the engineering company James Mackie & Sons poached many female workers to assist in the production of 75 million tonnes of munitions. Opportunity knocked, also, for Dr Margaret Purce, who became the Royal Victoria Hospital's first female house surgeon. Meanwhile, Harland and Wolff's contribution to the war effort drew on traditional and new strengths: it produced 200,000 tonnes of merchant shipping in 1918

A sad departure? A family pictured as they were about to emigrate in 1929. Persistently high unemployment produced a steady stream of migrants through Belfast docks for much of the twentieth century.

Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland, Collection Ulster Museum, BELUM.Y2362.

and developed an aircraft works to produce heavy bombers.⁷⁰ Following the war, there was a short economic boom until 1920. At that stage, the 29,000 employed in the shipyards was up 45 per cent on the 1914 figure. Demand for shipping, to replace that lost to German U-boats, had continued. Linen also thrived briefly, spurred on by consumer demand for its traditional products.

Thereafter, the interwar years were turbulent ones for Belfast's staple industries. The city's workers experienced an increase in their real incomes of between 10 and 15 per cent in these years, but this was significantly lower than the UK average increase of 25 per cent. By 1937 the average income in Northern Ireland was only two-thirds of the UK figure.⁷¹ A major factor in this statistic was the incidence of unemployment. Belfast's population increased by 61,000 to 444,000 between 1901 and 1937, at a time when its spluttering economy was not creating employment opportunities. Between 1923 and 1930 the number of unemployed insured workers hovered just below 20 per cent, before rising to 27 per cent between 1931 and 1939.⁷² Over 50,000 Belfast workers were unemployed in 1932, providing the bleak context for the Outdoor Relief Protest. The Belfast Board of Guardians had to provide support for the 14,500



unemployed who did not qualify for state unemployment benefits. The *Guardians*' response was to offer grants that the Presbyterian Church described as 'inadequate to provide the barest necessities of life'. On 3 October 60,000 protesters converged on the Custom House to voice their anger. When a protest march was banned, one week later, rioting erupted throughout the city. The resulting backlash forced the *Guardians* to increase payment levels.⁷³ This was, however, a rare success for working-class collective action. More often it was to their churches that the poor turned for welfare support. For example, the North Belfast Mission provided ultra-violet treatment to undernourished children who had developed rickets.⁷⁴

While the Great Depression weakened Belfast's staple industrial sectors, other factors also contributed. Demand for linen declined due to quicker turnaround in fashions, making durability less significant in the buyer's mind.⁷⁵ Harland and Wolff met changes in demand by diversification, constructing diesel trains and steelwork to meet the boom in cinema construction. However, Workman, Clark did not survive the Great Depression, closing in 1935. Other Belfast stalwarts came through the period relatively unscathed. Gallaher's was the largest independent tobacco manufacturer in the world, employing over 3,000. Many of these were women, toiling at its huge York Street factory. Its products were marketed as a symbol of modernity and sophistication, often to the growing bands of female smokers. The company also claimed a modern approach to working conditions. It hosted Ireland's only workplace welfare centre, looking after the health of 'girls' who worked in its 'great family circle'.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Belfast's new status as a centre of political power created opportunities in administrative roles. Employment in the service sector grew from around 80,000 to 100,000 in the interwar years. A further positive development was the arrival of aircraft manufacturers Short Brothers in 1937. The company employed 6,000 by 1939.⁷⁷ This development was part of an economic upturn ushered in by the anticipation of war. The local economy grew with 'unprecedented rapidity' between 1938 and 1947, and some ground was made up on the rest of the UK. Whereas income per head had been only 55 per cent of the UK average in 1938, by 1945 it was 70 per cent.⁷⁸ Many hard-pressed families appreciated the rise in wages at the time. Fifteen-year-old Bob earned 29s working in a laundry alongside his mother before the war. He then obtained a job at Mackies, producing armour-piercing shells:

I remember when I come home from Mackies and I got my first pay I never forget; it was three pound fifteen shillings. And do you know, I think I run down the Springfield Road and down the Falls Road and down Broadway and into the house; I don't think I stopped. I gave it to my mum: do you know what she said to me? 'Take that back Bob! Take that back, they've given you a man's wages!' She couldn't believe it. I think it was more than she was getting, you know? And she



Howzat! The Shankill Mission provided these delighted young boys with a rare excursion to the seaside where they indulged in a little beach cricket.

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says: '£3 15s?' I says: 'Aye, but mum that's twelve hours a night, sixty hours a week.' 'Oh yes', she says, 'isn't that great money?''⁷⁹

By 1944 80,000 were employed in shipbuilding and engineering. Linen struggled, however, due to a shortage of raw materials, and over a third of its workforce was unemployed in 1941. As a result, many female linen operatives found alternative work. The number of women in engineering was just 250 in 1939, but had soared to 12,000 by 1943.⁸⁰ Unemployment was not eradicated during the war, but the lowest dole queues for a generation gave Belfast workers a degree of workplace power. Shipyard and engineering workers gained a reputation for flexing their muscles in industrial action.⁸¹

In the immediate post-war years, linen and shipbuilding both benefited from relatively favourable economic waters. Linen prospered until 1952, but its employment levels then slumped from 31,000 to 8,000 by 1972. Shipbuilding's post-war employment peak was 20,000 (in 1960), but in 1968 the number was only 8,000. However, employment was generated in new industries, such as precision engineering, food processing and toy manufacturing. Employers such as British Tabulating Machine Company (later incorporated into ICL) and the German electronics firm Grundig located production on greenfield sites at Castlereagh, Dunmurry and elsewhere.⁸² The service sector also continued to grow. Meanwhile, the extension of the welfare state increased numbers in the health services, public administration and teaching. In 1901 there had been one teacher for every 58 children; by 1961 the ratio was 1 to 34. Professional services also expanded.⁸³

The experience of work was rosier during the 1950s and 1960s than it had been before the war. Wage levels, compared to the UK average, were higher than they had been in the 1930s, partly because trade unions negotiated equal rates of pay for equivalent jobs. Yet hourly manual earnings in Northern Ireland in 1960 were only 82 per cent of the UK average. In other respects, too, the people of Belfast were not having it quite so good (to paraphrase Prime Minister Macmillan) as those elsewhere in the UK. Unemployment in Northern Ireland stood at 6.1 per cent, compared to the UK figure of 1.5 per cent.⁸⁴ Even on the NIHT estates surveyed in 1953, where male unemployment stood at 4 per cent, living standards were lower than in Britain. Whereas Seebohm Rowntree's famous study *Poverty and the Welfare State* suggested that only 5 per cent of households were living below his minimum needs standard, on Belfast's relatively privileged NIHT estates the figure was 12 per cent.⁸⁵

The impact of poverty was cushioned, in these years, by the safety net provided by the welfare state. The working classes welcomed the social reforms of the 1940s, due to the advances they offered in terms of economics and health. Many Unionist politicians were resistant to increasing 'socialism', but their arguments lost ground for a number of reasons. The poor organization of Belfast's civil defences, which had left it so vulnerable during the Blitz,

shifted the public mood in favour of greater state planning and intervention. In creating refugees, the Blitz also increased the visibility of the city's poor, shocking many observers. One senior Presbyterian declared that 'I have been working nineteen years in Belfast and I never saw the like of them before. If something is not done now to remedy this rank inequality there will be a revolution after the war.'⁸⁶ In this fevered atmosphere, two reports on the health services, both issued in 1941, provided further stark evidence of the need for reform. An enquiry undertaken by the former deputy Chief Medical Officer at the Ministry of Health in London found that Belfast's medical services 'fell far short of what might reasonably be expected in a city of its size and importance'.⁸⁷ A further damning report, on the malpractices of Belfast Corporation's Tuberculosis Committee, led to its abolition and a much wider investigation of corruption in City Hall.

Tuberculosis was gradually brought under control; by 1954 its incidence stood at the same levels experienced in England and Wales. This was in no small part due to the formation of the Northern Ireland Tuberculosis Authority in 1946 and to the mass radiography unit opened in Belfast in 1945.⁸⁸ Wartime campaigns for tuberculosis patients to receive allowances at the rates granted in Britain were also successful, creating popular demand for similar initiatives in other welfare schemes. Advances by the Northern Ireland Labour Party, in the 1948 election, convinced Unionists to overcome their ideological principles and to plant Westminster's welfare innovations in local soil.⁸⁹ The comprehensive medical service that ensued had numerous benefits. One assessment suggests that free false teeth and spectacles made the biggest difference, as they had been beyond the means of almost everyone 'with the exception of the very wealthy'. More measurable was the notable fall in death rates. In 1946 the figures for the whole of Northern Ireland were 12.5 per 1,000 population compared with 12 for England and Wales. By 1962 the respective figures were 10.6 and 11.9. It is impossible to separate the role of the NHS from other factors, such as improved housing or diet, but it clearly had an impact.⁹⁰

The welfare state was also influential in numerous other ways. Ethel, who was born in a Welsh mining village, met her husband during the war and settled with him in east Belfast, raising seven children. Ethel's husband withheld a significant proportion of his wages for his leisure pursuits, giving her a level of housekeeping money of which she said 'sometimes I suppose it was adequate, sometimes it wasn't'. The introduction of family allowance payments was a boon to her and she remembered that it 'always went towards the rent'.⁹¹ The disbursement of this benefit directly to mothers provided valuable income for many hard-pressed women. Other individuals and families benefited from educational maintenance grants, enabling them to go on to higher education. Previously, they would have been forced to find work and contribute to family

income. In the ten years following the implementation of the Education Act of 1947, undergraduate numbers at Queen's University climbed by 50 per cent and the proportion of Catholics rose to 20 per cent of the student body.⁹² Increasing opportunities such as this led, in the opinion of one historian, to a 'softening of many Catholics' attitudes towards continued inclusion in the United Kingdom'.⁹³ At the same time a long-running squabble between the Catholic hierarchy and Unionist ministers about the governance and funding of the Mater Hospital marred the NHS's impact on community relations in Belfast.

The Social Composition of the Workforce

While the rising number of Catholics at Queen's was evidence that education in post-war Belfast was becoming more meritocratic, there was a lot of ground to make up in the city's labour market. Family connections and cultural networks were a common route into employment. Jimmy Penton, a Protestant, got work at the shipyards because 'it was tradition; my father put my name down'. Only later did he 'realise fully the extent of Masonic influence' that lay behind recruitment.⁹⁴ Factors such as this led to Catholic fatalism about employment practices. This sentiment surfaced in a darkly comic tale related to the journalist and writer Desmond Fennell in 1958: '[a] story is current among Catholics of a man who went to be tested for a post as a B.B.C. announcer. When he met his friends in the local afterwards he declared with an uncontrollable stutter: "They wouldn't take me because I am Catholic."⁹⁵ The power of this story lay in the fact that it was open to multiple readings. At one level, it could be interpreted as evidence of unjustified bitterness about anti-Catholic employment practices. An alternative allegorical reading was that the job-seeker's stutter represented his community's limited political voice and that his Catholicism, not his speech, was his impediment.

Tony Hepburn has probed the history of Belfast's labour market. He noted that because skilled employment was relatively scarce, it became an area in which narrowly defined sectarian interests were central. Protestants dominated the city's skilled worker elite, in which Catholic representation was minimal. For example, in 1911 only 10 per cent of those employed in engineering were Catholics. This contrasted with their over-representation in dock labouring, where 46 per cent were Catholic. However, the fact that Protestants made up three-quarters of the city's workers meant that they also outnumbered Catholics in the majority of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. Thus, in Hepburn's striking phrase, 'to say that the Protestant community had nearly all the plums is a long way from saying that nearly all the Protestant community had plums'.⁹⁶ In a similar vein, Sam McCaughy was fully aware of the Catholic critique of nepotistic and sectarian employment practices, but argued that not all Protestants were favoured:

When I was a youngster in Tiger's Bay we had poverty equalling the worst of that suffered by Catholics; we had no uncles, fathers, brothers in regular jobs to speak for us, no Freemasons, and, what a surprise, we were gamblers and heavy drinkers [...] Our homes weren't little palaces, like those of the Protestants on the Newtownards Road, stable families who lived stable lives. They knew that they could plan out their lives from Friday to Friday, while our men waited their turn for a day's work at the docks, or ploughed the ocean shovelling coal into furnaces, or sat at coke fires taking sulphur into their lungs as nightwatchmen on outdoor relief work, and they were the ones who got work at all. The Catholic men who spent half the day with their backsides against the bookie's wall along North Queen Street wouldn't have had to look far to see us doing the same.⁹⁷

Being Protestant was also not necessarily a defence from the demeaning comments of those empowered to dole out financial assistance. The Unionist Dehra Parker told one Shankill Road man, appearing before a panel assessing his right to benefits during the 1930s: 'Let's hope you bring no more [children] into the world.'⁹⁸

Hepburn's statistical analysis does demonstrate, however, that the already limited Catholic presence in trades such as engineering, shipbuilding and printing declined between 1910 and 1951. Notoriously, the high unemployment of the 1930s produced nakedly sectarian calls from Unionist politicians for Protestant workers to receive preferential treatment. In the improved economic conditions after 1945 the economic effects of occupational segregation were 'somewhat mitigated', as Catholics made some advances in the building sector and as wage rates for semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers improved.⁹⁹

Catholics had a more 'substantial representation' in the white-collar sector of the labour market. They were over-represented among shopkeepers and in the licensed trade. In fact, publicans constituted a third of the Catholic middle class.¹⁰⁰ Catholics also dominated among Belfast's street bookmakers, leading the *Irish Times* to comment that 'it is Catholics who control the double key to the irrational and unpredictable – the realm where money lies. All the bookmakers and nearly all the publicans are Catholics.'¹⁰¹ There was also a sizeable representation within the public sector, particularly in teaching and the health service. The employment of large numbers in Catholic schools and in Belfast's Mater Hospital effectively represented a mini-state within a state. Increased numbers of Catholic graduates also found positions in a variety of managerial and professional categories.¹⁰²

Belfast also demonstrated particularly marked gender dynamics in the workplace. The 'ideal family' consisted of a male breadwinner, whose earnings were sufficient to enable his wife to operate exclusively as household manager. While this was possible for skilled workers in shipbuilding or engineering, it featured much less in other families. Females made up 38 per cent of the labour force in the city in 1901 and 36 per cent in 1951.¹⁰³ They included a

significant number of married women, who worked sporadically. The presence of large numbers of married women in the linen workforce was driven by the availability of work for them in that sector and the modest male wages in many local industries. High male unemployment in the interwar years also encouraged many married women back into employment. Thus, in Belfast's textile communities the populist view that a married woman's place was in the home was subordinated to economic considerations. A wife's wage was often what kept the working-class family afloat during periods of depression.¹⁰⁴ High participation rates by married women in the textile sector were also fuelled by their exclusion from newer areas of female employment. There was a ban on married women working in the public sector until 1975.¹⁰⁵ The marriage bar also operated in clerical jobs. Harriet, who was born into a middle-class family in 1913, worked her way up the pecking order at the Ulster Spinning Company and was earning £8 when she married in 1940. At that point, she had to 'retire from working' and the family lived off her husband's much lower wage.¹⁰⁶

Occupational factors also created different levels of female/male population balances in various parts of the city. A female predominance in the Shankill and Falls emerged from employment opportunities for women in local mills. In the

Belfast's linen industry employed many women workers: one of them enjoyed being placed in the spotlight by BBC radio in 1949. Published with permission from BBC Northern Ireland Archives.



east of the city, where shipbuilding and engineering were concentrated, greater demand for male workers produced a smaller female majority.¹⁰⁷ The decline of the textile industry affected women workers, but job losses were offset by gains in the service sector. These involved increased numbers of retailing and catering jobs, and others in education and health care as the welfare state developed. Kathy, who was born in 1920, had an employment trajectory that illustrates some of these changes. Her schooldays were curtailed, as was the case for many others in interwar Belfast, and she put family before her own aspirations:

My father died in the thirties and there were seven girls and a boy. My mother couldn't get no help and she had to go out to work and she had to leave me with all the seven children. So, I didn't go to school and I was twelve going on thirteen and she did the best she could. There were days I was able to get to school and days I wasn't. And I had to do the washing; I had to learn to cook, I had to look after my sisters while my mother went out to get the money. Whenever I was the age for work, my mother sent me into the spinning room. And I hated the weaving, but I knew I had to stay in the weaving because there was no money coming in. So, when I got married, I went down the town and got myself in till the shop; no education nor nothing and I went in till the shop. I always had big ideas [laughs] and I did not want to be a weaver.

Drudgery and glamour: a group of women hard at work at the Devonshire Laundry, during the 1930s, are watched over by the photos of their favourite Hollywood movie stars.

Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland. Collection Ulster Museum. BELUM.Y3817.



Kathy worked for several years in Anderson and McAuley. Later in life, after raising her children, she heard that 'they were looking for auxiliary nurses in the Mater Maternity and I went down and I got a job as an auxiliary nurse'.¹⁰⁸

Kathy's testimony reveals commonly held distinctions about work in the spinning room, the department store and the hospital. Similar distinctions operated in male employment, but here the apprenticeship system formed a powerful barrier to upward mobility. A fortunate minority gained access to a skilled trade and then hoped that the economic waters of their chosen industry remained calm. Lily's father qualified as an electrician during his service with the Royal Navy, which he joined as a boy. On his return to Belfast in 1919 he worked as a foreman at Harland and Wolff. He saved avidly, helped by a navy pension as well as his wage. In 1938 the family owned their own terraced house in east Belfast, making them one of a select group of working-class owner-occupiers. Lily's father also lived a particularly 'respectable' lifestyle. He drank only in moderation, often choosing the anonymity of a city centre pub rather than one close to home.¹⁰⁹ His wage brought him a level of economic independence and status that many other Belfast men did not have.

Among dockworkers a complex system of work delegation operated. Catholics worked on the deep-sea wharfs and were members of James Larkin's Irish Transport and Workers Union, while Protestants toiled on the cross-channel wharfs where the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union (ATGWU) operated. There was also a hierarchy at work within the docks, as the example of the ATGWU demonstrates. During the Second World War it had established a first- and second-preference system among dockers, to limit the impact of unemployment on its members. First-preference men were given 'blue button' union badges and guaranteed work, while second-preference men, who had 'red buttons', worked only when all the blue-button men were employed. Blue buttons were rarely made available, and then only to sons or close relatives of existing first-preference men. In 1962 the 1,100 blue-button men and 250 red-button holders became embroiled in a bitter fight over the system's inequalities.¹¹⁰ The dispute was intensified because family members and neighbours were pitched against one another. Lower down the pecking order were the numerous casual dockers, known as 'Arabs', who scavenged for employment at the docks. The insecurity caused by these labour conditions formed the bedrock for a particularly rugged, often violent, masculine culture in the dock district. Tough men, who could hold their drink and take the bookmakers to the cleaners, were valued.¹¹¹ The extent to which male breadwinners took part in this form of masculine associational culture often had a critical impact on the family economy.

A Woman's Life in Twentieth-Century Belfast

Mrs Rafferty was born in 1904 and christened Ann Jane McGrady. She was raised by her widowed mother, a millworker in Grove Street, off North Queen Street. Her life story is unremarkable in many respects but she was an example of the many resourceful, tough and humorous characters that emerged from the adversity of Belfast life. Like many others, Mrs Rafferty was a 'half-timer' during her childhood. From the age of 12 she spent 'a day at work and [then] a day at school', until leaving school at 14. Mrs Rafferty explained that her mother 'put me into Gallahers' because 'the mill money wasn't as good'. She earned 25s a week at Gallaher's. She jokingly recalled how people were shocked to learn that she was a stripper, although it was tobacco leaves that she removed, not her clothing. She enjoyed her work, although she remembered that in the run up to the Twelfth the 'good Protestant' people she worked with would 'kind of drop away from you. Union Jacks were flying all around the place' and the radio played 'party tunes'. Mrs Rafferty left work when she had the first of her eight children (she also had five miscarriages), but returned during the Second World War. Her husband, William Rafferty, was a carter and family finances were often tight. She received assistance from her mother, but occasionally surreptitiously pawned William's best suit. On one occasion, a funeral in the street almost revealed her secret. Mrs Rafferty remembered that her husband announced that he was going to pay his respects to the deceased: 'I says "Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" I was sitting sweating, stuck to the stool. The suit was in the bloody pawn. And I looked at him and I said, "Oh the coffin's out now." The bloody coffin came out and saved me. "Dear God", I said, "never again will I take his suit to pawn – you never know what's going to happen"' [laughs]. The family were bombed out of their home in the Blitz and moved to Ardoyne. Despite the fact that Mrs Rafferty had seen a neighbour shot dead amid the carnage in Grove Street during the 1920s, she warmly recalled that community as her home: 'I was born and reared there and confirmed and married and all. I had five children down there.' Remarkably, sixty years after moving to Ardoyne she still felt like an 'import'.¹ Mrs Rafferty died in 2003.

¹ Interview with Mrs Rafferty (born 1904), 10 October 2002.



Mrs Rafferty.

In the typical Belfast household, monetary management was the wife's task. This role was frequently demanding. It had to be approached with one eye on available finance, the other on watchful neighbours. Harriet was by no means in dire financial straits, but still felt these pressures:

During the war I went to Robb's and I got a remnant of gabardine and I made my husband's trousers and I made the boys' trousers – although I never served my time but I just was able to do it. Must do is a good master. I wouldn't want, when the boys grew up, anybody pointing at them [and saying] 'I remember them when they were running about with no arse in their trousers.'¹¹²

Others lived a more hand-to-mouth existence. Trips to the pawnbroker or local moneylender were common, particularly before 1939. The one hundred pawnbrokers of 1930 were reduced to forty by 1960, due to the impact of the welfare state, rising incomes and lower unemployment. The nature of pledges received by pawnshops provides insight into Belfast's various sub-cultures and the changing nature of working-class consumerism. At the end of each summer in the 1930s, the ice-cream sellers of Little Italy pledged their carts at McKeown's pawnbrokers. One Shankill Road pawnshop took up to 700 pledges on busy Mondays, with Orange sashes pawned regularly. By the 1970s only items such as 'transistor radios, record-players, tape-recorders and good watches' were accepted.¹¹³ Moneylenders were also commonplace. Female street lenders typically provided loans to women for household bills, while male lenders operating at the docks, gasworks, pubs and other areas of male employment or leisure provided cash to pay for gambling or drink. These individuals usually came from the communities in which they practised their trade, which was often a sideline to other work. In some cases a moneylending career began when a gambling windfall or other cash acquisition brought neighbours to the recipient's door to request a loan. In March 1921 a bullet fired by a British soldier struck Sarah Bannon, of New Lodge Road, in the mouth.¹¹⁴ She used the proceeds of her compensation claim to launch her family's lucrative moneylending enterprise. Mrs Rafferty, a former neighbour, remembered the circumstances:

At the time of the trouble she walked down the room to look down Vere Street and a shot come up, shot her in the lip and it took the whole roof of her mouth away. She got a claim – it was a big claim worth about £100. That was a big claim then and she would lend out money.

Prior to that point she was 'like ourselves, robbing Peter to pay Paul'.¹¹⁵

The various religious denominations were highly active in offering charitable provision that might circumvent the need to pawn or use a moneylender. Among the most committed were the Shankill Road Mission, the Methodist Belfast Central Mission and the Roman Catholic Ladies' Clothing Society.¹¹⁶ The most effective intervention was the promotion of credit unions, run by local volunteers as equitable savings and loans institutions. Belfast's first was Clonard Credit Union, in 1962. Promoted by Redemptorist priests, it was built up by the Clonard Confraternity and other lay groups. A similar pattern occurred throughout Catholic Belfast in the

following decade. Newington Credit Union, formed in 1968 in Holy Family parish, had 500 members within a year. What made credit unions so successful was that the common bond of church membership brought together a variety of social groups with different skills and requirements. Middle-class and more affluent working-class savers provided the cash for low-interest loans accessed by harder-pressed families. Credit unions were a vehicle through which an increasingly confident Catholic middle class demonstrated financial independence, at a time when their thoughts were turning towards seeking greater social and political status. Credit unions did not become a feature in Protestant areas until the 1980s, when Shaftsbury Credit Union, in Sandy Row, was among those that created a common bond based on Orange Order membership. This development model proved as successful as that which operated in the Catholic parishes of the 1960s.¹¹⁷

Credit unions were not the city's first thriving co-operatives. The Belfast Co-operative Society was formed in 1888 and became a city institution, particularly its York Street department store, which was opened in 1910. The store's 1930–32 revamp introduced the splendid Orpheus Ballroom. This modernization was a response to intensifying retail competition. In 1930, for example, Woolworth's and the tailor Montague Burton opened stores in a purpose-built Art Deco building on High Street.¹¹⁸ By 1937 the Co-op had 49,526 members. The payment of a dividend to members four times a year – the famous Co-quarter – was eagerly anticipated and had an important function in family finances. However, the 'Co' was circumspect in its attitude towards consumer credit. It did offer it, but in 1937 it lamented that the 'habit of thrift had been relegated to the background in recent years'.¹¹⁹ Growing use of consumer credit also attracted political comment. In 1930 Northern Ireland's prime minister Lord Craigavon lambasted 'easy terms' and advised 'Ulster people not to tie such loads around their necks'.¹²⁰ Consumers often chose to ignore such advice. Those seeking the signature goods of the consumer society often turned to stores such as Gilpins, on Sandy Row, which was one of the first to advertise credit facilities. In 1935 it encouraged buyers to 'enquire for our famous No-Deposit Out-of-Income Convenient Terms'.¹²¹ Consumers' willingness to ignore the paternalism of politicians surfaced again after the Second World War, when the UK government attempted to control consumer demand by placing restrictions on hire purchase. In 1961 Crawley and Quinn of York Street faced a Grand Jury at Belfast City Commission for selling a refrigerator to a Mr and Mrs Adair without requesting the deposit required by law. In a victory for popular consumerism, the Grand Jury returned a 'no bill' verdict for the first time since 1925.¹²²

Memories of childhood deprivation prompted many to embrace the affluent society, as Kathy explained:



An interwar shopping scene. Many Belfast districts had a thriving commercial sector. Sandy Row and the Shankill Road were amongst those that attracted consumers from across the city.

Photograph © William Vandivert / Time & Life Pictures / Getty Images.

I tried always, I was obsessed with the house, making the house nice because we never had much in our house, it was just a big scrubbed table and there were five of us in one bed [laughs]. So, I always was very obsessed with the house. All the luxuries that I didn't have I went out, earned it, and got them. When the television came out first, I got it. I brought all the children out of the street to see the Queen's Coronation.

Kathy also recalled other expenditure on items ranging from children's bikes to an extension to her terraced house. Women such as Kathy wanted to establish a better lifestyle for their families than the one they had had in childhood. Kathy met most of her aspirations for a more modern lifestyle, but she was thwarted in her desire to own a car by her husband's traditional views. He told her "You're not going to take no driving lessons and go and kill somebody!" That's all, that's all I got out of him and I would have had a wee car today only for him.¹²³

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Leisure

There was a similar mixture of tradition and modernity in the development of leisure. Cinema, in particular, achieved incredible popularity. In doing so, it promoted new ideals about consumerism, as audiences saw the cornucopia of consumer goods portrayed in American movies. In 1914 Belfast's 12 cinemas had a dowdy image, but in the interwar years national chains glamorized the 'picture palaces'. Filmgoing offered cheap, comfortable entertainment and was particularly popular among children, youths and adult women. By 1935 Belfast had 28,000 seats in 31 cinemas. The following year, the UK's biggest movie star Gracie Fields attended the opening of the Ritz, in Fisherwick Place. The Ritz was a cinema for the more affluent moviegoer or for a young man courting a young lady in style. Cinema retained its popularity until the rise of television in the 1950s. By the early 1970s the number of picture houses had contracted to seven, including the newly established Queen's Film Theatre, with its menu of independent movies.¹²⁴

Most cinemagoers went once a week or more. Bob, who grew up in Sandy Row, recalled that

we used to go to the Coliseum — that was on the corner — and the Sandro. My father used to bring me to the Sandro every week. Thursday night and that was in the dear seats, up at the back. Then we used to go to matinees, when we were kids. I remember *Flash Gordon*.

A few years later, yet another cinema provided the venue for the next stage in Bob's lifecycle, courtship: 'I met my wife when I was walking down Donegall Road and I was in uniform and with a mate and we just got talking. And then we made a date and I took her to the pictures — the Majestic, on the Lisburn Road.'

The apparently casual encounter that Bob described was part of a traditional mating ritual, variously called 'dolling' or the 'Sunday Parade'. In 1937 Sam McCaughtry was an eager participant.

Almost as far as the eye could see the Antrim Road seemed to be black with sixteen-year-old fellas linking girls that they'd picked up on the Sunday Parade [...] Two dolls would come along letting on not to look right or left, but actually missing nothing. Before they would reach our length a couple of fellows like ourselves standing at the wall would call out something like: 'Does your Ma know you're out?' or else: 'Would you go for a loaf?' or maybe: 'Hey you — you've a quare leg for button boots.' The girls would slow up if they fancied the boys: then the boys would be over to them like greased lightning.

McCaughtry's use of the term 'dolls' indicates the Americanization of youth culture. He also indicated cinema's influence in this respect. A 'rage' for black



This programme for the Ritz Cinema, from 1938, indicates that the luxury cinemas of the 1930s attracted middle class, as well as working class, patrons.

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The Ritz Cinema: one of Belfast's interwar art deco 'dream palaces'.

Photograph © National Museums Northern Ireland. Collection Ulster Museum. BELUM.Y2221.

shirts with pearly buttons 'started when George Raft wore one in a gangster picture: like magic they had appeared all along York Street and Tiger's Bay', where they were donned by 'sixteen year olds, with short haircuts and their hair smothered in brilliantine and parted in the middle'.¹²⁵

Belfast's numerous dance halls were also courtship hotspots. Dances were often held at Catholic or Orange halls, but most venues saw a degree of religious mixing. The Plaza, owned by the Mecca chain, was the best known. It offered regular competitions, such as Miss Slim Ankles, Miss Shop Assistant, Miss Belfast and Miss Linen contests. In 1954 a journalist described the 'exciting feeling of sumptuousness' in 'the richly carpeted and elegantly furnished foyer' and the 'impeccable' Nat Allen and his orchestra. Other notable venues included the Maritime Club in College Square, and the Floral Hall that, from 1936, occupied a majestic position on Cave Hill. The ability to dance was an important factor in most successful courtships, and dance studios, such as those run by John Dossor, offered lessons for up to 450 eager learners at a time.¹²⁶ Revellers even had the opportunity to take part in lunchtime sessions. Florence, who worked in her father's shop on Peter's Hill in the 1930s, fondly recalled that there were 'all different places, you know, but I liked the Plaza. I used to go out of work at lunchtime. We didn't take our lunch and we went to the Plaza and had a wee dance and back into work again.'¹²⁷

Some parents declared certain venues, or even all dance halls, out of bounds. The Plaza's association with Teddy Boys in the late 1950s and early 1960s led some to shun it for this reason. Harriet's leisure time was closely monitored by her middle-class parents: 'Mum was strict but it was for our own good. She didn't allow us to just go to any dances that there used to be then, unless it was a thing with the Masonic. That was the only one we were allowed to go, where dad and her were.' As a result, Harriet met her husband via their



Georgina Lauder, dressed as a fortune teller, pictured with James Daniels in Donegall Avenue. Fortune telling remained a popular form of entertainment, particularly amongst working class women, well into the twentieth century.
NEED ACKNOWLEDGEMENT FROM SEAN

The Floral Hall. A striking art deco building, dramatically located on the slopes of Cavehill, was a mecca for dancers between the 1930s and 1960s.

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Following spread: Bellevue: Belfast's pleasure gardens, home to the city's extremely scenic Zoo, opened in 1934.

Copyright The Francis Frith Collection (R).

shared membership of a cycling club rather than through a penchant for the Rumba.¹²⁸ Norman, who was born in 1924 and raised on the Shankill Road, was prevented from dancing by his father. Like many parents, he feared the medical as well as moral consequences:

You see going into a dance hall and coming out sweating – he thought – You see the plague of those days was TB – Oh it was a terrible plague! [...] Well my father didn't approve of it and it wasn't that he kept us down, but we didn't go against his wish. My sister didn't dance either.¹²⁹

Many young people secretly attended the forbidden territory of the dance hall. Sam McCaughtry's future wife would go out with 'her dancing shoes wrapped up in brown paper under her arm [...] worrying about whether her dad would find out' that she had gone dancing rather than for the 'quiet stroll with her chum' that she had claimed.¹³⁰

Parental attempts to restrict dancing reflected concerns about their children's moral well-being, particularly that of their daughters. Such concerns reached a peak during the Second World War, with the arrival of over 100,000 American GIs. For local women they had an erotic appeal, kindled by the Hollywood movies that made up 95 per cent of all films exhibited, and further fired by the GIs' ready supplies of chocolates, stockings, cigarettes and other rationed commodities. Women seen in their company were immediately suspected of licentiousness, producing a variety of initiatives. American service personnel were barred from particular areas. Amelia Street, notorious for prostitution, was one such zone. In September 1943 local women established 'voluntary street patrols in the hope of exercising a moral influence on members of their sex'. They were trained by the police and patrolled the city centre in pairs, in an attempt to thwart over-excited transatlantic special relationships. The American Red Cross employed local women to investigate the characters of women who became engaged to GIs. The allowances available to wives of US servicemen constituted, it was feared, 'a certain lure for a certain type of girl'. Around 1,800 women, from across Northern Ireland, married US servicemen during the war. This figure represented the most obvious sign of amorous relations between GIs and local women, but even flirtatious encounters caused tension between Americans and local men. This led to many incidents, such as one in May 1944 when three Belfast men assaulted a GI after spending the evening watching him romance a local woman in a pub booth.¹³¹

Despite the best efforts of the GIs, it appears that the Americans did not usher in a new sexual permissiveness in Belfast. Doris, from Roden Street, who was a 21-year-old when the Americans arrived, explained the outlook in her family:

If you were single and expecting a baby you were shipped away across the water or somewhere, out of the road, until that baby was born and it was adopted [...]





Beatlemania reaches Belfast. The Fab four played the Ritz Cinema in November 1963. **ACKNOWLEDGMENT NOT IN AS IMAGE NOT IN!**

the mothers and fathers was very, very strict on you. My mother's sex instruction for me was – 'if he kisses you too hard you'll have a baby' – and that was it and that was stuck in my head. I really believed it, honestly that was it.

The churches continued to wield moral authority in matters of sexuality. This influence was also reflected in Belfast's experience of the 'swinging sixties', when it was not a particularly radical centre of cultural experimentation. It was significant that the 14lb of hemp found at the docks in August 1961 was destined for Liverpool rather than the local drug market. Belfast's most symbolic contribution to this hedonistic decade came in the person of George Best, who achieved the label 'the fifth Beatle' only after leaving the Cregagh estate for the nightclubs (and football pitches) of Manchester.¹³²

Evangelicalism's continuing influence meant that Belfast literally did not swing on Sundays: its children's playgrounds remained closed on the Sabbath. In 1964 the corporation overturned the Education Committee's decision to open them, even though an opinion poll suggested that a majority favoured the original pronouncement. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board warned of the dangers to the city's £12 million annual tourist trade from its reputation as 'a strict sabbatarian place'.¹³³ However, cultural shifts were taking place. Terri Hooley's autobiography demonstrates this and also provides a perspective on life within one family which, although idiosyncratically colourful, indicates the extent to which outward signs of respectability often masked a more complex family life:

Sunday was a big day in our house, Mum wouldn't even bake a cake on the Sabbath and my brother and I weren't allowed out to play. Church dominated everything. There was a service in the morning, then Sunday school and church again in the evening. We always went to church meetings, and every week we would go to the Grosvenor Hall, in town, to watch a religious film.

By 1968, when the RUC formed a drug squad (led by future journalist David Dunsieath) to deal with the city's growing cannabis 'problem', Hooley was a potential target. He had begun to experiment with drugs in slightly unconventional circumstances. As his mother was 'always concerned about my friends in case they got into trouble', she 'said we could smoke dope in her house so that the police wouldn't catch us'.¹³⁴ Hooley's embrace of 'free music, free drugs and free love' led him to set up an 'underground folk club' in a room in High Street in 1967. Charging women 1s 6d and men 2s for entrance, he claims 'we had some great nights there – a lot of sex and drugs'. Music played at the club included that of Jimi Hendrix, The Move, Pink Floyd and, ironically, The Temperance Seven. Hooley was not the only one experimenting musically in 1960s Belfast. Another east Belfast boy who was also the product of slightly unconventional parents, Van Morrison, produced his own influential music. However, Morrison and Hooley were in a minority. The majority of young people were still getting their musical kicks in more staid venues, such as the Strand Presbyterian Church Hall, where Hooley had been a teenage DJ, or in city centre dance halls that hosted the popular show bands of the 1960s.¹³⁵

There was also a strong tint of conservatism surrounding gender and leisure. This was exhibited most obviously in the case of pubs. Norman explained that on the Shankill Road a 'barman wouldn't serve a woman'. Instead, many pubs offered 'a family compartment where a man could have took his wife in for a drink'. Norman did remember that:

you could have bought whiskey by the pint and you would have seen women going to the pub with a shawl on them. And they carried a white enamel jug underneath the shawl – if they could afford it – and they bought some whiskey. But other than that, they weren't served. The barman wouldn't serve women at all. They had to get a man or somebody that'd get it for them.

Kathy explained that her experience of pubs was limited to one local bar:

I only went with my husband. I went into The Wheatfield. They played the organ up the stairs in it. That's the only one I was ever in. When I was a young women, if you were seen going into the pub you were classed as a bad woman [laughter]. So I didn't go into pubs when I was a young woman.

Kathy was one of an increasing number of working-class wives who began to accompany their husbands to the pub after the Second World War. Previously it was more common for them to visit relatives to engage in 'colloquing'

(gossiping), while their spouse spent Saturday nights in the pub.¹³⁶ In 1958 the *Irish Times* remarked that Belfast's numerous suburban golf clubs, such as Knock, Fortwilliam, Cliftonville, Balmoral and Belvoir Park, brought 'Catholics most effectively together with Protestants. The golf clubs have camaraderie of their own.'¹³⁷ However, as in the pubs of the Shankill and the Falls, it was male fellowship that was cemented at the nineteenth hole.

Gambling was a further area of leisure that occupied men's free time. It also provided Belfast with an unaccustomed pole position in the race towards the permissive society. In 1957 the Stormont parliament legalized bookmakers' shops, pre-empting by three years similar legislation at Westminster. The Northern Irish initiative proceeded despite vocal opposition from Christian groups. The Council of Social Welfare of the Methodist Church in Ireland called the legislation a 'retrograde step' and betting a 'running sore'. The issue also caused a spat with the BBC. A torrent of complaints followed an Alan Whicker film about Belfast's legal gambling establishments that featured, in 1959, on the *Tonight* programme. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board felt it showed the 'most sordid part of Belfast'. Whicker's remaining five films on Northern Ireland were shelved amid the furore.¹³⁸ The tax revenue available from gambling lay behind Stormont's early action. It was a profitable enterprise, with three in every four people admitting to at least an occasional bet.¹³⁹ It produced one of Belfast's best-known businessmen, Leonard Steinberg, who built up the Stanley Leisure Group from its origins in 'a discreetly placed illicit betting shop' behind a Belfast milk bar.¹⁴⁰

Others made smaller profits from illegal activities associated with gambling. From 1928 punters had been indulging their passions at Dunmore Stadium's greyhound racing track. It claimed to be 'unrivalled for accessibility, comfort, and charming situation'.¹⁴¹ The venue's 500 car parking spaces indicated that it attracted affluent gamblers, not just the local working class. With money to be made, Belfast's hardmen took an interest. In the late 1940s Alexander 'Buck Alec' Robinson, from York Road, and Patrick 'Silver' McKee, from the Markets, fought for control of the Dunmore protection rackets that relieved bookmakers of a percentage of their takings. The younger man, McKee, triumphed, but was then challenged by the equally formidable James 'Stormy' Weatherall, from the Shankill. This produced violent gang fights that spilled over into the city's nightclubs.¹⁴² These men were part of a Belfast criminal fraternity about which comparatively little is known, perhaps because the authorities of the time were not overly concerned about them. Lord Justice Porter declared, in 1953, that unlike London, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow and other big cities, Belfast was comparatively free of the professional type of criminal. 'Our criminals', he observed, 'are mostly bungling amateurs.'¹⁴³



Alexander Robinson (Buck Alec), captured by a *Belfast Telegraph* photographer. Reproduced with the kind permission of the *Belfast Telegraph*.



Buck Alec (and his lion) commemorated in a mural celebrating noted individuals from the York Street area. Photograph © Sean O'Connell

The Gunman turned Lion Tamer

Buck Alec (Alexander Robinson) was one of the most controversial and colourful figures in twentieth-century Belfast. His life, and its subsequent commemoration, is an example of how the city has come to terms with the uglier aspects of its history through a process of selective remembering. Robinson was born in 1902 and grew up in the tough York Street area. First arrested in 1913 (for larceny), he had a long list of convictions by 1921, at which point he joined the RUC's C1 Special Constabulary. In 1922 he won the RUC middleweight boxing championship. At this time, he was also a member of the notorious Ulster Protestant Association, which was responsible for numerous sectarian murders. Among the killings with which Robinson was linked was that of a Catholic woman who lived on his street. A police informer claimed Robinson's comment on her death was: 'I put another spy out of the way, I put three through her head.' After a brief period of internment, he was released and spent a period as a bootlegger in the USA, rubbing shoulders – he claimed – with Al Capone. On his return to Belfast, he again found himself before the courts for criminal activity and was involved in gambling and protection rackets, his fearsome reputation as a street fighter enabling him to enforce his authority. In later years he became best known for his succession of pet lions and his image became somewhat sanitized. At his funeral in 1995, the Revd Ian Paisley carried his coffin and described Robinson as 'a rare character, a typical Ulsterman'. Members of the nationalist community, such as dramatist Martin Lynch, were also among the mourners. Importantly for Lynch, Robinson had told him he regretted 'being used by the Unionist establishment' in the 1920s. Robinson's significance, according to Lynch, lay in his role as a 'legend' and 'hardman' in the masculine culture of the dockland community that the playwright had recreated on stage. After his death, Robinson was commemorated in murals (complete with lion) and in a Northern Ireland Tourist Board publication about celebrated residents of north Belfast, in which he appeared in the company of Mary McAleese, James Galway and Kenneth Branagh. This is a prime example of Belfast's repackaging of its violent past. Alexander Robinson, 'a gunman of the most notorious type' according to police files in 1922, was transformed into Buck Alec, 'one of Belfast's extraordinary characters'.

Lord Justice Porter was more exercised about juvenile crime. Belfast was not immune from the bouts of moral panic about youth that beset Britain in the 1960s. In 1964, for example, one press story claimed that a children's playground in Castlereagh was the battle zone for local Mods and Rockers.¹⁴⁴

Soccer hooliganism also surfaced. Games between Linfield and staunch rivals Glentoran frequently resulted in violence. Trouble at a match in May 1967 led to the jailing of seven young men for one month. The next game between the teams, in September, saw ten arrests as fighting broke out in the stadium at half time and ‘a penknife with both blades open was found in the Glentoran goalmouth’.¹⁴⁵ The rivalry of Belfast’s ‘big two’ was long-standing, being based on geographical and occupational rivalry within the Belfast Protestant working classes, but it had been heightened by the demise of Belfast Celtic. The club withdrew from the Irish League in the aftermath of a stormy game at Christmas 1948. At the match’s denouement, Linfield fans invaded the pitch and attacked Celtic’s Jimmy Jones, knocking him unconscious and breaking his leg.¹⁴⁶

On that occasion, sport was divisive, but it could create common bonds among individuals who were potential antagonists in other circumstances. Boxing is a case in point. Belfast’s pugilistic culture was widely cherished. This was particularly true in working-class areas where the hardened self-image of shipyard workers, dockers and others created ‘a physically tough and exclusively male occupational culture which cast a long shadow over popular recreation’. In this context, the ring work of flyweight world champion Rinty Monaghan was admired across the sectarian divide.¹⁴⁷ This was also true of Belfast’s most famous sporting celebrity, the soccer star George Best.

Mass television ownership created a new medium that brought popular entertainers to extensive audiences, who followed the careers of a number of Belfast celebrities. The arrival of UTV, in 1959, meant that the BBC was not the sole outlet for this coverage. Ruby Murray, who at 19 was dubbed ‘the North’s first TV star’, began her career in Richview Presbyterian church choir. She gained widespread recognition by appearing on the BBC’s *Quite Contrary* programme, in 1954, and first topped the charts the following year with her song ‘Softly, Softly’. Another remarkable vocalist was Van Morrison. His talents were honed playing with Irish show bands, before he formed the band Them. The Maritime Hotel in College Street was their base before the group, and then Morrison as a solo performer, went on to international acclaim. Belfast audiences basked in the reflected glory of viewing local heroes on *Top of the Pops*. Similarly, the weekly diet of English soccer served up on *Match of the Day* established the legendary status of George Best, who left the Cregagh estate in 1961 to seek fame with Manchester United. Best became a prototype for the modern-day celebrity, with his ‘brand’ being used to market products ranging from Cookstown sausages to the Great Universal Stores catalogue. Its George Best range offered ‘colour, impact, slickness [...] all you need to look and feel great’. While Best, Murray and Morrison achieved national and international fame, James Young’s career catered for more local tastes. A talented actor, his comic abilities shone when playing Derek the window cleaner in the radio serial *The McCooeys*, based on a Belfast working-class family of indeterminate religion,



Belfast’s most celebrated songstress, Ruby Murray (1935-96), photographed at the peak of her fame in 1956. Copyright © PA Archive/Press Association Images.

Van Morrison, born George Ivan Morrison in Belfast in 1945, pictured in a publicity still in 1977, ten years after he had left Belfast for the United States and an international career.

Photograph © Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images.



which had the highest listening figures in the BBC regions, with around 500,000 dedicated followers.¹⁴⁸ Thereafter he specialized in local, often topical, humour. During the controversy over the Sunday closure of parks in the 1960s, he quipped: ‘If you had to bail out of a plane over Belfast on a Sunday, sure they wouldn’t let you open your parachute.’ While the modern medium of television made Young famous, his performances were suffused with traditional elements of music hall entertainment. As Young rose to prominence on local television, the equally telegenic Ian Paisley was offering viewers ‘a form of evangelical vaudeville’ that included ‘humour and knockabout vilification of enemies’.¹⁴⁹ Television coverage of his theatrical street politics made him a phenomenon.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, Belfast underwent a great deal of change between the First World War and the late 1960s. Like many other industrial cities, it struggled to cope with the economic forces that undermined several of its formerly thriving industries. Despite this sluggish economic performance, there were gains in the standard of living for the city’s population, particularly after 1945. This was due to factors such as the emergence of the welfare state and the success of trade union negotiators, mainly in the public sector, in securing higher wages. In the same years many of Belfast’s worst slums were removed and replaced by public housing estates that varied between the good and the bad via the indifferent. Their cumulative impact improved housing (and health) standards, although many lamented that redevelopment schemes diminished Belfast’s character. However, the city’s resilience remained visible in its responses to two very different forms of foreign assault. Belfast took the worst that the Luftwaffe could throw at it, and made a significant economic contribution to the defeat of Nazism. Its citizens also embraced mid-twentieth-century popular culture, with its heavy American influences. In this respect, Belfast resembled other cities that were taking on twentieth-century forms of modernity. Elsewhere, notably in the workings of its labour market and in the survival of long-standing religious antagonisms, the political and cultural life of the city remained anything but progressive. The years between 1914 and 1968 were, for Belfast, years of conservative modernity, marked by a dichotomy between new forms of work, consumption and recreation and a regressive cultural politics. [8.18 Beatles near here