



Mapping the Narrow Ground

Geography, History and Partition

Mary Burgess

In 1952 J. C. Beckett wrote with a certain finality that ‘the real partition of Ireland is not on the map but in the minds of men’.¹

- 1 J. C. Beckett, *A Short History of Ireland* (London, 1952), 192
- 2 M. W. Heslinga, *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide: A Contribution to the Study of Regionalism in the British Isles* (Assen, 1962). For the pervasive influence of Heslinga, see Arthur Green, ‘Homage to Heslinga’, in Joep Leerssen, ed., *Forging in the Smithy: Representation in Anglo-Irish Literary History* (Amsterdam, 1995), 145–59.
- 3 A. T. Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609–1669* [1977] (London, rev. edn. 1989), 157. In the 1989 edition (159–60), Stewart went further: ‘Nationalists may or may not be justified in their attempts to remove [the border] and annex the other six counties of Ireland to the Republic, but there is little point in doing so unless they can find a way to eliminate that other border of the mind.’
- 4 See, in a different context, Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: A Study of the Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (London, 1983), 15: ‘The Irish problem has persisted because of the power of geographical images over men’s minds.’

Ten years later, M. W. Heslinga quoted Beckett as the epigraph to his *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide: A Contribution to the Study of Regionalism in the British Isles* (1962), a book that did much to promote both the border and the companion theory of two nations as facts of nature and history.² And fifteen years after Heslinga, A. T. Q. Stewart, in an even more influential book, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609–1669* (1977), wrote: ‘The truth is that partition is not a line drawn on the map; it exists in the hearts and minds of Irish people’.³ Beckett, Heslinga and Stewart were arguing against the imagined geography of nationalism (an island ‘limned by God in water’) and for an alternative imagined geography of unionism in which the six counties would appear as a territorial unit separate from the island of which it formed a physical part, but closely bonded to an island from which it was separated by a stretch of sea.⁴ In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu contends that geographical “‘reality” ... is social through and through’ and that ‘the frontier, that product of a legal act of delineation, produces cultural difference as much as it is produced by it’. For Bourdieu, indeed, ‘the most “natural” classifications are based on characteristics which are not in the slightest respect natural but which are to a great extent the product of an arbitrary imposition.’⁵ This essay argues that, while partitionist scholars like Beckett and

Stewart have consistently used the past to explain and justify existing state divisions in Ireland, unionist conceptions of geography have been decidedly unstable, leading to a curious insecurity in the crucial marriage between unionist interpretations of history and the geography of the north of Ireland.

From the moment the Irish border was drawn, ‘with a bland subordination of topography to self-interest’, it hardened into permanence in northern unionist politics.⁶ Certainly, the levels of violence and coercion which attended the birth of the state did not represent an auspicious beginning, or as natural a resolution to the ‘Irish Question’ as Stewart and Beckett, among others, would have us believe. The border would become one of the most contested and militarized state-boundaries in European history. It still retains the sense of unease, of impermanence and of contention that characterized its inception. This is so in spite of a long and complex effort by unionists to manufacture a sense in which the Northern Irish state has always ‘really’ existed.

The potential for violence in the very idea of the border has diminished. Especially since 1998, there has been such an enormous increase in cross-border initiatives — educational, commercial, economic, cultural and political — that it is widely claimed that it is losing both its relevance and its divisive potential.⁷

One of the great ironies of this situation for unionists is that, in the formative years of the state, regionalism added cultural density to the idea of partition. Now, in the ‘Europe of the Regions’ this is no longer the case; the border matters culturally only to an increasingly embattled and shrinking unionist community.

The earlier project of constructing Ulster accelerated after partition and was articulated in the works of geographers and historians in particular.⁸ The relationship between regionalist geography and historiography in the construction of Northern Ireland has always been central.⁹ Geography determined the history of the region, and the history finally realized the geographical imperative. In 1928, a young Welshman named E. Estyn Evans took up a lectureship in geography at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB). At some point in that year, Evans met with Thomas Jones, sometime Professor of Economics in the university, and formerly David Lloyd George’s private secretary. Jones had been the British Prime Minister’s chief negotiator with Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith during the Treaty negotiations which ended in the partition of Ireland.¹⁰ The content of their conversation is unrecorded. It had been Jones, however, who first mooted the idea of the Boundary Commission as a palliative to the Irish delegation; the possibility that the border was moveable, even ‘temporary’, was insinuated into the officially inflexible rhetoric of partition from the outset.¹¹ Given Jones’s own interest in geography, it is possible that they discussed the border. Moreover, Evans’s arrival in Belfast came at a time when unionists were intent on making the recently drawn border permanent; throughout his career, he remained close to the establishment and this central ambition.

Also in 1928, only three years after the Boundary Commission made the border permanent, D. A. Chart, the Deputy Keeper

of Public Records in Northern Ireland, published *A History of Northern Ireland*. Unsurprisingly, since ‘Northern Ireland’ had then been in existence for less than a decade, Chart’s book was relatively brief, yet it managed to confer on the recently formed ‘Northern Ireland’ a pedigree of antiquity stretching back to the fifteenth century and to make it identical with a new version of ‘Ulster’, now a six-county, not a nine-county, province. The new political formation became, at a stroke, ‘an old country’. Events which could properly have fallen within the ambit of Chart’s title — the violent political and sectarian events of 1920–22, for instance, or the passing of the Special Powers Act of 1922, or even the wrangles over the border — made no appearance in the book. The fact of partition was merely stated in the preface. Chart was resolutely unwilling to ‘reopen recent controversies and recall ... many painful memories’.¹² The conclusion of the Boundary Commission’s investigations had changed the atmosphere if not the rhetoric of Ulster; an editorial in the January 1926 issue of the new *Ulster Review* declared:

The signing of the Border Agreement wipes the political slate for us in Ulster ... We are like a garrison so surprised to find a prolonged siege suddenly raised, and the enemy quietly withdrawn, that we cannot quite believe in our good luck.¹³

Chart’s *History of Northern Ireland* suggested that the ‘stagnant optimism’, which G. K. Chesterton had observed in Belfast in 1918, was finally producing results.¹⁴

In this new mood of confidence and relief, born of the apparent gift of a clean ‘political slate’, the unionist establishment set about naturalizing its new state. A cancel line would be drawn through the troubled recent past, and an older history would instead gain prominence. Chart’s history, a textbook produced under the auspices of the new

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson and trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 222

6 MacDonagh, *States of Mind*, 21

7 See, for instance, the large number of cross-border initiatives, projects and publications produced by the Centre for Cross Border Studies, based in Armagh, and also the work of the Institute for the Study of Social Change, based at University College Dublin.

8 Relatively recent books and essays by Ian Adamson, and by two-nations geographer Dennis Pringle, in which the partitionist position is reiterated, have their foundation in the work of earlier scholars. See Ian Adamson, *The Identity of Ulster: The Land, the Language and the People* (Belfast, 1982) and D. G. Pringle, *One Island, Two Nations: A Political Geographical Analysis of the National Conflict in Ireland* (Letchworth, 1985) and ‘Diversity, Asymmetry and the Quest for Consensus’, *Political Geography*, 17, 2 (1998), 231–37.

9 Under the umbrella of geography were also sheltered a regional study of ‘folklife’, archaeology and a nascent Ulster anthropology.

10 This meeting is referred to by Evans’s widow, Gwyneth Evans, in ‘Estyn: A Biographical Memoir’, in E. Estyn Evans, *Ireland and the Atlantic Heritage: Selected Writings* (Dublin, 1996), 5, and by Matthew Stout in ‘Emyr Estyn Evans and Northern Ireland: The Archaeology and Geography of a New State’, in John A. Atkinson, Ian Banks and Jerry O’Sullivan, eds., *Nationalism and Archaeology* (Glasgow, 1996), 111–26.

- 11 Gwyneth Evans published a strong refutation of Stout's suggestion that Evans received 'tutelage' on the North of Ireland from Jones. See her 'Emyr Estyn Evans and Northern Ireland', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, 58 (1999), 134–42. Interestingly, however, she remembers Jones being a frequent visitor to her family home as she was growing up in Wales.
- 12 D. A. Chart, *A History of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1928), 1: 'In an old country such as Ulster there are few neighbourhoods that do not possess some actual relic of antiquity', and 'as Ulster is largely an industrial country, a section has been devoted to that aspect of its history'.
- 13 Editorial, *The Ulster Review*, 2, 8 (Jan. 1926), 337
- 14 G. K. Chesterton, *Irish Impressions* (London, 1919), 26
- 15 See Heslinga, *Irish Border as a Cultural Divide*, 36.
- 16 MacDonagh, *States of Mind*, 26
- 17 J. Logan, *Ulster in the X-Rays* (Belfast and London, 1924); Ernest W. Hamilton, *The Soul of Ulster*, (New York, 1917). Some other books of this type include: C. J. C. Street, *Ireland in 1921* (London, 1922); H. S. Morrison, *Modern Ulster, Its Character, Customs, Politics and Industries* (London, 1920); F. H. Crawford, *Why I Voted for the Six Counties* (Belfast, 1920); R. McNeill, *Ulster's Stand for Union* (London, 1922); Cyril Falls, *The History of the 36th (Ulster) Division* (London, 1922) and *The Birth of Ulster* (London, 1936); Henry Maxwell, *Ulster was Right* (London, 1924); D. J. Owen, *History of Belfast* (Belfast, 1921); H. C. Lawlor, *Ulster: Its Archaeology and Antiquities* (Belfast, 1928).

régime, exhibits several features shared by many publications similarly devoted to the naturalization of the partition of Ireland: the deployment of 'history' to legitimize the new state, a refusal to analyse too closely contemporary or recent political events and a whig-unionist narrative with its inescapable culmination in the present.

It is significant that even in the late 1920s, when a majority of the inhabitants of the new state believed the border would be permanent, they could not fix on a name for the area defined by it. That situation, of course, has not changed in the intervening years. The 'Six Counties' are not quite identical with 'Ulster'. Although many unionists were keen to jettison any 'Irish' connotations altogether, a movement to have the name 'Northern Ireland' officially changed to 'Ulster' was not successful.¹⁵ Oliver MacDonagh has stated perceptively that 'the Treaty of 1922 had rendered the Northern unionist view of place more instead of less ambivalent'. Partition, rather than reflecting an already existing Irish *mentalité*, as later historians (Beckett, Stewart and F. S. L. Lyons) would have it, had created a confused, more divided new one:

The very decision of 1921, confirmed in 1925, created in its turn a new mental geography. Once painted a different colour on the map Northern Ireland became a pictorial entity in men's minds, with fresh claims and counter-claims about territoriality. This reinforced the real internal separation of both the Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic communities, when they were divided by the two states, and henceforth carried along, to a degree, in the streams of two separate 'national' histories ... What Northern Unionists usually mean by 'place' and 'people' is Protestant Ulster. Yet — apart from anodyne 'Northern Ireland', employable for official purposes — what alternative do they have to 'Ulster'? One cannot very well write 'Protestant Supremacy' on a map.¹⁶

Chart's *History of Northern Ireland* was neither the first nor the last of its kind. Books with titles such as *Ulster in the X-Rays* and *The Soul of Ulster* had proliferated in the years after 1912 (the year of Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant), and especially through the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁷ These books form a miniature genre that achieved its highest definition in Stewart's *The Narrow Ground*.¹⁸ Stewart's book did with more authority and style what the earlier texts had attempted to do — it 'explained' the contemporary Northern crisis by showing it to be integral to Ulster's long history, a history that was interwoven with elements of archaeology and geography. It was part of a sustained effort to create a unionist and partitionist hegemony.

Partition was, amongst other things, an attempt to reshape Irish space. And if, in Foucauldian terms, space is always a container of social power, then 'the reorganization of space is always a reorganization of the framework through which social power is expressed'.¹⁹ The spatial structure of cultural partitionism was that of the region, a concept capacious enough to embrace both the recalcitrance and the political contingency of Ulster unionism. Irish geographical initiatives — the triangulation, the surveying and the mapping of the country — are central to the history of Irish colonization. Geographers T. J. Hughes and J. H. Andrews have told, in fastidiously impartial language, the story of the nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey of Ireland and Sir Richard Griffith's *General Valuation of Rateable Tenements* (1848–64); but what of the equally-militarized, more recent geography of partition?²⁰

The *géographie humaine* of Evans, who imported an innovative emphasis on the *longue durée* from the French *annalistes*, provided a comfortably neutral landscape for liberal unionism. His work avoided overtly political issues. *Les événements*,

including what Evans called ‘the controversial realms of religion and politics’, were replaced by a concentration on primarily rural material culture.²¹ His style was charming, elegiac, generalized; his maps were crude. In Evans’s work, history became ‘heritage’, and the folk-objects and practices he traced — ‘plough and spade’, ‘hearth and home’, ‘turf and slane’ — were constructed as museum objects or as dying arts in a curiously unpeopled landscape.²² Irishness, in the work of Evans, became a set of innocuous rural practices whose time was past.

There were important differences between Evans’s interest in ‘Irish folkways’ and the work being done on the other side of the border in the 1930s and 1940s to present the living voices of Irish speakers. No figure comparable to Peig Sayers appeared in Evans’s landscapes. His generalized, more ‘scientific’ and abstract approach contrasted sharply with the extensive, detailed, voluminous, nationally conscious work carried out, after 1935, by the Irish Folklore Commission (IFC).²³ There were clear differences between the work of the IFC, chaired by Antrim-born James Hamilton Delargy, and Evans’s concentration on ‘folklife’ studies. These differences tended to emphasize, once again, ‘Ulster’s’ separateness from the rest of the island, but also to distance Ulster’s ‘folklife’ (material culture and practice) from the Free State’s ‘folklore’ (oral tradition). Delargy, a cultural nationalist, was firmly convinced of a line of continuity between Gaelic, pre-colonial folk culture and that of contemporary Ireland, something which Evans’s folklife studies did not acknowledge.²⁴

Stormont facilitated Evans’s folklife studies just as various southern governments funded and promoted Delargy’s work. When the southern Department of Education invited the Northern Ireland Education Ministry to participate in a schools’ folklore collection project in 1937, it declined, only to support a similar project in the 1950s, covering the

six counties alone.²⁵ Evans chaired the Committee on Ulster Folklife and Traditions (CUFT), set up in 1955, and one of his students, R. H. Buchanan, edited its journal, *Ulster Folklife*. Stormont financed the work of this committee and, steered by Evans, in consultation with Terence O’Neill, it culminated in the foundation of the Ulster Folk Museum at Cultra in 1958 under the directorship of G. B. Thompson, another of Evans’s students.²⁶

Ulster Folklife, the journal founded by the CUFT, was supposed to cover the whole of nine-county Ulster, and yet the very first number includes declarations of purpose such as ‘The collection of the oral traditions of the people of the six counties of Northern Ireland is a work of great importance’ and ‘We are attempting to record and study the folklife of Northern Ireland as a whole.’²⁷ Furthermore, the journal did not make a clear distinction between material ‘folklife’ studies and oral ‘folklore’, suggesting the possibility that Evans, while interested in the southern effort, may have wanted to create an appearance of difference between the *practice* of northern and southern folklore studies when none in fact existed. It was in the area of *ideology* that the differences were clear. A comparison of *Ulster Folklife*, and its older southern counterpart *Béaloideas* (founded in 1927, with most of its early articles in Irish) reveals the very different approach to folklife/lore adopted by Evans’s committee, which is notably regionalist, and lacks the strong sense of a Gaelic national identity that governs Delargy’s work.

By 1948, Evans’s geography department at QUB was the largest in Britain and Ireland. He left a lasting impression on the cultural map of Belfast and the North, having been involved in, among many other things, the founding of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (1948), the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra (1958), the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen’s (1968), and the

18 Also important here is F. S. L. Lyons, ‘Ulster: The Roots of Difference’, in *Culture and Anarchy in Modern Ireland 1890–1939* (Oxford, 1979), 113–45.

19 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989), 255

20 See J. H. Andrews, *A Paper Landscape: The Ordnance Survey in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Oxford, 1979). T. J. Hughes, whose scholarly reputation rested on a lifetime’s work on Griffith’s Valuation, never published a book, but produced many articles. A list of these can be found in W. J. Smyth and Kevin Whelan, eds., *Common Ground: Essays on the Historical Geography of Ireland*, (Cork, 1988), 320–23.

21 E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Heritage: The Landscape, the People and their Work* (Dundalk, 1942), 2

22 E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London, 1957)

23 In 1927, the Folklore of Ireland Society (An Cumann le Béaloideas Éireann) was founded in Dublin; in 1935, it was streamlined and professionalized into the Irish Folklore Commission (Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann) and continued the systematic collection, preservation, classification and study of Irish folklore until 1971.

24 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* (Cork, 2000), 61–62, discusses the differences between folklife and folklore.

25 Ó Giolláin, *Locating Irish Folklore*, 134

26 Writing in 1970 of Evans's role in the creation of the Museum, Thompson tried — rather desperately — to place the museum in a wider cultural and political context: 'I have come to see the folk museum's likely role as generally relating to the absence of cultural identity in Ulster. Underlying the superficial complexities of the Ulster situation is the fact that by virtue of its chequered history Ulster has become a community in which political and religious identity supercedes cultural identity. The abnormal prominence of religion and politics, and the extent to which they are intertwined in Ulster, have stifled the natural emergence of any sense of regional cultural personality. Indeed, one might be tempted to conclude that no such personality exists now or ever existed in the past.' Perhaps sensing a mood of intemperateness here, Thompson goes on to say, 'I do not feel, however, that this is a theory to which Estyn Evans would subscribe.' See G. B. Thompson, 'Estyn Evans and the Development of the Ulster Folk Museum', *Ulster Folklife*, 15, 16 (1970), 236. The Ulster Folk Museum merged with the Ulster Transport Museum in 1967.

27 *Ulster Folklife*, 1, 1 (1955), 5, 7

28 Maurice Hayes, *Minority Verdict: Experiences of a Catholic Public Servant* (Belfast, 1995), 89

Ulster-American Folk Park at Omagh (1976), as well as in various government rural and urban planning committees. Though he played a vital role in the rural theme-parking of the province, Evans left a lighter impression on Belfast's urban landscape than he might have wished. Former civil servant Maurice Hayes, for instance, recalls Evans's involvement in the work of the Community Relations Commission in Belfast in the troubled late 1960s:

In this seminal stage, we were very much guided by Estyn Evans, the father figure of social geography and regional planning, who had written sensitively and perceptively about identity, tradition and folk culture. He rather shocked me by prescribing the use of bulldozers which would start at Castle Junction and flatten the segment of Belfast including the Shankill and Falls Roads; the area would subsequently be planted as an urban forest park which would effectively separate warring factions. We never got far enough into the discussion to find out what was to be done with the people so displaced.²⁸

Evans's plan to transform the problematic sectarian landscape of west Belfast into a 'peace park' was characteristic of his career-long refusal to combine political and historical analysis with human geography. It was also characteristically deterministic: change the landscape and the ghetto-dwellers will change with it.

Evans's 'Ulster' was ultimately conceived as a sectarian landscape in which the land itself had somehow shaped the politics of division. In a lecture delivered in 1971, the year in which internment was introduced, Evans paraded sectarian division as indicative of 'diversity' and a kind of equilibrium:

Diversity is revealed of course in many other different ways; it is reflected often in different religious affiliations; the most fertile areas of fat drumlins have usually been occupied by newcomers. In Ulster where you find the drumlins you will hear the drums, for the Protestant planters usually *chose* the most fertile lowland areas, and I suspect that people living in such closed-in lowlands with restricted horizons tend to have a limited vision and



imagination. I always like to contrast that kind of hidden landscape — Protestant landscape, shall I say? — with the open, naked bogs and hills which are naturally areas of vision and imagination, which are poetic and visionary and which represent the other tradition in Ulster.²⁹

This is an ‘Ulster’ regionalist redaction of Arnoldian stereotypes in which, it appears, the *longue durée* extends only as far back as the plantations. Evans’s landscape replicates the religious and cultural divisions so necessary to the reproduction of partition.³⁰ As Matthew Stout points out, ‘the unacceptable language of environmental determinism is heard in this grossly oversimplified explanation of divisions within Ireland’.³¹ Stewart Parker parodied just such an approach (also a key element in Helsinga’s work) in his play *Lost Belongings*, in which an Orangeman recites the geology of partition:

The bedrock of Ulster is just a continuation of the bedrock of Scotland. The rocks stretching across under the sea

... Now, along the southern edge of the Ulster bedrock there’s what they call a fault. South of that fault there’s an entirely disconnected type of a bedrock altogether. That’s the foundations of the Free State. So the two parts of this island, you see, are different and separate right down in their very bones. You can’t join together what God has set apart. We’ve got British rocks under the very soil of this province.³²

This geologized environmental determinism, whereby the ‘separateness’ of Northern Ireland is both produced by and reflected in its physical features, is also present in the drafting of a regional Ulster archaeology. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Evans conducted a series of digs along the northern side of the border with Oliver Davies, a friend and colleague at QUB. Davies and Evans had embarked on their excavations in 1932 in response to a characteristically partitionist suggestion by Sir Arthur Keith at the British Association meeting of 1928, that the ancient monuments of the North of Ireland differed

29 E. Estyn Evans, *Ulster: The Common Ground* (Mullingar, 1988), 7. Lecture first delivered in 1971, my italics. John Wilson Foster has more recently used this formula (i.e. that sectarianism is one kind of diversity) in his ‘Radical Regionalism’, *The Irish Review*, 7 (Autumn 1989), 1–15.

30 For an opposing view to that of Stout on the work of Evans, see Virginia Crossman and Dymphna McLoughlin, ‘A Peculiar Eclipse: E. Estyn Evans and Irish Studies’, *The Irish Review*, 15 (Spring, 1994), 79–96. The most sustained and sophisticated account of Evans’s career is Brian Graham, ‘The Search for the Common Ground: Estyn Evans’s Ireland’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 19, 2 (1994), 183–201.

31 Stout, ‘Emyr Estyn Evans and Northern Ireland’, 120

32 Stewart Parker, *Lost Belongings* (London, 1987), 50



- 33 Evans and Davies assumed the editorship of *The Ulster Journal of Archaeology* in 1938. They immediately altered its cover logo from the seal of Hugh O'Neill to the state emblem of Northern Ireland, the red hand of Ulster surmounted by a crown. See Stout, 'Emyr Estyn Evans and Northern Ireland'.
- 34 See *A Preliminary Survey of the Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1940).
- 35 Oliver Davies left QUB for South Africa in 1945.
- 36 See E. Estyn Evans, 'Disputing with de Valera', in *Ireland and the Atlantic Heritage*, 210–15.
- 37 See Marcus Heslinga, *Geography and Nationality. The Estyn Evans Lecture no. 2* (Belfast, 1978), 22: 'It was professor Evans who in the late summer of 1959, guided my first steps through the North of Ireland'.
- 38 E. Estyn Evans, Foreword to Heslinga, *Irish Border as a Cultural Divide*, i, ii

substantially from those of the South. Predictably, the tendency of Davies's and Evans's 'scientific' conclusions tended to emphasize Ulster's archaeological difference from the rest of Ireland, and its links to other 'British' regions. The absurdity, from an archaeological perspective, of siting digs according to a line on a map drawn only a few years earlier to demarcate a local power-base is blatant. But the border marked the edge of the new political entity, and what was being exhumed was a 'state' archaeology.³³

Evans and Davies also collaborated on the large survey of *The Ancient Monuments of Northern Ireland*, overseen by the government-financed Ancient Monuments Advisory Council for Northern Ireland.³⁴ This survey, directed by Chart, echoed in style and scale the rhetoric of nineteenth-century colonial-antiquarianism.³⁵ The non-political politics of the Evans–Davies collaboration re-emerged in the 1960s, when their thesis on 'horned-cairn tombs' in Ulster was questioned by de Valera's son, Ruaidhri — Evans misspelled it 'Rory' — a Professor of Archaeology at University College, Dublin. Evans and Davies, unsurprisingly, had argued that the tombs were an importation from Scotland (and were therefore implicitly 'British'). De Valera argued that the diffusion across Ireland of what he renamed 'court cairns' was from west to east. The politics of this debate are clear.³⁶

Equally clear is the tactic Evans adopted in his foreword to Heslinga's *The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide*.³⁷ It is a simple and well-tested approach, that always begins with a disingenuous affectation of scholarly disengagement from partisan politics; "'the border",' he claims, denying and asserting its reality by the use of the scare quotation marks, 'is such a lively political issue that our motives would be suspect, on one side or the other, and probably both, if we were to concentrate our attention on it. Any

student who approaches the subject must pick his way delicately through the hard spikes of political prejudice.' By guiding Heslinga's 'first steps through the North of Ireland' in the late summer of 1959, Evans had helped him 'pick his way' and praises him for having 'pursued it with a high degree of objectivity'. The conclusion is that partition is, or appears to be, a natural not a political condition of the landscape: 'Dr Heslinga sees both sections of the Irish border, land and sea, as in the last resort, religious frontiers.'³⁸

Heslinga combines a human-geographical definition of regionalism (the idea of regionally based imagined communities) and a physical-geographical emphasis on, for instance, similarities between the geological structures of north-east Ulster and the west of Scotland to reinforce the notion that the history of Ulster since the twelfth century is an example of a political divergence that is founded on inescapable natural differences. This was the most effective declaration of the two nations theory, and its strategic geographical remit, in which the central unit is the 'British Isles.' Irish unionists have embraced this thesis, and Irish nationalists have ignored it. Its ideological importance has always been enhanced by its claim to be a 'detached' account by an impartial foreign observer. Heslinga's book is a bible of regionalism; Northern Ireland is the political realization of objective, natural conditions for which geography and archaeology provide the scientific evidence.

Historical revisionism is the movement that derives from this view. The first issue of the revisionist journal, *Irish Historical Studies*, edited (from Belfast) by T. W. Moody and (from Dublin) by R. Dudley Edwards, appeared in 1938. The policy of *Irish Historical Studies*, to exclude subjects post-1900, operated as a fire-gap, ensuring that recent political events in Ireland (an IRA bombing campaign in Britain, de Valera's republican constitution, sectarian riots in

Belfast) were kept at a distance. Proximity would have lent disenchantment to the view that sought to make ‘distance’ a requirement for wisdom. This effectively garbled the differences between distance, so understood, and objectivity.

Belfast-born Moody was, from the mid-thirties until his departure for Trinity College Dublin in 1939, in charge of Irish history at QUB. He had returned from a stint at the Institute of Historical Research in London with Herbert Butterfield’s rejection of the whig interpretation of history as a new weapon he would deploy to reinforce unionist rebuttals of nationalist claims on Ulster.³⁹ The work of Moody, whose massive history of the plantation of Derry was published in 1939, ushered in a new era in the historiography of Ulster. It also paved the way for a new generation of northern historians emanating (via the Belfast Royal Academical Institution, or ‘Inst’) from QUB — Beckett, D. B. Quinn, R. B. McDowell and later the more maverick figure of Stewart, all of them ready alternatively to use Butterfield’s anti-whig polemic to attack nationalism or to abandon it to defend unionism.⁴⁰

In the mid-1950s, Moody, Beckett, and the Northern Ireland Home Service of the BBC combined forces to broadcast a series of lectures on Ulster history, later published in two books of essays. These books offer a history of the province since the Act of Union. The first volume opens with a map: ‘The Province of Ulster (Northern Ireland Shaded)’. The whig-loyalist teleology of that map, which inscribes the relatively recently-invented border onto a century and a half of provincial history, also manifests itself in the lectures.⁴¹ These essays epitomize the partitionist bias of revisionist historiography.⁴² In the heyday of Ulster unionism, however, these collections affirmed as history the myth of the always-and-ever separateness of Ulster. Not one of the essays questioned the legitimacy of the

border, or even addressed the ongoing debate over the issue. The discrete history of Ulster was read as a *fait accompli* to be examined and understood, not as part of an unending political crisis.

Sam Hanna Bell, in a 1951 essay on culture in Ulster, gave what at one level is a perfect description of the self-styled revisionist project:

Our history, for historical reasons, is still warm from the hands of zealots. And here, I should like to believe, a new element enters. During the past few years a number of Ulster historians have been reassessing, and, indeed, so far as the layman is concerned, discovering the history of our country and our people. T. W. Moody, Cyril Falls, D. B. Quinn, R. B. McDowell, J. C. Beckett, J. M. Mogeey, E. R. R. Green and Hugh Shearman have revealed to us the calm causality behind the frenetic story. Estyn Evans, Professor of Geography at the Queen’s University, Belfast, bringing an innate sympathy from Wales to our Province, has gathered into his book *Irish Heritage* the crafts, the occupations and the ingenuities of our forefathers, a book that should be on the shelf of every Ulsterman. Here, in the work of these scholars ... is our history cooled and tempered for us.⁴³

The Northern, institutionally cradled, element in this ‘cooling and tempering’ — the ‘professionalization’ of Irish history which began to reveal ‘the calm causality behind the frenetic story’ in the 1930s — is a neglected aspect of historiographical developments in modern Ireland. Moody’s writings after 1968, for instance, show that the issue of ‘the North’ persisted with him as a preoccupation. In his 1977 valedictory lecture on the myths of Irish history — and the necessity of demythologizing them — there is a qualitative difference in his debunking of the myth of ‘the predestinate

39 See Brendan Bradshaw, ‘Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 26, 104 (Nov. 1989), 328–51.

40 For the regionalism of Moody’s *The Londonderry Plantation, 1609–41* (Belfast, 1939), see Raymond Gillespie, ‘Historical Revisit’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 29, 113 (May 1994), 110–11.

41 See *Ulster Since 1800: A Political and Economic Survey* (London, 1954) and *Ulster Since 1800: A Social Survey* (London, 1957), both edited by T. W. Moody and J. C. Beckett. The two collections include pieces by Beckett, Moody, Lyons, McDowell, Evans and others.

42 The later work of F. S. L. Lyons on Ulster was similarly governed by a ‘two nations’ approach, though far less politically complacent. See Lyons, ‘Ulster: the Roots of Difference’, 113–45.

43 Sam Hanna Bell, ‘A Banderol: An Introduction’, in Sam Hanna Bell, Nesca A. Robb and John Hewitt, eds., *The Arts in Ulster: A Symposium* (London, 1951), 17–18. This collection of essays was produced as part of the Festival of Britain celebrations.



nation' and that of 'Orangeism'. Moody describes Orangeism as 'a rich and many-sided mythology', a 'great popular force in Irish society ... down to our own day', whose 'distinctive role was that of upholding the union as the best safeguard of protestant interests in Ireland'. Echoing the language of late nineteenth-century Ulster unionism, Moody writes that the strength of Orangeism 'lay in Ulster, where protestants constituted half the population and in economic power were immeasurably superior to the other half. Industrial revolution, pioneered and sustained by protestant initiative and protestant capital, added a new dimension to the distinctiveness of the north-east from the rest of Ireland.'⁴⁴ A far more straightforward — and longer — attack on the mythology of the Provisional IRA follows. 'This myth,' wrote Moody, 'identifies the democratic Irish nation of the nineteenth century with pre-conquest Ireland, incorporates the concept of a seven (now an eight) centuries' struggle with England as the central theme of Irish history, and sees the achievement of independence in 1922 as the partial fulfillment of a destiny that requires the extinction of British authority in Northern Ireland to complete itself.'⁴⁵ Moody's politics, kept in abeyance in his early, archive-based work, came increasingly to the fore towards the end of his career, particularly when he wrote on contemporary Ulster.⁴⁶

As already noted, Stewart's *The Narrow Ground* constituted a culminatory moment in the project to naturalize partition. Stewart sought to unearth the deep structures of Ulster's history, to trace what he called 'the shape of the past' as opposed to mere 'surface details'. This adoption of the rhetoric, if not the practice, of the French *annalistes* was a key innovation for those historians, geographers and archaeologists involved in the cultural reinforcement of partition. Stewart's 'shape

of the past' roughly corresponded to the *longue durée*, at least as far back as the Ulster plantations, and his dismissal of mere 'surface details', or *les événements*, enabled a shifting of the discursive territory away from the last fifty years, and especially away from the previous decade of violence in the North. Hence, Stewart sought to elaborate the unchanging patterns of Northern society, thereby showing that events since the late 1960s and early 1970s were not the result of the failure of the state, but were simply in keeping with a much older historical paradigm. His conclusion was that 'it' had always been thus; 'Whatever the "Ulster Question" is in Irish history, it is not the question of partition.'⁴⁷ The historical narrative of the north of Ireland, on the contrary, 'amounts to ... the delineation of patterns which cannot be changed or broken by any of the means now being employed to "solve" the Ulster question.' 'Neither pressure from London,' Stewart warned in 1977, 'nor pressure from Dublin, can alter them.'⁴⁸ Thus the strange historical narrative of 'Northern Ireland' is put firmly beyond the reach of contemporary interventions, and the maintenance of the *status quo* defended as a permanent and desirable goal.

Perhaps the most tendentious conclusion reached in *The Narrow Ground* is that the disarming of the police in the sixties was the reason for the return to what Stewart calls 'the inherited folk-memory of what had been done in the past.'⁴⁹ The disarming was 'in itself a profound shock to *society*,' he claims. As a consequence, 'the state had lost the capacity to safeguard life and property, and, stripped of that protection, the civil population turned instinctively to the only source of wisdom applicable to such circumstances'.⁵⁰ That is to say, for as long as the police remained in control, 'the monsters which inhabited the depths of the community's unconscious mind' were kept in abeyance; as soon as Westminster took away RUC guns (and disbanded the B-

- 44 T. W. Moody, 'Irish History and Irish Mythology', in Ciarán Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Irish Historical Revisionism 1938–1994* (Dublin, 1994), 77–78
- 45 Moody, 'Irish History and Irish Mythology', 84
- 46 See T. W. Moody, *The Ulster Question, 1603–1973* (Dublin and Cork, 1974).
- 47 Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 157
- 48 Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 185
- 49 In 1969 the RUC was disarmed, and its notorious B-Specials disbanded, as a result of the Hunt Report.
- 50 Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 184–85, italics added.

51 Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 16

52 Quoted in Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1984), 155

53 Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 17

Specials) those monsters were let loose on the streets of Belfast and Derry.⁵¹ The almost explicit claim here is that only when the established élite in Northern Ireland is wholly in control of ‘law and order’ will the re-emerging patterns of sectarian violence be contained. Thus, Stewart claims that it is the dissolution of ‘Northern Ireland’ that will release sectarian violence. The clear political bias of such a belief governs Stewart’s treatment of Catholics in the North between 1920 and 1969 and fails or refuses to address their belief that sectarian violence was made institutional by the creation of Northern Ireland. ‘Brothers and sisters in Christ,’ advised the Reverend Ian Paisley after he had read it, and much to Stewart’s chagrin, ‘here is a great book that tells the Truth about Ulster. Go home, friend, and read it.’⁵² Stewart’s book has rarely been out of print since its publication in 1977.

The real problem with Stewart’s historical method is that it underplays the organizational and ideological structures which have maintained the forms or conventions of ‘Irish disorder’. Notwithstanding his professed concern with deep structure and its inevitabilities, Stewart is paradoxically engrossed by the contingent features of local violence, such as urban streetscapes and rioting techniques.

Although they were enacted on the same streets, he claims, there were clearly different reasons for the riots of 1886 in Belfast and those of 1921–22, 1935, 1969, or 1972. But by grouping these instances into a general ‘pattern’, he makes the specific problems induced by fifty years of Stormont rule disappear. Invocation of the seventeenth century to explain the present difficulties of a modern state, on one level perfectly legitimate, is on another little more than a decoy. For Stewart and other unionist historians of the North, the past is not so much a foreign country as a place which bears an uncanny resemblance to ‘Northern Ireland’ itself. Ultimately, Ulster’s violence must be seen as another, and legitimating proof, of Ulster’s difference from the rest of Ireland. The Hidden Border, long-concealed, becomes visible to the historian, who ‘like the aerial archaeologist ... may glimpse the distinctive patterns of the past below the surface’.⁵³ The ‘distinctive patterns’ reveal Ulster’s difference; they coalesce in one line, the border. But now that it has been so seriously challenged, it can scarcely again rely on the arguments that attempt to assert its inescapable inevitability. In the case of ‘Northern Ireland’, there appears to be less ‘there’ there than we were led to believe. ■

Photographs: Charles Hewitt. At 6.15 pm on Friday 14 December 1956, a ‘person unknown’ crossed the border into county Monaghan and fired six .303 rifle bullets into the Clones Customs Post. The unidentified gunman was presumed to be a unionist, protesting against a series of gun and bomb attacks by the IRA and the breakaway republican group Saor Uladh. Later that night, the IRA attacked an RUC barracks in Lisnaskea, county Fermanagh, injuring a policeman. The photographs show the damaged window in the Clones Customs Post and the RUC preparing to start a patrol in front of the battered barracks in Lisnaskea; also shown is RUC Head Constable Leslie Singer questioning an unidentified suspect after the Lisnaskea attack. See Gavin Lyall, ‘Assassins on Britain’s Border’, *Picture Post*, 31 Dec. 1956.