



# ‘That Car’

## Modernity, Northern Ireland and the DMC–12

Richard Kirkland

Your eyes skim the sleek, sensuous stainless steel body, and all your senses tell you, ‘I’ve got to have it!’

The counterbalanced gull-wing doors rise effortlessly, beckoning you inside.

The soft leather seat in the cockpit fits you like it was made for your body.

You turn the key. The light alloy V-6 comes to life instantly. The DeLorean. Surely one of the most awaited automobiles in automotive history.

It all began with one man’s vision of the perfect personal luxury car. Built for long-life, it employs the latest space age materials. Of course, everyone stares at you as you drive by. Sure they’re a little envious. That’s expected. After all, you’re the one Living the Dream. Start living it today at a dealer near you.<sup>1</sup>

1 ‘Live the Dream’, two page colour advertisement for the DeLorean car, *Time Magazine* (January 1982), reproduced in John Lamm, *DeLorean: Stainless Steel Illusion* (Santa Ana, 1983), 100.

2 Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton, 1988), 6; Peter Wagner, *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory* (London, 2001), 4, conceives this ‘double connotation’ as modernity being ‘always both philosophical and empirical, or both substantive and temporal, or ... both conceptual and historical’.

The story of the DeLorean Motor Company’s venture in Northern Ireland in the early 1980s may be offered as a parable of a state-sponsored policy, there and in Ireland generally, to persuade private capital to assist in the modernization of Ireland. An attempt to build a 120 mph supercar, the DMC–12, for the American market in one of Belfast’s most economically deprived areas, the episode proved to be both tragic and farcical. It also became a resonant symbol of the failure of Northern Ireland as a post-industrial economic entity. And this bizarre affair provides a vivid example of the shifting, contested nature of modernity itself. If we can, in Douglas Mao’s arresting phrase, ‘read through objects to the truth of the social totality that produced them’, perhaps a historical understanding of the DMC–12 *affaire* might enable us to

apprehend something of what Peter Wagner has described as modernity’s ‘double connotation’.<sup>2</sup>

This ‘double connotation’ has become a central concern in Irish Studies, the focus of an intellectual project through which, in Fredric Jameson’s words, “modernity” is stripped of its semblance of obviousness’.<sup>3</sup> Critics such as Joe Cleary, Luke Gibbons, Colin Graham, David Lloyd, Conor McCarthy and Terry Eagleton have elaborated, for the Irish experience, the dialectical terms of modernity’s appeal, and contributed to the development of a critical practice that aims to account for its protean, ultimately ephemeral, nature.<sup>4</sup> The political significance of these interventions derives from the various ways in which critics have addressed a dilemma identified



by Wagner, namely that ‘any attempt at a sociology of modernity risks falling prey to the problematic of its being enmeshed with the social world it tries to understand’.<sup>5</sup> For Graham, this is the ‘fundamental question’, as any analysis of what he terms ‘the utopian and the modernising in relation to Ireland’ must be judged in terms of its ‘relation to the “progress” it attempts to describe, decry or be thankful for’.<sup>6</sup>

Graham’s point is important because it indicates that one of the standard views of the DeLorean project — as the modern declaring itself amidst the wreckage of the old, the atavistic and the uselessly traditional — itself deserves questioning. As Eamonn Hughes has argued, Northern Ireland may be seen, not as a pre-modern location nervously awaiting the modernizing benefits of American corporate finance, but as ‘a modern place with the pluralities, discontents, and linkages appropriate to a modern place’.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the political violence that has occurred in the North since the late 1960s can be understood dialectically as both modern and pre-modern, both of its time and residual.

But we can usefully bypass the worn terms of this account and focus instead on a persistent tendency in the history of Northern Ireland to ‘stage the moment of modernity’ through a series of discrete events. These would include prestigious cultural projects with an international dimension, public architecture such as the Castlecourt Shopping Centre in Belfast, and exhibitions such as Ulster ’71. Their purpose in relation to the state is to act as symbols of invigoration — as enabling myths — that can sustain and advance an idea of Northern Ireland itself as an entity engaged in a productive relationship with the modern. Central to this is fantasy, a mode that Graham has identified as linking both the idea of the nation and that of capitalist modernity.<sup>8</sup> It is in these terms that the British government’s investment in DeLorean can be understood — as a fantastical staging of the modern at a time when Northern Ireland was predominantly understood as a site of anachronistic passions.

In this context, the modernity that the DeLorean project embodied came, to use Cleary’s terms, ‘entirely from “above” and

Lead image: On a tour to impress potential investors in 1978: a prototype DMC-12 in front of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles. Photograph: Larry Chapman, courtesy of Jerry Williamson.

Left: The DMC plant in Dunmurry, Belfast. Photograph: courtesy of Bill Collins.

- 3 Quoted in Joe Cleary, ‘Introduction: Ireland and Modernity’, in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly, eds., *Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge, 2005), 1–21, 2
- 4 See Cleary’s essay on Ireland and modernity referenced above, Luke Gibbons’s *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996), Colin Graham’s *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh, 2001), David Lloyd’s *Ireland after History* (Cork, 1999), Conor McCarthy’s *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland* (Dublin, 2000), and Terry Eagleton’s ‘The Archaic Avant Garde’ in his *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London, 1995), 273–319.
- 5 Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (London, 1994), ix

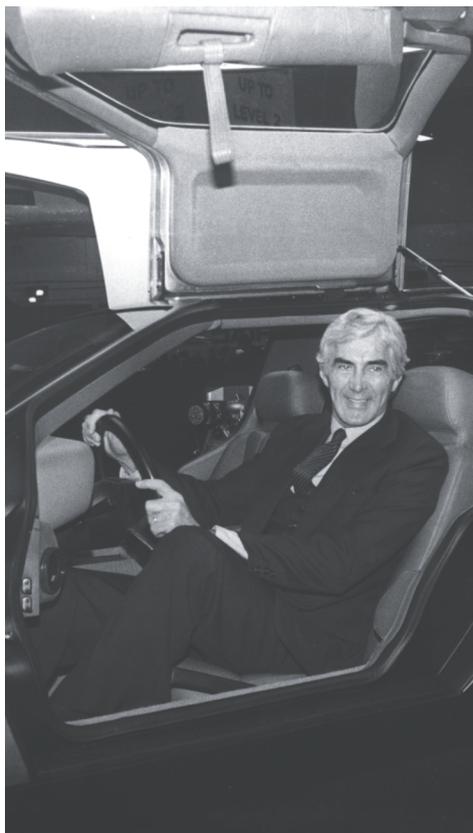
- 6 Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, 14
- 7 Eamonn Hughes, ‘Introduction: Northern Ireland — Border Country’, in Eamonn Hughes, ed., *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Milton Keynes, 1991), 3
- 8 Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, 16
- 9 Cleary, ‘Introduction’, 3
- 10 Mao, *Solid Objects*, 6
- 11 William Haddad, *Hard Driving: My Years with John DeLorean* (New York, 1985), 27
- 12 Richard Hughes, ‘DeLorean: Belfast’s Concorde?’, *Car* (February 1979), reproduced in R. M. Clarke, *DeLorean 1977–1995 Gold Portfolio* (Cobham, 2005), 22–25, 22
- 13 Ivan Fallon and James Srodes, *DeLorean: The Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker* (London, 1983), 116
- 14 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 134

“without”, rather than from “within” or “below”, and as such, it can be understood as simply a slightly revised version of the dominant way in which Ireland and modernity have historically been negotiated. For Cleary, this type of modernity is a ‘gift of colonial or religious conquest’.<sup>9</sup> The argument here is that it was through the discourses of colonial exchange that the DeLorean company typically came to understand its own particular form of civilizing mission. Central to this mission is, of course, the production of commodities, and it is ultimately the very physicality of the car — corporate finance rendered in startling material form — that carried this message. As a result, the DMC–12 is nothing less than an example of what Douglas Mao calls ‘the explosively signifying commodity’ — the apprehension of which acts as a marker of modernity itself. This moment of the modern is a disturbance in the midst of the known.<sup>10</sup> It declares itself loudly and unilaterally, but significantly it can never enter the realm of the familiar without a struggle. Instead, the modern is always imagined as being in a conflict with forces it always seeks to supplant. So imagined, it is only identifiable in relation to what it seeks to overcome; in order for it to be visible at all, it must be seen as partially, never wholly, victorious over what it is defined against. Understood as such, modernity is always dialectically dependent on the old.

The basic story of Northern Ireland’s DeLorean adventure is well known, but it rewards revisiting. John Zachary DeLorean (1925–2005) was a hugely charismatic, if eccentric, figure who had risen through the corporate hierarchy of General Motors with seemingly effortless momentum. Allegedly on the verge of the presidency of that corporation, he suddenly left, claiming (among other things) that ‘the automotive industry has lost its masculinity’.<sup>11</sup> He established his own firm, the DeLorean Motor Company (DMC), in 1973, and acquired investment loans from the Bank of

America. With the design and development of the car that would eventually become the DMC–12 in hand, he began his search for a suitable factory site, a place where labour was cheap and state subsidy a likelihood. After talks with government officials from the Republic of Ireland and Puerto Rico — one commentator describing the project as being ‘hawked around the world’ — a late intervention by the British government in 1978 secured the factory for Northern Ireland.<sup>12</sup> By any measure, the terms of the deal were astonishingly generous. DeLorean persuaded the Labour administration to advance £54 million in grants, equity and loans, and this was followed by a further £30 million from Margaret Thatcher’s new Conservative administration in 1980. As a result, each of the proposed 2,000 jobs created would cost the taxpayer something close to £25,000 — far more than in any previous government intervention in industrial job creation. The agreement was announced to sceptical journalists on 3 August 1978. In return for his state subsidy, DeLorean undertook to build a 550,000-square-foot factory on a 72-acre site at Dunmurry, six miles to the south-west of the city. With the momentum of free-flowing capital behind him, he ‘promised to move from cow pasture to production within eighteen months’, a promise that was kept.<sup>13</sup>

But all was not what it seemed. DeLorean’s own financial investment in the venture was negligible, bordering on non-existent, almost certainly because he was never entirely convinced that the project would succeed. One month after the deal with the British was signed, he startled DMC executives with the sudden assertion, ‘I don’t think we’ll ever build the car in Northern Ireland; the IRA will blow it up’.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, the heavily subsidized presence of DMC in Dunmurry was, paradoxically, at once confirmation that Northern Ireland’s economy was an abnormal failure and part of a governmental effort to represent the society as normal. The economic



situation was certainly grievous. General unemployment in Northern Ireland at the time was, at around 11 per cent, more than twice the UK average; unemployment among Catholics in West Belfast was nearer to 50 per cent, and showing every sign of worsening. But the readiness of an administration as ideologically adverse to state subsidy for industry as Thatcher's Conservatives to follow Labour in the heavy funding and high profile fêting of DeLorean, served only to underline that there was more at stake than mere job creation. Since the mid-1970s, London's Irish policy had essentially been a counter-insurgency strategy of Ulsterization, criminalization and normalization — that is, respectively, the replacement of British troops with locally recruited 'security forces', the representation of insurgents as criminals and gangsters, and the removal of the most overt signs of military conflict. Roy

Mason, the Labour Party secretary of state for Northern Ireland who first championed the project, was a professed believer in the effectiveness of economic intervention as a means of undercutting support for the IRA. Convinced that 'terrorists need unhappiness and hopelessness as fish need water', he assured his Cabinet colleagues in July 1978 that the investment in DeLorean would 'indirectly' save the lives of British soldiers and deal 'a hammer blow to the IRA'.<sup>15</sup>

DeLorean himself was at times ambivalent about Northern Ireland and at others openly dismissive. Still, he was nobody's fool. In the negotiations for financial concessions he had exploited the government's disparate reasons for wanting to bring his factory to the North and he now proclaimed: 'I'm starting to recognise that God stuck me here to be part of the solution to the crisis in Northern Ireland.'<sup>16</sup> Such was the prevailing goodwill for DeLorean that many were prepared to believe him. After all, as the American motoring journalist Tony Swan argued, 'guys with jobs are a lot less likely to enroll in their local extremist bomb factory'.<sup>17</sup> The facile terms of this equivalence effectively reveal the flaws of the argument. By asserting the primacy of economic factors in accounting for IRA support in deprived areas of the North, the government concomitantly underplayed the significance of cultural and historical factors in the IRA's appeal. Rather than a mere misjudgement of priorities, this policy reflected a much more profound misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict, and it was one that would be starkly outlined by the looming H-Block crisis.

As would become increasingly clear, the major instability at the heart of this precarious financial edifice was John DeLorean himself. An inveterate fantasist who would 'sooner be sterilized than go second class', according to Craig Waters, DeLorean was a figure with 'no understanding of his limitations'.<sup>18</sup> Rarely without either a project or a scandal, his

John DeLorean, sitting in the DMC-12, 1981. Photograph: Central Press/Getty Images.

15 Roy Mason, *Paying the Price* (London, 1999), 21; Paul Dixon, 'British Policy towards Northern Ireland 1969–2000: Continuity, Tactical Adjustment and Consistent "Inconsistencies"', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3, 3 (2001), 340–68, 362

16 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 54

17 Tony Swan, 'DeLorean: The American Dream is Alive and Fighting for Survival in Northern Ireland', *Motor Trend* (May 1981), 85–90, 85

18 Craig R. Waters, 'John DeLorean and the Icarus Factor', *Inc.* (April 1983), 35–42, 35, 38

Gloria Hunniford, presenter of Ulster Television's *Good Evening Ulster*, poses with a DMC-12. Photograph: Ken McNally.



19 The complex if entertaining plot of this novel is outlined on Haddad's *Hard Driving*, 13.

20 Tony Scott, 'Jim's Irish Joke?', *Motor* (1 December 1979), reproduced in Clarke, *DeLorean 1977-1995 Gold Portfolio*, 26-29, 26.

21 Swan, 'DeLorean', 39; Peter Martin, 'Supercar that Fuels New Hope for Ulster', *Now* (21 March 1980), 66-67

numerous financial concerns included a potato farm, a stake in two American football teams, a bus-building venture, an avocado farm in California, a plan to import Alfa Romeo, Suzuki, and Daihatsu cars into the US, a replica-car-building firm, investment in an optical laser research company, a snowcat manufacturing business, a stake in a maritime services enterprise, and a (sadly) uncompleted novel about the nuclear arms race.<sup>19</sup> With this record, it is not surprising that the Dunmurry project provoked scepticism from the first: 'Did you hear the one about the flashy America who blarnied £53 million of your money from Jim Callaghan in order to build in Ireland his 120 mph dream car for sale almost solely to the 55 mph-limited Yanks?' joked one car journalist.<sup>20</sup> Others were less cynical. For Swan, DeLorean represented nothing less than 'the last stand of the individual entrepreneur in a business

world populated by faceless conglomerate giants', while Peter Martin, with a faith that would soon appear hopelessly naïve, proclaimed: 'the other partners in this venture are you and me and not least the ragamuffin children who sell newspapers from pub to pub every evening in Belfast's many ghettos of unemployment'.<sup>21</sup> But the most gullible were the ministers and civil servants of the British Government, and it was their opinions that mattered.

Construction of the factory at Dunmurry began on 2 October 1978 with a small tree-planting ceremony conducted by DeLorean, his wife Christine, and one Don Concannon, a minister of state for Northern Ireland. As John Lamm observed, the event 'had a certain air of foreboding'. Appropriately, perhaps, the symbolism of the ceremony was muddled and open to contrasting interpretations. According to Lamm, the three trees planted



Don Concannon, Labour minister of state for Northern Ireland, and John DeLorean at the tree-planting ceremony that marked the commencement of work on the Dunmurry plant, 2 October 1978. Women supporting republican prisoners' campaign for political status can be seen through the wire fence. Photograph: courtesy of Bill Collins.

by DeLorean and various Northern Irish politicians symbolized 'the involvement of DeLorean, England and Northern Ireland'.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, for William Haddad, a DMC executive, they represented 'a trinity marking the joint effort of the Catholics, the Protestants and the British'.<sup>23</sup> Others would mark the event in less convoluted ways. As the *Irish News* reported:

Throughout the ceremony about 50 women, protesting about conditions in the H-Blocks at Long Kesh, chanted 'Brits Out' and 'Smash H-Block' and sang 'The Soldier's Song'. Mr Gerry Fitt, who was attending the ceremony, described the women's behaviour as 'disgraceful'. The women did not represent the views of the community living in Twinbrook and they were merely involved in a propaganda exercise, he declared. Canon

Padraig Murphy, P.P., St John's, said he hoped DeLorean would not judge the community by extremists on either side.<sup>24</sup>

Despite police protection, the DMC executives were certainly unnerved by their first taste of Northern Irish politics. Jerry Williamson was convinced that 'if they'd had guns they would have shot at us', while John DeLorean recalled with endearing frankness, 'they said they weren't protesting us, they were primarily protesting Don Concannon, who kept taunting them through the fence. I felt like hiding under a car, to be honest with you.'<sup>25</sup>

The presence of the demonstration at the ceremony was appropriate if only because the H-Block campaign and hunger strikes would shadow the fortunes of DMC throughout its short existence. The factory's

- 22 Lamm, *Stainless Steel Illusion*, 79
- 23 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 45
- 24 'Rush for Jobs at DeLorean', front-page story, *Irish News*, 3 October 1978
- 25 Lamm, *Stainless Steel Illusion*, 80

- 26 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 282; the emphasis is DeLorean's.
- 27 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 119
- 28 Martin, 'Supercar that Fuels New Hope for Ulster', 67
- 29 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 127
- 30 Martin, 'Supercar that Fuels New Hope for Ulster', 66

location between Protestant and Catholic enclaves reflected the government's concern that the company be seen to recruit from both sides of the community, but it also made it vulnerable to attack. This fear found material form in the architecture of the site. A separate access road was built from the Lisburn Road to enable Protestants to avoid travelling through the Catholic Twinbrook estate, while the plant itself was surrounded by two fences and split into a number of smaller buildings so that the effects of arson or looting might be minimized. This proved to be a wise precaution. The mother of Bobby Sands, Anti-H-Block MP for Fermanagh–South Tyrone and hunger-strike leader of IRA prisoners in Long Kesh, lived on the Twinbrook estate, and on the night of his death, 5 May 1981, a small group of rioters rammed the outer gates and got close enough to the factory to fire-bomb a small wooden building near the inner perimeter fence. This was the office of DMC's chief engineer, Mike Loasby, and it contained many of the blueprints and engineering drawings for the car. As duplicates of these were held elsewhere, this was an inconvenience rather than a disaster, but DeLorean still used the attack as an excuse to file a massively inflated claim for compensation with the British government. As his confidential memo to Haddad two days later exulted:

Today DMC is faced with the greatest opportunity of your corporate lifetime. With the troubles in Twinbrook/Belfast for the first time in our tenure there, *no single person in UK begrudges us the \$160,000,000 we got from the government!* Most today think we earned it!<sup>26</sup>

The fire-bombing of the wooden building, however, was the only significant act of violence that affected the company, and, for the most part, DMC enjoyed good relations with both sides of the community. Notwithstanding the British

army's occasional use of the building as a vantage point for reconnoitring nationalist Twinbrook, republicans were ambivalent about the factory.<sup>27</sup> Its status as a prominent government initiative made it an attractive target, but the fact that DMC was an American company reduced that unwelcome allure. Moreover, the nationalist community generally would have been resistant to any attack on a facility in which working-class Catholics held well-paid jobs. One journalist reported that the 'word is that the people of Twinbrook, which is Catholic through and through, have warned off the Provos: "Don't touch that factory. There's jobs for us in there"'.<sup>28</sup> Whether this was true or not, the IRA took a keen interest in what was happening inside the factory and, according to Haddad, met with him in a flat in Andersonstown in order to discuss the company's employment policy. The IRA was seemingly satisfied with his answers. The company did maintain a fairly equal balance of Catholic and Protestant employees, but Catholics were much more likely to be employed in 'dirty jobs' such as the body-press plant.<sup>29</sup> One euphemism that gained currency at this time was that 'skilled' in actuality meant 'Protestant'.

The most remarkable element of the whole enterprise was, of course, the car itself. Designed by the Italian Giorgetto Giugiaro in the mid-1970s, it was described by one early reviewer as 'a luxurious performance car with brushed stainless steel finish, gull-wing doors and pornographically low Italian styling'.<sup>30</sup> It was certainly an extraordinary creation. With its angular lines, uncompromisingly sharp edges and deeply raked windscreen, the car seemed unwilling to acknowledge its place in traditions of automotive design. It clearly looked nothing like its muscular American competitors, and (despite sharing much of its engineering with the Lotus Esprit) it similarly did not reference any clear European lineage. Car journalists struggled to find a language to describe it:

On first sight, the prototype is just flat stunning. ... The image is squat and smooth, like a pumpkin seed, and the stainless-steel skin makes it glow, changing from a metallic grey at midday to ever warmer shades of pink as the sun works towards evening. There is nothing frilly about this car, no flash and filigree for its own sake. Instead there is a kind of purity of form, the same suggestion you get in a well-crafted hand tool.<sup>31</sup>

Starved of origin, the DMC-12 was sold in the US without any acknowledgement that it was built in Ireland — a fact that DeLorean was, if anything, eager to conceal. Indeed, considering the extent to which the history of Irish manufacturing has often been reliant on the production and dissemination of Irishness as a quality inherent to the product, the deliberate concealment of the car's origin in Northern Ireland, perfectly understandable in many respects for a commodity of this kind, is also the more noteworthy. Yet, there is of course an industrial pedigree for heavy engineering products in Northern Ireland, particularly shipbuilding and aircraft, and they too have long histories of public subsidy, readily

granted by British governments otherwise hostile to such policies. But these did not conform to the commercial profile of the DeLorean project, nor was their history one he seemed anxious to appropriate. It was not just the stain of Northern Irish origin that had to be erased; it was the stain of any origin. This was a dream car, after all. It really belonged to Disneyland. As did its finances. This was a classic case of the fetish commodity, with its labour hidden, the collector's item that came from the Capital utopia of Nowhere — free of the local, the political, the sedimented remains of the historical.

DeLorean's ambitions for the DMC-12 went beyond looks and performance, however. He envisaged the product as an 'ethical car', one that would be light in weight and thus fuel efficient, safer in a collision than its competitors, and with a much extended lifespan, thanks to its striking stainless steel body panels (challenging what DeLorean termed 'this dynamic obsolescence kick').<sup>32</sup> Alongside these innovations, it was intended that each car would require a lot less energy to build than a comparable model constructed in a less advanced factory. In

- 31 Anonymous, 'The DMC-12', *Car and Driver* (July 1977), reproduced in Clarke, *DeLorean 1977-1995 Gold Portfolio*, 5-12, 9.
- 32 Anonymous, 'The Gull Wing Snub', *Wheels* (May 1980), reproduced in Clarke, *DeLorean 1977-1995 Gold Portfolio*, 30-32.

**GOODYEAR. QUALITY A MAN CAN STAKE HIS REPUTATION ON.**

John Z. DeLorean. A legend in the car industry long before he ever decided to build his dream car. And when he did decide to build his dream car, he went to Lotus for the suspension; to Giugiaro for the design.

And to Goodyear for the tires. Working with Goodyear engineers, and drawing on Goodyear's unequalled racing experience, John Z decided on race-type sizing for optimum balance and handling:

Goodyear NCT 195/60 HR14s for the front; larger Goodyear NCT 235/60 HR15s for the rear.

Given John Z's knowledge of the automobile industry, he could have decided to have just about any major tire manufacturer provide him with tires for the first car bearing his name.

But when John's first car rolled off the line, the only name other than John's that appeared on the exterior was ours.

Our name is Goodyear. And we make high-performance radial tires. Radial tires that a man can stake his reputation on.

**GOODYEAR**  
QUALITY AND INNOVATION

The DMC-12 used Goodyear NCT tyres; a full-colour two-page Goodyear advertisement trades on DeLorean's reputation for rugged individualism. Photograph: courtesy of Robert Lamrock.

- 33 Hillel Levin, *John DeLorean: The Maverick Mogul* (London, 1983), 206
- 34 Ed Jacobs, 'Under the Wolf's Clothing Lies a Safety Car for the Real World', *Popular Science* (July 1981), 71–72
- 35 Don Sherman, 'The DeLorean Dilemma', *Car and Driver* (July 1981), reproduced in Clarke, *DeLorean 1977–1995 Gold Portfolio*, 50–54, 52.
- 36 Levin, *Maverick Mogul*, 212
- 37 Sherman, 'The DeLorean Dilemma', 54

truth, however, the car's 'newness' went no further than its immediate visual aspect. Despite DeLorean's claim that it was a 'revolutionary new product', some of its technology was outdated even before it entered production.<sup>33</sup> As design problems with the prototype mounted, DeLorean invited Colin Chapman of Lotus Cars substantially to redesign the vehicle, and while this did achieve the desired outcome of making the DMC-12 production-worthy, the original concept of the ethical car was hugely compromised. Indeed, by the time Chapman had completed his work, in many respects only the external design of the vehicle remained as originally envisaged.

Perhaps because of these compromises the finished car was far from perfect. Even a well-intentioned reviewer from *Popular Science* was forced to acknowledge a high number of peculiar design flaws:

Above 65 mph all five cars developed a distinct, high-pitched whistle. The markings for the heater and air-conditioner controls were impossible to read in daylight, even though backlit. The digital clock lies nearly flat on the console, and the bottom half is obscured. Some rocker switches are placed on the console under your elbow and frequently bumped during shifting. And none of the heaters was especially effective. Overall, though, the cars were still quite good.<sup>34</sup>

This was not all. As the concept of the ethical car had been gradually compromised, so other design problems asserted themselves. Most obviously, thanks to the replacement of the original advanced plastic frame with a Lotus steel backbone, the production vehicles were excessively heavy. This, in turn, made them too cumbersome for their intended market. Another 'ethical' innovation — the use of stainless steel body panels to combat corrosion — also proved impractical, as their surfaces were marked by the slightest touch. As a result,

the vehicles required constant polishing. Less tangibly, a number of early reviews of the car described the experience of entering it as like being 'entombed'.<sup>35</sup> Instead of embodying a liberating expression of life in capitalist America, as DeLorean had originally intended, the DMC-12 unwittingly reminded its driver of the vanity of mortal desires.

These basic design flaws were compounded by poor construction techniques. While there was general praise for the commitment of the workforce (absenteeism at the factory was a remarkably low 1.2 per cent) and the willingness of the workers to acquire new skills, the lack of any substantial background in manufacturing or engineering created its own difficulties. As one DMC executive observed: 'I was watching one guy putting in water seals around the door, and he was having trouble making it all fit at once, so he was cutting it into pieces, and fitting one little piece at a time. He just had no idea what the seal was for and how it worked.'<sup>36</sup> The first cars constructed by the factory were so poor that they were condemned as 'abysmally short of any standard of commercial acceptability' by *Car and Driver* magazine.<sup>37</sup> Although build quality improved as the workers gained more experience, the car's reputation for unreliability remained. Indeed, according to Dick Brown, vice-president for marketing at DMC, after importation to the US each car had to be 'almost totally reassembled' before it could be shipped on to the dealers — a process that cost a minimum of \$1,500 per vehicle. As a result, the one significant advantage of locating the plant in Northern Ireland — the low cost of labour when compared to the US — was almost entirely negated. Common problems that new owners encountered included: malfunctioning doors that would trap the driver inside the vehicle; leaking bodywork; poor panel fittings; radios that did not work; windows that fell out; inoperative fuel gauges; and the fact that the dye from the



floor mats would stain the driver's clothing and skin. As if these faults were not enough, some drivers reported a more general problem — the car would not work in cold weather (or if it did work, the throttle had a tendency to freeze jammed open in an alarming manner). The National Highway Safety Administration twice recalled the car in order to rectify serious safety problems, including a potentially faulty fuel pump that in the event of a crash would continue to send fuel to the engine. As Brown noted forthrightly: 'Hey! We can't sell this shit!'<sup>38</sup>

Back in Ireland the project was beginning to encounter other difficulties. For the DMC executives, Belfast was becoming a place of myth and superstition, a city where 'fact and fancy tend to merge', as Haddad put it.<sup>39</sup> In turn they saw themselves as crusaders for modernization, negotiating local sensibilities with a mixture of condescension, timidity, and exasperation. An early episode that illustrates this was the discovery of what was purported to be a faerie tree growing in the middle of the planned factory site. As Dixon Hollinshead, who was in charge of the construction of the plant, recalled:

we joked about the thorny bush for awhile and then we tried to get one of the crew to cut it down and they wouldn't do it. They'd give us the story about Murphy, who went to cut one down once and cut his leg off. Then I spread a rumour that there was a \$100 bill buried under it, but I couldn't get any takers ... and then one day it was gone and they all went about their business.



I was accused of cutting it down but I didn't like the publicity, because I figured somebody might blame me for it and get mad about it.<sup>40</sup>

For Haddad the consequences of Hollinshead's act could hardly have been more ominous. As he heard one local construction worker prophesy: 'it's a dark day. You have wrecked everything we're building. The faerie will see to that'.<sup>41</sup>

After DeLorean himself, Haddad is perhaps the most fascinating figure in the DMC story. Haddad had been a journalist, a high-ranking official in the US Peace Corps and a special assistant to Robert F. Kennedy, before pursuing a career in business; according to Mike Knepper, his successor at DMC, he 'had some secretive, undercover-type contacts' and 'was happiest when involved with an intrigue of some kind or another'.<sup>42</sup> In his memoir, *Hard Driving: My Years with John DeLorean*, Haddad describes himself as DeLorean's 'eyes and ears' — the fool to DeLorean's King Lear — informing him of anxieties about the safety of the car and questioning some of the murkier aspects of the financing of the company.<sup>43</sup> Reluctant to listen to these disquieting truths, DeLorean banished Haddad from New York to the factory in Belfast on the day of Sands's funeral. DeLorean believed Haddad was 'scared silly' of the city and, as such, the exile must have seemed like an effective punishment.<sup>44</sup> Scared or not, banishment did not stop Haddad in his self-appointed role as the conscience of DMC. An obsessive memorandum writer, the longer

DMC-12s being assembled at Dunmurry. Photographs: courtesy of Robert Lamrock.

38 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 288

39 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 46

40 Lamm, *Stainless Steel Illusion*, 80

41 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 46

42 Lamm, *Stainless Steel Illusion*, 152

43 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, x

44 [www.home.no/delorean/dmccinc.htm](http://www.home.no/delorean/dmccinc.htm)

- 45 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 52  
 46 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 134, 283  
 47 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 84  
 48 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 283  
 49 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 53  
 50 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 297  
 51 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, xi  
 52 Fallon and Srodes, *Rise and Fall of a Dream-maker*, 379–80

he was in Belfast, the more fantastical his reports back to DeLorean became. Haddad became convinced that the IRA was closely monitoring the movements of DMC executives, recalling that 'British security forces instructed us to book one hotel and stay at another in both London and Belfast; to make several reservations; and not to develop predictable routines'.<sup>45</sup> Although the hybrid discourse of fear and affection that came to characterize his writings about Northern Ireland was typically that of a neo-colonial administrator sent against his will to the empire's furthest reaches, John DeLorean was more one-dimensional in his views. According to Brown, DeLorean characterized the Northern Irish he met as 'dummies, morons, incompetents', while he 'hated and feared' Belfast itself.<sup>46</sup> Little wonder, then, that he investigated purchasing an ankle-length bullet-proof raincoat of a type supposedly pioneered for Henry Kissinger.<sup>47</sup>

Bunkered in Belfast and attempting to keep afloat an increasingly unstable operation, the self-image of the DMC executives began to shift dramatically. Always prone to taking an idealized view of their talents — according to DeLorean, he and his team deserved to 'become the industrial heroes of the UK' — at first they began to think of themselves as war-hardened and somehow invulnerable.<sup>48</sup> Haddad reported with immense pride that the British auditors who oversaw the operation on behalf of the British government compared the DeLorean executives to 'the RAF in 1940: a combination of talent, black humour and suicidal determination'.<sup>49</sup> That many DMC executive memos from Belfast at this time were fantastical in their excesses was perhaps no more than the logical outcome of their attempt to negotiate what they saw as two incompatible world-views. As a memo from Haddad to DeLorean insisted:

John, I have been here when an angry mob (confronted by police firing plastic bullets

into a crowd of teenagers) has tried to rip our gate down, and seen them hurl fire and acid bombs within feet of our executives. I have seen our executives retreat to the manufacturing building to keep things going. I have watched them leave in their unprotected individual cars, passing alongside the unpredictable areas. (And we know that steel tipped sniper bullets have ripped into this place.)

Ivan Fallon and James Srodes have pointed out that this was all 'pure fiction'.<sup>50</sup> The factory had only come under significant attack once, on the night of Sands's death, and no executives, including Haddad, were anywhere near the plant at that time. What is of greater interest in Haddad's report, however, is its preoccupation with boundaries, transgressions and penetration (with the executives playing the role of vulnerable maidens); a discourse that can perhaps be described as a form of corporate capitalist gothic. As the gothic is a discursive formation frequently found at the point at which the modern and the pre-modern violently collide, its emergence in Haddad's accounts is certainly symptomatic.

Fearful that the British government — which had been leaked copies of all Haddad's memos by Marian Gibson, a disaffected former DMC secretary — would instigate an inquiry, DeLorean denounced them as forgeries and attempted to destroy Haddad's credibility.<sup>51</sup> By this stage, however, the damage was done. Indeed, DeLorean himself was beginning to exhibit similar symptoms of paranoia, claiming in February 1982 that there had been a total of 140 fire-bombings at the factory, that DeLorean executives had come under sniper attack, and that he had been told to 'stay away from windows when at the facility'. Similarly, he insisted that he could not stay overnight in Belfast, as 'the Brits want me out of here by nightfall — I'm a target!'<sup>52</sup> Although these stories were, as an unnamed DeLorean executive put it, 'unmitigated bullshit', so fearful did

DeLorean become about the possibility of IRA assassination that he began to publicize a previously unknown devotion to the Catholic Church, making a point of stopping at Catholic churches in Belfast whenever he was passing.<sup>53</sup> This was all the more surprising for those who knew him prior to his Northern Irish adventure; when he was at General Motors, he had indicated that he was an Episcopalian.<sup>54</sup>

By the start of 1982, the problems that faced DMC had become so great that the dissolution of the company appeared inevitable. Every part of the business was affected by cash-flow problems, and the failure of a proposed stock issue that would have raised over \$27 million meant that the firm could do little to alleviate its situation. DeLorean had alienated most of his original executive team (including Haddad), and the car itself was the subject of increasingly angry customer complaints. Despite DeLorean's appeals, the government was reluctant to provide more funding for the firm unless he was able to raise an equivalent amount; therefore, with no realistic alternative left to him, he invited the government to call in the receivers. The subsequent closure of the factory was prolonged and agonizing. By April 1982, the factory workers were on a one-day week. The unionist *Belfast Telegraph*, which now referred to the DMC-12 as simply 'that car', noted that 'while faith in the car is unshaken', firms supplying parts for the factory were now owed £26 million. Despite this — and surprisingly — it reported that while there was criticism of John DeLorean, 'there is an almost total absence of bitterness'.<sup>55</sup> Instead, a perception developed that the project had been somehow cursed from the start. With the firm in receivership, Loasby left the company bemoaning that 'everything combined against it', while the *Belfast Telegraph* lamented that 'the fates have not been kind'.<sup>56</sup> The nationalist *Irish News* was more forthright in its diagnosis:

The DeLorean tragedy — for that is unmistakably what it is — is seemingly grinding its stark and bitter way towards a not unexpected end. It is difficult to say whether the catastrophe has been made even worse by the tiny flickers of hope kept going from week to week as the official receivers kept interspersing optimistic phrases into the prevailing gloom. ... And as usual it is the ordinary man and woman who eventually pick up the tab — in this case the unfortunate 1,500 employees of DeLorean with their families and the local trade they help to maintain — of widening depression, bad housing, high prices and total disillusionment.<sup>57</sup>

Two days after this report, on 27 May, workers from the factory began a sit-in in the canteen, partly in protest at the closure, partly to guard the building from hopeful looters who had begun to circle ominously around the perimeter fencing. It was to no avail and the site closed for the final time on 31 May. Overshadowed by the Falklands conflict and the papal visit to Britain, the final day of the factory was ignored by most of the British news media, but David Beresford in the *Guardian* provided a suitable obituary:

The funeral, such as it was, passed off uneventfully. The obsequies were performed by the 1,500 workers and the Department of Health and Social Security who kept open two social security offices on the Bank Holiday, so the workers could sign on the dole. The factory resembled a well kept graveyard ... The presses, huge extractor fans, ovens and jigs were silent; about 1,000 cars sat motionless on the assembly line, vainly waiting for the engineers and fitters to transform them into status symbols for American roads. The tragedy attendant on all funerals was in the pride with which Mr Brendan Mackin, a shop steward and the former DeLorean

53 Levin, *Maverick Mogul*, 234, refers to DeLorean visiting 'St. Patrick's Cathedral'; the Catholic cathedral in Belfast is St. Peter's, and since it is in the republican Lower Falls, it seems unlikely that it would have been on DeLorean's route to and from the factory.

54 Haddad, *Hard Driving*, 82

55 *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 April 1982

56 *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 January and 14 April 1982

57 *Irish News*, 25 May 1982

58 Quoted in Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast, 2001), 783

59 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/3480679.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/3480679.stm)

60 See [www.dmcnews.com/cavepaintings.html](http://www.dmcnews.com/cavepaintings.html) for examples of the 'cave paintings'.

production foreman, guided me through the factory. As he demonstrated a gull-wing door, it squeaked and he said: 'Don't be put off by the noise: it's just the new hinges.'<sup>58</sup>

By this point, DeLorean's affairs were in meltdown. Desperate (or so he later told investigating police officers) to save his floundering company, he attempted to finance an operation to import 100 kilograms of cocaine into the US from Colombia. In fact, the operation was an elaborate FBI sting and on 26 October 1982 he was arrested in Los Angeles. In 1984 a Federal judge ultimately condemned the operation as a case of entrapment and acquitted DeLorean, but controversy would follow him for the rest of his life. Paranoid to the end, at various times he blamed his enemies at General Motors, the British government and even the IRA for setting him up. He died on 19 March 2005 aged eighty, still wanted for questioning on fraud charges in the UK.

The fallout from the DeLorean affair was to linger until 2004 — twenty-five years after the first Government investment package had been agreed — when a report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office revealed that the government had spent more than £20 million in its action against Arthur Andersen, the auditors acting on behalf of DMC. As John Dallat, of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, commented, 'everyone did well out of this project except the taxpayers, the

creditors and the poor workers who were exploited in a most shameful way'.<sup>59</sup> That said, and partly because of its central role in the *Back to the Future* film franchise, the DMC-12 has had a longer life and has attracted more affection than might have been expected. Despite its flawed design and poor construction, the car has gained a loyal following of enthusiasts who maintain the 6,500 DMC-12s estimated still to be in existence. When dismantling their cars for restoration, some of these devotees have found brief messages left by the Belfast construction workers hidden behind panels.<sup>60</sup> These so-called 'cave paintings' might be no more than the autographs of the production team, the date on which the car was completed, a cartoon, or a cryptic message about the uncertain future of the factory, but in each instance they are recorded, photographed and shared with something of the veneration one might associate with a reliquary. It is not difficult to understand why. Written upon a commodity that was intended to represent the ultimate placelessness of corporate capital, they fleetingly return the object to the moment of its production, placing the DMC-12 back into the matrix of Irish history and Belfast politics. As such, the resonance of the inscriptions is powerful. Certainly, for the factory workers who would soon find themselves once again unemployed and economically dependent on a state many of them saw as illegitimate, such writings were nothing less than a covert assertion of presence, a refusal to go quietly. ■