**GETTING BEYOND NO**

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***Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity: The Frustrated Promise of Political Loyalism*, by Tony Novosel, Pluto Press, 274 pp, £17.99, 978-0745333090**

***The End of Ulster Loyalism?*, by Peter Shirlow, Manchester University Press, 230 pp, £16.99, 978-0719084768**

The principal significance of these two works is that both confirm the existence of a progressive political ethos within Northern Ireland’s Protestant working class. The trick of repetition may be one their ideological opponents perfect, but the fact that a Loyalist vision of some originality and discernment did – and still could – exist is such an exotic notion in itself that it demands reiteration.

It is that spirit located by John Morrow, flowing “directly from the dissenting spirit that had sent Godgiven Kings to the block and, in 1798, had caused even Ireland to feel, however briefly, the breath of the Enlightenment”. While not a purely socialist strain of thought, it could be located in those swelling the ranks of the Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) in the 1950s and early 1960s, when all too briefly things may have been different. Most of all it is to be found in every writer of note to emerge from the community itself, from the historic imprint of Sam Thompson, via Graham Reid’s ground-breaking television plays of the 1980s, to the present day triumphs of Marie Jones and the energy of Gary Mitchell. In 1986 Edna Longley wrote that we needed to look at Ulster Protestant writers because “their political consciousness illuminates the darkest area”. This might sound cryptic but remains a statement anyone with knowledge of barren Northern Irish politics and the seemingly endless cycles of Loyalist violence, will appreciate for opening new doors. By failing to address its creative pulse, authors continue to inadvertently maintain the old fallacy that the Protestant working class has no culture but the Orange Order and Rangers FC.

With this in mind *The End of Ulster Loyalism?* and *Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity* are released at a time of great convulsion for Loyalism as older tics begin to resurface. But the more one views the history of the Protestant working class through the lens of the Loyalist paramilitaries alone the more this is revealed as absurd. Loyalist paramilitaries are not, and have never been, an authentic mouthpiece of the Protestant working class. Aside from a brief breakthrough in 1998 the constituency has repeatedly demonstrated its rejection of the paramilitaries at the ballot box, even when Loyalism produced spokesmen of articulacy. Generally Shirlow’s work lacks historical scope, the early violence of the Troubles – not to mention that of the 1920s and 30s – being conspicuously absent (such a spotlight is essential for an understanding of the travails of modern Loyalism). Novosel goes back further to get more of a handle on all of this, and also avoids getting too stuck in the well-established prison narrative. He pinpoints the crucial triumvirate of the Reverend John Stewart, Jim McDonald and David Overend – all three stalwarts of the NILP who acted as contacts to Loyalist prisoners and also talked with the Provisional IRA in 1974 – who helped nurture Loyalist acceptance of devolved power sharing at a time of vacuous Unionist integrationism.

This development was encapsulated in the Progressive Unionist Party’s “Sharing Responsibility” document, which gestated from 1977 onwards and led one of the North’s better secretaries of state, Jim Prior, to describe the evolving group as “twenty years ahead of their time”. Nevertheless, the “Long Kesh University” – where UVF (not UDA) members were tutored by Gusty Spence – is included. We never forget Spence’s journey and can hear his voice echoing through the huts of the Maze, his Socratic gift to every hot-headed young man sent through to the gateway of his supervision:

“Why are you here?”  
“I was defending my country.”  
“No! What circumstances in your life brought you a life sentence?”

Spence applied dissent to the root of every Loyalist’s relationship with the British state, simultaneously shattering the popular mythology that while Republicans came out of jail with PhDs the Loyalists came out with tattoos. In actual fact more Loyalist prisoners obtained degrees than their republican counterparts, with their education extending in certain cases to the Irish language. But the training meant nothing if the ex-prisoners failed to prosper on the outside. The fruit of engaged, thoughtful Loyalists – including David Ervine, Billy Hutchinson and Plum Smith – played a decisive role in the peace process and delivered the 1994 ceasefire, Spence’s ultimate progeny.

 Where Novosel is clear in tone Shirlow tends towards jargon, using convoluted language about a subject which needs most of all to be understood. Essentially his thesis is that Loyalism is divided into “progressive” and “regressive” wings, and the latter –with which we are so visually familiar, of “tattooed and muscular men with a dog in a T-Shirt”, as he paraphrases Hutchinson – must be abandoned. The thesis is a bit of a mouse; we could all do without Loyalist mayhem and criminality. But is also fails to address deeper complications. Take the recent flag protests: convention has it that they are a Paisleyite throwback, the kind of aggressive “Union Jackery” which used to define Protestant politics. Yet what can “progressive” Loyalists do? Do they condemn from the sidelines, potentially ceding what little influence they have over this marginalised and disillusioned section of the population? Or do they involve themselves in such a protest, curbing its destructive edges and simultaneously building a political power base so as to exert a meaningful (and possibly calming) influence once more? The latter course is a gamble but one the Progressive Unionist Party – now under Hutchinson’s direction – has taken. Do “progressive” and “regressive” wings of Loyalism convey such complexities? Absolutely not. All is grey as opposed to black and white, radical can accompany reactionary and vice versa. Loyalists were manipulated into voting against their class interests as long as the Unionist Party “brought a flute band and waved the Union Jack”, the pre-flag protest Hutchinson says to Novosel at one point.

In one of its most interesting and important features Loyalism is extremely diverse, something which differentiates it from mainstream Irish nationalism: there is no “line”. Thus Shirlow’s foremost error, which has unfortunately seeped into the work of some younger academics, concerns not revealing the names of his Loyalist interviewees. The use of “UVF Respondent” and “UDA Respondent” not only separates each individual from his analysis (they are of course only ever male), but also gives the highly misleading impression that members of the UVF and UDA speak with one voice and are broadly similar in mind and thought. The vital point is that these groups are so fissile that they do not speak – and have never spoken – with just one voice, and on the contrary are characterised by division and dissent. Novosel wisely avoids this mistake: we know when Hutchinson, Hughie Smyth or Dawn Purvis are speaking – they are all so very different – and we find out through the disparity of each person’s insight something about Protestantism itself.

At the same time Shirlow’s data yields some fascinating details such as the way “socialist” Republican ex-prisoners now tend to own their own homes while the majority of Loyalists are still renting! He scratches the surface of the problematic relationship with the media but *Northern Ireland’s Lost Opportunity* brings in voices which might escape the normal surveys. Liz Rea, Spence’s daughter, rather perceptively notes: “It always goes back to who they [the Protestant working class] see as the ‘big people’ out there. They’re frightened with going with a small Party … if we do that and don’t vote the DUP in, then Sinn Féin is going to take over government.” The PUP’s Hughie Smyth, present on Belfast City Council since 1973, confirms that his grouping’s contacts with Official Republicans and the Workers’ Party raised the prospect of a merger to form a united Ulster Workers’ Party. This never materialised and as it is both parties are stumped at two municipal seats each on the whole of the island.

Avila Kilmurray of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland tells Shirlow that Loyalism “is more positive than Unionism to a certain extent in that at least it does focus on identity issues … Whereas unionism tends always to be this thing of ‘oh well our economic benefit is in the Union’ and increasingly that’s becoming more questionable”. In 2005, when the interview took place and the South appeared in rude economic health, the superior economic benefits of the union may have *seemed* more questionable – not that most people in the Republic gave a hoot for unity at the time – but for Shirlow not to point out how preposterous it is nowadays is remarkable. The oversight ignores the fact that Unionists will cruise to victory in any border poll by focusing specifically on questions of “economic benefit”; it is also the kind of issue – minor things like employment and the health service – truly progressive Loyalists like talking about. The current flag protesters seem self-destructively hung up on identity issues, and it all contradicts the marvellous quote Shirlow opens with from David Ervine (to whom the book is dedicated), the kind of thing people say down in Dublin too: “I don’t want to wake up every morning and ask myself ‘Am I British or Irish?’ I want to think ‘Am I late for work?’”

Still, analysis of the monumental UWC Strike of 1974 manages to evade both books, despite changing everything. Yet Harry Donaghy, of the Messines project, tells Novosel that the greatest “lost opportunity” of all was ‘the power-sharing Executive … it was Sunningdale”. Enlightened Loyalists came round to the concept they opposed, and demolished, in 1974.

What both these writers deserve great credit for is their exhibition of that rare academic quality, generosity. Both call for further writing on the Protestant working class to remove it from the doldrums where it has languished for decades; “to expand the discussion of groups such as Loyalists and their journey out of violence” in Shirlow’s phrase. He is aware this must be cultural as well as political, as suggested by one of the nameless in a quote which lends him his title: “There will be no end to loyalism, just rebirth into something good this time around.” There are already signs that younger authors have taken up the challenge, with renewed focus on the Labour movement, the crisis of education, and above all on the creative lights – true rebirth – which represent the surest way the Protestant working class will transcend its old tics.

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