

the graffiti seemed merely a nuisance, an insult. And that was how I began to think of the whole country; if I had only one word to describe the expression of England's face I would have said: insulted.[^]

HACOY WEEK 6 (N. IRELAND)

TRAVELLING BRITAIN

PAUL THEROUX,

15

The Boat Train to Ulster

There was a gloomy irritable air about the passengers on the boat train to Ulster. It was not only that they had been on board for five hours and had three more to go before the ferry. It was worse than tiredness. It was resentment – as if they were being exiled, or forced back to school, or jailed after a period of freedom. But in fact they were homeward-bound.

I had joined the train at Carlisle. I expected to see either drunks or sleepers – it was mid-afternoon. But the passengers sat silently, holding their sallow faces in their hands, and they became gloomier as we progressed through the long Scottish hills of the border – Dumfries and Galloway. They were the sad-faced people in the wind at grey Stranraer.

By then the Scots had got off the train – the men who sat six to a table with a bottle of vodka and twenty cans of Tartan Ale; the families sitting in a nest of newspapers and sandwich wrappers and plastic bags; the poor stinking trampled terriers and their defiant owners; and the children screeching, 'How much farva!' and 'I can hear funda!' No trains got more befouled than the ones to Scotland, but this boat train was mostly empty by the time it reached Kilmarnock, and so on the last stage of its journey, along the Firth of Clyde, it looked wrecked and abandoned, the beer cans clanking and the bottles rolling on the floor, and an atmosphere of sour mayonnaise and stale cigarette smoke.

But I liked the hills and I was relieved once again to be near the shore. It was green countryside on a granite sea. Some of the coast was bare; in places there were forests, and hidden in deep lovely valleys there were baronial houses. The grey town of Girvan, with stone houses and squinting windows, had its

back turned to the water and wind. At Glenwhilly there were crimson poppies beside the track.

It was here, just before arriving, that the returning Ulster people became very irritable.

'Go and sit *dine!*'

'I'm tullying ya fer the last time!'

'I says go and find your suster!'

'Don't look so surprised!'

The Ulster accent is disliked in England, where it is regarded as a harsh, bastard, lowland Scots with a Glaswegian glottal stop. It is a blustering accent, and just as Welsh people seem permanently conciliatory in the way they speak, so the gabbling Ulster folk seem forever on the boil, trying to swallow and be cruel at the same time. The accent seems full of strain and greed, and yet the people are relaxed and friendly. A linguistic quirk makes them seem angry; it is as odd and as fascinating as the national lisp in Spain. Each time I heard an Ulsterman open his mouth I reached for my pen, like a missionary learning a tribal language and imagining a vernacular Bible or a dictionary.

Stranraer, in Loch Ryan, on the sea, was the main town on a peninsula shaped like a hammerhead. The ferry *Galloway Princess* was at the quayside, waiting for the arrival of the boat-train passengers to Larne. There were not many of us, but everyone was searched including the children – and the officers even groped in the infants' clothes. I was frisked, and then my knapsack was sifted through. They found my sheaf of maps, my binoculars, my notebook, my switchblade knife.

'And what's your purpose in going to Northern Ireland?' the policeman asked. This was Constable Wallace. Crumbs, the things he'd seen!

'Just looking around,' I said. 'A little business, a little pleasure. I might do a spot of bird-watching.'

'Carry on then,' Officer Wallace said, and handing me my knife he turned to his mate and said, 'A spot of bird-watching.'

There was a sign at the ferry entrance listing the various people who would not be allowed on board the *Galloway Princess* – rowdy people, drunks, and 'Football supporters ... displaying their club "favours" in any shape or form.'

Over dinner, Jack Mehaffy said, 'It's because the football clubs

are one religion or another, and if you wear a certain colour scarf you're a Catholic or you're a Protestant. It causes friction. They don't want trouble on this boat.'

We met by chance: we were each dining alone and so were asked to sit at the same table. The conversation got off to a slow start. Later, Mehaffy said, 'You don't talk too much unless you know who you're talking to. No one in Northern Ireland expresses opinions of any kind to strangers until he's very sure his listeners will be sumpathetic. If not, they'll puck a fight.'

Perhaps our conversation was typical. It took us forty-five minutes to get to religion and another hour before Mehaffy volunteered that he was a Protestant. By then it would have been too late to quarrel about Irish politics. We were friends.

He had not stated his religion. He had said in a challenging way, 'I'm British.' But that meant the same thing as Protestant. He was in the tailoring business and he told me how, very soon, most tailoring would be done automatically by sewing machines operated by microchips. This was bad news for Ulster, where shirt factories employed large numbers of people. Mehaffy said many were being closed down – he had shut a number of them himself.

He had grown up in a neighbourhood in County Down with Protestants and Catholics. 'We didn't have much money, and when we were short it was the Catholics who helped us out, not the Loyalists who were always running the Union Jack up the flagpole. We're still friendly with those Catholic families.'

He told me about his being a scoutmaster and how he always had Catholic boys in his troop. He asked the local priest's permission to include those boys and the priest said, 'Yes, me only regret is that you're doing something I wish I were doing meself.'

'I liked him for saying that,' Mehaffy said.

We talked about tailoring, about unemployment, about strife, and that was when he said, 'I'm British. But I'm also Irish. I mean, culturally I'm British, but I was born in Ireland, so I'm Irish too.'

'Do you feel an affinity with the Republic?'

'No, no. The south is different. They have a different tradition

there. Funnily enough, at one time I could actually see union with the Republic – a united Ireland. But now it's less and less a possibility.'

He was reluctant to explain why, but then said, 'The influence of the church is too strong there. Do you think any Ulsterman would accept the infallibility of the Pope?'

I said, 'But they accept the infallibility of the Queen.'

He laughed. He said, 'And contraceptives on prescription! We'd never accept it.'

Whenever the issue of union was raised Ulstermen mentioned contraceptives.

'And there's the tribalism,' Mehaffy said. 'The tribalism starts in July, with the Orange parades. The Catholic parades are in August. And then, people who are the best of friends all year won't speak to each other. There's a lot of suspicion in the summer – a lot of tribal feeling – between Catholic and Protestant.'

I said, 'Is it possible to tell them apart?'

'There are people who say it is,' Mehaffy said, and pointing to his eyes he went on, 'For one thing, a Catholic's eyes are closer together.'

We went out on deck and watched the cluster of lights at Larne drawing near. The mist liquefied the lights and made the harbour entrance dramatic. Mehaffy said that Ulstermen worked hard and had pride in their country. They hated people who tried to make jokes out of bombings and killings. This was while the ferry was making its way into Larne harbour, and the lights were piercing the mist and illuminating the dark brown waterfront, the gleaming slates on the roofs, the oily lough to port. The wind groaned among the dockside cranes. Mehaffy said it never stopped raining here. The returning Ulster people who had been on the boat-train stood silently at the rail, gazing upon Larne like mourners. Mehaffy said the trouble was, there was only one bloody topic of conversation, and who was really interested in that? The ferry horn echoed all over the harbour and lough, as if from a thousand empty holes in the night.

'I'm thinking of moving to England,' Mehaffy finally said.

His tone was confessional, his voice a whisper. I was still staring at Larne and did not know what to say.

'I've got two kids,' he said. 'They're still young. They'll have a better chance there.'

I expected formalities – customs and immigration – Larne was so foreign-seeming, so dark and dripping; but there was not even a security check, just a gangway and the wet town beyond it. I wandered the streets for an hour, feeling like Billy Bones, and then rang the bell at a heavy-looking house displaying a window-card saying *Vacancies*. I had counted ten others, but this one I could tell had big rooms and big armchairs.

'Just off the ferry?' It was Mrs Fraser Wheeney, plucking at her dress, hair in a bun, face like a seal pup – pouty mouth, soulful eyes, sixty-five years old; she had been sitting under her own pokerwork *Rejoice in the Lord Always* waiting for the doorbell to ring. 'Twenty-one fifteen it came in – been looking around town?'

Mrs Wheeney knew everything, and her guest house was of the in-law sort, oppression and comfort blended – like being smothered with a pillow. But business was terrible – only one other room was taken. Why, she could remember when, just after the ferry came in, she would have been turning people away! That was before the recent troubles, and what a lot of harm they'd done! But Mrs Wheeney was dead tired and had things on her mind, like the wild storm last night.

'Thonder!' she thundered. 'It opened up me hud!'

We were walking upstairs under a large motto – *For God So Loved the World*, and so forth.

'It gave me huddicks!'

The house was full of furniture, and how many floors? Four or five anyway, and pianos on some of them, and there was an ottoman, and a wing-chair, and pokerwork scenes from the Old Testament, Noah possibly, and was that Abraham and Isaac? The whole house was dark and varnished and gleaming – the smell of varnish still powerful, with the sizzle of a coal fire. It was June in Northern Ireland, so only one room had a fire trembling in the grate.

'And it went through me neighbour's roof,' she said, still talking about the storm, the thunder and lightning.

Another flight of stairs, heavy carpet, more Bible mottoes, an armchair on the landing.

'Just one more,' Mrs Wheeney said. 'This is how I get me exercise. Oh, it was turrrible. One of me people was crying -'

Mirrors and antlers and more mottoes and wood panelling, and now I noticed that Mrs Wheeney had a moustache. She was talking about the *reeyun* - how hard it was; about breakfast at *eeyut* - but she would be up at *sux*; and what a dangerous *suttee* Belfast was.

Christ Jesus Came Into The World To Save Sinners was the motto over my bedstead, in this enormous draughty room, and the bed was a great slumping trampoline. Mrs Wheeney was saying that she had not slept a wink all the previous night. It was the thunder and the poor soul in number eight, who was scared to death.

'It's funny how tired you get when you miss a night's sleep,' she said. 'Now me, I'm looking forward to going to bed. Don't worry about the money. You can give me the five pounds tomorrow.'

The rain had started again and was hitting the window with a swish like sleet. It was like being among the Jumblies, on a dark and rainy coast. They were glad to see aliens here, and I was happy among these strangers.

That first morning in Larne I discovered everything there was to know about Ulster rain - how it bucketed down from a sky no higher than a two-storey house; how it was never the quicksilver of the Channel rain but always dark, striking at such a merciless slant that it penetrated everything; how it was cold and noisy, and how it could be sharp enough to sting; how it never cleansed but rather blackened everything it struck. And no matter how often it rained, it was always so surprisingly cruel that everyone mentioned it. It was impossible to ignore. In this solemn, rain-darkened place people regarded the rain as unfair.

It was the setting that was solemn, not the people. (Though solemn was an understatement; Ulster looked black and devastated.) The people were curious - they stared, they smiled, they talked loudly and still managed to be polite. The women, most of all, seemed to me remarkable - just the way they stood and spoke, their decisive gestures, their spirit. It was true of girls, as well.

They seemed bold and friendly and able to take care of themselves.

These were judgements I made on the train from Larne to Belfast. It was a warm and rattly branch-line train, with bushes on the embankment beating against the door-handles, and bog ferns sliding across the wet windows.

I was talking to Dick Flattery. 'It's not a civil war,' he was saying. 'The Catholics and Protestants kill each other, but they haven't actually fought each other -'

Now who would have thought you could make such useful distinctions between 'fight' and 'kill'?

'- they kill each other singly,' he went on, 'but they fight the army and the police.'

Flattery seemed intelligent and detached. He had left Belfast seven years before, for good; he was only returning now because his father was ill. He wasn't planning to stay. He was frightened by the violence.

'It started as a civil rights issue, ten or eleven years ago' - he meant the marches, the first one in Londonderry in 1969 - 'and then it got violent. No one talks about civil rights anymore.'

He swiftly referred to Catholics as 'they' and I knew he must be a Protestant. I asked him whether he could tell a Catholic from a Protestant.

'The Protestants are from Scottish stock,' Flattery said. 'They look Scottish.'

We were travelling along Larne Lough - dark water, dark banks and the dark rain falling fast. We were talking about poverty.

'There's always been unemployment here,' he said. 'There's not the same stigma attached to it that you find in England. People here aren't lost when they're on the dole. It's really a kind of chronic condition - groups of men, standing on the street, doing nothing.' He looked out of the window. 'God, I hate this place.'

Now we were smack on the coast, leaving Whitehead and swaying towards Carrickfergus on a narrow shelf just above the sea, and then,

The little boats beneath the Norman castle
The pier shining with lumps of crystal salt;

The Scotch Quarter was a line of residential houses
But the Irish Quarter was a slum for the blind and the halt.

Louis MacNeice grew up in Carrickfergus, but it was not only his poem about that town that seemed to me clear-sighted – all his Ulster poems were vivid and true. And he wrote so well about the sea, sometimes as a tumultuous thing ('Upon this beach the falling wall of the sea . . .') and sometimes as a fuss-budget ('That never-satisfied old maid, the sea/Rehangs her white lace curtains ceaselessly'), and ultimately in its cosmic and thalassic sense: 'By a high star our course is set,/Our end is life. Put out to sea.'

He had looked out to sea here, beyond Belfast Lough into North Channel, and he had certainly been on this train, or else he could not have written, 'Like crucifixes the gantries stand', seeing the shipyard at Belfast.

I knew at once that Belfast was an awful city. It had a bad face – mouldering buildings, tough-looking people, a visible smell, too many fences. Every building that was worth blowing up was guarded by a man with a metal detector, who frisked people entering and checked their bags. It happened everywhere, even at dingy entrances, at buildings that were not worth blowing up, and again and again, at the bus station, the railway station. Like the bombs themselves, the routine was frightening, then fascinating, then maddening, and then a bore – but it went on and became a part of the great waste-motion of Ulster life. And security looked like parody, because the whole place was already scorched and broken with bomb blasts.

It was so awful I wanted to stay. It was one of those cities which was so demented and sick some aliens mistook its desperate frenzy for a sign of health, never knowing it was a death agony. It had always been a hated city. 'There is no aristocracy – no culture – no grace – no leisure worthy of the name,' Sean O'Faoláin wrote in his *Irish Journey*. 'It all boils down to mixed grills, double whiskies, dividends, movies, and these strolling, homeless, hate-driven poor.' But if what people said was true, that it really was one of the nastiest cities in the world, surely then it was worth spending some time in, for horror-interest?

I lingered a few days marvelling at its decrepitude and then vowed to come back the following week. I had never seen any-

thing like it. There was a high steel fence around the city centre, and that part of Belfast was intact because, to enter it, one had to pass through a checkpoint – a turnstile for people, a barrier for cars and buses. More metal detectors, bag searches and questions: lines of people waited to be examined, so that they could shop, play bingo, or go to a movie.

There were still bombs. Just that week a new type of bomb had started to appear, a fire-bomb made of explosive fluid and a small detonator; it exploded and the fiery fluid spread. And it was very easily disguised. These bombs had turned up in boxes of soap flakes and breakfast cereal and pounds of chocolates. One in a tiny bag had been left on a bus, and ten passengers had been burned and the bus destroyed. That was my first day in Belfast – *Driver Steers Through Blaze Hell to Save Lives* displaced the Falklands news.

Threats, was a headline in every newspaper, with this message: *If you know anything about terrorist activities – threats, murders or explosions – please speak now to the Confidential Telephone – Belfast 652155.*

I called the number, just to inquire how busy they were. But it was an answering machine, asking me for information about bombs and murder. I said, 'Have a nice day,' and hung up. On the way to Coleraine and the coast I was in a train with about ten other people, two in each car – and some got out at Botanic Station, a mile from Central. I had never imagined Europe could look so threadbare – such empty trains, such blackened buildings, such recent ruins: *Dangerous Building – Keep Clear*. And bellicose religion, and dirt, and poverty, and narrow-mindedness, and sneaky defiance, trickery and murder, and little brick terraces, and drink shops, and empty stores, and barricades, and boarded windows, and starved dogs, and dirty-faced children – it looked like the past in an old picture. And a crucifix like a dagger in one brute's lapel, and an *Orange Lodge Widows' Fund* badge in another's. They said that Ulster people were reticent. It seemed to me they did nothing but advertise. *God Save the Pope* painted on one ruin, and on another, *God Save the Queen*. And at Lisburn a large sign by the tracks said *Welcome to Provoland*. Everyone advertised, even urban guerrillas.

Fifteen minutes outside Belfast we were in open country:

pleasant pastures, narrow lanes, cracked farmhouses. But in such a place as Ulster the countryside could seem sinister and more dangerous than a crowded city, since every person on the move was exposed in a meadow or a road. The old houses all stuck up like targets, and it was hard to see a tree or a stone wall and not think of an ambush.

No Surrender, it said on the bridge at Crumlin. That town was a low wet rabbit-warren set amid cow parsley and wet fields. And then Lough Neagh, one of Ulster's great lakes, and the town of Antrim. Now the train had a few more sullen skinny faces on board. The towns were no more than labour depots, factory sites surrounded by the small houses of workers. But the factories were shut, the markets were empty, and the farmland looked flooded and useless. We came to Ballymena. I asked a man in the car if it was true that in Slemish near here ('where St Patrick herded his sheep') children used to be kept in barrels to prevent them fighting.

He said he did not know about that. His name was Desmond Corkery and he guessed I was from the United States. He wished he were there himself, he did. He was after coming from Belfast, he was, and was there a more bloody miserable place in the whole of creation? And dangerous? Policemen and soldiers everywhere – and they talked about Lebanon and the flaming Falklands!

I guessed that Corkery was a Catholic. I asked him my usual question: How do you tell a Protestant from a Catholic? He said it was easy – it was the way a Protestant talked, he was better educated. 'If he's using fancy words you can be sure –'

And then Corkery became reflective and said, 'Ah, but you're never really safe. You go into a bar, and you don't know whether it's a Protestant or Catholic bar. It can be frightening, it can, sure. You don't say anything. You call for your beer and you keep your mouth shut, and then you go.'

But I began to think that it was an advantage to be a stranger here, not English, not Irish; and it was a great advantage to be an American. I never felt the Ulster people to be reticent or suspicious – on the contrary, it was hard to shut them up.

'And it was around here,' Desmond Corkery was saying – we were past Ballymoney and headed into Coleraine; I had been encouraging him to tell me a story of religious persecution – 'just

about here, that a bloody great team of footballers started to walk up and down the train. They were drinking and shouting. "Bloody Fenian bastards!" Up and down the train. "Bloody Fenian bastards!" Looking for Catholics, they were. One comes up to me and says straight out, "You're a bloody Fenian bastard!"

I shook my head. I said it was terrible. I asked him what he did then.

'I said no,' Corkery looked grim.

'You told him you weren't a Catholic?'

'Sure I had to.'

'Did he believe you?'

'I suppose he did,' Corkery said. 'He slammed the door and went roaring off.'

We travelled in silence along the River Bann, and I thought how that denial must have hurt his pride, and it seemed to me that it was this sort of humiliation that made the troubles in Ulster a routine of bullying cowardice. It was all old grievances, and vengeance in the dark. That was why the ambush was popular, and the car bomb, and the exploding soap box, and the letter bomb. The idea was to deny what you stood for and then wait until dark to get even with the bugger who made you deny it.

It was drizzling at Coleraine, where I boarded a two-coach train to Portrush, a small seaside resort, emptier than any I had so far seen in Britain. But emptiness had given the place its dignity back.

Portrush was rainswept and poor, and part of it was on a narrow peninsula with waves breaking on three sides. The rain intimidated me for an hour or so. I had lunch with a man named Tubby Graham – there were only the two of us in the restaurant. Tubby was seventy and from Bangor. He liked motoring around, he said. 'But I stay out of those ghetto places. Bushmills, for example – that's a completely Protestant town. And Derry's a Catholic one.' He recommended Magilligan Point. Did I want a lift?

I said I had other plans and when he was gone I sneaked down the beach and started walking towards Bushmills, to see what a Protestant ghetto looked like. It was still raining, but I thought that if I kept walking it might stop; and so it did, by the time

I reached Dunluce Castle, three miles away. I walked along the sandy beach – not a soul in sight. And the cliffs were like battlements, made of white chalk with flint embedded in it. The only sounds were the gulls and the wind.

Further on I climbed the cliff and walked through the wet grass to Bushmills. The more prosperous a place was in Ulster, the sterner and more forbidding it looked. Bushmills, rich on whiskey, was made of flat rocks and black slates and cemented to the edges of straight roads. And now I saw what Tubby meant: the Orange Hall was large enough to hold every man in town.

I began to develop a habit of asking directions, for the pleasure of listening to them.

'Just a munnut,' a man in Bushmills said. His name was Emmett, about sixty-odd, and he wore an old coat. He had a pound of bacon in his hand, and pressing the bacon to the side of his head in a reflective way, he went on.

'Der's a wee wudden brudge under the car park. And der's a bug one farder on – a brudge for trums. Aw, der used to be trums up and down! Aw, but they is sore on money and unded it. Ussun, ye kyan poss along da strond if the tide is dine. But walk on the odder side whar der's graws.' He moved the bacon to his cheek. 'But it might be weyat!'

'What might be wet?'

'The graws,' Mr Emmett said.

'Long grass?'

'In its notral syat.'

This baffled me for a while – *notral syat* – and then I thought: Of course, in its natural state!

Kicking through bracken, I pushed on and decided to head for the Giant's Causeway.

Boswell: Is not the Giant's Causeway worth seeing?

Johnson: Worth seeing? Yes; but not worth going to see.

I stayed on the coastal cliffs and then took a short cut behind a coastal cottage, where I was startled by a big square-faced dog. The hairy thing growled at me and I leaped to get away, but I tripped and fell forward into a bed of nettles. My hands stung for six hours.

The Giant's Causeway was a spectacular set of headlands made

of petrified boilings and natural columns and upright pipe-shaped rocks. Every crack and boulder and contour had a fanciful name. This massive coastal oddity had been caused by the cooling of lava when this part of Ireland had oozed during a period of volcanic activity. I walked along it, to and from Dunseverick Castle – 'once the home of a man who saw the Crucifixion' (supposed to be Conal Cearnach, a roving Irish wrestler, who happened to be in a wrestling match in Jerusalem the day Christ was crucified).

The basalt cliffs were covered with black slugs and jackdaws, and at seven in the evening the sun broke through the clouds as powerfully as a sunrise, striping the sea in pink. It was very quiet. The wind had dropped. No insects, no cars, no planes – only a flock of sheep baaing in a meadow on a nearby hilltop. The coves and bays were crowded with diving gulls and fulmars, but the cliffs were so deep they contained the birds' squawks. The sun gleamed on the still sea and in the west above Inishowen Head I could spy the blue heights of Crocknasmug. Yes, the Giant's Causeway was worth going to see.

It had been a tourist attraction for hundreds of years. Every traveller to Britain had come here to size it up. There had been tramlines out to it, as Mr Emmett had told me in Bushmills. But the troubles had put an end to this and now the coast had regained a rough primeval look – just one stall selling postcards, where there had been throngs of noisy shops.

This landscape had shaped the Irish mind and influenced Irish beliefs. It was easy to see these headlands and believe in giants. And now with people too afraid to travel much, the landscape had become monumental once again in its emptiness.

In pagan Ireland cromlechs had been regarded as giants' graves, and people looked closely at the land, never finding it neutral but either a worry or a reassurance. Hereabouts, there were caves that had been the homes of troglodytes. And it seemed to me that there was something in the present desolation that had made the landscape important again. So the Irish had been returned to themselves in this interval, and their fears restored to them, for how could they stand amid all this towering beauty and not feel puny?

Enough of these natural wonders, I thought, and at the hotel

that night I button-holed Mr McClune from Ballywalter. 'Oh, I like Ballywalter! Oh, yes, Ballywalter's pleasant, it is! We only get the odd bomb in Ballywalter!'

But he was worried about his sister.

'My suster is going down to Cavan this weekend. I don't unvy her. She's a Protestant girl, you see.'

'Where is Cavan exactly?'

'In the Free State,' Mr McClune said.

I smiled; it was like calling Thailand 'Siam', or Iran 'Persia'.

'A pig farm,' he explained. 'I mean to say, that's where my suster's staying. Now at this piggery there's a foreman. He is a member of the IRA.'

'I see why you're worried,' I said.

'But that could be a good thing, couldn't it?' he said. 'It could keep her safe.'

He meant that no one from the IRA would murder his sister, because a man from the IRA was employed by his sister's friends.

'We'll see what happens,' he said.

We were having coffee at the Causeway Hotel, sitting in front of the fire. We were the only two guests. An Ulster conversation could be very restful. I was never asked personal questions. People talked in general, on harmless subjects, unless I took the plunge. Mr McClune, who was seventy-three and very wealthy – he had a Jaguar out front – said he had been to Australia and Canada and California.

'But I've never set futt on the continent of Europe,' he said. 'And I've got no desire to.'

I said I was going to Londonderry.

'I haven't been to Derry for thirty-three years.'

The next morning I walked back to Portrush. I passed a signboard indicating the way to Blagh. It was eight-fifteen and there were no cars on the road, and very quiet except for the birds – crows and finches. I kept walking, towards the train. It was green as far as I could see, and I could see twenty miles up the lovely coast.

The 10.24 to Londonderry

The 'troubles' – that quaint Ulstonian word for murder and mayhem – had something to do with the Irish differences between men and women here, I was sure. Why, look at this train to Derry. Nearly all the passengers were women, talking in normal voices. The few men on board were either shouting or whispering. The women were neither demure nor brassy; they were plain, frank and a bit careworn. The men by contrast looked both jaunty and evasive, and they seemed to have nothing whatever to do. Women and men; duty and dereliction. Usually, though, there were only women around, and it seemed all the men had gone away to war – which in a sense was true.

There were always women and girls waiting for buses at cross-roads. They were early risers – they walked, they even hitch-hiked. I saw them along the coast of Londonderry, the shore of Lough Foyle, from Ballyrena to Waterside. It was a country of active women, going shopping, or to work, shovelling manure, driving tractors, riding trains.

People in Ulster only travelled when absolutely necessary, so it was significant that women travelled much more than men. Very often the only man on an Ulster bus was the driver. The wife was frequently the breadwinner – particularly in Derry: she was cheaper to employ and more dependable. I was never frightened in a train or a bus. They were seldom attacked, because they were full of women and children. The children could seem almost demented – nowhere in my life had I seen such excitable rowdy kids – but the women were noticeably friendly.

Women had assumed so many domestic and social duties here that a situation had arisen in which the men had no responsibilities. It was idleness more than religion that made Ulstermen

fighting mad. The proof that they were demoralized was the self-hatred in Ulster aggression. What was more self-destructive than a hunger strike? And wasn't it peculiar that the hunger strikers, far from being pacifists, were often very violent men who ought to have known that their captors were eager to be rid of them?

Let Them Die was scrawled on the bricks all over Orange Antrim, and ten hunger strikers had recently fasted until death in the Maze Prison. Then there was the so-called 'Dirty Protest'. I could not imagine a preoccupied and overworked Irish woman dreaming up this loony tactic. But it was easy to see how a maddened and self-hating Irishman might decide to act out his frustration by smearing the walls of his prison cell with his own shit, and refusing to wear clothes, or have a bath or a haircut. 'Take that!' they cried, and pigged it in those cells for months, innocently believing they were getting even with the British government by stinking to heaven.

I thought: This behaviour is so strange and stupid there's probably no name for it. But surely it was in a way profoundly childlike? This was how small children behaved when they felt angry and abandoned, when they wanted to be pitied.

'At home these men were treated by their overworked women-folk as if they were forever boys and burdens. The shame or guilt this dependency inspired made the men aggressive; but they had all the time in the world to ventilate their aggression. Religion was hardly a restraining force. Irish Catholicism was one long litany of mother-imagery and mother-worship, which only bolstered the odd family pattern; and Irish Protestantism seemed mainly to be based on a tribal memory of bloody battles, remembered with special relish in the all-male Orange Lodges.

I did not believe that it was religion as Christian doctrine that was at the bottom of it all. Ulster was a collection of secret societies, to which only men were admitted. The men dressed up, made rules, beat drums, swore oaths, invented handshakes and passwords, and crept into the dark and killed people. When they were done they returned home to their women, like small children to their mothers.

Anyway, this was how it seemed to me in Londonderry.

*

From a distance, Derry was lovely and familiar. It looked like a mill-town in Massachusetts – churches and factories piled up on both banks of a river, the same sort of tenements, the same sleepy air of bankruptcy. But up close, Derry was frightful.

Some Ulster towns inspired fear the way a man with an ugly face frightens a stranger – their scars implied violence. Derry was a scarred city of broken windows and barricades; it was patterned with danger zones, and every few blocks there was a frontier: the Waterside, the Bogside, the Creggan, and all the disputed territories among them. And it was possible to tell, from the damage and the slogans, that this was the principal killing ground of Ulster. *Fuck the Pope* was scrawled at the Protestant end of the Craigavon Bridge, and at the Catholic end, *Fuck the Queen*, and now and then corpses were found bobbing in the pretty River Foyle that ran beneath the bridge. Derry was also the headquarters of the most violent of the nationalist factions, the Irish National Liberation Army. They made the IRA seem a party of dear old Paddys, twinkling and fiddling in the Celtic twilight. By contrast the INLA was heartless and unsentimental – eager to establish a reputation for cruel tenacity. It was always easy to spot an INLA slogan on a Derry wall: *Peace Through Superior Firepower*.

The geniality and filth of Derry, and its state of siege, made the city an interesting muddle. Here were old geezers being shifty and jaunty in an Irish way, and over there the British soldiers were tense and watchful and stiff with starch. They crouched in doorways, peering, rifles poised, while the women gathered at Foyle's Pork Store (nothing but sausages and hams) and the men strolled into the betting shop. The soldiers meant business. They wore helmets and face masks and they travelled in armoured cars; they moved singly, covering each other; all their vehicles had wire skirts beneath the chassis so that fire bombs could not be rolled under them.

While I was in Derry the annual Foyle Festival was on. It was one of the paradoxes of Ulster that for many life continued as usual, and that everything happened at once – the festival concert and talent show and bicycle race and cooking exhibit, along with mass frisking, soldier patrols, bomb threats and arrests. There

was the traditional football game, and a festival art exhibition; and on the opening day there was a grotesque killing.

It was a typical Derry murder, the Derry men said: a phone-call reported a cache of stolen goods; the policemen arrived and examined the stuff – a television, a fur coat, clocks, radios. One man lifted the television, and it blew up. It had been booby-trapped – the policeman was torn apart. ‘They was pieces of the bugger all over the place.’ Two other policemen were badly injured, one blinded. Then a mob gathered. The mob was hostile. They howled at the injured men, they jeered at the corpse. They obstructed the ambulance and booed when it broke through. And while the men were put into stretchers the screams were, ‘Let the bastards die!’

Two men described this to me with approval – it was not an atrocity story to them, it was a success story. Their attitude was: ‘Look at the horrible things they make us do to them – sure, it’s tragic, but it’s their fault. Won’t they ever learn?’

Those same men, Tim Cronin and Denny McGaw, urged me to go to Donegal.

‘Ah, Donegal’s a lovely place, like,’ Cronin said. He was seventy-five years old, as white-faced as Yeats and with the same black-rimmed glasses. And he boasted, ‘Sure, I’ve been there almost a dozen times.’

He was speaking of County Donegal, four miles from where we stood.

‘So it’s not violent like Derry?’ I said. Call it Londonderry and they thump you for being English.

‘Derry’s not violent,’ Mr McGaw said. ‘Belfast – that’s the violent place. They fight each other there. Aw, Derry’s a lovely old town. Have you seen the fine walls?’

‘But the police,’ I started to say.

McGaw pointed behind me. ‘A policeman was killed as he stood right there, not two weeks ago. Two men in a van came up that hill, and shot him and rode on.’

‘So people do get killed?’

‘Policemen and soldiers get shot, no doubt about it,’ Cronin said. ‘But we don’t shoot each other. Ah, sure, stay out of Belfast – that’s a bad place!’

Most people called Eire ‘the Free State’, but they were not

particularly sentimental about it. The IRA was of course banned in Eire, and Irish soldiers at the border post had a reputation for harassing Ulstermen, getting them to empty their pockets and turn out their suitcases. But that was not the main grievance Ulstermen had with Eire – the main grievance was money.

In a high-pitched voice of complaint, Paddy Dineen said, ‘Do you know what a beer costs in the Free State? Twenty-two shillings in the old money. Twenty-two shillings for a pint of beer!’

I said, ‘Is that an argument for staying British?’

‘It is!’ he said. ‘You can get a beer for half of that in Derry.’

So much for Irish unity. But the notion of unity was very blurred by all the contending groups. In fact, the most nationalistic ones like the IRA and the INLA seemed to want to sweep both the British Government and the Irish Government away, and start all over again with the People’s Republic of Ireland.

The hatred for British soldiers in Derry was extraordinary. Soldiers raided houses and, searching for guns, tore up floors and broke cupboards – they were vandals. Soldiers took money and personal effects, and did not give them back – they were thieves. Soldiers drove through the streets in Land-rovers, shouting abuse at women and children – they were brutes. Soldiers timed their visits to Catholic areas to coincide with children getting out of school, in order to coax them into starting riots – they were criminal-minded. Soldiers shot innocent men – they were murderers.

This was how the *Derry Journal* portrayed the soldiers. And one day the paper announced, ‘The Army are now adopting Cromwellian tactics – destroying Catholic homes.’

I stayed in a boarding house in Derry that was the Catholic counterpart to Mrs Fraser Whenehy’s pokerwork paradise in Larne. Instead of Bible mottoes, Mrs McCreadie had portraits of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and statuettes, too, the shape and size of Oscars. ‘Mothera God,’ Mrs McCreadie was always saying, while Joe her only other lodger told her what terrible things he had seen the night before in the Bogside.

They were great readers of the newspaper, these two. It was not the Falklands news. They were ignorant of the fact that British

soldiers seemed about to recapture Port Stanley; but they knew every bit of the Ulster news because the Ulster newspapers printed everything – rumours, hearsay, gossip, ‘witnesses saw’, ‘it is believed’, and sentences such as, ‘He alleged that the soldiers called him a “Fenian bastard”.’

The most popular page at Mrs McCreadie’s was the one – or sometimes two – that contained the *In Memoriams*. It made me think that there was a sort of cult of death in Ulster. There certainly was one in Derry. It was not merely a list of obituaries saying ‘So-and-so died yesterday’ – it was a sheaf of tributes to people who had died years ago. ‘11th Anniversary’, one read, and another ‘15th Anniversary’, and I saw one that commemorated the twenty-second anniversary of a parent’s death. And with each tribute was a poem:

The mother is someone special, patient, kind and true,
No other friend in all the world will be the same as you.

Or,

Sweet are those memories, silently kept,
Of a mother I loved and will never forget.

Or,

We never fail to think of you
We never cease to care
We only wish we could go home
And find you sitting there.

There were hundreds of these in the paper every day, often a dozen or so to the same person, invoking the prayers of St Columba – the sixth-century Irish missionary – and ‘Mary, Queen of Ireland’. The Virgin Mary had been elevated to the Irish throne. Mothera God, as Mrs McCreadie said.

There were always tributes to men who had been killed in the Irish cause. This one was typical:

4th Anniversary
Vol. Dennis Heaney

Shot dead by S.A.S. on 10th June, 1978

‘Life springs from death; and from the graves
of patriot men and women spring living nations.’

Proudly remembered by [a long list of names]
Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on him
St Columba, pray for him
Mary Queen of Ireland, pray for us.

One day I left Mrs McCreadie’s and kept walking. It was a lovely morning – clear skies and warm sunshine. I walked on a boggy path along the River Mourne, which was the border between Eire and Ulster – though you would never have known it. The grass was just as spectacularly green on this bank as on that one. I walked ten miles and the weather changed. The rain came down, flattening the buttercups in the fields. So I caught a bus into Strabane.

Strabane was said to be the poorest town in Europe – it had the highest murder rate, for its size, and the highest unemployment rate, and the fewest pigs and the dimmest prospects. It was smack on the border and it had the curiously unfinished look of a frontier town – like a house with one wall missing. It was sorry-looking, with men propped against shopfronts, whistling, and a number of cracked windows. But it was not noticeably more decrepit than other towns I had seen in Ulster. I considered staying the night, but the Control Zone and all the soldiers and police complicated the mildest stroll. And when I thought it over I decided that I had seen few places on earth more depressing than Strabane in the rain.

The day after I left Strabane a man walked out of a motor accessory shop where he worked. He was thirty-nine, a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment – a hated paramilitary force that had come into existence when the Protestant ‘B-Specials’ were disbanded. A car drew up, the man was shot four times, the car sped away. The man died immediately. He was the 123rd UDR man to be gunned down since the regiment was formed, ten years before.

Every town and village was deserted by six or six-thirty and it was eerie, because the summer evenings were often sunlit and long, and the desertion was obvious.

‘There’s a dread of trouble,’ Sean McLaughlin said. He lived in Omagh, where I had gone after Strabane. Omagh was also funereal. But Sean’s solution was to get out of town on a bus to

Belcoo, on the border of Eire. There was a *fleadhcooil* being held there that weekend – a ‘flah’ he called it – a festival of fiddles and flutes and concertinas. Sean got on the bus, with only his fiddle for baggage. He said that three days of drinking and singing in Belcoo would put him right.

That was the real paradox of Ireland. The dimple-chinned fiddler heading down the road to the ‘flah’ at Belcoo – as warm-hearted and unsuspecting an Irishman as ever plucked a sham-rock; and on the same bus as Sean (though I did not speak to him until we got to Enniskillen), the grey-browed Morris Grady Smith, who also knew Belcoo.

‘I was driving out of Belcoo towards Garrison in the van’ – Morris worked for the Public Works Department in Enniskillen – ‘there were eight of us in the van and I was at the wheel as usual. Suddenly there was a blue flash right in front of me. The wind-screen burst open and all the glass fell on me. It was an explosion, and then there was shots! I kept driving, though I felt some pain in my arm. I was shot seven times, but the bullets just passed through my arm – not one of them struck a bone!’

He offered to show me his scars, but I said that I believed his story. He kept talking.

‘Three of my men were dead – hit with small slugs from an M60 rifle. One of the men was a Catholic. See, they were shooting across the border – that Belcoo to Garrison road passes right along the border. They must have mistook our van for an army vehicle and thought we were soldiers. We were just men with shovels, fixing the pot-holes in the road.’

One day all cities will look like this, I had thought in Belfast; and the same thought occurred to me in Derry and now in Enniskillen. The centre of these places was a Control Zone, with an entrance and exit. All cars and all people were examined for weapons or bombs, and the tight security meant that inside the Control Zone life was fairly peaceful and the buildings generally undamaged. It was possible to control the flow of traffic and even to prevent too many people entering. It was conceivable that this system would in time be adapted to cities that were otherwise uncontrollable. It was not hard to imagine Manhattan island as one large Control Zone, with various entrances and exits; Ulster

suggested to me the likely eventuality of sealed cities in the future.

In Enniskillen each car in the Control Zone was required to have at least one person in it. If a car was left empty or unattended, a warning siren was sounded and the town centre cleared. If the driver was found he was given a stiff fine; if no driver claimed the car the Bomb Squad moved in. This system had greatly reduced the number of car bombs in Enniskillen (only ten miles from the border). The last car bomb had gone off two years ago. The nicer part of Church Street was blown to smithereens, but it was a pardonable lapse, the soldiers said. That wired-up car *seemed* to have a person in it: how were they to recognize the difference between an Ulsterman and a dummy?

Willie McComiskey, who described himself as a fruiterer, told me that Enniskillen had been pretty quiet lately – no bombs, not many fires, only a few ambushed cars.

‘What they do, see, is they go to isolated farms near the border. They take the farmer and stand him up and shoot him.’

He seemed rather emotionless as he spoke, and he described how the men were sometimes murdered in front of their families – the wife and children watching.

I asked him how he felt about it.

He said in the same even voice, ‘Why, you wouldn’t do it to a dog.’

‘So what do you think of these gunmen?’

‘I hate them,’ he said. He began to smile. What absurd questions I was asking! But he was uncomfortable stating the obvious. Here, such attitudes were taken for granted.

He said, ‘We’re eight per cent British here. We couldn’t have union with southern Ireland. A Protestant would have no chance. He wouldn’t get a job’ –

So McComiskey was a Protestant; that was his emphasis.

‘– but I don’t think the IRA want union now. They don’t know what they do want.’

From Enniskillen I walked south to Upper Lough Erne, one of the two enormous lakes here in County Fermanagh. The sun came out as I walked, and a milkman I met said, ‘The weather’s being kind to us.’ There was no sound on these country lanes except the odd squawk of a crow. I found a hotel near the village of Bellanaleck, and now the sun was shining on the green woods

and the lake. It was a sixty-room hotel. I thought I was the only guest, but the next day at breakfast I saw two Frenchmen in rubber waders – fishermen.

‘I have to check you for bombs,’ Alice, the room-girl, said.

She followed me to my room and then peered uneasily into my knapsack.

‘I’m not sure what a bomb looks like,’ she said.

‘You won’t find one in there,’ I said. ‘It’s just old clothes –’

‘And books,’ she said. ‘And letters.’

‘No letter bombs.’

She said, ‘I have to check all the same.’

I went for a walk. This was deep country. The pair of lakes went half-way across this part of Ulster. People spent weeks on cabin cruisers, Germans mostly. There were no English tourists here any more.

‘The English started to believe what they saw on television,’ Bob Ewart said. ‘They actually thought all that stuff about bombs and murders was true!’

He himself was from Nottingham.

‘I’ve lived here fourteen years and I’ve yet to see an angry man.’

That night the movie on television was *The Invasion of the Body-Snatchers*. I watched it with the Irish hotel workers. It was a horror movie about the world being taken over by alien germs. The Irishmen said it was frightening and of course went to bed happy. Then it struck me that a horror movie could only enjoy a great popular success if its frights were preposterous – like someone saying, ‘Boo!’ The ultimate horror was really what was happening in many Ulster towns: bombs, murders, people’s hands being hack-sawed off, or men having their knee-caps shot off as a punishment for disloyalty, or the tarring-and-feathering of young girls for socializing with soldiers. Because this was the truth, unlike the Hollywood monster movie. It was worse than frightening: it was unbearable.

And the next day a man named Guilfoyle told me there was quite a bit of rural crime in the border areas – cattle-maiming. I had no idea what he was talking about. He explained that to take revenge on farmers, some of the republican country-folk sneaked into the pastures at night and knifed off the cows’ udders.

*

On my map of Lough Erne I saw there was a hotel at Carrybridge about four miles away by water. The man who let me have a rowing-boat said, ‘It’s a fair old pull. Your arms are going to be screaming.’ This was John Joseph Skerry, who hadn’t rented out a boat for years. He waved to me as I rowed away, down the narrow lake, to have lunch at Carrybridge. I saw herons and terns and curlews, and a circling flock of swans. My boat was a shallow dinghy – two hours it took me to row the four miles, and I arrived at the hotel at about three o’clock. ‘We’ve just closed,’ the girl at the bar said as I entered. ‘I can’t sell you anything.’ But I was glad to have a chair. I went into the lounge where a television was on – a tennis match. ‘You can’t sit here if you’re not a resident,’ a young man said. ‘You’ll have to leave.’ I went outside and saw that the hotel was the whole of Carrybridge. This was the middle of nowhere, on the lake! It was beautiful, but I was hungry. Then it started to rain. And there among the yellow irises and the cows, on the bridge at Carrybridge it said **NO SURRENDER – 1690** and on a pillar **NO POPE HERE**. I cast off and rowed four miles back, thinking: This is just a row on an Irish lake for me, but it’s their whole life.

There was an army checkpoint down the road at Derrylin. On the way to see it I stopped in local inns, in villages so small they were not on any map. The inns were full of men and boys and on summer evenings places like Crocknacreevy looked and smelled like Rhodesia, a tough and beautiful colony in the dust.

‘They’re not farmers,’ an innkeeper told me. ‘They’re all on the dole. They’re not bad, but they’ve been brought up to behave like cretins. They chuck their cigarette ends on the carpet and grind them in with their boot-heels. Farmers don’t stay up until all hours drinking. They work hard for their money, so they save it.’

The army checkpoint was just a barrier manned by six soldiers, but this road went straight to the border. The soldiers would not talk to me.

Don’t talk politics, don’t talk religion, people said; but I thought: Ridiculous! What was the point in travelling around Ulster if you avoided those two subjects?

A Protestant named Mortimer gave me a lift and said, ‘The army are very rough when they first arrive in an area. Those men

you saw are paratroopers. They've just got here – that's why they look so nasty. After three or four weeks they'll be a bit more polite.'

I asked him whether they harassed people, as the papers reported.

'Aye. They do. Especially if you have some connection with Irish politics – or if they think you have. They come to your house at six in the morning. They don't knock you up – they kick your door off its hinges. Sometimes they tear the place apart.'

I said it sounded fairly severe.

He smiled. 'It's worse when they take you in. There are lots of stories. Even if they're half-true they're very bad.'

'Have you been arrested?' I asked.

'They don't have to arrest you,' Mortimer said. 'They take you in.'

'And then?'

'Beat you up.'

I said, 'Maybe you'd be better off without the army?'

'I wouldn't say that. But it can be pretty rough with them.' He thought a moment and said, 'We get more trouble from the UDR than the army.'

'Who's "we"?''

He said, 'Everyone.'

I took a bus in an easterly direction to Dungannon. The hills were steep and green and very close together in this part of Tyrone, and in the small town of Clogher they were like green wrinkles on the face on the earth, the ridges of hills, one after another.

Every town looked as though it was expecting trouble at any moment. All the police, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, were armed and alert and seemed nervous. They knew that the suddenness of violence was peculiar to this sort of piecemeal siege: everything happened in seconds.

I made the mistake in Dungannon of going repeatedly through the same checkpoint turnstile. 'You again,' the policeman's expression said. 'Make up your mind – stay in or stay out.' He seemed irritated, like a man who has to keep getting up to unlock a door. The town centre was completely sealed off, and surrounded by police marksmen, with automatic rifles.

On the way to Portadown in North Armagh I sat in a bus filled with women and children, as always. The children were hyper-active, jumping on the seats and yelling. One kicked at the window.

'Missus,' the driver kept saying, 'take that chayld awee from that wunder.'

The villages all followed the same pattern: a church, a post-office, a manor house, an Orange Hall, a cluster of tiny cottages. There were no strangers here, no city slickers moving in and fixing up the cottages, as they did in Dorset and Devon; and no people who had come here to retire, and grow roses, as they did in Sussex and Kent. The old people in Ulster villages had been born in those same villages. They did not move to the coast. They did not move at all. This was a society in which everyone stayed put.

Where was the railway station? I asked people in Portadown. They said: Over there, over there. But there was no station; I couldn't see it. Over there, they said. Then Mr Cleary said, 'It's right here.'

I could not see it, I said.

'Aye,' he said. 'It got blew up four months ago. But this is where it used to be.'

It had been bombed on Sunday night. Mr Cleary had heard the explosion himself in his kitchen. He asked where I was going.

'Newry,' I said.

'Ah, that's all right then. The train doesn't go to Newry.'

He meant I need not have troubled myself. Anyway, the train was gone. It went to Dundalk in the Republic: it didn't stop for twenty-five miles.

Why didn't the train stop anywhere? I asked.

'No necessity. No one goes to Newry.'

Sean O'Faoláin had written of being in Portadown in the 1940s and asking a man, 'What is the outstanding characteristic of this town – a typical Ulster town – compared with any typical southern town?' And the man had replied, 'I'll tull ye. No Jew ever made a living here or in Ballymena.'

I told this to Mr Cleary and he said, 'Aye. That's true, right enough.'

There was no quick way out of Portadown, and it was a dreary place. I wanted to go to Newry and then Killeel and continue up the coast. People said: Don't go to Newry – it's bandit country there, sure it is. I'm after coming there meself and I'm surprised I'm still alive, like.

'Aw, if they'd listened to Joe Gibson we'd still have a railway station,' a man named McGrane told me. 'But they didn't believe him. He's daft, see. "I seen the kyar!" he says. He was trying to warn them. But he's sort of screwy. They just laughed and then bang!'

'Who did it?' I said.

'No one took credit for it. Could have been anyone,' McGrane said. 'Take your pick. We've got the IRA, the Provos, the INLA and Provisional Sinn Fein. There's the UDA, the UVF, the UFF, the Tartan Army and Paisley's Third Force. There's also common criminals. There's people cashing in on the violence. There's bloody kids. There's too many, if you ask me.'

McGrane was against union with the Republic: 'If a woman don't want any more kids, the priest will come round and tell her not to take any conthra-conthra-conthrathep –' He winced, trying to say the word.

I said, 'I get the point.'

Thomas B. Mules was very fat and had small close-set eyes. He had stopped smoking only a few months before, because he could no longer afford it. He had gained forty pounds and now weighed two hundred and thirty.

Mr Mules said, 'Don't go to Newry.'

'Why not?'

'Tis a Provo town,' he whispered, edging nearer.

'So?'

'Talking English,' he said. 'Asking questions,' he said. 'Dey'll take ye for an SAS man,' he said. 'Dey'll cull ye.'

'Cull' seemed somehow worse than 'kill'. It was like being noiselessly dispatched forever.

Mr Mules said, 'Go to Newcastle.'

So I went to Newcastle, via Gilford and Banbridge, on more country buses ('Missus, please take yer chayld . . .').

All municipal buildings were protected in an unusual way. They were not merely fenced in – they were enclosed in cages that

occasionally rose over the top of the building. They had elaborate gates and barbed wire, and the mesh was very fine. They made the police stations and telephone exchanges and all the other likely targets bomb-proof. It was strange to see such heavy security in what were otherwise sleepy country towns, and also strange – in the face of such ugly fortifications – to be told: 'Aye, but it's very quiet here, really.'

In Banbridge I wrote in my diary: *Over a week in N. Ireland pestering people with questions and I still haven't met a real bigot.*

Because Banbridge was on the main road from Eire to Belfast there were a number of checkpoints just south of the town. Some were manned by the jug-eared volunteers of the Ulster Defence Regiment ('Open yer boot –') and some by the Royal Ulster Constabulary ('Have you ever been in the North before?'), and some by British soldiers ('Carrying a gun?').

On the country bus to Newcastle I kept glimpsing the Mourne mountains. They were sudden and unusual in the gentle landscape. Farther east the land was stony, and the mountains which had looked blue from Katesbridge were pale green and bare, smooth, bulging and undulant, like a naked giantess lying in a green sleeping bag.

Newcastle lay beneath the high peak of Slieve Donard, and it was empty. In pretty places like this I got the full flavour of Ulster desolation: no one at the beach or in the park, no one promenading on the promenade; no parked cars, because there was a bomb-law against it; no one in the shops, and only one couple in the Chinese restaurant. Bright and bleak, the sunlit ghost towns of the Ulster coast!

Scrawled on a building in Newcastle was the slogan VIVA ARGENTINA. It was the first time in my travelling that I had seen any graffiti in support of Argentina in the Falklands war. The irony was that the day I saw it was the day the British Army entered Port Stanley, forcing the Argentines to surrender. The next morning's newspapers all had the same headline: VICTORY!

17

The 15.53 to Belfast

The British victory in the Falklands was not celebrated in County Down. The people I spoke to were perplexed and bitter. 'Too many men had to die for that,' Mr Hackett told me in Newcastle. 'Yes, I saw the papers,' Constance Kelly said in Castlewella, 'but we're too busy with our own troubles to take an interest in that pile of rocks in the South Atlantic.' And a man named Flannagan in Downpatrick said, 'What about the lads getting killed here? There was a bomb in town not long ago, but none of the English papers printed a story saying, "Tim Flannagan took a light head and is far from well at the moment."' "

I caught the school bus – it was the only one at that early hour – and went to Castlewella with the yelling boys and the womanly girls of St Malachy's. I was hardly thirty miles from Belfast, but instead of heading straight there I took a roundabout route on the coastal side of the Ards Peninsula. I was making for Bangor, and the train to Belfast. It was a June day of suffocating dampness, the brown sky like a mass of ravelled wool, threatening rain.

Walking out of Downpatrick, where I had just met Tim Flannagan, I was thinking about the Falklands and the attitude here. *What about us?* the Ulstermen said. Catholic and Protestant alike objected to the attention given to the far-off Falklands and their 1700 inhabitants (who, at that time, were not even full citizens of Britain). I came to a war memorial on the outskirts of the town, with a slab inscribed with the lines,

They shall not grow old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

What fascinated me was that the verse portrayed the advantage of dying young – being spared the fatigue and weakness of old age. The poet, Laurence Binyon, was English, but this was a very Irish sentiment. It seemed to me that the real problem in Ulster – and the reason there were so many bloody killings – was that everyone believed in an after-life.

It was nine miles to Strangford. I walked to Milestone Seven and then the rain started. I did not mind the rain, but the thunder-growl worried me. I was on an open road between flat fields – no village, no trees, no shelter. I decided to hitch-hike.

This was Ulster, and hitch-hikers here often hijacked the car and kicked the driver into the road (the bombers and gunmen nearly always used stolen cars), and yet I got a ride from the second car that passed.

Mr Hurley was a Strangford man. It was a mixed community, he said, and he was proud to say they all worked together.

'Of course, there's extremist groups operating in the area,' Mr Hurley said. 'And there's political parties. And there's clubs and lodges. Now out of all that lot you'd think one of them would reflect my thinking, wouldn't you? But none of them does. I think if we had better leadership we'd get somewhere.'

He said he had worked in London as a plumber's mate.

'Three years in London and for the whole of that time no one asked me my religion. That's what I liked about London.'

Strangford was about five streets – fifty families, no more – and a ferry landing. I crossed the harbour-mouth on a ferry to the neat and rather formal village of Portaferry. It was unusual in Ulster to find a village with no graffiti, no bomb damage, no broken windows, no blasted buildings; and Portaferry was almost like that – the only sign of fanaticism was a blasted church.

'It's a wee pretty little town,' a man said to me. 'You should see it with the sun shining in the square.'

It was still raining very hard. He said Portaferry was famous for its offshore whirlpools.

I said I was not staying here but was going on to Portavogie.

'I'm after coming from Portavogie meself,' he said. 'And how are ye getting there?'

I said I would either walk or hitch-hike.

'I'll take ye,' he said. 'I have to go home for me lunch.'

His name was Cosmo Shields and he said his bus was just around the corner. I was surprised to see that this was no euphemism: a big empty bus was parked on the next road. This was his bus, he said. He had done his morning run from Newtownards and now he was going to lunch. He took the bus home, because he had an afternoon run up to Kirkcubbin and Belfast. Not long ago there had been sixteen buses on this peninsula, but as the drivers had died – ‘Most of them took heart attacks’ – the buses were phased out.

It was not that people had cars nowadays, Cosmo Shields said. It was that they did not have any money and it was not safe to travel.

He had been lucky, he said. He had been driving for thirty-three years – driven double deckers down these country lanes. But in all that time, making two trips a day into Belfast, he had had trouble only twice – both times he was stoned and the windows broken in the Short Strand district.

‘Aye, but it wasn’t me they was throwing stones at. They’d have thrown stones at the bus if you’d been driving it. It’s the bus, see. Government property.’ He drove with his elbows on the wheel. He was a stocky man, in his late fifties. He had not collected any fare from me. This was not a service run, he said. ‘Mind you, I’ve had plenty of trouble with drunks. And children.’

I said, ‘The kids seem very jumpy.’

‘They’re more destructful than ever they were!’ Mr Shields said. ‘They’ve got destruction in their heads. Aye, there’s talk. People are worried about Ulster children nowadays.’ Mr Shields swung his whole body over, and taking his eyes off the road for five dramatic seconds, he said, ‘Aye, the wee kids see what’s going on.’

We were just then entering Portavogie. It was attractive in the same way as Portaferry – no bomb-craters, no hysteria, and an air of normality. High-sided trawlers were moored at the docks, discharging crates of herrings and prawns.

Cosmo Shields was still grunting darkly. I guessed he was thinking about the destructive kids.

He said, ‘Aye, the way things are going, it’ll hoppon soon, like.’

‘Pardon?’

‘The end of the world.’ He was nodding with certainty now. ‘Aye, I reckon the end of the world is not far off’ –
And in the same breath:
‘– shall I take you up to Ballywalter?’

It was my walking and hitching up that coast to Bangor that made me modify my opinion of Ulster. Part of the society was wild, and religious mania only made that wildness worse – martyr-mad and eager to chant, ‘Anti-Christ! Anti-Christ!’ (as Doctor Paisley’s congregation had done to the Pope in England just a few weeks before). It was an old society, with a long memory, and no nose at all for the future – 1690 was considered just yesterday by people who were not sure whether they had their bus fare home tonight.

I had no idea where the cruelty came from. Tennyson said that Irish cruelty was due to a lack of imagination, but other writers had put it down to a strain of anarchy and an evasion of moral worries. The Irish could be glad about the idea of Ireland, but Ulster was a nebulous thing – and wasn’t it really nine counties and not six? The people of Ulster, neither Irish nor British, felt lonely and left behind.

It was a society of hard workers who were unemployed. It was a beautiful country that was impossible to live in. It was a society which still had real peasants and real skinflint duchesses, pig-farmers and dowager countesses. And, amazingly in a country where roots went very deep it had the highest rate of emigration in the world – especially lately: almost 140,000 people had left Ulster in the ten years between 1971 and 1981. It was, most of all, a society with tribal instincts – tribal warfare, tribal kinships, and (common among tribal people) a sense of isolation that inspired both suspicion and generosity, particularly towards strangers. They said, ‘Fuss is better than loneliness.’

When I hitch-hiked I was picked up. When I asked questions they were nearly always answered. I saw signs of violence but I never felt I was in physical danger. I liked the Ulster curiosity – so different from the English narrowness and fear. I was dressed like a tramp or a bandit, but I was made to feel welcome. ‘Come home with me and have some lunch!’ It was not until I visited Ulster that I received that invitation. I made my way up the bouldery

coast to Millisle, and walked to Donaghadee, which was rainswept and empty. 'You should have been here three weeks ago,' I was told in Donaghadee. 'The sun was shining. It was lovely and warm. Still. Not to worry. Come in and get your feet up. I'll put the kettle on.'

Most of these coastal places were only incidentally seaside resorts. They were small towns with the Irish Sea splashing against them and taking the sewage away and drowning the odd cat. Down there was an empty amusement arcade, an empty café, a fish-and-chip shop, a few broken benches and a rocky foreshore covered with black seaweed – maybe kelp, maybe tar: it made no difference, no one swam.

'Come back in a few weeks,' I was told.

'Is that when the season starts?'

'No. Just the one day. Orange Day.'

'I'll make a note in my diary,' I said.

'The twelfth.'

I walked via Groomspoint to Bangor. Bangor resembled a certain kind of English coastal town. It was a little like Bexhill and a little like Dawlish; it was elderly and respectable and cliffy, and in a tawdry-genteel way it had a comic air of pretension that was rare in Ulster. But that was at the better end of Bangor. At the other end it was just as desolate and friendly as everywhere else. Some of Bangor served as a refuge for the fairly well-off, the businessmen and professional people who worked in Belfast but could not bear to live there. So Bangor was safer but a great deal duller than any other town its size in Ulster, including Newcastle, which did no more than gape like an oyster.

It was a sign of Bangor's relative quietness that there was no security check at the railway station. I took the 15.53 one day – all the trains went west, Bangor was the end of the line – and after a few miles it was like any suburb in England with old and new semi-detached houses, rose gardens and high hostile fences. Now I was passing along the southern part of Belfast Lough, and at Carnalea I could see the towns of Carrickfergus and Whitehead across the bay. I had almost completed my circular tour of Ulster.

The rain came down. In places there were meadows to the sea. Helen's Bay railway station was designed by Lord Dufferin as a

mock-fortification, with arrow slits in the towers and castellated walls – the Irish aristocracy seemed to me more foolish and artless than the peasantry. It was here in Helen's Bay and further on at Cultra and Marino that people said, 'I've never seen a riot nor heard a bomb, and I don't think I ever shall.'

We passed Holywood and the large army depot, and then the gantries and cranes of the shipyard, which meant we were near Belfast, the old horror.

It was a city of drunks, of lurkers, of late-risers. It smelled of wet bricks and burning coal. It stank. It had a sort of nightmare charm. When the rain came down in Belfast it splashed through the roof and spattered through the window glass and poured into your soul. It was the blackest city in Britain, and the most damaged.

Belfast had a tourist bureau. Don't be afraid, was their message. I liked the blarney in their brochure:

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's
storm-troubled sphere

These lines by Emily Brontë (daughter of an Ulsterman) are often quoted to describe the spirit of Belfast. Visitors, having heard only news of the city's political troubles, are invariably surprised when they see the citizens' 'business as usual' briskness and the positive signs of achievement . . .

But the Brontë poem ('Last Lines') was about the love of God and 'Heaven's glories' and faith 'arming me from fear'. Trust in God and you'll be safe in Belfast!

The achievement, I supposed, was that after such a battering the city still stood; after so many streets had been torn up, and so many bombs thrown, there were still buses running; after so many windows broken there were still windows intact. Life went on, how could it not? Forty per cent of the Ulster population lived in this city and most of the remaining industry was here. But the outlook was grim. The shipyard, Belfast's largest employer, was said to be laying off 4,000 men. 'That's when the real trouble will start,' a hard-faced man named Muncaster said to me. 'The

British Government's been protecting their "workers". But what happens when they don't have any more workers?"

Muncaster – 'call me Jack' – was a real Belfast toughie. The city either destroyed a person or else it made him merciless. The people of Belfast – most of them – suffered from what journalists had begun calling 'compassion fatigue'. They had seen so much misery and heard so many explosions and cries for help they hardly blinked.

'What do I think of the bombers?' Muncaster said. 'I think they're boring. When I hear a bomb go off I just look at my watch. I look at the time – I don't know why – and then I walk away. And I feel a little safer after a bomb, because there probably won't be another one that day. But God, it's boring!'

It was true – a dangerous society was frightening, and then inconvenient, and then annoying, and then maddening, and ultimately a bore. All the security checks! All the metal detectors! All the body searches and friskings and questions! I was being put through a security check one day and the police officer, a woman, shrieked and jumped away from my knapsack crying, 'Feathers! Feathers!' and shaking her hands. 'Get them away from me!'

They were the hackles of a dead pheasant I had found down at Dundrum Bay.

In Belfast I stayed in a dirty hotel with a damp interior and wallpaper that smelled of tobacco smoke and beer and the breakfast grease. But there was no security check here. I had been searched in Enniskillen, a town that hadn't had a bomb in years; and I would have been searched at the grand Europa Hotel in Belfast – it was surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence and had sentries and guard dogs. The tourists and journalists stayed at the Europa – it was a good target for bombs. But no one of any importance stayed at Mooney's Hotel.

I called it Mooney's because it greatly resembled Mrs Mooney's flophouse in James Joyce's story, 'The Boarding House'. Our Mrs Mooney also had an enormous florid face and fat arms and red hands, and she catered to travelling salesmen and drifters. The carpets were ragged, the wallpaper was peeling, there were nicks all over the woodwork. But I was free there, and I would not have been free in an expensive hotel; and I also thought that

in this grubby place I was out of danger. It was Belfast logic, but it was also a pattern of life that I was sure would become more common in the cities of the future.

The bar at Mooney's was busy all night, filling the whole building with smoke and chatter.

'What time does the bar close?' I asked on my first night.

'October,' a drinker told me, and laughed.

One day in Belfast I saw a poster advertising 'the world première' of a play called *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty*. It sounded political – that was promising; and the author, Martin Lynch, was a local man. It was being staged at the Lyric Players Theatre near the Botanical Gardens and Queens University. I splashed through the rain to buy a ticket – my shoes had been wet for three days! Rain was general all over Ireland, falling on every part of the dark central plain, softening the Bog of Allen and blackening Belfast still more.

It was still raining the night of the world première. But the play drew a good crowd and I thought afterwards I could not have seen a better play. It summed up the mood I had detected in Ulster – farce and tragedy, one turning into the other, one sometimes indistinguishable from the other.

Ambrose Fogarty, a Catholic from the Falls Road, is picked up on suspicion by a British soldier and taken to a police station for questioning. He is kept for three days and given the third degree. Fogarty is innocent; the British soldier is a lecherous, toffeenosed brute who is contemptuous of Ulster and Ulstermen; two of the policemen are ineffectual; the rest are sadists and bigots. There is another suspect, Willy Lagan, but he is a fool – drunken, feeble-minded, and plucking a guitar; he is as comic as Fogarty is pious.

It was a play about persecution and torture. In places it was crudely written, but it seemed to confirm all the stories I had heard about the intimidation of suspects. Ambrose is asked to sign a confession admitting that he is a member of the IRA and that he has taken part in an armed bank robbery. He refuses to sign – he denies everything. So he is threatened. He still refuses. At last, he is savagely beaten, kicked, choked and his arm nearly twisted out of its socket. But all the police have succeeded in doing is

giving a rather pleasant young man a grievance. The play ends with Fogarty political in a platitudinous way.

The violence was eased somewhat by the presence of the second suspect, Willy, who provided the comic relief by singing off-key, appearing to co-operate and then collapsing, pulling faces and saying everything twice. And he looked ridiculous: he was dressed in a zoot suit and a loud tie and had slicked down hair – straight out of the American fifties. But he was too ridiculous, and really wasn't it all preposterous – Ambrose too innocent, Willy too bizarre?

'What do you think?' I was asked afterwards by a lady in the foyer, as I was having a pint of Guinness.

I thought: It's loaded. And why were such plays always about innocent people? Why not make Fogarty an IRA man? After all, there were enough of them around, shooting people in the back and muttering *Sinn Fein*, 'Ourselves Alone'.

I said, 'Very interesting. But I'm an alien, so naturally I have a few questions.'

'Why don't you ask them? The author's standing right behind you.'

Martin Lynch was about thirty. I was immediately struck by his physical resemblance to his main character, Fogarty. I said that I had heard about such interrogations, but how true was his play?

'It's about me,' he said. 'I was arrested and held for three days. They beat me up. They tried to make me sign a confession. All that in the play – it's true.'

'The Willy character is dramatically right, I think,' I said; but I meant he was too convenient and preposterous.

'Want to meet him?' Lynch said. He called a man over.

This one was older and uglier than Willy Lagan but there was no doubting that he was the original. He pulled a face, he winked at me and started to sing. He wore a white satin necktie and a black shirt, and a flashy zoot suit. He got on to his knees and made monkey noises; he snatched at my hand.

'We were in prison together,' Lynch said smiling at the man's antics. 'Well, it's just like in the play. If he hadn't been there it would have been unbearable. I'm really grateful to him.'

The man made affectionate monkey noises, and rolled his eyes;

and now it was impossible to tell at what point the play ended and the lives of these men began.

It seemed to me a healthy sign that there were such plays being produced, but it was a play about a deranged society. I kept wishing that it had been a play about a real bomber, because it was a society in which everyone talked about persecution but no one took any blame.

No one admitted to crime in Ulster. The most they said was, 'Look what they make us do!' It was as if all the street violence was imaginary or else rigged by soldiers who (so it was said in Derry) coaxed children into starting riots. It was slippery, shadowy, tribal; it was all stealth. It was a folk tradition of flag-waving and the most petty expression of religious bigotry west of Jerusalem. Apart from the bombing it was not public crime anymore. It was sneaking ambushes and doorstep murders ('I've got something for your father') and land mines in the country lanes. Some of the worst crimes took place in the prettiest rural places – the shootings and house-burnings and the cattle-maiming – in the green hills, with the birds singing.

People said, 'There is no solution ... Ireland's always had troubles ... Maybe it'll die out ... I suppose we could emigrate ...'

I kept thinking: This is Britain!

It was like being shut in with a quarrelling family and listening to cries of 'You started it!' and 'He hit me!' And I felt about Ulster as I had felt about some south coast boarding houses on rainy days – I wanted to tiptoe to the front door and leave quietly and keep walking.

But I was grateful, too. No one had imposed on me. I had done nothing but ask questions, and I always received interesting answers. I had met hospitable and decent people. No one had ever asked me what I did for a living. Perhaps this was tact – it was an impolite question in a place where so many people were on the dole.

I had been asked the question in England and Wales. 'I'm in publishing,' I always said. Publishing was respectable, harmless and undiscussable. The conversation moved on to other matters. 'I'm a writer' was a fatal admission, and certainly one of the great conversation-stoppers. Anyway, in my wet shoes and scratched leather jacket and bruised knapsack would anyone have