INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I extend the discussion of identity to examine the contrasting roles played by the contested imagery of cultural landscape in defining or impeding social cohesion in Ireland. As explained in Chapter 1, manipulated depictions of landscape offer an ordered, simplified vision of the world and act as a system of signification supporting the authority of an ideology and emphasising its holistic character. These constructs are central to discourses of inclusion and exclusion and to definitions of the Other and Otherness. The ubiquitous relationship between politico-cultural institutions and territoriality suggests that agreed representations of place are fundamental to establishing the legitimacy of contemporary authority which is derived, not from the support of a numerical majority alone, but through renditions of plurality that transcend class, gender and ethnic divisions.

In addressing the particular significance of emblematic place to understanding the contested nature and meanings of identity in contemporary Ireland, this discussion incorporates many of the themes already examined in the previous chapter, albeit largely from the perspective of Northern Ireland. Although unionism is very much a fractured concept, its adherents remain largely defined by a shared negativity. This is expressed in adversarial Otherness to the Republic of Ireland, to which Ulster Protestants react with a sense of inferiority and defensiveness, mostly stemming directly from ignorance of the Irish past, combined with a sense that history is being used against them in claims to the moral high ground (Pollak 1993:97). The mainstream unionist version of Britishness is equally flawed, particularly in its failure to recognise the conditional and contested nature of the British state.

Gallagher (1995), who argues that there are three nations in Ireland—an Irish nation, an Ulster Protestant nation and part of the British nation—assumes that the Irish nation can be defined sufficiently broadly to encompass both Ulster nationalists and the population of the Republic of Ireland. It is
argued here, however, that the contemporary renegotiation of Irish identities has widened the dichotomy between North and South, irrespective of ethnic alignment. Both unionist and nationalist identities in Ulster remain heavily informed by representations of nineteenth-century ethnic nationalism, later incorporated into the 1937 Constitution as the moral core of the Irish state (Lee 1989:648). This required a representation of place, which denied heterogeneity in the interests of a communal solidarity that subsumed the ethnic plurality present in the South before independence. Economically disastrous in the long term, this partisan ideology still provided the fledgling independent state with a strength and symbolic unity of purpose that contrasts markedly with the unagreed nature of Northern Ireland. Today, however, this hegemonic representation is increasingly irrelevant as the Republic is transformed into an energetic, outward-oriented member of the European Union and a markedly more secular state, in which the exclusivity of ethnic nationalism is gradually being replaced by the inclusiveness of civic nationalism with its notions of a people linked by a communality of laws and institutions of citizenship rather than sectarian ethnic markers (see Chapter 7).

In summary, I argue here that the absence of an agreed representation of place, congruent with territory, to which its inhabitants can subscribe irrespective of their class, gender or ethnicity, is a primary factor distinguishing North and South in contemporary Ireland. The result is particularly evident in the troubled nature of unionist and nationalist identities in Ulster. I am concerned too with the ways in which representations of landscape and place create manipulated geographies that mesh landscape and memory within the contested arenas of cultural identity and nation-building. Inevitably, these landscape texts are concerned with mutual discourses of inclusion and exclusion, based on antagonism to the Other. They are constructed to act as signifiers of particular discourses within the welter of contested identities that is modern Ireland.

**LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY**

The embodiment of public memory in landscape provides a robust example of the ways in which representations of place are intimately related to the creation and reinforcement of official constructions of identity and power and to the whole question of empowerment. These mythical worlds become literal (Agnew 1996:35), even though they may bear little relationship to the places in which most people who subscribe to the mythology actually live. Memory can be outer-or inner-directed but, whichever, it too is a social construct, in this context a direct parallel to the dual linear narratives of history that were imposed on a multifarious Irish identity in the late nineteenth century (see pp. 57–60). Samuel (1995) regards memory, not as timeless tradition, but as being transformed from generation to generation through, for example, the contrived nature of heritage, which can be defined, not as
artefacts and traditions inherited from the past, but by the contested modern meanings that are attached to these objects (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996). The function of memory is defined by the present, its connections with history and place vested in emblematic landscapes and places of meaning that encapsulate public history and official symbolism.

One illustration is provided by the varying attitudes in Ireland to landscapes of remembrance. These too are complex social constructions that can be read in a variety of ways. For instance, Heffernan (1995) argues that the war memorials and cemeteries of the Western Front—muted, serene, peaceful and intensely moving—convey no real sense of sacrifice to the nation-state. Instead, they are immortal, sacred landscapes, essentially apolitical. Unionists, however, regard them as symbolic of Ulster’s embattled past, thereby fulfilling some part of the need for an outer-directed memory. The slaughter of the 36th (Ulster) Division on 1 July 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, is central to unionist mythology as the debt that Britain owes. Thus while the Somme Heritage Centre, opened in 1994 near Newtownards, County Down, is predicated ‘upon the moral necessity of remembering the dead’, there is a clear tension between this role and the simultaneous renditions of the events which it records in competing political discourses. In the unionist state, Ulster’s sacrifice for Britain became the leitmotif of loyalty (Officer 1995) while, in the South and nationalist North, public remembrance of Irish deaths in the Great War became little more than a peripheral embarrassment (Leonard 1996). Remembrance Day is seen as a unionist ceremony. The carnage of the Somme and the other battlefields of the Western Front can also be read, however, as a memory of shared loss, the sacrifice of the ‘sons of Ulster’ matched, for example, by that of the mainly Catholic 16th (Irish) Division around Messines in the several Battles of Ypres. The Ulster Tower at Thiepval, the memorial to the 36th Division, can thus become an inner-directed mnemonic symbol of the mutual suffering of Protestants and Catholics (Graham 1994a).

This example demonstrates how continuously renegotiated landscapes of memory are implicated in the construction and maintenance of cultural identities. Johnson (1995) distinguishes between the construction of landscape images through the imaginings of an intellectual élite of writers, politicians, artists and architects, and ‘popular’ imagined communities. The essence of an élitist narrative of place is encapsulated in Ashworth’s argument (1993) that dominant ideologies create specific place identities, which reinforce support for particular state structures and related political ideologies. Although these constructs are transmitted in many ways—notably through political structures, education, socialisation and media—the representative landscape is also a substantial device in the evocation of official collective memory. Johnson (1994) points to the importance of monuments and statuary in Ireland as one important means of arousing public imagination. However, it must be recognised that these monuments,
like all heritage artefacts, are polyvocal—capable of expressing a multiplicity of political ideologies (Barnes and Duncan 1992)—and thus symbolic of the multifaceted nature of Irish political identity.

Nevertheless, one vision may acquire hegemonic status during a particular epoch as ‘time [is] translated into space...“blocks” of space [being] labelled with the essential attributes of different time periods relative to the idealized historical experience of one of the blocks’ (Agnew 1996:27). Consequently hegemony, which can best be visualised as a dominant cultural form accepted as legitimate in that it embodies the aspirations of a society, is an active process that is constantly re-articulated and renegotiated as historical circumstances alter. Duffy (1994) demonstrates, for instance, how one collective hegemonic memory of eighteenth-century Ireland was shaped by the valued or preferred landscapes of the landowning upper echelons of society and wealthy tourists. Although many writers commented on the poverty and squalor of rural Ireland’s teeming population, visual art stressed the wildness and beauty of the ‘natural’ landscape, or the demesnes and big houses of the members of the landowning class, which commissioned the work and whose values and tastes it incorporates.

In contrast, the nineteenth-century Gaelic Revival—initially, if ironically, also associated with the Anglo-Irish élite—created an emblematic landscape in which certain artefacts acquired mnemonic status because they fulfilled the need for a retroactive continuity of culture to a distant age prior to the ‘book of invasions’ that Anglophobic Irish history all too often became. As shown in Chapter 4, the imagery accompanying this narrative was of a predominantly rural Ireland, its true cultural heartland defined by the landscapes and way of life of the wild, western Atlantic fringes—those furthermost removed from Anglo-influences but also most congruent with the precepts of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Iconic sites of continuity in this mythology included Celtic monasteries, Iron Age hill-forts and megalithic tombs. There was no place for towns, archetypal symbols of the Other and dismissed as an alien (and particularly English) innovation. This narrative of place—like the nationalist rhetoric from which it emanated—became that of ‘one nation’ Irish-Ireland, its ultimate corollary an exclusion of any social groups not encompassed within an ideology eventually wholly Gaelic and Catholic in ethos.

Compare the renegotiation of this official and élitist landscape of memory to present-day Belfast. Here popular ‘imagined communities’ and life-or-death landscapes of fear are marked and reinforced by flags, murals, painted kerbstones and graffiti, and claimed by marching (Rolston 1991). These cultural signifiers embody memory—wall murals, for example, often entrench existing structures and beliefs rather than advocating any potential transformation toward a new Ulster (Jarman 1992; Bryson and McCartney 1994). Freedom Corner in Protestant east Belfast and Free Derry Corner in the city’s Catholic Bogside do not seek consensus but merely echo the mutual
incomprehension of the question: whose freedom? To Edna Longley (1991:37), such symbols are an inner-directed mnemonic, a rhetoric of memory that tries to place the past beyond argument. Again, marching can be depicted in similar terms as a territorial marker, justified by its connections to the historical events being commemorated, the very routes an expression of communal consciousness and solidarity. Orangemen would prefer to ask nobody’s consent to their marches. However, loyalist parades seem to be increasing in number (Jarman and Bryan 1996), while ‘traditional’ routes are often more flexible and the history of many marches less continuous than is alleged by loyalists proclaiming that their cultural traditions are under threat.

What all this emphasises is that the same components of human landscape acquire contrasting meanings as hegemony is negotiated or contested in both official and popular discourses. Like their predecessors, current myths also evoke and sanctify memories of the past. It is we who impose our narratives on that past and it is we who construct it into our collective and individual memories, which are then played out through our manipulated constructions of place. These texts are embodied in our emblematic landscapes, whether official or unofficial. The mural on a Belfast gable, the official state monument, the heritage artefact, the patriot’s grave and the war cemetery are all parts of landscapes of memory, legitimating our presents by connecting them to the conflicting justifications of our pasts. That the same places may participate in different landscapes, denoted by different meanings, merely reflects the unagreed nature of our society.

THE DIVERSE UNITY OF IRELAND

The notion that landscapes embody memory in discourses of inclusion and exclusion is closely linked to the idea that manipulated geographies also function as symbols of identity, validation and legitimation. Thus there are archetypal national landscapes, which draw heavily on geographical imagery, memory and myth (Gruffudd 1995). Continuously being transformed, these encapsulate distinct home places, defined by their very difference to the Other. The ‘imagined community’ comprises people who are bound by cultural and, more explicitly, political networks, all set within a territorial framework that is defined through whichever traditions are currently acceptable, as much as by its geographical boundary. As we have seen, those national traditions are narratives that are invented and imposed on space.

One of the critical contemporary distinctions distinguishing South from North in Ireland concerns the contrasting official symbolic universes created through narratives of place identity. The fledgling Irish Free State derived strength, legitimacy and a unity of purpose from its exploitation of the hegemonic imagery of the West of Ireland as Ireland’s cultural heartland. Nevertheless, the constitutional institutionalisation of de Valera’s ideal of an
agrarian, homely, Catholic society could never accommodate Protestant, industrialised north-east Ireland. To Irish-Ireland, it became the lost land, shrouded in Celtic mists and populated with warrior heroes, the most intensely Irish of all the regions of the island. The success of the Roman Catholic church in Ireland in harnessing itself to this version of history also ensured that the decisive ethos within nationalist Ireland after 1922 was Catholic rather than Gaelic (Ó Tuathaigh 1991:63). Faced with this ideological victory in which everything Irish was sequestered as Republican and Catholic, Protestants—even those opposed to unionism—increasingly lost, abandoned, or were excluded from any sense of being Irish. Moreover, the unionist state in the North failed to develop an alternative indigenous cultural synthesis, relying instead on the political dimensions of the union to delimit Northern identity. Undermined by the ambiguities of that relationship, the poverty of unionist historical awareness and a political unwillingness to develop a representation of Northern Ireland that transcended the sectarian dichotomy, the result has been cultural incoherence and political impotence (Brown 1991:82).

As we have seen, traditional Irish nationalism involved the deification of places essentially defined by Daniel Corkery’s realisation of a ‘Hidden Ireland’, in which Irish identity was couched in terms of a Gaelic society of great antiquity oppressed by British economic, political and religious discrimination (Cullen 1988). MacLaughlin (1993) argues that the dominance of this imagery reflected the political and moral hegemony in Irish society of the petty bourgeoisie and other like-minded social groups—substantial farmers, local business interests and the Roman Catholic church. It was their interests and values that came to define a new Irish state which had little to offer Protestants. Therefore the rendition of Ireland, enshrined in the 1937 Constitution, was but one particular socially constructed trope of exclusivity which, having outlived its epoch of genesis, is no longer an appropriate expression of collective Irish memory. Hegemonic ideas are being renegotiated and refashioned in the multifaceted context of secularisation, Europeanness and the seemingly eternal conflict in the North. Nevertheless, the traditional rendition of identity is perpetuated by political conservativism, tourism imagery and the folk memories of the diaspora. Crucially, it still continues to inform both Ulster unionist and nationalist representations of Irishness.

If historians and cultural theorists remain enmeshed in the controversies of revisionism and post-colonialism, geographers—as argued in Chapter 1—have often seemed intellectually more inclined to accept what has become the essentially post-colonial representation of a geographically heterogeneous Ireland, the personality of which is largely defined by its multiplicity of regional differences—among which Ulster’s particularity is but one (Graham and Proudfoot 1993). Denying the exclusivity of post-partition Irish place and the emphasis on continuity within the Gaelic rhetoric, this rendition demands
the dismantling of Ireland into the narrative of regional variety which Smyth has outlined in Chapter 2. Thus Whelan (1992, 1993) questions the whole myth of homogeneity, arguing that Ireland was and remains an island comprised of localised regions, an interpretation which demands the deconstruction of the potentially divisive nature of island-wide generalisation and state-sponsored ideology.

Diversity, of course, is a double-edged quality, being grounds for both inclusion and exclusion. In his very influential, if deeply pessimistic, analysis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the historian F. S. L. Lyons (1979:177) argues that beside ‘the essential unity’ of Ireland there is a no less ‘essential diversity’, ‘unbridgeable fissures’ deeply embedded in the past and perpetuated by contemporary politics. He sees ‘a collision within a small and intimate island of seemingly irreconcilable cultures, unable to live together or to live apart’. The phrase, ‘essential unity’, was coined by Estyn Evans, who argued from a very different perspective. He depicted the conflict between native and newcomer as being the true dynamic in Irish society, ‘the clash that struck the sparks in Irish culture’ (1984:13), Ireland’s very insularity attracting invaders and creating the reality of its diversity. His account of the ‘personality’ of Ireland (1981) argues that the island is no different from the majority of European nations and states which have evolved through a fusion of regional loyalties. The (nine-county) province of Ulster is one strong regional variant within Ireland, if morphologically distinct behind the barrier of difficult drumlin country that stretches from the County Down coast to Donegal Bay (Figure 10.1). Nevertheless, for Evans, it remains within the essential unity of Ireland, one distinctive element in the island’s diversity of habitat, heritage and history (Graham 1994b).

A pluralistic emblematic landscape—with its renegotiation of what is acceptably Irish—including many of the same places but with different meanings and memories. It also embodies an apparent willingness to accept variant strains of Irish nationality and thus admit a more inclusive landscape in terms of locality and artefacts. For example, the overtly anti-urban nature of Gaelic nationalist historiography was consequent upon the rendition of towns as a central element of a landscape of oppression. The ‘environmental revolution’ of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which transformed urban landscapes throughout Ireland to conform to the tastes and values of the landed élite, can now be depicted as one element in a process through which that essentially arriviste class set out to affirm its Irishness and claim Ireland as its own (Foster 1988:191–4; Graham and Proudfoot 1994). Driven by the continuous renegotiation of hegemonic imagery and the ongoing process of nation-building, but also by the economic commodification of the past as tourism, the current Irish myth of place can incorporate these once-excluded artefacts within the canon of its permissible icons (Graham 1994c).
Identity in Ulster

In many ways, such representations of unity in diversity forged through the renegotiation of landscapes of memory reflect a construction of Irish identity no longer dependent on opposition to the Other for its defining characteristics. To a large extent, this also emphasises the divergent pathways of a Republic of Ireland, redefining and reorienting itself as a modern European state, and Northern Ireland, where unionists and nationalists remain locked into zero-sum thinking on the exclusivity of territoriality, parallel inflexible mind-sets that are apparently oblivious to any conception of the changes repositioning the contemporary Republic. Thus Ulster Protestants remain very sure of what
they are not (Catholic Irish), but much less certain about who they are. Superficially, religion may be a far more important element in defining identity for many Protestants than either unionism or Britishness (Pollak 1993), although this may well reflect no more than religion’s central function as an ethnic marker (see pp. 130–3).

The increasingly fluid perceptions of Irishness have also had little impact on the representation of Ireland held by many northern nationalists. Like the descendants of the eighteenth-and nineteenth-century diaspora, they may largely continue to subscribe to the traditional discourse in which the six counties of Northern Ireland constitute a temporarily separated part of an inner-directed Irish nation-state, a determinist rendition in which the surrounding sea demarcates the natural national unit. At least superficially a majority of Catholics support the unification of Ireland, the proportion holding this view having increased since the 1994 Downing Street Declaration underlined the lack of British interest in Northern Ireland. The commitment, however, is variable by age and class, younger and middle-class Catholics rejecting both nationalist and unionist labels (Breen 1996). O’Connor’s study (1993) also points to major ambiguities in Catholic identity, which can no longer be defined as simply ‘Irish’. In part, this reflects processes such as the renegotiation of gender representations and identities (see Chapter 6) and also the strategy of conscious embourgeoisement discussed in Chapter 5, the cleavage of the sectarian axis along gender and class lines having created a dissonance of identity, particularly among middle-class Catholics (Shirlow 1995). According to some commentators, these policies have inverted the rationale of Irish political unification for a socially ascendant Catholic middle class, whose cultural identity may be superseded or diluted by material interests, best served by maintaining strong economic and political links with the UK (for example, Gudgin 1995). Conversely, working-class Catholic attitudes to cultural identity are much more readily—if by no means absolutely—located within the confines of the sectarian discourse.

At an aggregate scale, the contested evidence of the 1991 Census suggests that the ethnic geography of Northern Ireland has become more sharply demarcated, a trend attributable to conflict, more or less voluntary population movement and differential rates of migration (Figure 10.2). Catholics, who now constitute about 42 per cent of the population, form a substantial majority in all of Counties Fermanagh, Tyrone, parts of Down and Londonderry (including Derry City), together with considerable areas of Belfast. Protestant numerical domination is restricted to the remainder of Belfast, central and north Down, County Antrim (except for its north-east corner) and, finally, the area around Coleraine. Of course, these aggregate patterns conceal both population density and the complex micro-geography of ethnic segregation within the six-county border. It is only at the local scale that Catholics and Protestants occupy spatially discrete and mutually exclusive territories, an intimate geographical proximity which results in
relationships between Protestants and Catholics, carefully balanced in peacetime, becoming tense and murderous in crisis—as demonstrated by the sectarian dimension to the Troubles. However, the degree of tension varies with location, class and age.

**Integration and devolution—the cultural ambiguity of unionism**

In further exploring the issues of identity and place in modern Ulster, the remaining discussion concentrates on unionism, which demonstrates clearly the irreconcilable tensions that ensue from an unagreed representation of place. As Chapter 8 has shown, it is apparent that contemporary unionism is highly fractured. Gallagher (1995), for example, distinguishes between an Ulster Protestant nation and part of the British nation while Porter (1996)—in a brave attempt to construct a theoretical basis for unionism—argues more convincingly that the discourse takes three forms. Cultural unionism (which might be equated to the devolutionist mainstream) relies on its adherence to an exaggerated and heavily qualified perception of the Protestant—British way of life. In contrast, liberal unionism is integrationist, seeking a narrowly political form of freedom and citizenship, which it naively claims to be
characteristic of the rest of the UK. Porter rejects both, arguing instead for a civic unionism that recognises both the Britishness and Irishness of Northern Ireland and deals fairly with issues of parity of esteem. Both cultural and liberal forms of unionism are exclusivist because they fail to understand and address nationalist alienation, whereas civic unionism is to some extent congruent with the centrist or accommodationist alignment, already addressed elsewhere (see Chapters 5, 7 and 8), in which cultural and material aspirations are separated. This fracturing of unionism is reflected in a contested set of ill-defined representations of identity which—as Porter argues—interact with political perspectives that encompass the integration of Northern Ireland into the UK and the broad devolutionist perspective that constitutes mainstream unionism but which can merge into advocacy of an independent Northern Ireland (Table 10.1). Clearly, such political solutions are about judgements related to power as much as identity, but the latter fulfils a key role in legitimating and validating the authority of the former.

Table 10.1 The fracturing of unionism in Northern Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political perspective</th>
<th>Alternative labels</th>
<th>Cultural representations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integration of Northern Ireland into UK state</td>
<td>Liberal unionism</td>
<td>Denial of Irishness; denial of nationalism; claim to citizenship of multi-national, multi-ethnic UK state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part of the British nation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devolution</td>
<td>Cultural unionism Ulster Protestant nation Loyalism Ethnic nationalism</td>
<td>Ulsterness defined by location in separate region, culturally and historically distinct from remainder of Ireland but conditionally linked to Britain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repartition Independence</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>As above but with emphasis on internal cohesion rather than dependence on UK allegiance. Ulster is portrayed as a conflict of nationalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodationist</td>
<td>Civic unionism Centrist Third force Civic nationalism</td>
<td>Repositioning of Northern Ireland to allow co-existence of both British and Irish aspirations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The competing versions of unionism have contrasting demands of manipulated geographies. Integrationists—Porter’s liberal unionists, Gallagher’s ‘part of the British nation’—regard Northern Ireland as a physically separate but nevertheless fully integrated region of the UK. To a very considerable extent, the concept of an imagery of identity derived from within the island of Ireland is irrelevant, indeed subversive, to this viewpoint. Northern Ireland, being at one with Britain, does not require any symbolic universe apart from that conferred through its status as a distinct region within a heterogeneous union state. In contrast, devolutionists—adherents of cultural loyalism or the ‘Ulster nation’—seek some degree of self-determination, believing Northern Ireland to be more Ulster than it is British or Irish. The union is thus highly conditional, being seen as the most effective means of avoiding incorporation within a Catholic-dominated Ireland and retaining the material benefits accruing from the UK state. The proposal that Northern Ireland be ‘cantonised’ or repartitioned constitutes a somewhat deviant strand within this broad theme. However, sufficiently extended, and underpinned by a strong sense of grievance stemming from what is now widely perceived as a British betrayal of unionist interests, devolution, in stressing Northern Ireland’s cultural and historical separation from the remainder of Ireland, can drift towards the logic of a negotiated independence.

If any form of Irish unity is rejected, and ethnic cleansing of Yugoslavian dimensions abhorred, all strands of unionism—with the exception of integrationism—require some overarching representation that subsumes sectarianism and depicts an integrative, pluralistic myth of Northern Ireland place acceptable to all who live within its disputed boundaries. Only then could unionism as a discourse obtain the legitimacy that would allow it to exercise power over the people who inhabit the territory it seeks to control. Prior to the collapse of the Stormont government in 1972, the unionist leadership displayed a very selective concern with the Province’s cultural landscape as an element in the construction of identity. The principal exception was Terence O’Neill (Prime Minister, 1963–9), who—in concert with Estyn Evans—was instrumental in establishing the Ulster Folk Museum at Cultra Manor, County Down, an institution ambitiously designed to demonstrate the cross-sectarian nature of Ulster’s rural material culture (Graham 1996). Otherwise, the unionist government adopted a strategy of ‘masterly inactivity’ toward the past (Clifford 1987), much applauded by Aughey (1995:15) because it prevented Northern Ireland from becoming a state with illusions of self-determination. However, the unionist leadership, albeit culturally indolent, took great care to ensure that Northern Ireland shared in the material and welfare benefits of the UK state.

Given this studied neglect of the integrative continuities of cultural metaphors, the unionist discourse was reduced to little more than a handful of events (primarily sectarian). Official unionist identity lacks any resonances of a hegemonic, legitimising representation of place but has
depended instead on an exaggerated sense of Protestantism, with its history of martyrdom, treachery and Catholic duplicity. Territory can still be claimed through marching and mural but, at the official level, single events set outside place—the 1641 Rebellion (when settlers were massacred by Catholic rebels), the Siege of Derry in 1689, the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement at Hillsborough in 1985—have substituted for the communality and continuity embodied in representative landscapes. The iconography of Protestantism, displayed on Orange banner and mural alike, depicts such events in terms of blood sacrifice and/or Catholic deception and, increasingly, as British betrayal. But, crucially, such readings offer neither narrative of continuity nor text of place. Mainstream ‘cultural’ unionist identity remains largely dependent on depictions of the Other to legitimate its discourse of exclusion.

To integrationists or liberal unionists this does not constitute a dilemma. On the contrary, the lack of an emblematic unionist landscape is a positive virtue, a Britain embodying progressive, liberal and democratic values being the imagined community. Aughey (1989) disputes the widely held perception of unionists as a people in limbo, who have not yet come to terms with Ireland because of narrowly Catholic and aggressively Gaelic versions of Irish identity. He denies that the lack of an unequivocal sense of Protestant national and political identity is a problem. Rather, citizenship of the UK state provides the principle of unity, transcending any need to formulate a distinctive Northern Irish identity which would necessitate accepting the postulates of the nationalist argument and thus equate to a form of embryonic separatism. Consequently, the very idea of a representative landscape as a signification of place is anathema to the integrationist or liberal discourse.

However, this argument, which clearly clashes with Anglo-Irish policy, is also undermined by Ulster’s sectarianism (Coulter 1994), no other region of the UK containing a substantial minority population, defined by a strong cultural nationalism and actively seeking unity with another state. Again, Aughey neglects the ubiquitous relationship between political structures and territoriality, the actual legitimacy of any state being defined by the acceptability to its population of the representations of the territory it occupies. Linda Colley (1992:5–6) argues that Great Britain can plausibly be regarded as an invented nation—forged above all by war—and ‘superimposed, if only for a while, onto much older alignments and loyalties’. It is defined not by any domestic political or cultural consensus but in reaction ‘to the Other beyond [its] shores’ (formerly the French, now the European Commission) (see p. 218). Despite the dismantling of the apparatus of local government by a New Right administration that has transformed the UK into politically the most centralised state in the EU (Hutton 1995), the cultural tensions of this invented nation are readily apparent in the demands for devolution, regional
assemblies and cultural recognition for ethnic minorities. The schism within Scotland between those who seek to express their cultural nationalism within a union state, and advocates of political independence, is but one manifestation of the illusory unity of the UK.

This suggests that although unionism could be incorporated within this diverse state in narrowly civic terms, it cannot define itself through assumptions of enduring Britishness when that identity itself is being subjected to radical transformation under the impact of internal and external forces, and is anyway unacceptable to many nationalists in Northern Ireland. Yet there appears to be little or no consciousness within the broad unionist discourse—Porter excepted—of this continual renegotiation of Britishness. In one respect, paralleling their attitudes to territorial sovereignty, British identity is a zero-sum. But in other regards, unionists do profess a very conditional conception of Britishness (Bruce 1994). Mainstream unionism is irredeemably devolutionist, loyalists—the cultural unionists—paradoxically finding their communality within Ulster (McAuley 1994). They may express loyalty or allegiance to the British Crown but, as Miller (1978) persuasively argues, this is a contractual relationship rather than a condition of identity. Logically, if such a covenant is broken, one is released from it. But if that is the case, it underlines the confusions of this axis of unionist identity, which cannot be defined by political criteria if these are negotiable and even ultimately expendable, or by a reactionary rejection of an Other that arguably no longer exists. Furthermore, this insistence upon the conditional nature of the relationship with Britain forces unionists to acknowledge that their identity must somehow embrace their domicile in the island of Ireland and the legitimation conferred to power relationships by a social solidarity fixed in that place. The failure to come to terms with this dilemma lies at the root of the downfall of the unionist polity. The selective and spasmodic history, centred on largely sectarian events, which the unionist state chose for itself, was not only irrelevant to the nationalist population, but also more generally inadequate as a means of legitimisation, principally because of its lack of congruence with place. In the absence of an overarching narrative embracing the mutual reinforcement of power and space, unionists are left lacking legitimacy and authority throughout the territory which they seek to control.

A Common Ground?

All strands of unionism share the belief that the island of Ireland is not a natural socio-geographic entity. In the words of one submission to the Opsahl Commission, ‘there is no historical imperative that Ireland should ever be united’, Northern Ireland being ‘an “unagreed” entity, rather than a non-legitimate one’ (Pollak 1993:17). Unity with what is still widely perceived to be a sectarian Irish state is neither a desirable political nor cultural goal. But, conversely, Northern Ireland cannot survive by looking to a Britain that is at
best ambivalent, at worst overtly hostile, and which has declared its lack of political strategic interests in Ireland. Faced with this dilemma, the nationalist rejection of Britishness, and the desire to define some project of legitimation that might transcend sectarianism, the Protestant middle class, acknowledging the notion that Northern Ireland’s British allegiance and Protestant ethos are inadequate to define its identity, has often turned culturally to the landscape that, in its indigenous historical and cultural heritage, ‘seems on occasion to join the sects’ (Foster 1991:158).

The unifying potential of emblematic landscape as an overt signifier of a common ground between unionist and nationalist has long given rise to discussion. For example, such notions were central to the philosophy of John Hewitt (1907–87) and, indeed, it is in literature, characterised by a sense of place, that the issue of the Province’s representative landscape continues to be most comprehensively addressed (see pp. 77–9). Hewitt, a Protestant who could not fall back on religion to define the Irishness in his identity, depicted Ulster as a landscape of singular geographical and economic coherence, one that conveyed a traditional and historical oneness to all its people. In so doing, he directly challenged the unionist assumption that an exploration of Ulster’s cultural environment would admit the political mystique of Irishness. Hewitt wanted to invent something quite distinct from the exclusive representative landscapes of Irish-Ireland. But it was to be different, too, from the militaristic Ulster of the new unionism, ‘the land of the heroes of the Somme and the generals of England’s war’ (Vance 1990:228).

There are, however, alternative and more exclusivist representations of the common ground. While the various devolutionist interpretations of Northern Ireland do not normally question the integrity of the political unit—indeed, they generally seek a cultural underpinning that might strengthen it—the idea of repartition can be regarded as one deviant form of this general perspective. Kennedy (1986)—in an argument that, more recently, has received significant support from elements among the loyalist paramilitaries—contends that the contact between the two political traditions in the ‘narrow ground’ of Northern Ireland has frequently been mutually deforming. Thus he advocates repartition along ethnic grounds to produce a sustainable unionist Northern Ireland. However, an almost entirely Protestant polity could only be attained through ethnic cleansing, given the intensely localised nature of residential segregation. Nor would it attain any legitimacy in the wider world although, ironically, it would at last fulfil the cultural unionists’ assumption that nationalists are not there.

Again, if unionist allegiance is indeed contractual, it follows that another radical common ground might be sought through the abandonment of the union in favour of an independent Northern Ireland state. Recent attempts at delineating an indigenous cultural representation for Northern Ireland emphasise this tension. These aim at creating a northern origin myth of place
that would legitimate the claim of Ulster’s Protestants to their territory within
the island of Ireland (Graham 1994a). Central to such projects, whatever the
attitude to the union, is the development of an iconography that emphasises
Northern Ireland’s cultural separation from the remainder of Ireland.
Ostensibly an expression of ethnic nationalism, such propositions are not in
themselves sectarian if Catholics are prepared to share in the representations
so defined.

The basic premises behind these ideas derive from the assumption of a
common past, separated from the remainder of Ireland by the drumlin belt
of south Ulster, the most enduring frontier region in the island’s history.
This cultural distinctiveness is not a product merely of the seventeenth-
century plantations, but is rooted in the long-term communality of the
Dalriadan Sea cultural province (Adamson 1991) (Figure 10.1). Ironically,
the proponents of this perspective exploit precisely the same sort of heritage
sources and artefacts in creating a sense of place as did traditional Irish
nationalists in their creation of the Gaelic mythology. Adamson (1978,
1982), for example, seeks to erect a narrative of continuity that links
contemporary Ulster to the tales and sagas of the Iron Age. The earliest
inhabitants of what is now Ulster controlled an Ulster-Scots cultural province
prior to the arrival of the Celts—or Gaels—in Ireland. Gradually, their
ancestors were driven back to the area that now constitutes Counties Down
and Antrim by Gaelic tribes from the south and west. The hill-fort of Emain
Macha (Navan Fort near Armagh), the capital of Ulster during the first
centuries BC, becomes the ceremonial centre of this mythology. Cú Chulainn,
the hero of the Ulster Cycle, the pseudo-histories of the Province during the
Iron Ages, is reincarnated as the leader of Ulster resistance to the invading
Gaels.

Consequently, the Scottish migrants who crossed to Ulster in the
seventeenth century were the inheritors of a culture, essentially framed in
earlier millennia, which linked north-east Ulster, Argyll and Galloway.
The Scottish Plantation of Ulster was therefore not a confrontation of
alien cultures, nor the oppressive colonialism of the Gaelic myth, but a
reunification and reconquest by a Scots-Irish people once expelled from
their rightful territory by the invading Gaels. Adamson argues that even
the latter, ultimate victors over the Ulaid, had more in common with their
ethnic kindred in Scotland than those in the remainder of Ireland. Thus
the Scottish—but not the English—Planter and the Gael in north-east
Ireland shared a common cultural ancestry. This mythology—blatant even
by Irish standards—is being used to construct a representative Ulster
discourse of place, a signifying system that communicates and reproduces
a separate but ethnically integrated representation of the North, its
contemporary stature legitimated by the longevity of its independent and
once glorious past. In seeking an authentic expression of Ulster culture
that is no longer a pale reflection of those ‘psychological colonialisms of

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Irish nationality and British nationalism’ (Foster 1991:294), this is a populist rather than élitist narrative, much sneered at by professional historians and archaeologists although, as Roy Foster (1989:4) observes, it does rearrange the pieces in more surprising patterns. It may also be questioned if such ideas have much relevance to many unionists who may be content to see themselves as a settler society, akin to those of North America. Certainly, the whole notion of a Scots-Ulster migratory epic, transcending both the Dalriadan Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, is one deeply entrenched in unionist consciousness.

An indigenous Ulster representation of place—framed in Adamson’s terms—is open to exploitation by advocates of both devolution and independence. The tortuous case that the Province has always been distinct and distant from the remainder of Ireland in turn confines the scope of Ulster’s British cultural connection to its hypothetical linkages with Scotland. Recent attempts to strengthen these by seeking European Commission recognition of an Ulster-Scots language failed when the EC’s Bureau for Lesser Used Languages was unable to find any evidence of a communal language other than English in the Protestant heartland of east Ulster. Indeed, the Ulster-Scots narrative depends on many of the same postulates of separateness from England which have produced a strong Scottish cultural nationalism, albeit contested between those who wish to see that separatism accommodated within the UK state and others who aspire to independence for Scotland within the EU. The logic of an indigenous representation of Ulster points in this latter direction as well, particularly given the lack of reciprocal political support within Scotland for any Ulster-Scots identity. Thus the development of a legitimating and empowering metaphor of place for contemporary Northern Ireland places unionist devolutionists in a double-bind. On one hand, it points to the Irishness within their identity, on the other to the failure of the union to provide anything more substantial than an increasingly compromised political allegiance which is irrelevant to nationalists. Ulster becomes neither Irish nor British, the Ulster-Scots connection demonstrating only that devolution and independence are exclusivist strategies separated by degree rather than kind.

CONCLUSION

The absence of a political consensus within Ireland reflects the contested nature of identity and place discussed here. If any unity of purpose concerning future political structures for the island is to be constructed from the several strands of unionism and nationalism, a cultural environment must first be provided in which ideology creates an integrative place consciousness which, in turn, can signify the holistic and inclusive nature of that philosophy. No matter how impaired the rhetoric might be, the challenge in Ireland is to create cultural landscapes in which inclusive pluralist myths can be embedded.
Without the cultural cement of an ordered simplified version of the world, no political framework can achieve legitimacy and Northern Ireland will follow Algeria and South Africa into the history of failed settler societies. There is no far-flung western frontier here, only the ‘narrow ground’ of six small counties.

It has been argued above that the Irish state is in the process of discarding time-worn representations of place that served to help unify the twenty-six county state (not least by its exploitation of partition) in favour of a sense of place that, while encapsulating the unique qualities of Irishness, is also heterogeneous, outward-oriented, markedly less Catholic and intensely localised. In contrast, Northern Ireland is contested not merely between unionism and nationalism but actually within both camps themselves, which are further riven by class, gender, locality and age divisions. It might be argued that for the middle classes, material prosperity (ironically, much of it directly created by the Troubles) transcends questions of identity but that for the working classes—unionist and nationalist—sectarian consciousness has subsumed class, gender, rural and urban divisions (McAuley 1994:174–81).

To a very significant extent, this dissonance of identity—ultimately the principal impediment to political negotiations on the future of Ireland—reflects the plethora of places and utter lack of consensus that Northern Ireland has become. Together, many unionists and nationalists espouse a shared insistence on equating cultural identity with territorial sovereignty. Although Ulster Catholics may be British citizens, a majority identify culturally with Ireland. As Scotland shows, cultural nationalism could be incorporated within the UK, albeit with some tensions. However, many Northern nationalists remain locked into the discourse of exclusion that is Sinn Féin’s Irish-Ireland, even though this is increasingly divergent from the ongoing renegotiation of place that defines the Republic. In their own ideology of exclusion, cultural unionists (to adopt Porter’s term) ignore both revisionism and the simultaneous renegotiation of Britishness, yet possess no agreed alternative hegemonic representation of place to legitimate and validate their cause with all the people of Northern Ireland. Liberal unionism fails to acknowledge the complexity of Britishness, regarding it instead very much as the ‘collective social fact’ once characteristic of traditional Irish nationalism. It defines the union largely through political criteria while admitting no place for Ireland in Ulster. Faced with the dilemma that any internal cultural synthesis would have to embrace—or at least acknowledge—elements of Irishness, liberal unionism opts to be no more ‘than a distant echo of another land’ (Foster 1991:294), one, moreover, that shows little long-term interest in returning its loyalty.

The development of a culturally separate Ulster narrative of place memory, integrated into the Ulster-Scots epic, has been one response to this impasse. However, not only does it embrace connotations of alienation from the union
by its imperceptible shading into an argument for independence, but it further depends on the assumption that Ulster is the single distinctly different region in an otherwise geographically homogeneous island. As observed here, contemporary historiography argues against this, depicting a heterogeneous Ireland of many local places in which Ulster, one particular region among a number, is itself extensively differentiated by more parochial loyalties. Thus the unionist predicament remains that, while the development of an indigenous, synthetic, cross-sectarian cultural representation of Ulster is necessary to legitimate power in the terms defined here, inevitably that construct will also support the efficacy of a pluralist depiction of aspirations to Irishness. However, as overlapping and intersecting socio-political networks of power fundamentally redefine Europe, the cultural problem for Ulster unionists remains a vexed one. They cannot continue to say no but must instead formulate the positive cultural iconography necessary to imagine and thereby legitimate their place for all its people. Inevitably, such a construct must take them closer to Ireland but only to a revised and pluralist representation of that society, defined by regional and cultural heterogeneity, notions of hybridity and the equality of rights of citizenship embodied in civic nationalism.

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REFERENCES


BRIAN GRAHAM


