

Speech to CLÉ - Irish Book Publishers' Association  
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By Conor O'Clery

The first headline I wrote on my first week in the Irish Times in 1972, over a story about Waterford library looking for more money, was 'Library Seeks to Balance Books'.

In those days the Irish Times was a paper of record. Our reports from Stormont could fill volumes. We used to have an advertisement that said 'If you miss the Irish Times you miss part of the day.' We had to drop it because people said 'If you read the Irish Times you miss the whole day.'

The Stormont reports of our Belfast correspondent Fergus Pyle were allegedly longer than Hansard.

There was a reason for that. My editor Douglas Gageby wanted to increase the readers' knowledge about what was happening across the border.

I have been asked to talk here today about what we know of each other across that border: whether the Republic and Northern Ireland are one culture or two: whether ironically the two parts of Ireland may be diverging socially and culturally at the very moment they are attempting a closer accommodation politically.

The best way to answer that is to look at the situation both before and after the Troubles, if one assumes that what began in 1968 has now run its course.

I grew up in Newcastle, Co Down, so I can talk with some knowledge of what cultural and social connections we in the North had with you in the South before the Troubles.

They were very few. If you turned on the radio you got a very British local BBC that almost totally ignored Irish culture. We couldn't get RTE. We never heard of Gay Byrne.

The Newcastle drama society of which I was a member wouldn't put on JB Keane plays, as too foreign, we put on London farces instead, or Gilbert and Sullivan.

God Save the Queen was played in cinemas at the end of each performance ó except in Derry. The Irish colours were banned. There was divorce, and contraceptives were sold in chemists' shops.

There was no book censorship in the North. At that time in the 1960s 1,500 books were banned in the Republic. You had to come to Belfast to buy Edna O'Brien's 'The Country Girl', published in London. But there was some self censorship. You

wouldn't find Erskine & Maine's in Belfast promoting Tom Barry's 'My Fight for Irish Freedom'.

There was a real border in those days with customs' posts. You had to get a big triangular triptique on your car to cross the border into the Republic. At that point the potholes began.

The main reason for Catholic nationalists to cross the border was to attend GAA games. I recall huge convoys of cars with their triptiques traveling from Co Down to Croke Park for the great GAA football victories of Down over Kerry in 1960 and Offaly in 1961.

1961 was the year Yuri Gagarin orbited the world. When he got back to Russia Khrushchev asked him what was the most friendly country he passed over. He said Ireland: There was a crowd of people in a park in Dublin there shouting 'Come on Down!'

I remember a few apolitical Protestant friends coming to Dublin for those games. But the GAA in those days didn't encourage contact with the other side: It suspended any member who (I quote) 'plays, attends or helps to promote Rugby, Soccer, Hockey or Cricket.'

To refresh my memory about those pre-Trouble times I consulted a book published in 1962 that caused quite a stir. It is called 'The Irish Border as a Cultural Divide.' I am pretty sure the publisher is not in this room. It was written by a Dutchman, Marcus Heslinga and published in Holland by Royal Van Gorcum press.

Heslinga concluded that both parts of Ireland were dominated by English culture ó in language, trade, media, sport and finance - but the religious and ethnic differences were so strong that the North and South constituted two distinct nations.

Indeed it sometimes felt like that. The Catholic ethos dominated the South whereas the Calvinistic culture in the North meant that nothing opened on a Sunday. (That was another reason for crossing the border on a Sunday ó to get a drink).

There was also a general assumption in Northern Ireland that life was materially better there ó that the south was impoverished and populated by feckless and reckless spenders, whereas the Northerners were thrifty and hard-working and frugal. They also had a huge annual British subvention.

As Heslinga put it, 'the Northerners are more provident, and the Southerners lean more on Providence'. They were perceived to be as different from southerners as Northern Germans were from southern Italians.

He found that 'the people of the north shared a sense of regional fellowship, a sense of difference from southerners, that mixture of contempt and defensiveness that is typical of the strongly- marked provincial character.'

The early Troubles exacerbated the divisions. Unionists saw the Republic as a haven for terrorists. Southerners saw the North as a violent place to be avoided.

I attended Queen's University in Belfast at the start of the Troubles. I don't remember coming across a single fellow student from the Republic.

Unionists suspected, with much justification, that any cross border initiatives by the Dublin Government were designed to advance nationalist aims. The Irish president could make an official visit any part of the world, except Northern Ireland. When Terence O'Neill invited Sean Lemass to Stormont in 1965 it marked the beginning of the end of his political career.

The division was given a new dimension when the Irish and British currencies diverged in 1978.

Before that Irish bank notes circulated freely in the North alongside Sterling. I recall just after that stopping for petrol in the nationalist town of Hifitown in Co Down and asking the young lad filling the tank for me, 'Do you still take Irish money' He replied, 'If things were right I'd take nothing else.'

They weren't right then. But are they any more 'right' today in the wake of the Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement and all that has followed. They should be. The Republic has dropped its claim to the North. The Good Friday Agreement has laid the groundwork for cooperation between North and South and the two sovereign governments in Dublin and London

There is still a monetary border but a lot of the barriers have gone. There are no customs posts at Killeen, only a bureau de change. Coming from the North you can no longer tell when you are in the south by the potholes. Now the road on the southern side of the Border is better than on the Northern side.

Every action has a reaction, and the violence of the Troubles produced dozens of organizations dedicated to peace and reconciliation, such as Cooperation North, founded by Brendan O'Reagan, the father of duty free at Shannon, in 1979, and the Glenree Centre for reconciliation founded in 1974.

It used to be that loyalists would dream of crossing the border. Now you are nobody in the loyalist paramilitary world if you haven't been to Glenree.

And you are nobody in the Orange Order if you haven't had afternoon tea in Aras an Uachtarain.

It's a two-way traffic. No one bats an eyelid when President Mary McAleese visits a town like Ballymena, while her husband Martin plays golf with

Unionists. Who would have thought that Liz McManus would represent the Dublin government at the funeral of a loyalist David Ervine. Brian Cowen made a speech in my home town of Newcastle on Wednesday. Who noticed or cared about the location?

Unionist and Loyalists are now familiar voices on RTE. Turn on Questions and Answers and there is Peter Robinson discussing issues affecting North and South. And if you tune into BBC Radio Ulster at 7.00 you will hear a half hour programme in Irish called Bias.

But is this all meaningful. Are there real and significant links between North and South today, involving ordinary people.

Not so long ago the University of Limerick conducted a survey of cross-border links.

They found that there are scores of all-Ireland organisations which ignore the border, many since before the Troubles, whose members, unionist and nationalist, regularly mingle with people from the opposite jurisdiction.

I noted the names of a few at random:

The Golfing Union of Ireland;  
The Irish Amateur Boxing Association;  
The Irish Amateur Rowing Union;  
The Irish Amateur Swimming Association;  
The Motor Cycling Union of Ireland;  
The Mountaineering Council;  
The Coarse Fishing Federation;  
Irish Olympic Committee;  
The Special Olympics  
Tennis Ireland;  
The Clay Pigeon Shooting Association of Ireland;  
Cricket Ireland;  
The Union of Students in Ireland;  
The Irish Bank Officials' Association.,

The list goes on and on. I even came across a rather obscure, little known, cross-border body called The Irish Book Publishers' Association.

Think of the endless traffic back and across the border by all the members of these bodies.

And of course the cross-border body that has been most in the news recently is the Irish Rugby Football Union.

How many thousands of Unionists crossed the Border to attend the match between Ireland and France last Sunday and cheer on Ireland? They are the real

Northsiders now. Many Southsiders might actually feel they have more in common with them than their stereotyped Dublin Northsiders.

Here's a quotation. 'Anyone who is Irish wants to beat England in rugby.' Who said that? Hard-line Unionist politician, Ken Maginnis, now Baron Maginnis. He was at Croke Park last Sunday, cheering on the players in green.

Social interchange across the border has been enormously advanced by the decision of the GAA to drop its old rules about not promoting games like rugby and not allowing Northern Ireland police officers to join. The PSNI Gaelic Football team played UCD last year. Some PSNI members are relatives of the Irish president Mary McAleese.

When Tyrone played Kerry in the 2005 Gaelic Football final, the Ulster Unionist Party spokesperson on sport, Trevor Ringland, called on all Ulster people to support Tyrone, with the words, 'Stand up for Ulstermen and stand up for Tyrone.'

All this doesn't mean that Unionists are queuing up to play Gaelic football. Go on to Slugger O'Toole dot.com, one of the North's most popular blogs, and you will find many Unionists voicing scepticism about the GAA as a sectarian organisation.

But there are changes afoot, and cooperation between the two 'nations' identified by Heslinga that would have old Brookborough turning in his grave if he was alive today. Remember he was the one who said he wouldn't have a Catholic around the place.

His son John Brookborough wasn't quite so bigoted. He showed me around the Brookborough mansion one day in 1975. There were rows of mounted skulls on the walls. When I asked what they were, he replied, 'Oh, mostly deer, and a few Roman Catholics.'

Last year Ian Paisley met the Archbishop of Armagh and the world didn't end. The Limerick survey also found that there were 1,000 students from the Republic at Queen's University, and 2,500 at the University of Ulster. It noted that all Irish universities North and South did joint cross-border research and exchanges on an unprecedented scale.

Incidentally all universities in Ireland ó and practically every body devoted to reconciliation North and South - have received substantial funding from Chuck Feeney, the American philanthropist whose biography I have written, and who has contributed over one billion dollars to the island of Ireland in the last 20 years.

There are lots of official cross-border initiatives. The inter-government body Tourism Ireland is currently running a TV ad promoting both the Cliffs of Moher and the Giant's Causeway - immortalised by Samuel Johnson as 'worth seeing but

not worth going to see'. Bord Failte and its Belfast equivalent used to compete bitterly. I remember that just as the Troubles were breaking out in 1969, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board had to drop its main ad: 'Come to Northern Ireland for a shooting holiday'.

There are lots of cultural interactions. The Arts Councils of North and South jointly fund Annamacerrig, where many of your best writers, like Colm Tobín, penned their first novels. The two Arts Councils are funding a chair of poetry with a professor accredited to three universities, Queen's University, TCD and UCD. The Ulster Orchestra plays in Dublin and the RTE Orchestra plays in Belfast.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies in Armagh, run by a former colleague of mine, Andy Pollack, reports that 90,000 young people have crossed the border as part of school and youth exchanges in the past five years.

The business world no longer recognises the border. There are dozens of big cross border businesses which once were associated with one side or the other, like Dunnes Stores, Musgraves, Cantrell and Cochrane, Bushmills, Glen Electric, Sangers, Hastings Hotels, the Quinn Group.

Several large construction businesses ~ the north have been winning large contracts across the border, including Grahams (of Dromore), Gilbert Ash and the Lagan Grop.

Southern companies like CRH and the ESB have made total investments worth \$2 billion euro in the North. Tony O'Reilly owns the Belfast Telegraph. That couldn't have been contemplated in the 1960s.

The key to this is that the British and Irish governments are committed to an all-Ireland economy. Both have ear-marked 11 million euro for the development of the airport in Derry. The Irish Government's new National Development Plan in January commits hundred of millions to initiatives like new road corridors linking North and South. This was welcomed by all sides in the North, even by the DUP.

Northern business people now join their southern counterparts on trade missions, such as that led by the Taoiseach to the Middle East last month.

The European Union has pumped nearly 400 million euros into Irish cross border cooperation in the last two years – compared to just over 50 million for cross border initiatives in the much larger region containing Lithuania, Latvia, north-eastern Poland, Kaliningrad and eastern Belarus with a population of over 10 million people.

Mind you it is not all plain sailing. There is no question that there is a long way to go to change old habits. Hostility and inertia still characterises the reaction of some Northern civil servants to southern initiatives.

But they have little choice. According to an expert on the subject, Professor Bob Osborne, around 30 per cent of the brightest young northern people - twice as many Protestants as Catholics - currently leave Northern Ireland to study in Britain as soon as they leave school, and very few come back.

If Northern Ireland does not become a more harmonious and rewarding place to live, the demographics will work against the Unionist population, and leave an intellectually unbalanced community.

There are other factors at work breaking down the old barriers. We are all in the EU. Dublin and London are partners, not antagonists.

And don't forget the impact of globalisation. The bookshops in both jurisdictions are full of the latest American and British books. We can get cable and satellite on both sides of the border and watch CNN and Fox News. I live in Dublin and my brother lives in Belfast and we both watch Al Jazeera.

One of the reasons for the more enlightened atmosphere of today is that throughout the Troubles a great national debate took place, and continues today, about the relationship between the two parts of Ireland. It took place in the media, on radio, TV, newspapers, and in books. The Troubles created a publishing phenomenon.

The first bibliography of books about Northern Ireland was published in 1975 by Garland Press.

It was compiled by a friend of mine, a German academic called Richard Deutch, for whom I wrote the introduction. I had a look at what I wrote then. I noted that there was a dearth of books about Northern Ireland before the Troubles but a 'unique proliferation' of books about Northern Ireland since the Troubles began seven years earlier.

How many hundreds of books have been published about the North since then? Every journalist, historian, paramilitary, politician, sociologist, informer, army officer and chancer has written a book about Northern Ireland. The shelves of the bookshops in Dublin and Belfast are crammed with books about Northern Ireland.

They played an enormous and vital role in explaining ourselves to each other, and removing much of the ignorance with which we were programmed. That is a great credit to Irish publishers, North and South.

Of course many books about Northern Ireland and the Irish Question sell better in the North than in the Republic. It's their story. Des Kenny mentioned to me last night that books on the north no longer sell. Well of course not. It's yesterday's story. Kevin Meyers book on the north will sell because its Kevin Myers. But the period of inside stories from journalists and ex-paras have run their course. We're moving on.

One shouldn't draw the conclusion from this pattern of book-buying that - as the programme suggests - North and South may be diverging socially. In fact I think what I have outlined shows that the very opposite is happening.

It is of course a good thing to publish such books and have everything out in the open. Some I am sure didn't make money. Some one complained this morning that the book business is tough and the financial rewards are not great, and no doubt some writers and publishers stick at their last because they love what they do. As a writer I know what you mean. The book business is the opposite of sex, when it is good it is still lousy.

I'll stop here. I find that as I grow older I know more and more about less and less, soon I will know everything about nothing.

So I wish you well in your conference. Thank you.