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Expelled from Yard and Tribe: The "Rotten Prods" of 1920 and Their Political Legacies*

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Abstract:

This article investigates "Rotten Prods" (Protestants) through an archival and historiographical survey of the shipyard expulsions of the summer of 1920. The historical background to the "insult" is discussed, as is racial violence in British cities and industrial unrest in 1919. It charts the development of the original Home Rule-supporting Protestants to the more radical, working-class "Rotten Prods" of a later era. It explains the political dynamics of violence in 1920 and considers the predicament of "Rotten Prods" per se in the early years of Northern Ireland and beyond. Finally, it frames and assesses three exemplars of the tradition: Belfast Labour counsellor James Baird, the Communist Party of Ireland's Betty Sinclair, and trade unionist Joe Law.

Keywords: Communism, Labour, Ulster Protestantism, Unionism, Violence

Even by the standards of Ireland's "decade of centenaries", 1920 in Ulster is an emotive time to consider because to many it corresponds with a later phase of Irish history. The legacy of the conflict in Northern Ireland (1968-1998) has powerfully shaped historical writing on the 1916 Easter Rising and the War of Independence in Ireland (Townshend 2005, 354; Fanning 2013, 3). Patterns of violence were established in 1920, though, of course, there was precedence well before that. Belfast, raised to the status of a city in 1888, regularly saw serious sectarian rioting – for the first time in 1835, and again in 1857, 1864,

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1867, 1872, 1886, 1892, 1898, 1902, 1907, 1911 and 1912, with further outbreaks in the 1920s and especially in 1935 (Goldring 1991, 22). Indeed, it was the most consistent site of violence in Ireland since the mid-nineteenth century and would erupt once again in the late-1960s. Catholics and Protestants were persecuted and "burnt out" in 1920, as they were in 1969. Shipyard "expulsions" occurred in both 1920 and 1970[1]. Younger generations have grown up in the shadow of divisions established back in the 1920s, reinforced during the 1960s and 1970s, and low-scale sectarian violence is ongoing in Belfast and across Northern Ireland (*The Irish News*, 21 May 2018; *Belfast Telegraph*, 6 October 2020). Before considering the evolution of the "Rotten Prods", it is essential to establish the way political currents have coloured interpretations of an event that occurred over a century ago, with political pressures entering and informing certain histories of Unionism and northern affairs in 1920 (Barton 2020).

This article investigates the term "Rotten Prods" [Protestants] via the pivot of July 1920, when approximately 1,850 Protestant workers (of a Labour/Left-wing vintage) joined Catholics as part of an estimated 7,500 workers who were physically driven out of Belfast workplaces – including Harland and Wolff and Workman Clark's shipyards, engineering works (including Sirocco's), and other textile mills – by "loyalist" workers (Patterson 2019, 14)[2]. In part it is an archival and historical survey of these expulsions, but it is also concerned with the "Rotten Prods" term *per se*, and how the vein continued on in later political figures. It proceeds to examine three exemplars of the tradition: James Baird, Betty Sinclair, and Joe Law, who reflect over a century of "Rotten Prod" history through their trade unionism, Marxism, opposition to sectarianism, and their experience of finding themselves caught between the dominant ideologies of Irish politics.

Historian Henry Patterson has described how his father fought in the Second World War (in North Africa and Italy), only to find his "loyalty" questioned – as part of stock Unionist tactics – when as a supporter of the Labour movement he challenged the economic record of the Unionist government after the war (correspondence with the author, 9 March 2021). For this connective reason, Patterson's various works offer an important reassessment of the shipyard expulsions and, indirectly, "Rotten Prods". Patterson questions in a recent paper whether "it is legitimate to tar the trade union movement in the shipyards and indeed the wider labour force with [the] sorry history of discrimination" (Patterson 2019, 1). Re-examining the "Rotten Prods" and the expulsions of 1920 allows us to address this. In a useful revisiting of the concept, Graham Walker and James Greer coin a separate but connected classification: "Awkward Prods", with several in this caste including Harry Midgley, Albert McElroy, and Jack Hassard – all "reformist Northern Protestants" with progressive credentials (Walker, Greer 2018)[3]. The "Awkward" designation is appropriate in the sense that these names represent a different strand of Protestant politics: gradualist, supportive of the Labour movement through a British lens, and capable of co-existing within Unionism's laager. Though the lines between "Awkward" and "Rotten" could be blurred, and both could easily work alongside other in mutual campaigns against the official forces of Unionism, the latter variant moved more defiantly beyond – or

[1] Roughly 400 Catholic workers were forced out of the shipyard in July (*The Irish Times*, 30 June 1970). On this occasion, however, reinstatements were rigorously enforced shortly after.

[2] Alan Parkinson (2020, 30) puts the final figures of expelled workers over the course of the summer at roughly 10,000, with 2,250 from the shipyards.

[3] Hassard for instance, remains the only Labour councillor ever elected in Dungannon, and he was active in the civil rights movement having served in the British Army and the B Specials. He later supported the Sunningdale Agreement and was returned as an Independent Councillor from 1977 to 1981 (*The Irish Times*, 20 February 1979).

were ejected by – their original community, while also retaining traces of its history. This article explores some of these distinctions.

Why should we reflect on "Rotten Prods"? Many histories now just flatly ignore the fact that around one in four evicted during the shipyard expulsions of 1920 were Protestant workers (Morgan 1991, 269). The popular television programme *The Spirit of Freedom–The Irish Revolution*, a three-part series voiced over by Cillian Murphy and first broadcast on RTE in February 2019, covers the convulsions in Belfast in 1920 and neglects to mention the Protestant contingent expelled, presenting it as a solely Catholic experience. It would appear, therefore, that the "Rotten Prods" were not just expelled from the workplaces in 1920 – they have also been expelled from history (at least, many popular and general histories, see Ferriter 2019). This was contemporaneously voiced by Westminster MP for West Belfast Joe Devlin, whose communal emphasis led him to only issue calls for "protection of Roman Catholic workers" in the House of Commons (*Belfast Newsletter*, 27 July 1920). Ostensibly Left-wing studies of the Irish working class also present a one-way stream of persecution: a "Holy War" prosecuted by "armed Orangemen" against Catholic workers alone (Beresford Ellis 1972, 251, 254)[4]. This common reading ignores the complexity of historical facts and once again expels the "Rotten Prods".

1. Origins

In retrospect, the original nucleus of the "Rotten Prods" might be located in the United Irishmen, drawn mainly from the Presbyterian tradition, who had led the movement for Irish independence in 1798 (see Stewart 1993). Names such as Henry Joy McCracken and James "Jemmy" Hope, weaver of Templepatrick, could be construed as early "Rotten Prods". However, this article focuses on the twentieth-century usage. Indeed, the designation originally became widespread when it began to be directed against Protestant Home Rulers in Ulster. As Conor Morrissey has shown (2018, 744), this was a well-heeled version of "Rotten Protestantism" in the form of industrialists such as nonconformist shipbuilder William James Pirrie (1847-1924). Pirrie began public life as an opponent of Home Rule, who had switched to being a supporter by 1902 (Simpson 2012, 33; Hartley 2014, 246-249).

Despite his Home Rule views and financing of independent working-class unionist Thomas Sloan in the Belfast South by-election of 1902, Pirrie was "looked up to by the shipyard workers and by the people generally" (Tom Boyd, quoted in Hammond 1986, 107; see also Goldring 1991, 117). His respect flowed from economic power. As a partner and Chairman of Harland and Wolff, Pirrie was responsible for almost 25,000 jobs, and his connection with White Star Line enabled him to gain orders for vessels like the Titanic, the Britannic and Olympic, unprecedented in other parts of the British Isles. Port investment allowed Liverpool shipping capital to fund the "Yard", while expertise in engineering initially developed for local linen machinery began to forge the same equipment for a world market. Though Pirrie had been disparaged in the Unionist press for his views and membership of the Ulster Liberal Association, one former shipyard worker claimed that, by and large, "The people didn't seem to mind that Lord Pirrie

[4] This also links to the description of the events of 1920 as a "pogrom" – a word that suggests that the victims of this violence were drawn from only one community. Though not the remit of this article, a famous publication from G.B. Kenna (a *nom de plume* of Father John Hassan) was accordingly entitled *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom 1920-1922* (1922). For a refutation of the propagandistic tone of Father Hassan see Goldring (1991, 84), and for a defence of Hassan's language see Glennon (2020, 31).

had those political [Home Rule] ideas" (*Ulster Herald*, 17 February 1912; Morrissey 2018, 754; Boyd, quoted in Hammond 1986, 107). Teeming slipways after the Great War, at a time of decline in other regions, appears to have kept Pirrie in credit with "the people".

As a transition between the Home Rule supporting-element to "Rotten Protestantism" and the later more radical lineage, it is worth mentioning Robert Smillie (1857-1940). A Belfast-born Protestant, he grew up in a tall terrace near the Crumlin Road and worked as a youth in the mills before emigrating to Glasgow at the age of 15 (*Belfast Telegraph*, 29 November 2016). Two years later he entered the pits as a coal-miner in Larkhall, though it was his later leadership of the miners and founding of both the Scottish Labour Party and the Independent Labour Party, during which time he became closely linked to Keir Hardie, that marked him as a presence within the Labour movement (Wrigley 2004). He attended the annual Trades Union Congress in Belfast in 1893, where his appearance was said to antagonise loyalists (Boyd 1987, 180), and he would eventually become a member of Parliament for Morpeth in 1923, having helped shift the axis of miners' support from the Liberals to Labour. By the summer of 1920, Smillie was still being lamented in Unionist newspapers as a miners' leader responsible for the "Labour Threat of a Strike" across the United Kingdom (*Belfast Newsletter*, 26 July 1920).

However, the First World War was key to the development of the "Rotten Prod" tradition. As a later labour historian put it, an expanding Labour Party in Ulster "threatened to create new political alignments as well as social and economic issues of a more radical character than Unionists had had to contend with to date – an economic depression, getting deeper every year, made that party alarmingly relevant" (Devlin 1981, 6). This was of great concern to the political leadership of Ulster Unionism, who began to adopt Labour nomenclature in an effort to sweep up this constituency. Sir Edward Carson was particularly attuned to combating the threat, with the Ulster Unionist Labour Association, fronted by the paternalist employer profile of John Millar Andrews, formulated to this end by June 1918. This body was explicitly concerned with ensuring Protestant working-class voters stayed ethnically loyal to Unionism and would resist socialist alternatives. The Ulster Unionist Council thus decided to sponsor "Unionist Labour" candidates in future elections, with the same representation to be made on the Council. It is vital to understand, as Graham Walker has pointed out, that Ulster Unionism "spoke only for a portion of the working class, and indeed the Protestant working class: in 1919 a strike by predominantly Protestant (and on the constitutional issue Unionist) engineers caused consternation in Unionist party ranks" (Walker 2004, 42-43). Furthermore, the Belfast Labour Party, bringing together Independent Labour Party members in the city, reminded Unionists that they could not rely on unanimous Protestant working-class electoral support when they won twelve seats in the 1920 local elections. Predictably, Unionist political elites and strategists began linking this emerging Labour vote with "Bolshevism" and "disloyalty", with unemployed ex-servicemen incorporated in Unionist strategy towards sectarian ends and the Orange Order also expanding its proletarian dimension (44; see also Parkinson 2020, 27, 32)[5]. This is an ideal juncture to provide a working definition of later "Rotten Prods": "Protestant trade unionist militants and socialists who refused to support the Unionist Party" (Newsinger 1998).

However, there is a specificity to the "Rotten Prod" label. They were not simply supporters of Labour and trade unionism. In their case a Protestant working-class background combined with radical trade unionism, anti-sectarianism, class politics, and the experience of finding themselves ultimately caught between Unionism and Irish nationalism. "Rotten Prods"

[5] This accelerated after partition, when feelings of uncertainty were not unreasonable and the future of Northern Ireland as a devolved UK entity was by no means guaranteed (Greer, Walker 2019, 220, 238).

pointed out from a Left-wing perspective that the syndrome of "Catholic Nationalism versus Protestant Unionism diverted attention from the harsh and evil effects of the world economic crisis upon ordinary people" (Gray 1986, 111). At the same time, a few could be found in the trade union-based Northern Ireland Labour Party from 1924 until its political demise in the 1970s. After a few turbulent years (1920-1922) when "Labour undoubtedly did well just to survive" (Walker 1984, 19), the NILP brought together Protestants with Catholics to advocate for better terms and conditions, more "fair shares" in working conditions, as well as electoral, political, and social rights that were enjoyed across the United Kingdom by their brethren in the wider British labour movement (Edwards 2009). It was the NILP, rather than the Unionist Party, who set up advice centres for constituents, after they won four seats at the 1958 Stormont election, and by demanding their entitlement, "British rights for British citizens", the NILP paradoxically became opponents of the Unionist regime at Stormont. This Labour vote was undercut by Unionist abolition of Proportional representation for municipal elections in 1923 and in 1929 for Northern Ireland parliament elections.

2. A Note on Sources and 1920

An abundance of memoirs, especially from upper-class Unionists, characterise the era of the Home Rule crisis and the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force (Orr 1987, 237). By 1920, the well dries up. Newspapers remain an excellent resource to determine grassroots attitudes, but there are surprisingly few accounts written by Unionists (or working or middle-class Protestants) about what happened on the ground in 1920. We simply do not have memoirs detailing much about the actions and attitudes of Unionists in the storm-centre of 1920. It is a fascinating and revealing moratorium. Labourer Robert McElborough, who began writing his memoirs in 1946, does not linger on the events of 1920 in any detail (McElborough 2002). Another case is that of a labourer who worked at Workman Clark's shipyard, Thomas Carnduff (1886-1956), who later became a well-known playwright (see Parr 2017, 45-80). Active in the Young Citizens Volunteers and the Royal Engineers in the First World War, he demobilised in 1919 and returned to work at the shipyard, where an anonymously authored "Portrait Gallery" piece in *The Irish Times* stated that he helped Catholic workers escape over the River Lagan during the shipyard expulsions of 21 July 1920 (*The Irish Times*, 2 October 1954). The difficulty is that Carnduff's writings on this episode, if they ever existed, have not survived. Despite extensive research on Carnduff's life, there is little or no documentation relating to 1920. The aforementioned detail is a fleeting claim published in a newspaper thirty years later.

As with any other source, newspapers are not beyond reproach. However, as pointed out by Dennis Kennedy, they were "the windows through which the vast majority of Northern Unionists viewed the nationalist struggle from 1919 onwards. For most they were the only sources of information". Similarly, titles such as Unionist *Belfast Newsletter*, still apparently the oldest English language newspaper in the world (and still very Unionist),

> were widely read in a highly literate society and were, through editors, staff and ownership, closely integrated into the Unionist community. Editors and proprietors could be, and were, politicians up to government level. They were influential lay members of church committees; journalists at all levels were often active members of the Unionist Party, of the Orange Order and of the Masonic Order. (Kennedy 1988, 6)

Kennedy is aware that these newspapers also have "clear limitations" (*ibidem*). These are apparent from a basic check of the *Newsletter*, where one searches for coverage of the shipyard

expulsions of 1920 to discover that, according to this outlet, they did not happen. The nature of the violence from 21 July that began two years of violence, in other words, do not exist as *their* record – unreported, as absent as the memoirs. What is reported is violence on the Falls Road and wider Belfast in the days following, with descriptions of a "violent mob" who "shot at and stoned the troops who eventually were compelled to fire" (*Belfast Newsletter*, 22 July 1920)[6]. The IRA and "disloyal" Sinn Féiners were thus exclusively guilty of starting and maintaining the disorder. The partiality of sources is not always retrospective. Nevertheless, "as aids to understanding Unionists' perceptions of both what was happening to them and what was going on in the island", Kennedy is correct to note that they are significant and convey ground-level Unionist vision.

3. The Violence of 1920

Going against the cliché of cyclical and identical violence over decades (Boyd 1987, *passim*), working-class riots in Belfast were more an increasing manifestation of social organisations within Protestant working-class communities, both gaining in prevalence from the ninetieth century onwards (Gibbon 1975, 72). The politics of the shipyard expulsions are particularly bound up in the specific status of shipyardmen as workers, and the unskilled element in this workforce that felt threatened at this time. As a pioneering study points out, the shipyardmen were the "labour aristocracy" of workers in Belfast (83), settling in different parts of the city from their fellow workers (in Ballymacarret, for instance, rather than the Shankill) – askance from the city and proud outsiders to it. They even had their own [Queen's] "Island"[7]. Connectedly, though trade unionism was stronger in Belfast than anywhere else in Ireland, unskilled Protestant workers were less likely to be members of trade unions (Hepburn 1996, 227). Alastair Reid has clarified that the shipyard expulsion attacks were,

> not acts of aggression by Protestant skilled workers against Catholic unskilled workers, but actions of *insecure* groups of Protestant workers keen to ensure that their Catholic rivals should be first out in period of depression (1886, 1921). As the impact of such insecurity and competition on Protestant tradesmen and unskilled workers was highly uneven, the apparent unity of such actions had a crucial political component, being more influenced by the effects of broader political conjunctures and alliances than just a simple expression of economic privilege. (Reid 1980, 123)

Henry Patterson concurs that as the aggressors were apprentices and "mostly unskilled workers" (such as rivet-boys), Catholics were the "easy target" for Unionist and Loyalist resentments as they were most prevalent in the expanding unskilled labour force during the War (Patterson 2019, 15; see also Parkinson 2020, 26). It was, in other words, "economic vulnerability, not economic privilege, that reinforced their strong sectarian group consciousness" (Norton 1996, 155). The postwar pressures of unemployment and economic depression, also prevalent in the wider United Kingdom, played its part, along with ongoing atrocities committed during the Irish War of Independence. Unemployment in shipbuilding began to rise throughout the UK

[6] Sub-headings to this column include "Sinn Feiners attack workers" and "Sinn Feiners at the shipyards".

[7] Playwright Wilson John Haire, who like his father worked in the shipyard, recalled "elitist trades" within its workforce and how this often expressed itself in uniform. Electricians "who scarcely got their hands dirty" often wore a collar and tie, along with brown overalls "to distinguish themselves from everyone else". This was succeeded in rank by joiners, who could sport "suits or sports jackets with a white carpenter's apron", with some wearing silver or fine metal on their cuffs to prevent them touching glue or timber (Haire 2020, 30).

in May 1920, meaning that by July of that year, 27,000 men were employed in Belfast's two shipyards, two thousand fewer than the previous year (Morgan 1991, 271).

1920 began ominously with the chairman of the West Belfast Unionist Club informing those present at a January meeting in an Orange Hall on the Shankill Road that,

> Until the employers of Belfast took up their proper position and cease employing Sinn Feiners and other rebels from the south and west, they could never hope to occupy their right position in the city, which had been built up by Protestant energy and enterprise. The murders going on throughout the country might before long lead to retaliation. (Patterson 1980, 135)

Fear of Sinn Féin political successes throughout the island were mounting, leading to Unionists viewing Catholic populations as coterminous with Sinn Féin. The latter's members and other nationalists combined to control 23 local authorities (in Counties Fermanagh and Tyrone especially, and Derry City) which in some cases declared allegiance to Dáil Eireann (Grant 2018, 91–92). Statements by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church that same month cemented this identification, which was taken in Ulster as evidence of their backing for Sinn Féin (Kennedy 1988, 44). Across Ulster, Unionist apprehension was about to boil over. It was a decidedly two-way process, with the approaching "exclusion" from the "Free State" and the postures of Protestant extremists spiking Catholic resentment, as well as further Sinn Féin support (McMahon 2011, 185).

On 12 July, at a field at Finaghy, near Belfast, Carson delivered a speech that drew comparisons with those he had given back in 1912. He castigated "tacking on" the "Sinn Fein question" to "the Labour question", exclaiming:

> What I say is this – these men who come forward posing as the friends of Labour care no more about Labour than does the man in the moon. Their real object, and the real insidious nature of their propaganda, is that they may mislead and bring about disunity among our own people; and in the end, before we know where we are, we may find ourselves in the same bondage and slavery as is the rest of Ireland in the South and West. Beware of these insidious methods…we in Ulster will tolerate no Sinn Fein – (cheers) – no Sinn Fein organisation, no Sinn Fein methods. (Clarkson 1970, 365)

Carson was essentially warning the British government that if it did not take adequate measures against Sinn Féin, he would "call out the Ulster Volunteers" (that is, reorganize the UVF). Though the *Irish News* thought the speech "a harmless and commonplace harangue… (comprising) platitudes and conditional threats" (quoted in Patterson 2019, 8), alarms sounded in London. Attitudes to Unionists in Britain were already hardening, with "the sympathy of the pre-war days giving way to a sense of frustration and a feeling that the Ulstermen had all along thwarted a settlement in Ireland" (Stewart 1981, 118). An attempt was duly made to censure Carson in Westminster. Back in Ireland, that same week letters continued to appear in the *Newsletter* linking the Sinn Fein menace to ordinary Catholics. On 16 July, one – signed "THOR" – referred to the insidious system of "peaceful penetration"' of Ulster by Catholics, of a new plantation, and of the "well-intentioned but foolish" policy of employing Catholics: "The old spirit which existed in 1914 is still alive in Ulster – it only needs wakening" (*Belfast Newsletter*, 16 July 1920). A recurrent image was of Catholics from the south moving north to seize the jobs of those who had volunteered for war service. The belief that those who had "served" should be prioritised with employment naturally belied the fact that Catholics, as well as Protestants, also fought in the War (*The Irish Times*, 3 August 1920). On 21 July, as British Army officer and senior civil servant Wilfred Spender arrived in Belfast to begin reorganising the UVF (Farrell 1976, 30; Moore 2019, 30; Boyd 1987, 193), violence began.

The immediate trigger was when the Cork IRA's Seán Culhane shot dead Colonel Gerald B.F. Smyth in the Cork County Club on 17 July. Born in the Punjab but raised as a Protestant from Banbridge County Down, Smyth was a Royal Irish Constabulary Divisional Commissioner who had gained a level of notoriety for incendiary pronouncements to a gathering of Royal Irish Constabulary personnel in Listowel, County Kerry, on 19 June (Farrell 1976, 28; Lynch 2008, 379-380). His hard-line, anti-IRA opinions made him popular with Loyalists, though his speech, during which he said "You may make mistakes occasionally and innocent persons may be shot, but this cannot be helped and you are bound to get the right person sometimes", also left some RIC officers aghast (O'Halpin, Ó Corráin 2020, 149). Nonetheless, Smyth's distinguished war record in the Royal Engineers at the Battle of the Somme and elsewhere – he was disabled following the loss of his arm at Givenchy in September 1914 – meant that his death caused serious anger in the north, a situation heightened by disruption in bringing his body there for burial when the driver and fireman refused to make the engine function on the train from Cork. Smyth's funeral took place on the day the expulsions began: 21 Wednesday July – the first full day of production after the annual holiday for Orange celebrations.

Alan F. Parkinson (2020, 26) suggests that despite the lack of evidence for planning of the violence, the timing of the attacks with the return to work of several thousand workers suggests a "degree of opportunism". A group thought to be the Belfast Protestant Association (BPA) posted up notices in the yards and approach roads calling on "all Protestant and Unionist workers" to attend a "Mass meeting" during the dinner break (all placards ended with "God Save the King"). The meeting which took place outside the gates of the Workman Clark South Yard was estimated to have comprised between two and five thousand men. The main topic raised was the IRA campaign in the south and west of Ireland, where it was claimed the British administration had collapsed and Sinn Féin was in control (Patterson 2019, 8-9). Recent rioting in Derry in which at least twenty people had been killed was highlighted as evidence of an attempt to import the situation in the south and west to Ulster (*The Irish Times*, 23 June 1920; Parkinson 2020, 19), and a resolution was passed ensuring that any worker who refused to sign a declaration that he did not belong to or join Sinn Fein should get no work with employers. An invitation was also issued to every member of "Carson's navy" to join the Orange Order, the Ulster Volunteer Force, or the Ulster Labour Party (Clarkson 1970, 367).

After this meeting a mob armed with hammers, wooden staves, iron bars, and – it was claimed – revolvers, went on the rampage. While some workers who anticipated trouble left before lunchtime (leaving behind expensive tools and belongings), unluckier ones were stripped to their undergarments in the search for Catholic emblems like rosary beads. Many were beaten up (Moore 2019, 28). A deputy named Travers from the Belfast Expelled Workers later described the gates being hammered down with sledges, whereupon "One man was set upon, thrown into the dock, had to swim the Musgrave Channel, and having been pelted with rivets had to swim two or three miles, to emerge in streams of blood and rush to the police office in a nude state" (Clarkson 1970, 366). This soon spread to the other four main engineering works: Mackie's, Musgrave's, Davidson's Sirocco works, and Coome, Barbour, Fairbarin, and Lawson's. Catholic workers and "Rotten Prods" were also forced out of the linen mills and McLaughlin and Harvey's, the main building firm. Disturbances took place for days after and were not limited to Belfast, with violence being directed at Catholic businesses and homes in Banbridge (Colonel Smyth's hometown), Dromore and Bangor. The spectre of militant Sinn Feiners materialised in Belfast with the IRA engaging its snipers and volunteers armed with revolvers (*Belfast Newsletter*, 22 July 1920). More was to follow the following month when District Inspector Oswald Swanzy of the RIC was shot dead on 22 August in the centre of Lisburn

on his way home from Church[8]. Severe repercussions followed against Lisburn's small Catholic minority over three days of rioting, during which sixty public houses, the parish priest's home, and shops were set on fire. One person was killed, and 600 families forced from their homes. Many resettled in Dundalk (and a small group in the Falls Road). The violence continued on into early September and verbal threats indefinitely (*Irish Independent*, 16 September 1920; Farrell 1976, 31; see also Lawlor 2009).

The sectarian actions at Lisburn led to the imposition the Belfast boycott, which also took place against other towns and only formally ended in 1922 (and went on unofficially beyond that) (*Irish Independent*, 20 August 1920; *Irish Examiner*, 28 October 1921; Moore 2019, 36-37). Northern newspapers regularly reported the destruction of goods from or to Belfast, with bread, newspapers and other items destroyed and whisky stolen. Meanwhile, killings of Protestants like Thomas Bradfield, a farmer who was shot dead near Bandon, carried on in the new year (Kennedy 1988, 49). 20 people were killed in August and 400 (mainly Catholic families) evicted. Overall, between July 1920 and October 1922, an estimated 498 people died in the violence that gripped the northern part of the island (Parkinson 2004, 12; Glennon 2020, 31), and expulsion episodes continued against both Catholics and the "Rotten Prods". By November 1920, 10,000 Catholics – and their 20,000 dependents – looked for relief from the Belfast Expelled Workers' Fund (McMahon 2011, 187), an organ of Bishop Dr Joseph MacRory, Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor. Roughly one in five of the entire Catholic male workforce (and one quarter of the Catholic workforce *per se*) had been expelled from their workplace, with 9,000 remaining unemployed for the next few years[9]. Many at this time became undoubtedly reliant on charity, emigration to Glasgow and Dublin, and jobs on the Belfast Corporation's tramline reconstruction scheme (Parkinson 2020, 36-37). The threat and fear of future violence ensured "maintaining the ethnic boundary in many areas of employment" (Hepburn 1996, 226, 232).

In something that is increasingly uncredited in modern Irish historical writing, it is worth Unionising this history through investigating not just what was going on in Ireland, but also in the wider United Kingdom. 2019 saw the centenary of what were known as the "Yemeni riots" of 1919, which took place in the North East of England in South Shields, around four miles downstream from Newcastle Upon Tyne. It becomes clear that 1919 was a precedent for the events of 1920, with a similar process occurring in this case whereby returning servicemen resented arriving back on Tyneside to zero or few jobs and became frustrated by seeing a new Yemeni community who had arrived in South Shields (by way of the Empire) mixing with the local English population (Jenkinson 2009). The sight of white English people entering Yemeni shops in February 1919 sparked attacks on Yemenis in South Shields (the name "Yemeni riots" is itself misleading, as the Yemeni community was on the end of the attacks). Robert Lynch notes how, as in Belfast, "Similar expulsions occurred in many port cities across the country caused by the economic strains of demobilisation and competition for postwar employment, housing and pensions" (2018, 93; see also Loughlin 2018, 125-126). They occurred in Glasgow

[8] Swanzy had been in Cork at the time of the killing of Tomás Mac Curtain in March 1920 and was charged by a coroner's jury with the wilful murder of the Lord Mayor. Shortly afterward he was transferred to Lisburn, nine miles south-west of Belfast. A recent journalistic "micro history" of the Troubles hammers home the point that violent assassination of the kind explored in the book (in April 1978) had not been seen in the town since the shooting of Swanzy (Cobain 2020, 81-87, 144).

[9] Relatively untouched were the deep-sea dockers of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, as this was a mainly Catholic cohort.

(where black sailors working in Govan were attacked), Salford, London, Hull, Liverpool, Barry, Newport, and Cardiff, with attacks on Asian, Arab and Chinese minority ethnic populations "triggered by intense job competition in the merchant navy, the first sector to feel the bite of the postwar economic downturn" (Lynch 2018, 94).

On 26 July 1920 a deputation from the Belfast District Committee of the Engineering Federation met the management of the shipyards and called for those expelled to be reinstated (*Belfast Newsletter*, 26 July 1920), but this was countered by a different meeting of shipyard workers held outside the Milewater Basin gate of Workman Clark's North Yard two days later. A resolution was passed which deplored "wrecking and looting", but declared "we will not work with disloyal workers until the railwaymen decide to handle Government stores and troops as heretofore and Sinn Feiners cease the foul murder campaign which has destroyed the fair name and fame of our beloved country"[10]. It added a "respectful suggestion" to employers that in future applications for employment "first consideration be given [to] loyal ex-servicemen and Protestant Unionists". The "loyal" was an addition to cover the way a large number of those expelled had been Catholic ex-servicemen. The chief speaker at the meeting was a joiner and member of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, William Barclay, who proceeded to outline four reasons for the expulsions. Firstly, he said:

> 1) Many of their men, who were loyal to King and Country, and who joined the forces of the Crown when the war broke out, were now walking about the streets unemployed……while in the yards were employed disloyal members, earning good livelihoods at the expense of the men who joined the Army.
> 2) Another cause was the action of some of their trade unionists and trades council in trespassing upon political territory which had caused a cleavage in their ranks --- some of the trade union executives had passed what were virtually Sinn Fein resolutions.
> 3) Then there were those terrible outrages in different parts of the country.
> 4) The last cause of the trouble was the circumstances surrounding the fate of that gallant Ulsterman, Commissioner Smyth.

The meeting ended with a rendition of the National Anthem and all present who were not already members of the Orange Order, the Ulster Volunteer Force or the Ulster Unionist Labour Party were invited to join (*The Irish Times*, 29 July 1920; *The Irish Times*, 31 July 1920).

In local trade union terms, the strongest challenge to the expulsions came from the Carpenters' Union, who issued a call in September for their workers in the shipyards to strike and would take their objections to the Trades Union Congress the following year (Bell 2016, 88-93)[11]. For the most part, however, unions remained typically divided in their response. The Belfast Central Branch of the Electrical Trades Union quickly issued statements condemning the expulsions and calling for "the co-operation of all trade unions to see that their members are allowed to peacefully pursue their lawful occupations", while two months later employees

[10] The munitions strike started in May 1920 when Dublin port dockers refused to handle war materials being imported into Ireland. Dun Laoghaire dockers followed suit, before the embargo spread to the railways. By the end of 1920 much of the Irish railway network was paralysed and thousands of workers had been dismissed (Clarkson 1970, 340-342). The Great Northern Railway line was mostly unaffected because it was handled by predominantly Belfast crews.

[11] Bell (2016, 94) argues the Carpenters' Union and the Catholic working class was symptomatically failed by a TUC who "look[ed] the other way" and sided with "the sectarians", though this was always tempered by a British labour movement who "conditioned their acceptance of Irish self-determination on protection for minorities in Ireland", i.e. Unionists.

of the Great Northern Railway adopted a resolution that it would be necessary for workmen to sign a "declaration of loyalty to their King and Constitution" before returning to work (*Belfast Newsletter*, 27 July 1920; Clarkson 1970, 370). Some historians have argued that employers who "tacitly consented" to sectarian violence in 1920 were driven by "pragmatic responses" to the dominant ethnic consensus. The capitalistic impulse frankly ensured that an all-Protestant workforce would give employers in shipbuilding or engineering "less trouble" (Hepburn 1996, 243). While one recent study terms this the "moral economy of loyalty" (Loughlin 2018, 14 and *passim*), prominent industrialists such as Edward Harland and Gustav Wolff could build political careers tapping this deferent Protestant working class base who they allowed to monopolise workplaces through the "path of least resistance" (Hepburn 1996, 38, 244; Simpson 2012, 32).

Though "Rotten Prod" prototype Lord Pirrie refused to segregate Catholic employees in a part of the Harland and Wolff plant under military guard, he also threatened – as he had in 1912 – to lay off the entire 17,000 workforce unless Catholic workers were reinstated (Patterson 2019, 4)[12]. The month after the violence of July 1920, Pirrie clarified that he thought Catholic refusal to sign the "loyalty" declaration was holding things up, and that drastic action was on hold because "the Ulster temperament is always uncertain at this time of year" (*Belfast Newsletter,* 17 August 1920). Dublin Castle's deployment of troops led to casualties (including, in a grimly ironic twist, veterans of the Great War)[13], but eventually did restore order in the Yards. Pirrie's influence here should also not be underestimated. However, in October 1920 Carson eulogized his shipyard "friends" in the House of Commons, the same month James Craig told Loyalist shipyardmen responsible for the expulsions: "Do I approve of the action you boys have taken in the past? I say yes" (Clarkson 1970, 271; Nelson 1984, 35). It was retrospectively noted that this set the tone for what kind of action would be tolerated by Unionist leaders at Stormont thereafter. The expulsions removed a layer of shop stewards from the factory floors and yards, with trade union officials literally being replaced by loyalist vigilante committee members (Bell 2016, 87; Parkinson 2020, 300). Less scrutiny of rights for workers resulted, along with the accordant fall in wages that broke across the rest of Ireland and the United Kingdom in the economic downturn.

4. The Tradition Established – James Baird

The Labour movement always faced difficulty in navigating questions of national identity in Ulster, and this persevered during and after the events of 1920. In one of the memorable dedications of Irish history, Austen Morgan dedicated his book *Labour and Partition* (1991) to "the 'rotten Prods' of Belfast, victims of unionist violence and nationalist myopia". The essence of "Rotten Prods" is that they received animosity from *both* sides, reflecting the position of the Labour movement throughout Ireland in being "handicapped by the need to develop an attitude to the ever-present national question" (Hepburn, Rumpf 1977, 155). In July 1920, "Rotten Prods" included relatively high-profile figures such as John Hanna, an ex-master of an Orange Lodge (who had worked alongside James Larkin in the 1907 dock strike), and James Baird, a Labour councillor and member of the Boilermakers' Society who was prominent in

[12] This contrasted with Workman Clark's, which permitted "loyal" Protestant employees to hold meetings in their yards, just as they had allowed the Ulster Volunteer Force to use their property as a drill ground (Clarkson 1970, 368-369).

[13] Joseph Giles (19) was an ex-soldier only recently demobilised, residing at Kashmir Street, who was killed in Bombay Street having apparently been shot in the head with a machine gun (*Belfast Newsletter*, 23 July 1920; O'Halpin, Ó Corráin 2020, 153).

the engineering strike the previous year (Farrell 1976, 28, 336)[14]. Though Parkinson (2020, 31) downplays physical attacks on Protestant trade unionists, Baird recalled being amongst those assaulted, "flung into the river and, while struggling for life, [being] pelted with rivets and washers" (Devlin 1981, 47). In many ways the first radical "Rotten Prod" leader, Baird experienced loyalist intolerance in the summer of 1920, and then faced coercive anti-trade union sentiment in the Irish Free State three years later.

Baird was aware of how the War had altered the game in terms of the struggle between capital and labour. He thought strategically about the "44" hour strike of 1919, observing that it would be wise to stockpile three months' worth of food to blunt the "hunger weapon" and "the haunting fear of starvation" that had been used to undermine previous stoppages (*Belfast Newsletter*, 16 January 1919; Baird 1919). The strike's leaders, including Baird and the "Islandmen", unsuccessfully sought a "shorter working week" (44 rather than a 54 hours), but were venerated for being "pioneers in a revolutionary direction" – defying "the United Belfast Press, both Orange and Green" in their unanimous call for strike action (Baird, quoted in *The Voice of Labour*, 31 August 1918; Anon., "Belfast Strikes First Blow", *The Voice of Labour*, 25 January 1919). Though Baird was clearly influenced by James Connolly's Marxist emphasis on "militant industrial trade unionism", it was also observed that as rank and file trade unionists had arranged mass meetings of shipyard and engineering workers in August 1919, this was predominantly a movement "from below" (Patterson 1980, 96). In the January 1920 municipal elections, he was elected as a counsellor for Ormeau ward.

After the shipyard expulsions, Baird was a signatory of the Belfast Expelled Workers' Fund, though his requests for help from British trade unionists at the September 1921 Trades Union Congress in Cardiff fell on deaf ears. Baird compared the rioting and expulsions with those of previous decades, and was reported to have said in his speech:

> It was not a question of Protestants expelling Catholics, but of expelling every worker who openly opposed the ascendancy gang led by Sir Edward Carson. The "boss" class becoming alarmed resurrected old spites to divide Irishmen, and labour men whether they were trade unionists, whether they were Sinn Feiners or not, were expelled from the shipyards. The real objects of the capitalists in the North of Ireland in fostering religious differences was to break trade unionism and to represent Irishmen to the British people as unable to manage their own affairs. (*The Irish Times*, 8 September 1921)

That same month Baird was part of a delegation that met with Éamon de Valera to protest against partition. In another impassioned speech, Baird claimed that it would divide the workers, avert the "one big union" of Ireland (a reference to the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union), ruin industry and drive workers to emigration. Baird factually asserted that partition would also place power in the hands of those responsible for the violence of 1920 (*The Irish Times*, 29 September 1921; see also *Young Ireland*, 8 October 1921). Earlier that year he was the only councillor on the Corporation to oppose a motion backed by James Craig and the Lord Mayor Belfast calling for Belfast City Hall to hold the opening proceedings of the new parliament of Northern Ireland (*The Irish Times*, 31 May 1921).

As with later northern figures, Baird took refuge in Irish trade unionism as an organizer for the ITGWU. He was active in the East Waterford farm strike of 1923 (*Irish Times*, 23 June 1923), which became a stubborn dispute at a time of considerable sabotage in the region. He

[14] Baird was an unsuccessful Labour candidate for South Belfast in the first elections to the Northern Ireland parliament in 1921. As with the other two Labour candidacies, he ran on an anti-partitionist line (Patterson 1980, 149).

also stood as an Irish Labour candidate at the August 1923 Dáil election, polling quite strongly in Waterford, though relinquishing a seat on transfers to his running mate John Butler, a farmer and trade unionist (*The Nationalist*, 1 September 1923). A "Special Correspondent" for the *Irish Times* printed in its preamble to polling day that Baird had "made himself conspicuous by the extreme bitterness of his speeches during the past few months" (*The Irish Times*, 25 August 1923), speeches it claimed might win him votes from East Waterford agricultural workers, but not the trade unionists of the city nor West Waterford workers. There is little evidence of this "bitterness", though the following month Baird was arrested and imprisoned without charge in Kilkenny Prison under the Public Safety (Emergency Powers) Act (*The Irish Times*, 14 September 1923; *The Irish Worker*, 6 October 1923). Poems and articles appeared in his honour in *The Workers' Republic* journal, and it also called for workers to submit resolutions to their unions across Ireland for a general stoppage to secure his release (*The Workers' Republic*, 29 September 1923; Anon., "You, Mr. Union Man", *The Workers' Republic*, 6 October 1923). All evidence of Baird's activities show a man increasingly out of step with the nascent Free State. After a hunger strike, undertaken at the same moment as republican prisoners, he was released from prison (*Nenagh News*, 15 September 1923; *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 October 1923). Baird emigrated the following year to Australia, where little is known of his life. He died in Brisbane in 1948 (*Munster Express*, 7 January 1949).

5. Awkward and Rotten

Within a decade of Baird's departure to Australia, a series of protests became one of the rare points in the history of Belfast where Catholic and Protestant workers rioted together, on economic issues, against the miserly dispensations of Belfast's "Poor Law Guardians" (Devlin 1981; Mitchell 2017). In September 1932, a month prior to what became known as the Outdoor Relief protests, Jack Beattie, member for Pottinger, tried to raise a motion on unemployment. The government did not want to hear this, with James Craig preferring to use the occasion to thank the Belfast Corporation for using City Hall for meetings of the Northern Ireland parliament, and so ruled it out of order. This led to a protest from Tommy Henderson, Independent Unionist representative for the Protestant working-class Shankill constituency, who rowed in behind Beattie. Though Henderson always declared he was more a "friend of the worker" than a socialist (Bell 1976, 70), he tended to be close to the NILP on bread-and-butter issues and thus something of an "Awkward Prod". With Stormont refusing to hear the motion on unemployment, Beattie bellowed at the speaker, "I absolutely refuse to sit in this House of hypocrisy and indulge in hypocrisy with thousands starving around me". It was then that he charged forward and seized the Mace, hurling it along the carpeted floor where it smashed: "Out of the road with this; it is only the emblem of hypocrisy!" Pandemonium followed, with Beattie thrown out of the House to cries of "God Save the King". In response, Henderson shouted back: "God save the people!" Before leaving with Beattie that day, Henderson asked those in the House "what the unemployed were going to do for the next two months" while Parliament was adjourned (Mitchell 2017, 67-68). The answer came in the form of the Outdoor Relief riots of the following month.

In such political situations and moments, "Awkward Prods" of the Northern Ireland Labour Party – and Independent Unionists (including Henderson) – could collaborate with "Rotten Prods", but at other times there was a clear differentiation between the "Christian socialism" overwhelmingly practiced by the NILP and the more radical Marxist analysis of the "Rotten Prods". The NILP's Protestant working-class base tended to firmly back the pro-union posi-

tion the party adopted in 1949[15], when it declared in favour of partition and expelled certain branches such as West Belfast, though the specific Christian socialist vs. radical Marxist divide was a longstanding divergence reaching back to earlier debates in the Labour movement, also replicated in Scotland (Greer, Walker 2019). The NILP's deputy leader David Bleakley articulated best "Christian socialism" in Northern Ireland, which also manifested in the form of distinct local neighbourhood activism rooted in a UK ethos and drawn from British thinkers like R. H. Tawney. This was an ideological world away from talk of international solidarity and radicalism espoused by "Rotten Prods". In 1961, Bleakley confirmed the NILP's desire to "work within the framework of the existing constitution to achieve a prosperous and unified community in Ulster" (quoted in Edwards 2009, 55, 83) cemented by the Cold War era when centre-Left parties in Western European liberal democracies differentiated themselves from any vestige of Communism.

6. Betty Sinclair

Conscription during the First World War ensured that female labour had been introduced into Belfast's shipbuilding and engineering industry. By July 1916 there were 151 women working in the yard (1.7% of the workforce) and four years later around 1,800 of those ultimately forced from their jobs (especially in the linen industry) across the city were women, including the last workers to be evicted: four waitresses in the staff dining room of Harland and Wolff (Lynch 1997, 55). One who exemplified the female component of the "Rotten Prods", who came into her own during the aforementioned Outdoor Relief protests of 1932, was Elizabeth (Betty) Sinclair[16]. Leading the agitation in the north of the city, she described herself as one of those "men and women who had never spoken on a platform in their lives [who] became orators overnight, through sheer desperation" (quoted in Morrissey 1983, 123), speaking to as many as 90,000 people on one occasion. Though Sinclair is rare as one of the few men or women within Irish Communism to receive scholarly and biographical treatment (Morrissey 1983; Smylie 2016), she has not been well-served by researchers, and a proper full-length study of her life is in order.

Sinclair was born into a Protestant working-class family in Hooker Street, in the Ardoyne district of North Belfast (then a mixed area). The particular span of Sinclair's life (1910–1981) takes in key episodes in Ireland: both World Wars, partition, the Belfast Troubles, the Outdoor Relief riots of 1932, and the outbreak of the Troubles in 1968. There were innate Protestant values in her background, deriving from her Church of Ireland upbringing and Sunday school attendance. She went to St. Mary's Church of Ireland school on the Crumlin Road and was the by-product of her liberal father Joseph, a sawyer in Harland and Wolf, and her more church-oriented mother Margaret, who was a reeler at Ewart's Linen Mill and held the tenancy on their house (Morrissey 1983, 121-122). While working at Jennymount Linen Mills,

[15] Internal divisions on constitutional matters often shook the NILP, but it could still include within its ranks individual Protestant radicals (and anti-partitionists), some of whom came to the fore during the civil rights movement in the late-1960s.

[16] This may appear an ironic segue-way, as Sinclair tended to see class politics and not feminism as the principal struggle. Nevertheless, Sinclair's rejection of feminism has probably been overstated by political opponents of the later civil rights struggle. Her views on social issues were inherently connected to economic inequality, which meant she was unmoved by constitutional prospects in the Republic of Ireland: "Money was the key, if that was available then so were abortion and contraception, it is the poor who suffer at the hands of such legislation" (*Irish Press*, 30 December 1981).

Sinclair attended meetings of the West Belfast Labour Party and the Revolutionary Workers' Groups – the first Communist movement in Belfast, with a class-based analysis ("class against class") that Sinclair retained for the rest of her life. In 1932 she joined the Irish-based Flax and Other Textile Workers' Union, before breaking into public consciousness, especially in the eyes of unemployed workers, during the Outdoor Relief protests (Smylie 2016, 123). In 1933 Sinclair left for Moscow, having received an invitation to study at the International Lenin School through the recently-reconstituted Irish Communist Party (CPI). The Marxist training she received over 18 months reinforced her class analysis.

Following the sectarian riots of 1935, shattering the working-class unity of the Outdoor Relief protests three years previously, Sinclair helped Catholics settle in to the Glenard estate, Ardoyne, and for this was reproached by another Protestant woman active with a local Mission Hall. The pious lady told her "we had to stop helping these Catholics", and that if Sinclair persisted her own house would be burned down. Sinclair replied:

> 'Well, you can go ahead and burn the house down. It doesn't belong to us and we don't have much in the way of furniture or that. But, I don't think that Ewart's mill directors would be very pleased with its workers burning down its property and it might be worse for you than for us in the end.' Nobody ever came back again but for two years none of the Protestant people in Hooker Street spoke to me. (Munck and Rolston 1987, 54-55)

The mid-1930s, which saw refugees arrive in North Belfast from all over the city, was also a trying time for the Left. The CPI struggled in its own "Rotten Prod" predicament where "meetings that it held at the Custom House steps were subject to constant heckling and abuse from Catholic Action on one side and the Ulster Protestant League on the other" (Morrissey 1983, 125). Along with Billy McCullough, Sinclair was detained under the Special Powers Act in October 1940 and jailed after two Communist publications carried an article by Jack Brady of the IRA, a proscribed organization. After a successful appeal, she served just two months in the archaic Armagh Jail. Following her release she was placed under official surveillance, with her correspondence perused and copied (Goss 2018, 513).

The end of the Second World War, however, represented a high watermark for Communism in Northern Ireland. Sinclair played a key role as District Organizer and Treasurer in the campaigns and debates during the War, when the Communist Party took a broadly pro-Union stance similar to "Awkward Prods" in the Northern Ireland Labour Party. It emphasised anti-fascism in the 1945 general election, when Sinclair was one of three Communist Party candidates who polled surprisingly well (she received 4,130 votes in Cromac, in the South Belfast area) (Milotte 1984, 212; Smylie 2016, 125). After a brief hiatus in Bristol managing the Communist Party bookshop, Sinclair was made Secretary of the Belfast District and Trades Council from 1947 until her retirement in 1975 and was later credited by Irish Communist leaders for bringing the diverging north/south traditions together and making them stick (Devine 2020, 264). Well-read and fond of classical music – she had attended opera and ballet in Russia – Sinclair was a friend of the playwright Sam Thompson (1916-1965), who provided the archetypal cultural portrayal of a "Rotten Prod" with Davy Mitchell in his 1960 play *Over the Bridge* (*The Irish Times*, 25 December 1981).

In line with Communist Party operations in Ireland, Sinclair was prone to involve herself in "Popular front"-style campaigns with the aim of radicalisation, though when it comes to Civil Rights she had been involved as far back as the 1940s with the National Council of Civil Liberties. She was thus well-placed to act as chairperson of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) Executive and serve as one of its original 13-strong Committee. While

a Left-wing radical in economic terms, Sinclair's desire to maintain broad-based support for civil rights, built in part on her memories of the original "Belfast Troubles", ensured that she was cautious about the marches developing too militant a character. As she wrote in her diary: "What is wanted is a cool appraisal of the situation and, above all, that civil rights must be won for the whole working class of NI – Catholic and Protestant. If we fail to make that clear – we will be sectarian in our approach" (quoted in Smylie 2016, 128). Here she was to encounter what Austen Morgan called in his *Labour and Partition* dedication, "nationalist myopia". For urging restraint during this time, Sinclair was undermined and described as "one great reactionary bitch who is holding up the revolution" by Frank Gogarty (PRONI, D/3253), an Irish nationalist who ran a dental practice in Fortwilliam (north Belfast) and represented the Wolfe Tone Society within NICRA. This dovetailed with old internal battles between Communists and the Ultra-Leftists of People's Democracy: "It was a fight over Stalin and Trotsky all over again. The hatred that [Michael] Farrell and the others had for Betty and Edwina [Stewart] came from their indoctrination as Trostskyites, and indeed they saw this Right wing (in socialist terms) Stalinist Betty Sinclair who had to be opposed and brought down" (Interview with Erskine Holmes, Belfast, 23 July 2020).

Sinclair found fighting both "Republicans" (see Johnston 2003, 252, 255-256) and the Ultra-Left too much. By March 1969, she had resigned from the Executive with the promotion of two People's Democracy candidates and was replaced as chairperson with Gogarty, who sided with Farrell and others against the "Right-wing Stalinist Communist"[17]. Having lived through the strife of 1920, Sinclair lived to hear of equivalent shipyard expulsions and violence in 1970. Retrospectively, her resignation from the NICRA Executive meant "the labour movement lost its capacity to influence the organisation and as a result the Republicans grew in authority and influence", though Sinclair's predictions of a confrontational approach ghettoising the movement and divesting it of liberal Protestant elements proved incredibly well-founded (Morrissey 1983, 129-130). After serving on the Supplementary Benefits Commission, enacted by the Sunningdale Executive of 1974, she moved to Prague in 1976 to act as Irish representative on the editorial board of the *World Marxist Review* and lived between there and Belfast until 1979, when she returned home for good. By this time Sinclair was lonely and painfully reliant on alcohol. She died of smoke inhalation following a fire at her flat in the Cregagh area of Belfast on Christmas Day 1981.

Sinclair's "thrawn" political instincts and campaigns against unemployment brought her from beyond the usual casing of the Communist Party to a broader public consciousness, both in Ireland and internationally. This was reflected by her funeral at Carnmoney Cemetery where representatives from the USSR, the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia rubbed shoulders with doyens of the Irish Labour movement (*Irish Press*, 31 December 1981)[18]. The Belfast Trades Council's association with causes such as Anti-Apartheid, the citizenship rights of Paul Robeson, and nuclear opposition stem from her time in charge (Morrissey 1983, 128). In what was claimed as her last interview, the *Irish Press* sent former Provisional IRA volunteer Dolours Price to talk with Sinclair about her life. Price's surprisingly affectionate portrait – published posthumously – captures the contradictions of Sinclair's life. The public speaking qualities

[17] NICRA's Treasurer recalled that despite her resignation from the Executive, Sinclair remained a member of the association and "continued to fight within" (Heatley 1974, 14).

[18] The latter included Irish trade union leaders Donal Nevin, Brendan Harkin, and Sam Nolan, along with Lord Billy Blease, independent socialist Belfast councillor Paddy Devlin, the Workers' Party's Tomás Mac Giolla, and historian C. Desmond Greaves.

she was known for emerged not from the Party but from being a keen listener at Sunday school, where she learned "the art of modulation, expression and word use". Classically, it was observed that "Protestant workers saw her as 'Fenian lover' and Catholics regarded her as a communist and therefore 'anti-God'". Sinclair reiterated the story of the woman who threatened her with being "burned out" of Hooker Street for helping Catholics in 1935, and Price seemed oddly sympathetic to her position in the Civil Rights movement (she had heard Sinclair speak as a schoolgirl and been impressed). Price approvingly quoted Sinclair's advice to former Chief of Staff of the IRA Cathal Goulding, that the IRA should take the guns out of his volunteers' hands and "put something in their heads" instead (Price 1981), and Sinclair wanted it to be known that she had been a Bible scholar and carried off prizes for her knowledge of it in her youth. "Having put your hand to the plough never turn back", she said.

7. Joe Law

The final profile considered in this Irish political tradition is Joe Law (1946-2016), who, like other "Rotten Prods" understood that Loyalism to the state was built into his DNA. His mother Susie thought mainly of the basic need to provide food and clothing, while his father George, a clerk in William Ewart's Linen Mill, preceded his own trajectory in starting out as a man of God, Queen, and Ulster: an Orangeman, who in his later years "fell out with them and never went back" (Law, in Hyndman 1996, 158). His father was also widely-read and enjoyed writing, which led – as so often – to the independent-thinking of "Rotten" Protestantism. Born in Bradford Street off the Shankill, Law was, like Betty Sinclair, a working-class intellectual, a committed trade unionist, and later a member of the Communist Party of Ireland. His family were immersed in a Protestant culture of trade unionism, meaning he was aware of the "Christian socialist" strain in Belfast Labour politics, with one of his uncles an election agent for the NILP's Billy Boyd. By the 1980s Law was attending meetings of groupings such as the Labour Party of Northern Ireland, but – emphasising his "Rotten Prod" credentials (a term he embraced) – he believed that the Communist Party was a better fit for him politically (Interview with Joe Law, Belfast, 26 June 2013).

Law left school at fifteen to take a job at Mackie's foundry on the Springfield Road. He realized that "I got my job because I was a Prod. But I didn't know that at the time as a young man. You just knew you were getting a start. That's what we used to call it: 'Did you get a start?'" (Interview with Joe Law, Belfast, 26 June 2013). Law went to England to work and experienced the longstanding Unionist condition where he was "just another Paddy", shocked to discover they would not play "God Save the Queen" before cinema screenings (Byers and Edwards 2016; Hyndman 1996, 160). His work experience continued to read like a roll-call of Protestant workers' history in Northern Ireland: the merchant navy and then Rolls Royce, a riveter in Shorts, and a shop steward with the Amalgamated Transport & General Workers' Union. But Law's "traumatic" trip to South Africa in the 1960s, where he witnessed the dehumanising system of Apartheid "changed my world. Being called 'Master' on board a ship, black people called me 'Master', and I was going 'What are you talking about?' Seeing a cook kicking a black fella for taking a bit of bread and having a row with him, thinking 'That's fucking not right' ". For Law, the problem was the acceptance of such practices, as in "That's the way it was. Whereas, whatever was in my thought processes, I couldn't" (Interview with Joe Law, Belfast, 26 June 2013).

Despite his travelling, "I knew that this was always where I was going to end up. Worked in England, worked in the south [of Ireland], went to sea – always knew I was coming back

here. This is me, my place – Belfast particularly" (*ibidem*). He returned home to see his place tear up at first hand, standing at the corner of Agnes Street in August 1969 watching as the west of the city burned. After a further interlude in England, he was back home again in May 1974 when the Ulster Workers' Council Strike ground Northern Ireland to a halt and collapsed the Sunningdale power-sharing Executive. He connected this with a story of meeting a Loyalist friend who served time in jail and asked him if he would fight for Ulster. At this point Law told him a story from his childhood about a kid who was waiting to march with the Orange Order bands, who fell in a pile of muck. No-one in the community had a spare jacket or pair of trousers, despite the best efforts of the mothers. A jumble of clothes was set on the unfortunate lad leading him to looking "like a liquorice all-sorts when he came back". Law told his old friend: "That's your Ulster…I was trying to explain that if we were all going to fight for something, let's fight for something better. The UWC Strike had just ended and what did the Loyalist workers do? They gave everything back to the unionist politicians!" (Law, in Hyndman 1996, 162-163). He credited its trade union impetus but noted the problem with the UWC stoppage was its class-conscious edge was offset by the desire to "maintain" the state. In Law's abiding view, "the state has to get better" – simply voicing this aim ensured "that's where I got into trouble" (Interview with Joe Law, Belfast 26 June 2013).

Despite his admission that he had once been "the bigot", Law came to challenge, as per the instinct of the "Rotten Prod" lineage, sectarianism, intimidation, and harassment (Parr, Edwards 2017). He was upset by the mistreatment of Catholics on the shop floor, who went for tea and returned to Union Jacks draped on their machines. In one case Loyalist workers held a series of wildcat strikes protesting the removal of flags and emblems from the shop floor, leading to death threats and abuse, but Law held firm in the face of it (Byers, Edwards 2016). He became an executive committee member of Belfast Trades Council and did some of his most impactful work for Counteract and then with Trademark (Robinson and Nolan 1999), the latter of which he brought into being in 2001 as a trade union-based anti-sectarian training organization. In an observation he was fond of retelling, he noted how "I got a living talking about sectarianism, but I've never met anyone who's sectarian. Nobody was bigoted. Everybody can tell me exactly who *is* sectarian though" (Interview with Joe Law, Belfast 26 June 2013). Law's straight-talking led him to the heart of the society.

Speaking at the Trademark offices off Northumberland Street in the summer of 2013, Law remained concerned by the "benign apartheid" of Northern Irish society:

> I think we're stuck. I think people actually don't know what to do here. How can we move this on? Our view, as it's always been in this organization, is education. Particularly education that tells people how they've ended up like this. Because we don't know. I left school in '61 or '62 and if you'd have said to me 'Well what do you think of partition?', I thought you meant something my Ma put in front of the scullery door. Knew about King Billy. Most Loyalists, 1690. Before that, not really sure. After it: Northern Ireland, Orange Order, marching, bands, that's us, boop, brilliant, and watch them [Catholic] fuckers. (*Ibidem*)

Law then explained how after a two-day History training course, Trademark would move people onto "Anti-sectarianism/Anti-racism" courses: "Underneath that is our function of raising class issues. The idea of class, of trade unions, and the right to be in a trade union, the right to strike" (*ibidem*). Though energised by his work and colleagues, Law found ongoing cases of sectarianism and racism in Belfast, where eventually the only recourse was for employees to leave their workplace for other jobs, a depressing challenge. This was a two-way process not

limited to intolerance from his own original community. He disdained the sectarian dimension to Provisional IRA violence and believed present-day political promotion of its "just campaign" represented a demonisation of those crushed by it. He predicted following the 1998 Belfast Agreement that Sinn Féin would embrace "neo-liberal" attitudes and be "Unionists in a green cloak" (Interview with Brenda Callaghan, Belfast, 20 August 2020).

When the "Flag Protests" blew up in Belfast in December 2012, spurred by the democratic vote of Belfast City Council to fly the Union Jack on seventeen designated days rather than all-year round, some on the Left in Scotland and Ireland denounced the "Fascist" elements within Loyalism. Law confronted this attitude:

> I says 'Listen these people aren't fascists. Don't get that into your ideas and write this whole community off as Fascist – it's not'. The Fascists never took a hold here, the National Front never really took a hold here. There's people in that community have a very strong nationalist British identity, but it's just not as simple as that. Yes these people can be won to Far-Right ideology and super-nationalism; but they also can be won back in class politics as well. We've seen that in the past now. All right it didn't survive, but that's what you have to think about. We can't wipe a whole community out here and think it doesn't exist, or is not of worth. If you put people down as a group with no culture, what worth are they? (*Ibidem*)

Law in turn spoke about organizing events with the leaders of the Flag protests to engage them. Little was reciprocated, but as a point of principle he wanted to reach them, despite the fact they were his opposite.

Law married beyond the tribe, meeting fellow trade unionist Brenda Callaghan at an Anti-Apartheid event in Belfast. They wed in 1987 and would host South African activists in their home, and he would often mention to her his old journey to work at Mackie's, passing through both the Shankill and Catholic working-class areas: "He said you were walking through Protestant houses and then Catholic houses, and he said they were the same two-up, two-downs with the water running down the walls and failing schools." His aspiration was to "get people to stop worrying about their identity and worry about how they lived" (Interview with Brenda Callaghan, Belfast, 20 August 2020). Law was also passionate about preserving the memory of those who joined the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War and defined his own Republican aspirations not in terms of sectarian armed struggle but after the example of the United Irishmen, who he read widely on (Hyndman 1996, 166). Joe Law passed away, quite suddenly, in September 2016 (*The Irish Times*, 26 November 2016). "See when I go I want banner flags, the works, the whole fucking lot. No fucking messing about", he had said, and this he received with the barrage of large Red flags amid the black cortege at his funeral at Roselawn's Cemetery on 4 October 2016. The funeral notice read: "Family flowers only please. Donations if desired to Cuba Solidarity".

8. Conclusion

Though this article has explained the violence of 1920 and profiled the "Rotten Prods" of subsequent years, there are others. Andy Barr (1913-2004), who was active in multiple large trade unions and the Communist Party (Devine 2004), and Madge Davison (1949-1991) were similarly in this mould. Davison grew up in Pittsburg Street off the Shore Road, but became assistant organiser for the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, where she knew and looked up to Betty Sinclair. As with other "Rotten Prods", she was forced to move homes from the Loyalist north Belfast area of her upbringing to Lenadoon, west Belfast, because of her personal and political associations (as a Communist civil rights supporter who married a Dublin

trade unionist). Despite this, Davison was "very proud of her Presbyterian background", seeing "no clash between that and the ideals of universal Civil Rights and Equality for which she so strongly stood" (Bradley 2011). Like Joe Law, far from renouncing her Protestant background, she drew attention to the United Irishmen heritage.

Though not prevalent in organizations that represented the political "majority" of Protestant opinion, Rotten Prods are a notable tradition in their own dissenting capacity. Henry Patterson's ultimate argument relating to 1920 – that the shipyard workforce was, against stereotypes of a sectarian bloc, actually "diverse in both economic and political terms" (Patterson 2019, 1) is illustrated by the Rotten Prods themselves. The case of James Baird remains instructive. After leaving Belfast for Waterford and finding himself involved in the Farm strike and unrest of 1923, his experience of being thrown in the river by Belfast Loyalists transitioned to being thrown in gaol by the Free State government:

> Baird is regarded by the Free State Government in the same way as he was regarded by the Six-County government: they know that all Governments are much the same. But even our Government might have had the wit to realise that an already bitter dispute between farmers and farm labourers can only be still more embittered by the arbitrary arrest of the labourers' representative. (Anonymous 1923, 6)

Baird was one of three anti-partitionist Labour candidates in the 1921 election to the first Northern Ireland parliament. As all were Protestants, this made them "all the more reprehensible in the eyes of those Loyalists to whom they were the archetypal 'Lundies'" (Walker 1984, 19)[19]. They faced attacks and intimidation on the campaign, with one Ulster Hall meeting charged by a crowd. Having predicted that partition would lead to emigration of workers, Baird went to Australia the year after his release from prison and never returned to Ireland.

Betty Sinclair lived the latter part of her life in melancholia, her scabrous diary providing evidence of her distinction from the working-class Loyalist area where she lived. In hindsight some might find her private barbs amusing (especially at the expense of celebrated personalities in People's Democracy), but this could not hide the fact that she was politically and personally isolated (Smylie 2016, 129). Imprisoned along the way by the Stormont government, she then found herself out of step with the Civil Rights movement through her "broad based" anti-sectarian approach, which was formed by her actual memories of the 1920s and 1930s. In August 1969 her childhood home in Hooker Street was burned, the fire of the start of the Troubles triggering a memory of her father putting her and her siblings to bed "with blankets over the windows to stop bullets that were being spat out around the area". She estimated that "we all lived to know something of the history of ourselves and our country (we left the unionist fold – we were never committed)" (quoted in Smylie 2016, 121). Joe Law confirmed that during the Troubles, unless you were willing to "live your life quietly" as he did before he got married and moved out, the situation would be dangerous. Law identified that even in "post-conflict" Northern Ireland, "The problem within Loyalist communities is if you criticise the state, then you're seen as an enemy of the state. That's what happened to me in the early-1970s. It's harder, a hundred times harder being radical, moving to the Left within Loyalist communities, because you have to leave it all behind. It's easy in Nationalist communities." By the end of his life, Law "couldn't go on the Shankill for a pint, no I wouldn't feel happy at all" (Interview with Joe Law, Belfast 26 June 2013).

[19] "Lundy" is a Loyalist term of abuse meaning "traitor". The other two candidates were John Hanna and Harry Midgley.

It is therefore clear that, unlike "Awkward Prods" and the moderate leaders of the NILP, the more radical lineage explored in this article could not exist comfortably within a pro-Union, reformist environment for very long. Harry Midgley exemplified how one could respond to similar experiences to Baird by adopting a pro-unionist Labour posture that still made the Unionist Party uncomfortable. Initially prominent in the NILP, before founding his own Commonwealth Labour Party, Midgley's awkwardness ultimately dissolved into Unionist ministerialship (Walker 2004, 114-115). Unionism could absorb such personas and welcome them into the fold in a way they never could the Rotten Prods. Despite being one of the minorities to lose out post-1921, the latter profile is an ongoing project. To some it represents a badge of honour, though its derogatory epithet enrages literalists of Northern Ireland politics to this day; especially those conventionally glum in the largest parties of Unionism. There were those who, facing the threat of expulsion and intimidation, persevered as Rotten Prods and continue today its historical vein.

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