

In support of the Debates on Europe conference in Belfast on September 13–15, the next five pages contain writing on the subject of borders, those contentious zones of modern politics.

This summer I hosted some friends who'd never been to Northern Ireland. Before visiting, they asked me to recommend a book about the Troubles; something that would give them an accurate overview. I couldn't recommend a single book. There are so many versions of the Northern Irish story. Each one is dependent on the teller's perspective: their age, their class, their cultural and political background. It is not uncommon to hear of tourists who have talked to Belfast's barmen or taxi drivers and subsequently heard half a dozen versions of the same event. Inevitably, these visitors leave the city more confused than when they arrived.

I'm a writer. I understand that story is a fluid concept. Stories are shaped by the teller's perspective and subject to the listener's interpretation. Even a published story isn't a fixed concept. Inevitably, it will resonate differently with each person who encounters it. Stories, even "real-life" ones, are an unstable vehicle for the truth. My novel, *The Fire Starters*, published earlier this year, begins with the proclamation, "This is Belfast. This is not Belfast". I wanted to challenge the notion that this place, its people and its troubled past could be reduced to a series of indisputable facts. "In this city truth is a circle from one side and a square from the other", my narrator continues. Like the proverbial elephant described by blind men, Northern Ireland's story varies according to the angle of approach. Some view this as a stumbling block when it comes to forging a shared future. How can we move forward with any kind of unity when we can't agree on where we've come from? Northern Ireland is not the only place challenged by conflicting narratives. However, because of the traditional sectarian divide, still present, our communities hold opinions and views that are radically divergent.

The arts sector has played a huge part in acknowledging and reconciling these diverse outlooks. Chronically under-funded in recent years, the artists who practise here have still managed to create spaces where participants are free to celebrate, explore and challenge each other's narratives. For many people who grew up in Northern Ireland, the arts have provided a liberating alternative to the binary and prescriptive outlooks still present here. I can't speak for everyone, but my own small-minded opinions (the result of a conservative Presbyterian upbringing) were radically altered when I discovered Belfast's only art-house cinema, the QFT. I've been a regular attendee for twenty years. The education I've received thanks to its two small screens has taught me as much about empathy and tolerance as I learnt in church and school. It seems obvious to state that art is essentially an exercise in objectivity. Good art encourages diversity and autonomous thought. However, in Northern Ireland, where people are often brought up with inherited prejudices, the much-needed ability to empathize and question is particularly important.

Earlier this year, the Belfast-born writer Lucy Caldwell edited a new Faber anthology of the Irish short story. She called it *Being Various*, taking the title from Louis MacNeice's poem, "Snow". *Being Various* is a particularly



The Women's Quilt Mural, Belfast

Incorrigibly plural

How to engage with the future of Northern Ireland

JAN CARSON

appropriate title when applied to the Northern Irish writers who make up a third of its contributors and are, themselves, an accurate reflection of the different voices now telling the story of this place. It is no longer a two-sided story, split down sectarian lines. There are other voices now being heard: members of the LGBT community, older people, women, climate activists, ethnic minorities, people from working-class backgrounds. Arguably, these people have always been present. Unfortunately, in the past, they were often ignored.

When I hear the phrase "being various" I am struck by the movement in MacNeice's words. We must be alive and active in our diversity. There's an energy about the way MacNeice describes the world as a teeming, pluralistic kind of place.

World is crazier and more of it than we think
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

Perhaps the next chapter in Northern Ireland's story should focus on both variety and being. Tolerating difference is not enough. We must actively engage with diversity. Again, the arts, and particularly the community arts sector, is already pioneering this work. During the past few decades thousands of cross-community arts projects have brought different people together under the auspices of creating

something new. This past spring, the Irish Writers Centre invited me to facilitate a series of workshops with older women from the Falls and Shankill areas of Belfast. For ten weeks they literally crossed the sectarian divide, scuttling backwards and forwards across the peace lines, to drink endless cups of tea, chat and write stories about their memories of growing up in this infamous part of the city. Stories unique to each woman emerged from these sessions. I helped one woman write about her beloved Orange Hall, while another wrote about naming her baby after the Pope. When it came to crafting our final group poem, however, the women chose to end it with a resounding affirmation of their unity, "we are stuck together, and stronger for it". They claimed, through the process of being together, to have found more common ground than difference.

This sense of achieving commonality despite difference transcends the arts sector. I have often witnessed it while working with people who are living with dementia. Faced with a bigger, more pressing issue – a loved one diagnosed with a serious disease – people will often disregard the social, political and religious affiliations that might otherwise cause division. Instead, they will form networks of support and consolation with anyone who understands what they are going through. On a national level, this can also be seen in the human rights issues such as equal marriage and abortion legislation; in each case, a wide

range of people from diverse backgrounds have rallied around a mutual cause. Much of Northern Ireland is slowly moving towards a shared future. This unity is not primarily ecumenical or political, however, so much as an engagement with the fundamentals of humanity. Interestingly, Belfast's annual Gay Pride has now trumped the Twelfth of July Orange marches as the country's best-attended parade.

Since Northern Ireland's earliest attempts at reconciliation there has been a fear that forging a new, shared narrative would mean compromising or even losing aspects of identity peculiar to each community. Integration, if handled incorrectly, could lead to an unappealing homogeneous culture which, though safe and inoffensive, had no distinctive attributes. This fear is still manifest in a number of ongoing cultural debates, championed by community leaders and politicians across the political spectrum. Flags, bonfires, parades and language have all become rafts that communities cling to, fearing that the removal of these unique signifiers will leave them adrift without any sense of distinct identity.

While much of my own community arts experience has been focused on integrating divided communities, there are many examples of excellent single-identity projects that directly challenge this fear, creating space in which to celebrate the culture and heritage of individual communities. The John Hewitt Society's long-running "Once Alien Here" project pairs writers with community groups who wish to explore their individual cultural identities in the context of Hewitt's belief that a citizen of Northern Ireland can claim many different identities.

I'm an Ulsterman, of planter stock. I was born in the island of Ireland, so secondarily I'm an Irishman. I was born in the British archipelago and English is my native tongue, so I am British. The British archipelago consists of offshore islands to the continent of Europe, so I'm European. This is my hierarchy of values and, so far as I am concerned, anyone who omits one step in that sequence of values is falsifying the situation.

This is a complex and highly developed understanding of personal identity. It works on the assumption that diversity can sit comfortably under the larger umbrella of collective unity. Or, to couch it in literary terms, there are many, equally valid ways to tell the story of what it means to be Northern Irish. Every version has the right to be heard.

My own story is complicated. I'm a lapsed Presbyterian, raised Unionist, who calls herself an Irish writer. I hold both British and Irish passports. Politically, I fall somewhere in between. In the space created by the Good Friday Agreement it felt possible to hold all these narratives in tension. There were many different versions of our story. Like most forward-thinking citizens of Northern Ireland, I was happy to let my neighbours live the way they wanted to live, so long as they did so peacefully. I have to be honest. Brexit scares me. It is hard to imagine it will be anything but a backwards step for Northern Ireland. I had hoped to continue being various. However, it seems likely I'll be forced to decide which of my identities defines me. Irish? British? European? I may not be given a choice.