APPENDIX

The Wounds of History
A short sketch of Northern Irish history

Northern Ireland is situated in the far North-western part of the civilised and relatively peaceful European Union. Its last thirty years of civil strife and violence, the so-called Troubles, have on the one hand set it apart for a long time from the rest of European history, while at the same have made it into a tragic harbinger of the explosion of the ethnic wars and barbarous violence which broke out in Eastern Europe at the end of the cold war following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Anyone who seriously wishes to come to terms with the reality of the North, who wishes to understand the irrational litany of discrimination, intimidation, bombs, murders, burnt-out houses, knee-cappings, and protection rings must take a long, hard look at what has been aptly referred to as "the war of myths" waged between the divided communities.

In a passage which could very well be read as an epigraph for recent Irish historical revisionism, the historian A.T.Q. Stewart states:

> Ireland, like Dracula's Transylvania, is much troubled by the undead. King William III, Wolfe Tone and Patrick Pearse sustain an unnatural immortality with the blood of succeeding generations, and when people talk about the inability of the Irish to forget the past, this is usually what they mean. As a matter of fact, the Irish are not only capable of forgetting the past, but quite deliberately expunge from their minds whole areas of it. Like other nations, they have woven for themselves a garment of myth and legned which they call Irish history. (...) To the Irish all History is Applied History, and the past is simply a convenient quarry which provides ammunition to use against enemies in the present." [1]

Stewart's remarks help remind the observer just how necessary it is to try to understand the myths which are still being generated about the past and which continue to cause its wounds to remain open and blood to spill in the North of Ireland.

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[1] An extract from A.T.Q. Stewart's *The Narrow Ground*, quoted in *The Rattle of the North: An Anthology of Ulster Prose*, edited by Patricia Craig, Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1992, p. 17.

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Ulster is the Northernmost of the four historical provinces of Ireland, the others being Leinster, Munster, and Connacht. Originally comprising the nine counties of Fermanagh, Cavan, Monaghan, Tyrone, Antrim, Down, Armagh, Derry, and Donegal, it has always been divided from the rest of the Island by formidable natural barriers. From the outset of its difficult history, Ulster was the poorest and the most isolated part of Ireland, despite possessing a rich cultural wealth which can be seen in ancient manuscripts and above all in the epic legends of the "Ulster Cycle".

Like the rest of the island, it was populated by Celts and divided into mini-Kingdoms, known as "tuath" – the gaelic word used to describe the land and people of a particular clan. Over the centuries it was successively invaded by the Vikings and the Normans. But while the rest of the island capitulated relatively quickly to Norman might, the province of Ulster became renowned for its stubborn resistence. By the thirteenth century it was the largest and most powerful stronghold of indominatable Gaelic independence, still unconquered by the Normans. It was the inpenetrable heart of what the English in the fourteenth century referred to as the "Great Irishry" when describing the large area of Celtic culture reaching from the Western Hebrides, through the Scottish Highlands and across to Ireland.

Long a riotous and incontrollable land, Ulster revealed its fiery spirit at the end of the sixteenth century, when Hugh O'Neill, of the famous O'Neill clan of Tyrone, organised a rebellion which rapidly spread to the rest of Ireland and was the first large-scale Irish uprising against the English. This rebellious war lasted more than fifteen years and came to an end – in the best Irish tradition – with the defeat of the rebels at Kinsale in 1603 and O'Neill's subsequent signing of the peace of Mellifont with General Mountjoy. The death of Queen Elizabeth around this time brought with it the end of the Tudor era, a period of relative tolerance in the English administration of the colony of Ireland.

The arrival of the Stuarts to power brought immediate changes. James I abolished Irish laws and customs, declared all the Irish to be 'free subjects' and effectively cancelled the power of the chieftains by declaring their kingships to be illegitimate. But the Stuart King went even further in order to enforce the political and cultural domination of the island, as he was convinced that peace could be guaranteed only with the complete anglicisation of Ireland and, in particular, of Ulster.

His task was rendered easier by the controversial "flight of the Earls", which saw the cream of the Ulster Irish aristocracy flee the country. Despite the very favourable conditions granted them by Elizabeth, all the chieftains of the most important Northern families (including the O'Neills) left Ireland in the autumn of 1607 and took refuge in Rome. They never returned to their native land. However justified their gesture might have been, it still left behind it a huge power vacuum and effectively handed Ireland on a silver plate to the English. The lands of the fleeing

Irish leaders were immediately seized by the English authorities, who met little or no opposition in their path.

It was in this way that the plantation of Ulster started. This swift and radical process of colonisation is the key event in the history of Ulster, and in just twenty years it utterly changed the social fabric of the province which passed from being the hotbed of Gaelic resistence into being home to the most concentrated population of Protestants in Ireland. The plantations saw vast English and Scottish migration into Ulster which involved all classes of society. The colonizers were not only enterprising nobles or the second sons of aristocracy, but also their relatives, neighbours, servants, as well as artisans, small landowners, farmhands and workers of all types. In addition to these groups, Ulster also became home to landless farmers, down and outs, adventurers, delinquents and fleeing thieves. This variegated population combined to build cities, take possession of lands, and occupy houses that had once belonged to others.

The way in which they achieved the complete colonisation of this most stubborn part of Ireland was carefully planned. The key to the enterprise, which followed the strict guidelines outlined in the *Printed Book of Conditions for Successfull Applicants for Ulster Land* (1610) about how to place in Ulster a large Protestant population which could be trusted, lay in separating the colonised and the colonisers. Eventually this led to segregation between the two peoples. The colonizers were divided into three groups: "undertakers", "servitors" and "deserving natives". The "undertakers" – that is the more important colonizers with at least three thousand acres of land – were allowed only to employ Protestant peasants and to accept Protestant tenants exclusively, and were forbidden from having anything to do with Catholics. The "deserving natives", that is the "deserving" Irish who were allowed to remain, were relegated, separated from one another and placed in the internal valleys where the land was less fertile and where a close eye could be kept on them while the Scottish and the English set up home on the confiscated lands close to the rivers and the coast.

This officially imposed segregation – or better this intentional separation of the two communities – the English Protestant and the Scottish Presbyterian on the one hand, and the Gaelic, Catholic Irish on the other, survived and strengthened down through the centuries and still today permeates every aspect of the social, political, cultural, and religious life of the province. Above all, the Protestants, by and large a political and religious élite with greater economic opportunities than their Catholic counterparts, suffer from what has been aptly termed a "siege mentality", which sees them continually feeling threatened by a minority they consider inferior and dangerous. They particularly fear what they see as the backward Catholic religious practices and use this fear to adopt positions which remain stubbornly intransigent.

Such was the scale of the transformation enacted through the Plantations of Ulster that in 1690, when King William of Orange arrived in Ireland to fight James II, the only place the Catholic forces encountered opposition was in Ulster, that very land where less than forty years

earlier the English were still being resisted. In 1690, under siege behind the walls of Derry, the Ulster Protestants held out for 105 days before their English navy arrived to help them. This remarkable and heroic refusal to surrender is the key memory in the Protestant history of the North. For this community it assumes the sacred and untouchable qualities of myth as an example and symbol of their struggle against what they have always considered a dangerous majority. The Siege of Derry is the Protestant myth *par eccellence*, but so too is the twelfth of July 1690, the date of the victory of William of Orange over James II at the Battle of the Boyne. It is still celebrated today as the centrepiece of the Protestant marching season, that period between July and August when the Protestants of Ulster take to the streets with banners and drums, Union Jacks, sticks and bowler hats to pay honour to the memory of the Protestant past, to celebrate the famous victories over the Catholics and to remind the Catholic population that they are still a force to be reckoned with. It is also, obviously enough, a period of great tension between the two communities. To the outside observer, these popular demonstrations might, at first glance, seem innocuous, vagually infantile and even a bit ridiculous, but the grim expressions of pride beneath the bowler hats make one immediately aware that this is a serious business and that the emotional charge surrounding it could not be higher.

The plantation of Ulster rendered the province quite different to the rest of the island, and this difference has become more and more accentuated with the passing of the centuries. While the Protestant populations of Munster, Connacht and Leinster never exceeded 10%, in Ulster it represented around 50% of the population and exercised total economic and political control. Ulster's anomalous situation grew more distinct for two reasons. The first was that Protestant middle-classes in Ulster (a class which simply did not exist in the rest of the country) remained utterly unaffected by the restrictions of the anti-Catholic Penal laws, introduced at the start of the eighteenth century by the Irish parliament, and which denied Catholics the right to vote in 1728. Secondly, the Northern Irish Protestants, already possessors of a consolidated economic weight, took the Protestant work ethic to heart, and it was their efforts which saw the province enjoy a huge period of economic growth from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century. The linen industry played a key role in this process. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Belfast's population and financial might surpassed Dublin, once the proud second city of the British Empire. This economic development increased the divide between Ulster and the rest of the country, which was poor and still predominantly agricultural.

In the nineteenth century, the Northern Protestants did everything within their power to obstruct Daniel O'Connell's movement for Catholic emancipation, and as the century drew to a close, they vehemently opposed the Home Rule movement led by Charles Stewart Parnell and anything which threatened the Union with Great Britain. As the Northern Protestants continued to underline their links to Britain, the idea of an "Irish Ireland", an independent, Gaelic, and Catholic country, was gaining

weight in the South. Cultural movements such as Yeats's, Synge's and Lady Gregory's "Celtic Revival", associations such as Douglas Hyde's "Gaelic League", which proposed the deanglicisation of Ireland through the revival of the Irish language, and the "Gaelic Athletic Association" (GAA), which encouraged the practice of purely Irish sports, contributed to the creation of an Ireland for the Irish, but also to the increased alienation of the Northern Protestant population. All of these associations played important roles in the spreading of nationalist sentiment. The direct political expression of that nationalism was to be found in the heavily militarized, anti-Protestant, anti-English, revolutionary "Irish Republican Brotherhood", better known as the "Fenian Brotherhood", and above all in "Sinn Fein", which proposed completed independence from the United Kingdom rather than mere "Home Rule."

The last years of the nineteenth century brought some solace to the Northern unionists. On the one hand it came with the dramatic and tragic fall of the charismatic leader of the Home Rule movement, Charles Stewart Parnell, and on the other with the rise of the Conservatives to power in Britain. Neither of these events caused them to lower their guard, however. Indeed, as soon as Gladstone's liberals, who had for many years been openly in favour of Home Rule, returned to power, the atmosphere in Ulster immediately became again very tense, and the Unionists began to openly talk of armed resistance.

In 1911 the unlimited veto-power exercised by the House of Lords, the members of which were overwhelmingly and intransigently conservative, was reduced to a period of two years. With this measure, the passage of the Home Rule Bill suddenly began to seem inevitable. 200,000 Protestants immediately took to the streets of Belfast to demonstrate against the hated Home Rule Bill, but their protest had little effect and the Bill was passed by the House of Commons. As a response, the Ulster Unionist Council set about establishing its own provisional government for Northern Ireland and began to set up their own army, the Ulster Volunteer Force.

The question of whether Ireland was one or two nations was now, finally, to be addressed in a decisive manner. But just a couple of weeks before the Home Rule Bill was to become law (having been blocked for two years by the Lords) World War I broke out and the enactment of the bill was postponed. Three years later, the 1916 Easter Rising took place in Dublin and the whole Irish scenario changed utterly. The British government were forced, for once and for all, to grapple head-on with the Irish problem, to address the claims of the populations and try and find a reasonable solution. All this while World War I still raged throughout Europe.

Worse (from the British and the Unionist points of view) was to come. In the 1917 elections, the radical Sinn Fein party won the majority of the Irish seats at Westminister but decided not to attend the British parliament. Instead, they established their own independent parliament in Dublin, Dail Eireann, and began to govern the country directly from there. From this moment on the Irish Republican Army (IRA) embarked on its guerrila war against the loathed "Black and Tans" – a special corps

of the British army – and the situation in the south of Ireland degenerated into civil war. In Ulster the violence between Catholics and Protestants reached unprecendented levels of bitterness and intensity. For the first time the term "the troubles" began to be used to describe the violent events in the North. It soon was to become a common euphemism to describe the civil war in Northern Ireland.

The British government's political response to the chaotic events in Ireland came in 1920 with the Government of Ireland Act, which provided for the establishment of two parliaments, one for the six counties of Armagh, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Derry, Antrim and Down – the geographical and political entity which from then on was to be called Northern Ireland – and another for the remaining twenty-six counties. The reduction from the original nine counties of Ulster to a rather artificial six represented a victory for the delegates of the Ulster Unionist Council, who, in order to guarantee their own supremacy and absolute, unchallengeable political control, had decided to abandon their fellow Protestants who made up 18.5% of the population of Cavan, 21.1% of Donegal, and 25.6% of Monaghan. Despite this, Sinn Fein declared that the jurisdiction of Dail Eireann, accepted by the British government in 1919, extended to the entire 32 counties of Ireland. On 23 December the "Government of Ireland Act" obtained the *placet* of the English King.

Northern Ireland, which had for a time clearly been a separate entity, now formally became a political reality, a reality which rose from the ruins of the First World War and the Irish Civil War, the product of a British government which was incapable of designing a more equitable solution than that imposed on it by the two-thirds Protestant majority a majority which from this moment on would wield all the political power and subject the minority opposition to decades of unbridled discrimination. One might have hoped to reach a more reasonable solution which could have guaranteed the peaceful co-existence of the two communities but this was not to be. As it was, Northern Ireland, from the moment it became a political reality, continued to hoard the seeds of violence which were so much part of its history and which would re-emerge with ever-increasing destructive force.

Throughout the fifty years of the Northern Ireland government and the Stormont Parliament (1921-1972) both these bodies were distinguished for their intransigent anti-Catholic stances, their discriminatory practices, the obtuseness of their backward-looking political visions which invariably aimed at maintaining the status quo. The Catholics were politically penalised, and were also openly discriminated against when they went looking for employment. Big employers systematically refused to employ Catholics and this practice was tolerated if not positively encouraged for decades. Two emblematic examples were those of the Bushmills whiskey distillery and the Harland and Woolf shipyards in Belfast, both of which continuously refused to employ Catholics and, until quite recently, took pride in the fact. Education was also discriminatory, but in this case the closed attitudes of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches contributed notably towards a situation which saw the Catholics receive inferior educational opportunities.

It was not until 1963 that the Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, the relatively new face of the Unionist nomenclature, became the first ever member of the Protestant government to publicly declare that the reconciliation of two communities must be an integral part of any political programme proposed for the North. Under his guidance, a new mentality disposed to at least partially abandoning the 'siege mentality', that unfortunate legacy of a distant past, began to gain strength. But in order to be successful, O'Neill would have needed to have the support of his own people and of his own ministers. Neither the one nor the other fully backed him, and, in the meantime, the support for the Loyalists – the extreme Unionists who followed the fiercely anti-Catholic leader, the Reverend Ian Paisley – began to grow. On the other side of the divide, the Catholics were beginning to articulate their anger at having suffered years of gerrymandering, bullying and discrimination at the hands of the Protestant majority.

Towards the middle of the 1960s, various Catholic civil rights movements began to sprout up around the province. 1968 was a symbolic year for them: it was the year of the international student protests, of Martin Luther King and the equal rights marches in America, of the protests against the Vietnam war, and of the Prague Spring. The demonstrators in Northern Ireland felt part of this great world-wide protest against social injustice, and their associations represent a turning point in the history of the North of Ireland also because with them, for the first time, the existence of Northern Ireland as a political entity was recognised by Catholic representatives who, up to that time, had addressed all their claims to the politicians in the Republic. These new Catholic leaders did not preach violence but demanded specific improvements for their followers, such as a more equitable distribution of public houses, 90% of which were given to Protestants, and equal work opportunities.

Just as these movements were gaining momentum, the IRA, a terrorist organisation banned both North and South of the border which had been inactive since 1962, began to look for new spaces in which to forward its aims and found them in the civil rights associations. Slowly but inexorably, things began to take a turn for the worse, and the fiercest radical nationalists gradually gained control of the new-born organisations, forcing out the original moderate founding members such as Conn and Patricia Mc Cluskey, Gerry Fitt, and John Hume. At the same time, the opposition Loyalists (often with police support) became more and more violent and at each Catholic civil rights march staged a counter demonstration. All the old hatreds had come to the surface, outbreaks of violence became increasingly frequent and worrying, people began to be hurt, then seriously injured, some were even killed until the situation seemed to have spun completely out of control. As Jack Lynch, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) said: "The Stormont Government is no longer in control of the situation. Indeed the present situation is the inevitable outcome of the policies pursued for decades by successive Stormont Governments".

Around this time, a group of fiercely anti-English traditional militant republicans, led by Sean Mac Stiofan and Ruari O' Bradaigh, broke away

from the Official IRA, which, in the 1960s had adopted a non-violent Marxist stance, in order to form the Provisional IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein. This new IRA, a Catholic paramilitary organisation, whose members are commonly referred to as "Provos" (by the Protestants) or the "Provies" (by Republicans, Nationalists and Catholics), swiftly established itself in the Catholic ghettoes of Belfast, where the population, intimidated and exhausted by violence, warmly welcomed its militants as heroes. The IRA embarked on their first bombing campaign in the summer of 1970.

The Unionist government struggled to come to terms with the chaotic situation and attempted to introduce small changes. But it was all too little too late. Before long, Terence O'Neill was forced to resign and was replaced by Brian Faulkner, one of the hardline Protestant old guard, who immediately introduced internment and thus santioned the almost indiscriminate arrests of hundreds of Catholics, many of whom were innocent.

It was not until the events of "Bloody Sunday" – that tragic 30 of January 1972 in Derry – that the British government decided to take direct control of the situation and to introduce more decisive and far-reaching measures. That day 15,000 demonstrators gathered outside the walls of Derry to take part in an unauthorised march organised by the Civil Rights Association to protest against internment. Newly arrived British soldiers blocked the roads, but tragedy struck when the British parachuters, frightened of losing control of the situation, lost their heads and fired hundreds of bullets at the panicking, fleeing protesters, killing thirteen Catholics (all of them unarmed) and seriously wounding at least as many.

The massacre was greeted with unanimous indignation and forceful protests. Despite the British efforts to cover up what had happened, it was clear from numerous eye-witness accounts that the army was indeed responsible, and was guilty of having opened fire against unarmed civilians. Thirty thousand people took to the streets of Dublin to protest, while the British embassy in the capital was set on fire. The IRA's response was even more brutal and resulted in the planting of bombs both in London and in Belfast.

Around this time the first Protestant terrorist organisations began to form with the aim of countering the activities of the IRA. They included the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF). Violence and chaos now reigned in Northern Ireland and fear reached intolerable levels. On 24 March 1972, Faulkner and his government were summoned to London by the British Prime minister Edward Heath, who informed them, rather unceremoniously, that the British government was assuming direct control of the running of the province. Faulkner and his cabinet resigned and Heath adjourned the Stormont parliament for a year, naming William Whitelaw as secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Unionists reacted furiously, but their protests fell on deaf ears.

Thus, fifty years of unionist government drew to a bloody, violent conclusion. Since then Northern Ireland has continued to be run by a

Secretary of State appointed by the British government. The British army presence has steadily grown since the early seventies attempting to at least contain Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries whose terror campaigns have continued unabated and with varying degrees of intensity for twenty-five years.

In Northern Ireland, as nowhere else, "peace comes dropping slow", as W. B. Yeats put it. Over these twenty-five long years of bombs, deaths, mutilations, parades, and funerals, the attempts at finding a solution have invariably failed. In 1972 the first meetings between the British government and the terrorists, and a subsequent IRA ceasefire, brought no progress. In fact five hundred people were killed in this, the worst year of the Troubles. Another failure came with the "Sunningdale Agreement", the first and only attempt made by the moderate Catholics and Protestants to run the province together. Sunningdale collapsed in 1974 as a result of the loyalist general strike, which the government had tried to ignore and which effectively paralysed the whole province. There followed a new hard-line government approach, which saw the prisons being filled with hundreds of political prisoners. In 1975 a second IRA ceasefire led to more talks between the British government and the IRA, but once again the talks broke down. In 1976 the government attempted to defeat the IRA by taking away their status as political prisoners and declaring them common criminals, a decision which led to a prolonged series of protests in and out of the prisons, and, in 1980, to the infamous "H-Block" demonstrations. The death of one of the leaders of these IRA prisoners, Bobby Sands, after 63 days of hunger strike, and of a further 9 of his companions, has long been considered to have been a turning point in the province's history: Margaret Thatcher's total refusal to concede political-prisoner status to the hunger strikers indirectly caused the death of 10 people and cost the British government very dearly in terms of its international prestige. Furthermore, it caused a massive wave of sympathy in favour of the IRA and Sinn Fein. At the following elections, Gerry Adams, the Sinn Fein leader, was triumphantly elected to Westminister.

These events convinced Mrs Thatcher that something had to be done and urgently. It was against this background that a series of official meetings began to take place between the British and Irish governments and the two prime-ministers. This led to the drafting of the first "Anglo-Irish Agreement", which was signed at Hillsborough, in Northern Ireland, in 1985 by the Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, and Mrs Thatcher – the great annoyance of the Unionists, who resented the fact that the agreement gave the Irish government an advisory and consultory role in in the running of the statelet. The Agreement was followed in 1993 by the "Downing Street Declaration", signed for Great Britain by John Major and by Albert Reynolds for the Republic. For the first time the principle of auto-determination was conceded for the North.

While these talks and agreements represented significant breakthroughs, they were nontheless weakened by their having been negotiated without the direct involvement of the Northern Irish representatives, which also meant that for the people of the North little or nothing changed (although the Dublin government did play a more

active role in ensuring that the rights of the Catholic minority were guaranteed).

At the beginning of the nineties the first attempts were made to involve all the parties in the North in talks designed to reach a consensus approach for the future of the province. Unofficial talks were held between the IRA and British officials, often facilitated by Irish mediators and later by American envoys. These talks led to the first IRA ceasefire in almost twenty years, declared in a mood of optimism on 31 August 1994. The ceasefire was greeted with great enthusiasm abroad, but with predictable caution in the North. Yet for once scepticism had to give way when the Protestant terrorist organisations followed the IRA's example and declared a ceasefire on 13 October 1994. For the first time ever in thirty years, the two warring factions had agreed to lay down their weapons. As one commentator put it, with typical Northern Irish cynicism, now the time was right for the Protestants and Catholics to return to hating one another as they had done in the old days without living in fear of being killed on their way to work.

Now the hard work of serious negotiations had to begin. A further four years of endless talks, threats and posturing ensued. Almost a year was lost in "talks about talks", that is in talks designed to structure the nature of the real negotiations, which were punctuated by walk-outs, protests, threats, and defiance on both sides and very often only kept alive at the insistence of the Irish government and the American envoy, George Mitchell. The London government, partially dependent on the Unionist votes in order to maintain its parliamentary majority, became increasingly ineffective in dealing with the North under John Major. Eventually the IRA ceasefire broke down and violence began once again.

The election of Tony Blair as British Prime Minister, with a secure majority to support his government, represented a turning point in the process. Along with the new Irish Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, of the traditionally nationalist Fianna Fail party, he began to focus on the North with more determination and seriousness than the vast majority of his predecessors had ever done. After marathon talks, the result was the "Good Friday" agreement, brilliantly brokered by George Mitchell and signed by John Hume's Catholic Social and Democratic Labour Party, Gerry Adam's Sinn Fein party, David Trimble's Ulster Unionist Party, and John Alderdice's Alliance Party, as well as several other small parties, on 10 April 1998. Only Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party chose not to be involved.

The agreement offers something to all sides. Over 10,000 words long, it seeks to address the relationships between the communities in Northern Ireland, between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland, and between the two islands – Britain and Ireland. It was put to referedum before the people of both Northern and Southern Ireland, who gave it a ringing endorsement. On 25 June, a 108 seat assembly was elected by proportional representation (this method was chosen to ensure that the assembly would not be dominated by Unionist members) and the pro-agreement parties won a clear majority – the Ulster Unionists taking 28 seats, the SDLP 24, Sinn Fein 18, while Paisley's hardliners won 20 seats.

From this body a new government with executive powers, and made up of the moderate political forces, will be elected. Over the coming months a North-South ministerial Council will be established under legislation at both Westminster and in Dublin to "develop consultation, co-operation and action within the island of Ireland". Finally a British-Irish Council – consisting of members of the British and Irish governments, as well as representatives of the devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales – will be created; further specific commitments have been made in the field of human rights, justice, the prisons, and on the difficult issue of decommissioning. Finally, the population of the Irish Republic voted to cancel the territorial claim to Northern Ireland from their written Constitution, an important concession, this, to the Protestant community in the North. To date, the agreement appears to be working and has survived a vicious attack – the mid-August bombing of Omagh, a town renowned for the peaceful co-habitation of its two communities by the so-called "real IRA" (a republican splinter group) – which was designed to cause its collapse and was the worst bombing atrocity ever carried out in the history of Northern Ireland. 28 people died and scores more remained seriously injured. Never before in the history of Northern Ireland was the repulsion from both sides of the divide more evident and the determination to defeat violence more genuine.

All signatories of the "Good Friday" Agreement have stood firm in defending it and most commentators still maintain that it represents a new positive chapter in Northern Irish history, that it is a workable basis for the future running of the province and that it has established a context in which the work of reconciliation can take place. In October 1998 the peace process was given a further boost when its main architects, David Trimble and John Hume, were awarded the Nobel Peace prize. Time alone will tell if this process can bring to a definitive end the years of mutual hatred and the harrowing litanies of violence.