

The Troubles  
in Ballybogoin

# The Troubles in Ballybogoin

MEMORY and IDENTITY  
in NORTHERN IRELAND

William F. Kelleher Jr.

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FOR

*Jo, Susan,*

AND *Kathleen*

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# Preface and Acknowledgments



This book is about identity in Northern Ireland. In it, I delineate and interpret a number of sites where the work of identity formation takes place in and around Ballybogoin, a town in the western region of the province. Ballybogoin, a fictitious name, is a socially and politically divided place where Catholics slightly outnumber Protestants in the urban area but form a clear majority in the town's hinterland. Both town and country receive attention throughout this book.

The terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" designate political, not religious, communities in this text. Citizens in Ballybogoin refer to the broadest local group to which they belong and the group from which they differentiate themselves through these two categories. The rhetoric of religion certainly enters the politics of division in Ballybogoin, but political identities, not religious ones, constitute the major arena of struggle. "Protestant" translates into Ulster unionist and "Catholic" into Irish nationalist in this ethnography. I do not, as some social scientists do, use lowercase letters to spell these terms to index their meaning as political rather than religious entities. I maintain uppercase letters to remind the reader that these groupings are multiply formed. Religious discourses and economic discourses, among others, have worked to produce and reproduce the contested identities that concern this book, and the spellings deployed indicate that history.

The research that informs this work began in the mid-1980s and continued through 1999. I lived continuously in Ballybogoin from June 1984 until December 1985 and have returned for short-term visits to Ballybogoin and its outlying areas six times since.

I would have liked to be precise about the town's location, its name, its demographics, and its specific history because this book emphasizes the importance of the past and of the social context in understanding the everyday practices that make Ballybogoin's social identities and its political conundrums. I have been imprecise to protect the privacy of the people who taught me the complexities of life in the Ballybogoin region and for reasons of safety. Ballybogoin was a violent social space and is still a frightfully conflicted one. I promised anonymity to the many consultants who steered me through the area's complex social terrain, but I told them, as well, that total anonymity would be impossible if I told a story that would come to grips with their everyday lives. I do not use composite individuals, so people who know the area well will likely recognize persons described here. Readers familiar with Northern Ireland will likely recognize the actual place that is represented in these pages.

Ballybogoin's Irish nationalist people are the subject matter of this book. When I conceived this research, I had hoped this would not be the case. I planned to conduct fieldwork in two factories, a Protestant firm and a Catholic firm, to establish networks with what Ballybogoin people call "both sides of the house." I was not able to do this. I worked in a nationalist factory, one I have named the Drumcoo Glassworks, and did not get a chance to work in a unionist factory.

I developed ties with both communities but had the opportunity to engage Catholics to a far greater extent. I went to work with them, participated in their leisure time activities, and got to know Catholic families from a variety of places and in a multiplicity of relationships. I never became this familiar with the Protestant people from the area, but I did meet regularly with a relatively narrow network of the town's unionist citizens.

Irish nationalist citizens of the Ballybogoin area make their collective identities in constant negotiation with their unionist neighbors even when they do not speak to them. For Catholics, Protestants are an enduring presence however absent they may be from their immediate physical surroundings, homes, and neighborhoods. Protestants are in the same situation. Each constitutes the other as they go about the never-ending process of making their collective selves. This study regis-

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ters this. Every site analyzed has both identities present, if not with concrete individuals then with beings of their social imaginations.

In the course of researching and writing this book I have incurred many debts. The greatest one is to the people of Ballybogoin. They welcomed me into their beleaguered social world and shared with me their considerable tragedies, their abilities to endure, and their wonderfully creative senses of humor. “Both sides of the house” left me with lessons of value that go far beyond what I can transmit in these pages.

The management of the Drumcoo Glassworks allowed me to conduct fieldwork in their offices and in their two factory sites. They opened up their archives and allowed me the freedom to explore whatever interested me in the production process. For this access and their generosity, I am extremely grateful. The workers at the glassworks, both white collar and blue collar, deserve my greatest thanks. They accorded me the wonderful hospitality for which they are renowned. They connected me to family and neighborhood networks, taught me about work and play in their divided social world, and extended kindness at every turn, as did their families and kin. No acts of exchange could reciprocate the debts I owe them and am still accruing after seventeen years.

The warmth and hospitality of many people in the Ballybogoin area made fieldwork remarkably easy to negotiate at certain times and very difficult at other times. Both Ulster unionists and Irish nationalists believed they suffered from negative representations at home and abroad, and they took it upon themselves to show me those aspects of themselves that differed from those stereotypes. The two groups understood, however, that the opposing political community often contradicted their stories. When one group or the other saw me with the other side, they often remarked on my absence from them and, at times, became suspicious of my intentions.

When I focused my attention on Protestants and let my relations in the Catholic community lapse for even a period of a week, I was accused of forgetting my friends and of ignoring my social obligations. The same was true, but less so, when my contacts with the Protestant community waned. Relatively less protest was made, I believe, because I was much less invested with the Protestants of Ballybogoin.

One interlocutor brought this to my attention one day at a drinking session in what was considered the most exclusively Protestant pub in the town, one that Catholic Irish nationalists did not patronize even

though it was owned, as most pubs were, by a Roman Catholic. I asked this man, “Do any Catholics ever drink here?” He looked at me funnily and said, “Well, you’re drinking here, aren’t ye!” I was classified as an American, a stranger, in Ballybogoin but was labeled as leaning to the Roman Catholic, Irish nationalist side by both Protestants and Catholics, although people discounted that I could fathom the passions that possessed them. “You’d have t’have grown up here to really understand it,” many people told me.

In these circumstances, and I believe it is impossible to get beyond this, I have produced only partial understandings, partial truths, of Ballybogoin’s complicated social world. I did not establish a fully objective position. As Begoña Aretxaga writes in the introduction to her study of women in Belfast, “In Northern Ireland, as perhaps in all places, writing does not escape the arena of hotly contested political claims.” Citing Max Weber, she reminds us that “partiality is the inevitable predicament of the social sciences” (Aretxaga 1997, 22). I produce partial perspectives throughout this ethnography and take full responsibility for it. I could never know it all.

A variety of colleagues and friends have constantly kept me in mind of that predicament as they have prodded me to improve upon the conceptualization and writing of this material. Aram A. Yengoyan, as a teacher and friend, was the first to do so, and his lessons at a variety of levels have been crucially important. In the planning stages of this project Joy Wolf, Yoshinobu Ota, Lindsay French, and David B. Edwards were important interlocutors. The Institute of Irish Studies at Queens University, Belfast, provided an intellectual home for me in the academic year prior to starting fieldwork. The director of the institute, Ronald H. Buchanan, advised me on the Ballybogoin area and connected me to it through his network of former students. I thank the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan for the Queens University Exchange Fellowship that enabled me to spend an academic year in Belfast.

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lowship allowed me to return to the field in 1992. A William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Summer International Research Grant enabled me to conduct research on the Irish border in 1996. I am grateful for a leave and a research fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study at the University of Illinois.

The collegial network at the University of Illinois has deepened my interdisciplinary resources and helped me to sort out some of the material in this book. The Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory provided me a forum with which to try out some of the ideas that appear here. The Department of Anthropology has been a source of welcomed criticism and intellectual excitement for me over the past several years. Matti Bunzl, Alma Gottlieb, Janet Keller, F. K. Lehman, Steve Leigh, Martin Manalansan, Andrew Orta, Arlene Torres, and Norman Whitten have been sources of intellectual encouragement. The department's sociocultural anthropology workshop gave me an opportunity to present some of my later thinking on this project. So Jin Park and Edward M. Bruner offered particularly insightful criticism on that occasion. Brenda Farnell and Charles R. Varela read chapters of the manuscript and offered particularly apt suggestions. Alejandro Lugo read a variety of chapters and offered persistent criticism and collegial advice. He has been a source of intellectual excitement and comradeship. I have been most fortunate to have Nancy Abelmann as a colleague and friend in my years at the University of Illinois. Nancy has read most of this book at one time or another and several parts of it in their different stages. I have come to expect insightful criticism, friendly encouragement, and helpful suggestions from her.

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Curtin, eds., *Reclaiming Gender: Transgressive Identities in Modern Ireland* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 123–41, copyright © Marilyn Cohen and Nancy J. Curtin. I gratefully acknowledge Palgrave and St. Martin's Press for permission to reprint this revised version of that paper. Steve Holland of the University of Illinois Department of Anthropology constructed the maps. I am grateful for his facility with this work.

I first considered pursuing a career in anthropology when I met Monique Girard and David Stark in Mexico during the summer of 1973. Trying to understand cultural difference alongside them was exciting, stimulating, and fun. Conversations with them now remain so, and the original title for this book, now the title of the introduction, was culled in exchanges with them. David came up with the title as the three of us talked about the themes of the book, and it still best captures the overall thrust of the ethnography in these pages. The introduction reproduces, in part, some of the ideas we played with that afternoon. I am thankful for their encouragement, creativity, and intellectual integrity. As this book demonstrates, my borrowings from David's work have considerably improved mine.

My family has been a source of encouragement through the years. The late Marjorie Mitchell Kelleher, my mother, showed me the value of intellectual pursuit early on and encouraged any such endeavors. Bill Kelleher, my dad, has been a foundation of emotional support. My sisters Nancy Kelleher and Joan Kelleher visited me in the field with their husbands, Bob Connolly and Paul Casey. Their interest in Northern Ireland has been gratifying. I thank my brother, Dennis, for his interest and support. I am grateful to Joan and Paul for last minute help collecting references.

I owe my greatest personal debt to Jo Thomas. Since I met Jo in the field and marveled at her energetic and insightful reporting on the conflict in Northern Ireland, she has had to live with this project. She has covered for me when deadlines loomed and has had to endure the absences of mind that accompanied them. She applied her keen copy-editing eye to the entire manuscript and gracefully forced me to confront its excesses and superficialities. Susan and Kathleen Kelleher, our daughters, have had to forbear this project over the long haul as well. Susan's artistic sensibilities and Kathleen's humor have been constant sources of pleasure and joy during the ups and downs of writing. I dedicate this book to the three of them.