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NME's "Irish Troubles": Political Conflict, Media Crisis and the British Music Press¹

Abstract: This article explores coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-1998) in Britain's weekly music press, focusing on the country's leading music paper, the *New Musical Express* (NME), during its 1980s "heyday", when it attracted a weekly readership of between one and two million people. The article shows how this paper (despite its principal remit as a popular-music publication) strove to cover the Troubles through a series of feature articles, letters page debates, and (even) a special themed issue, offering space to oppositional views and – crucially – affording a platform to the voice of its readers, at a time when much of Britain's media was reluctant to address the conflict. Drawing on original interviews with key NME writers, as well as extensive trawling of press archives, the article excavates the intricacies of NME's account of the conflict, charting its shifting approach to the Troubles, and tracing tensions that this generated between – and *amongst* – its writers and readers.

Keywords: Northern Ireland – conflict, British media, music press, *New Musical Express*, 1980s.

Résumé: Cet article explore la couverture du conflit nord irlandais (1968-1998) dans la presse musicale hebdomadaire britannique, en se concentrant sur son magazine phare, le *New Musical Express* (NME) alors qu'il était à son apogée dans les années 1980. L'article montre comment ce magazine, essentiellement spécialisé dans la musique populaire, s'est efforcé de couvrir la période des Troubles à travers une série d'articles de fond, de débats dans la rubrique courrier, ainsi qu'un numéro thématique spécial offrant un espace à des points de vue divergents et une plateforme aux voix de ses lecteurs, à une époque où la plupart des médias britanniques hésitaient à aborder le conflit. S'appuyant sur des entretiens originaux avec des auteurs clés du NME ainsi que sur l'exploration extensive des archives de presse, l'article étudie les subtilités du récit du conflit par NME, retraçant son approche changeante des Troubles et les tensions générées entre auteurs et lecteurs.

Mots clés: Irlande du Nord – conflit, médias britanniques, presse musicale, *New Musical Express*, années 1980.

Introduction

Invocations of the Northern Ireland conflict (1968-1998) have resurfaced, in recent years, at the forefront of British popular and literary culture via a sequence of

1. This title serves as a self-conscious echo of Robert Savage's study of the BBC and the Northern Ireland conflict (Robert Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles": Television, Conflict and Northern Ireland*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015).

successful novels and television series, such as *Derry Girls* (Channel Four, 2018-), *Milkman* (Anna Burns, 2018), *Spotlight on the Troubles* (BBC4, 2019), and *For the Good Times* (David Keenan, 2019)². Indeed, this period came to constitute, explained David Keenan, “a kind of Troubles ‘moment’” in expressive culture³. It was not only in the creative sphere, though, that the conflict would reappear, for political discourse in Britain became eclipsed – amidst the fractious and protracted “Brexit” crisis – by debates about the “Irish backstop”, precipitating concerns about the potential return of paramilitary violence⁴.

Against this increased awareness of Northern Ireland (and its troubled past) came a stark reminder – via embargoed files released in 2019 – of high-level British disinterest in the region: one such document detailed that Margaret Thatcher would “switch off” when the topic of Northern Ireland came up during Cabinet meetings in the 1980s⁵. The former Conservative Prime Minister was, of course, hardly alone in this respect; for much of Britain’s left also exhibited a lack of interest⁶. In this context, certain Labour MPs, such as John Mackintosh, would confess that they, too, had “switched off” to the conflict⁷. Despite the significant social and economic costs of the Troubles then, the issue remained, says David Miller, “very low on the political agenda”⁸.

At the same time, the conflict had an especially inhibiting effect on Britain’s “fourth estate”, engendering (what Miller calls) “a substantial chill factor” across the mediascape⁹. For Peter Taylor, a BBC journalist with considerable experience of covering Northern Ireland, the conflict was “the most sensitive issue in British broadcasting”¹⁰. Certainly many media accounts of the Troubles were – in the words of the British television producer, David Elstein – “censored [...] banned, postponed [or] cut”, with coverage that questioned British policy being “equated with treachery, with undermining the security forces, with endangering lives, with

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2. For an account of such work, see Caroline Magennis, “In *Derry Girls* and *Milkman*, Teenage Girls Dance through the Troubles”, *Prospect*, 4 March 2019; Alison Flood, “David Keenan’s Troubles Novel *For the Good Times* Wins Gordon Burn Prize”, *The Guardian*, 11 October 2019.
 3. David Keenan, “Top 10 Books about the Troubles”, *The Guardian*, 30 January 2019.
 4. Oliver Wright, “Is an Irish Backstop Breakthrough on the Horizon?”, *The Times*, 11 September 2019; Patrick Cockburn, “If the Troubles Return after Brexit, It Won’t Just Be Because of the Irish Border Issue”, *The Independent*, 31 August 2018.
 5. Brian Hutton, “Thatcher ‘Switches Off’ when Northern Ireland Comes Up”, *The Irish Times*, 28 December 2019.
 6. See, for example, Sam Porter, Denis O’Hearn, “New Left Podsnappery: The British Left and Ireland”, *New Left Review*, July-August 1995, p. 131.
 7. *Festival 40: What Do You Think of It So Far?*, BBC2, 29 August 1976. Mackintosh’s comments in this broadcast were reprinted in the Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, *The British Media and Ireland. Truth: The First Casualty*, London, Information on Ireland, 1978, p. 7.
 8. David Miller, *Don’t Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media*, London, Pluto, 1994, p. 3.
 9. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
 10. Peter Taylor, “Reporting Northern Ireland”, in *The British Media and Ireland: Truth – The First Casualty*, Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland (ed.), London, Information on Ireland, 1979, p. 22.

encouraging rebels"¹¹. In this context, then, the media became an important terrain in the contest to narrate and frame the conflict, forming the site of what Liz Curtis called "the propaganda war", in which participants sought to secure "the hearts and minds of the British people on the question of Ireland"¹². Consequently, a key question for journalists was how to keep the public informed of the Troubles without succumbing to the views of its key actors (whether the British government and its armed forces, or republican and loyalist political or paramilitary groups)¹³.

A considerable amount of scholarship has addressed media coverage of the conflict¹⁴. Much of this work is concerned with broadcast (and specifically television) – rather than print – media, often in relation to the 1988 "broadcasting ban", which constituted "the most severe assault on media freedom during the Northern Ireland conflict"¹⁵, with its prohibition of "the broadcast of direct statements [on British media] by representatives or supporters of eleven Irish political and military organisations"¹⁶. Whilst the ban served as a significant milestone in the media's handling of the Troubles, it was, arguably, only the apex of an ongoing "trajectory of media control"¹⁷, that endured throughout the conflict. To this end, this article attends to the period immediately prior to the ban, and addresses the sphere of print, which has arguably been overshadowed by a concern with audio-visual media in accounts of Troubles coverage¹⁸. Where print has been explored, the

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11. David Elstein, "Why Can't We Broadcast the Truth?", in *The British Media and Ireland...*, p. 14.
 12. Liz Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War. The British Media and the "Battle for Hearts and Minds"*, London, Pluto, 1984, p. 1.
 13. Brian Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British Press and Northern Ireland: A Case Study in the Reporting of Violent Political Conflict*, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1987, p. 110.
 14. See, for example, David Butler, *The Trouble with Reporting Northern Ireland: The British State, the Broadcast Media and Nonfictional Representation of the Conflict*, Aldershot, Avebury, 1995; Liz Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War...*; David Miller, *Don't Mention the War...*; *The Media and Northern Ireland: Covering the Troubles*, Bill Rolston (ed.), London, Palgrave, 1991; *War and Words: The Northern Ireland Media Reader*, Bill Rolston, David Miller (eds.), Belfast, Beyond the Pale, 1996; Robert Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles"...*
 15. Max Pettigrew, "The 'Oxygen of Publicity' and the Suffocation of Censorship: National Newspaper Representations of the British Broadcasting Ban (1988-94)", in *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain: Impacts, Engagements, Legacies and Memories*, Graham Dawson, Jo Dover, Stephen Hopkins (eds.), Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 227. For work that focuses on broadcasting, see, for instance, Gary Edgerton, "Quelling the 'Oxygen of Publicity': British Broadcasting and 'The Troubles' during the Thatcher Years", *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, p. 115-131; Lesley Henderson, David Miller, Jacqueline Reilly, *Speak No Evil: The British Broadcasting Ban, the Media and the Conflict in Ireland*, Glasgow, Glasgow University Media Group, 1990; Rita Lago, "Interviewing Sinn Féin under the New Political Environment: A Comparative Analysis of Interviews with Sinn Féin on British Television", *Media, Culture and Society*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1998, p. 677-685; Robert Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles"...*; David Miller, *Don't Mention the War...*; Ed Moloney, "Closing Down the Airwaves: The Story of the Broadcasting Ban", in *The Media and Northern Ireland...*, p. 8-50.
 16. David Miller, "The Media and Northern Ireland: Censorship, Information Management and the Broadcasting Ban", in *Glasgow Media Group Reader*, vol. II, *Industry, Economy, War and Politics*, Greg Philo (ed.), London, Routledge, 1995, p. 48.
 17. Max Pettigrew, "The 'Oxygen of Publicity' and the Suffocation of Censorship...", p. 239.
 18. Brian Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British Press and Northern Ireland...*, p. 79.

focus has largely been on daily news publications¹⁹. Although this emphasis is, of course, understandable, it has had the effect of eliding the broader span of (weekly and monthly) print publications, and eclipsing the diverse means through which discrete papers and magazines sought to frame or stage the conflict. This proclivity to concentrate on the daily press has, significantly, bequeathed a view of print as a less critical or questioning sector – in its coverage of the Troubles – than television, despite the fact that the latter was subjected to greater regulatory constraints²⁰. The publication explored here serves to challenge this perspective, in that it was a popular and widely-circulated print outlet that addressed the conflict in ways that ran contrary to the views of the mainstream press and broadcast media, and afforded space to oppositional views, not least those of its readers.

The significance of *New Musical Express* (henceforth *NME*) on the British print landscape – particularly during its 1980s “heyday” – is difficult to overstate. At that time, the paper enjoyed an extraordinary public reach, achieving a weekly readership of between one and two million young people (depending on shifts in circulation), with sales of up to 230,000 copies per week, and with each physical copy being browsed by up to nine people²¹. Moreover, *NME* performed, for many readers, an expressly pedagogical role²². In this context, the cultural critic Mark Fisher once explained that his “education didn’t come from school [...] it came from reading *NME*”²³. Beyond the paper’s immediate popular-cultural remit (encompassing music, film and television), *NME* also engaged, at this time, with a range of social and political themes, issuing feature articles on – and devoting front covers to – *inter alia* animal rights, unemployment, the miners’ strike, “race” riots, South Africa, nuclear war, and environmentalism²⁴. In this context, the paper

19. See, for example, Liz Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War...*; Brian Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British Press and Northern Ireland...*; Max Pettigrew, “The ‘Oxygen of Publicity’ and the Suffocation of Censorship...”; Greg McLaughlin, Stephen Baker, “‘Every Man an Emperor’: The British Press, Bloody Sunday and the Image of the British Army”, in *Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain...*, p. 183-198.

20. Greg McLaughlin, Stephen Baker, “‘Every Man an Emperor’...”, p. 185.

21. Patrick Glen, *Youth and Permissive Social Change in British Music Papers, 1967-1983*, London, Palgrave, 2019, p. 153; Patrick Glen, “‘Sometimes Good Guys Don’t Wear White’: Morality in the Music Press, 1967-1983”, PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 2013, p. 23.

22. Laura Snapes, “‘Its Soul Was Lost Somewhere’: Inside the Demise of *NME*”, *The Guardian*, 14 March 2018.

23. Andrew Brooks, “Do You Miss the Future? Mark Fisher Interviewed”, *CrackMagazine*, 12 September 2014, on line: <https://crackmagazine.net/article/long-reads/mark-fisher-interviewed>.

24. See, for example, Chris Salewicz, “Carnival”, *NME*, 6 May 1978, p. 31-33; Andrew Tyler, “Return of the Anti-Nazi League”, *NME*, 7 March 1981, p. 16-18; Mick Duffy, “Life in the War Zone”, *NME*, 8 August 1981, p. 7-8; X. Moore, “The Road to Blackpool Pier”, *NME*, 24 October 1981, p. 31-35; Richard McDermott, “Together We Can Stop the Bomb”, *NME*, 31 October 1981, p. 18-19; Andrew Tyler, “CND Fights March Ban”, *NME*, 2 May 1981, p. 12; Andrew Tyler, “Turning to Green”, *NME*, 31 October 1981, p. 24-27; Andrew Tyler, “W.O.R.K. No No My Daddy Don’t...”, *NME*, 6 June 1981, p. 4, 14; Ray Lowry, “The Walker Brothers”, *NME*, 23 May 1981, p. 29, 55; Paul Du Noyer, “The Burning of Southall”, *NME*, 11 July 1981, p. 3; Ray Lowry, Chris Salewicz, “Anarchy in the UK: The Reality”, *NME*, 18 July 1981, p. 4-6; Andrew Tyler, “Britain on the Junkheap, Part One: Britain’s Big Sleep”, *NME*, 26 February 1983, p. 20-22, 33; Andrew

also sought to address the Northern Ireland conflict, publishing – at key points in the 1980s – dedicated feature articles and letters page debates on this topic, and even convening a special themed issue on Northern Ireland that included (amongst other things) an interview with Martin McGuinness, who at the time was deputy leader of Sinn Féin (and widely assumed to be the IRA's Chief of Staff)²⁵.

Neil Spencer, who was editor of *NME* for most of this period, suggests that the paper's engagement with Northern Ireland was born of a wish to address the inadequate coverage offered to the issue by mainstream media outlets²⁶, which at that time were seen to have "fail[ed]", as Brian Hamilton-Tweedale explains, "in their public duty to provide a comprehensive and meaningful account of the Irish conflict"²⁷. In this context, then, Spencer sought to prise open a space for public discussion of the topic in *NME*²⁸. Crucially, this coverage would draw not only on the views of its writers, but also those of the paper's young readers, who regularly deployed "Gasbag" – the *NME*'s letters page – to express their views on the conflict²⁹. Reflecting on this point, Spencer relates that such views were unlikely to be afforded space elsewhere on the British mediascape: "Where else were young people going to write tirades about the Northern Irish question? Where would their voices ever be heard?"³⁰.

It is certainly true that *NME*'s letters page, which often acted, in the 1980s, as an unusually erudite forum for social and political debate³¹, published a striking number of exchanges that addressed the Irish conflict. Indeed, *NME* would occasionally devote its entire letters section to readers' views on this issue³². It was, moreover, a reader's intervention on this topic – in the letters page in August 1980 – that instigated *NME*'s engagement with the conflict. In this missive, the reader (from Derry in Northern Ireland) assailed *NME* for eliding Northern Ireland in its coverage of contemporaneous political concerns (the paper had published a range of

Tyler, "Britain on the Junkheap, Part Two: No Future in the UK", *NME*, 5 March 1983, p. 12-14; Andrew Tyler, "Britain on the Junkheap, Part Three: Sweet and Sour City", *NME*, 12 March 1983, p. 20-22; Julie Burchill, "Silencing the Song of Freedom", *NME*, 22 October 1983, p. 27; Andrew Tyler, "Mandela: 21 Years of Forced Silence", *NME*, 16 July 1983, p. 8; Andrew Tyler, "Sending Down the Lawless", *NME*, 15 October 1983, p. 22-23, 26; Paolo Hewitt, "Dumbstruck and Doomed Down on Animal Farm", *NME*, 17 December 1983, p. 26-28; X. Moore, "Lives on the Line", *NME*, 5 January 1985, p. 20-22, 26; X. Moore, "Lives on the Line: Part 2", *NME*, 12 January 1985, p. 6-7, 28; Steven Wells, "Ghetto Blasts", *NME*, 21 September 1985, p. 29; Tim Jarvis, "War of the Worlds", *NME*, 9 November 1985, p. 6-7; Donald McRae, "Freedom Road", *NME*, 9 November 1985, p. 8; Donald McRae, "Rhythms of Resistance", *NME*, 16 January 1988, p. 26-28.

25. For the McGuinness interview, see Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O'Hagan, Gavin Martin, "Those Petrol Emotions", *NME*, 10 May 1986, p. 24-25, 27.

26. Neil Spencer, interview with the author, 30 April 2019.

27. Brian Hamilton-Tweedale, *The British Press and Northern Ireland...*, p. 120.

28. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Mark Sinker, interview with the author, 18 June 2019.

32. See, for example, "Gasbag: The Irish No-Joke", Charles Shaar Murray (ed.), *NME*, 4 October 1980, p. 62-63.

political articles that year). In light of the points made by the reader, it is worth quoting their letter at length:

NME does it again. The champion of the oppressed and the representative of caring humanity has again bombarded us with articles about the [nuclear] holocaust, suppression of dissidents in Czechoslovakia, genocide of Indians in Chile and other causes. Don't get me wrong – I'm not knocking your coverage of these subjects [...]. It just seems strange that you deal with all these things and then dismiss events here in Northern Ireland as something that shouldn't be dealt with. [...] *NME* writers who regularly give off about violations of human rights [...] tend to ignore the Irish situation. They complain about police harassment of minorities in England yet ignore the daily obscenities perpetrated by the so-called "security forces" in the ghettos of Belfast and Derry. They ignore the total disregard for such concerns as justice or even decency that keep the Northern Ireland legal system going; the H-blocks of Long Kesh are the inevitable result of this system [...] Is this because, unlike many of *NME*'s pet subjects, the British government doesn't like coverage of something so controversial? If people in England were put through a legal system which involved torture, lengthy internment periods, no jury courts and judgement by men obviously sectarian and partisan, we'd hear enough about it in your pages [...]. It strikes me that your political hobby-horses are all safe ones that cause little worry to those in power. The "Troubles" have gone on for 11 years now and, more urgently, the H-block question for nearly four years. You have made yourself political and therefore your failure to cover these issues is not quite the same as *Sounds*' or *Melody Maker*'s failure – they don't care at all but you claim you do. Ignoring Ireland won't make it go away. The "problem" might be solved if more people in England gave a damn. Or is *NME* really full of ostriches³³?

The publication of this complaint, in the paper's letters page, precipitated a plethora of further missives on the matter, prompting Charles Shaar Murray – one of *NME*'s most celebrated writers – to observe that letters on Northern Ireland had, during that time, "completely swamped all other topics" in *NME*'s mail bag³⁴. This would, in turn, provoke the paper to convene a special issue of "Gasbag" focused solely on the conflict³⁵, before the paper issued its first feature article on this topic (albeit encased in an account of Belfast's music scene)³⁶. Subsequent letters page debates, and feature articles, would, moreover, be published across the decade. For much of the 1980s, then, *NME* sought to address one of the most contentious issues in British politics, whilst other (more obviously political) outlets appeared to eschew it³⁷.

33. The letter appeared in "Gasbag", Paul Rambali (ed.), *NME*, 30 August 1980, p. 54. The articles to which the letter-writer referred included: Andy Gill, "Starlin Wars", *NME*, 26 July 1980, p. 31; Angus MacKinnon, "Trident: Britain's Brand New Passport to Armageddon", *NME*, 9 August 1980, p. 6-8; Vivien Goldman, "E.P. Thompson: The Man Who'd Save the World", *NME*, 16 August 1980, p. 27, 53; Ian MacDonald, "The *NME* Consumers' Guide to 1984", *NME*, 23 August 1980, p. 29-32.

34. "Gasbag: The Irish No-Joke", Charles Shaar Murray (ed.), p. 62.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Gavin Martin, "Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality", *NME*, 11 October 1980, p. 31-34, 61.

37. Sam Porter, Denis O'Hearn, "New Left Podsnappery...", p. 131.

This endeavour to address the Troubles did not go unobserved by *NME*'s readers, some of whom praised the paper's coverage of the conflict, noting that it had the effect of "shaming the self-styled 'progressive' left (*Guardian*, *City Limits*, *New Socialist* et al...)" in Britain "for their timidity and refusal to address [...] the one 'problem' in British politics that simply won't go away"³⁸. Despite this fact – that *NME* had confronted the conflict at a time when many left-wing publications were conspicuously quiet on the topic (and when much of the mainstream media was deeply wary of it) – the paper's engagement with the Troubles has been ignored in scholarly work on media coverage of the conflict, and in academic (and journalistic) accounts of the British music press³⁹. While the announcement of *NME*'s closure as a print outlet in 2018 (after sixty-six years of publication) prompted a profusion of public eulogies across the media, highlighting the paper's history and significance⁴⁰, scant regard was paid to *NME*'s political commentary, despite the fact that this constituted one of its key characteristics in its (most) celebrated phase in the 1970s and 1980s. This article seeks to extend, then, existing accounts of the media and Northern Ireland – beyond the orthodox orbit of broadcasting and the broadsheets – by exploring the (hitherto overlooked) coverage of the conflict that emerged in the British music press, whilst also expanding extant work on the music press (with its focus on style, individual critics, and chronicling of canonical "scenes")⁴¹ by excavating, and addressing, its political commentaries. The article offers the first sustained account of this aspect of *NME*, unveiling the intricate – and often fraught – efforts of this non-news publication to address what was arguably the most controversial question in British politics: the Irish conflict.

38. See letter in "Big Baad Bag", Sean O'Hagan (ed.), *NME*, 31 May 1986, p. 50 (original emphasis).

39. There is a significant body of scholarship on the popular-music press. See, for instance, Eamonn Forde, "From Polyglottism to Branding: On the Decline of Personality Journalism in the British Music Press", *Journalism*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2001, p. 23-43; Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock*, London, Constable, 1983, p. 165-177; *Pop Music and the Press*, Steve Jones (ed.), Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002; Dave Laing, "Anglo-American Music Journalism: Texts and Contexts", in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, Jason Toynbee (eds.), London, Routledge, 2006, p. 333-339; Dave Laing, "'The World's Best Rock Dead': Let It Rock 1972-75", *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2010, p. 449-463; John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music*, London, Blackwell, 1986, p. 83-88; Jason Toynbee, "Policing Bohemia, Pinning Up Grunge: The Music Press and Generic Change in British Pop and Rock", *Popular Music*, vol. 12, no. 3, October 1993, p. 289-300.

40. See, for example, Laura Snapes, "'Its Soul Was Lost Somewhere' ..."; Jack Shepherd, "NME Closes Print Edition: Bands and Journalists Pay Tribute", *The Independent*, 7 March 2018; Ben Beaumont-Thomas, Laura Snapes, "The Stories behind NME's Greatest Covers", *The Guardian*, 9 March 2018.

41. See, for example, *Pop Music and the Press*. A modest amount of reflection on the politics of the music press has emerged in the accounts of music journalists. See, for instance, Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press*, London, Sanctuary, 2001; Pat Long, *The History of the NME: High Times and Low Lives at the World's Most Famous Music Magazine*, London, Portico, 2012; *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week: The Unruly Curiosity of the UK Music Press from the 1960s-80s, in the Words of Those Who Were There*, Mark Sinker (ed.), London, Strange Attractor Press, 2018. However, none of this work explores *NME*'s coverage of the Northern Ireland conflict.

The article deploys original interviews that the author has conducted with key *NME* writers (such as Stuart Bailie, Len Brown, Stuart Cosgrove, Paolo Hewitt, Danny Kelly, Gavin Martin, Lucy O'Brien and Neil Spencer), as well as journalists from competitor papers, such as Barry McIlheney (who wrote for *Melody Maker* before editing *Smash Hits*), and Mark Sinker (who contributed to *NME* before editing *The Wire*), to illuminate decision-making issues at editorial level. The article integrates these interviews with an extensive archival trawling of *NME*'s back issues, enabling closely-focused content analyses, and affording new insights into the process by which a high-profile popular-cultural platform strove to address the Troubles. The article charts the different rhetorical modes and techniques – as well as the discrete themes and standpoints – that *NME* deployed in its account of the conflict, exploring the dilemmas that its writers faced in addressing this issue, and tracing the tensions that this induced between (and *amongst*) the paper's writers and readers. The article also unveils the operation of antithetical codes, at *NME*, with the paper endeavouring, on the one hand, to act as an oppositional, counter-cultural voice (by espousing partisan views), whilst seeking, on the other, to adhere to quasi-“public-service” values (by appearing “balanced”). Before exploring these points, though, it is necessary to place *NME* – as a publication – in the particular political and popular-cultural context of the time, and reflect on its expressly ideological profile during the 1980s.

Political *NME*

The immediate context for *NME*'s political commentary in the 1980s lay in the special political and popular-musical nexus of the late 1970s. During that period, the youth subculture of punk – and its associated musical “scene” – had punctured the prevailing codes of Anglo-American popular music, and, in consequence, had the effect, in the words of the former *NME* writer, Paolo Hewitt, of “politicising pop”⁴². In this context, the pages of the music press became, in light of the few available platforms at the time, a key space in which punk could “take place”⁴³, and through which its “politicising” effects could percolate. And though *NME* was not the first of the British music papers to document punk⁴⁴, it was, without doubt, the one in which its “politicising” process was most clearly registered. Indeed, certain musicians at that time saw *NME* as “the most PC [politically correct] of all the music magazines”: “Within their ranks there was a lot of almost politicians, who had a certain party line”, observed Hugh Cornwell⁴⁵. This view of the paper was perhaps informed by the fact that its editor from 1978 until 1985 – Neil Spencer – was “a

42. Paolo Hewitt, interview with the author, 13 June 2019. For an account of punk, see Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Methuen, 1979; Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London, Faber, 1991.

43. Neil Spencer, in *Inky Fingers: The NME Story*, BBC Four, 4 July 2005.

44. Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 131.

45. Hugh Cornwell, in *Inky Fingers...*

committed Labour Party member" who moulded *NME*, as Pat Long explains, as "a voice of dissent", with an "increasingly politicised" outlook⁴⁶.

The paper's ideological orientation echoed, of course, the increasing socio-political consciousness that, at the time, informed the popular-musical milieu, via initiatives such as Rock Against Racism (1976-1982), Two-Tone (1979-1985), and Red Wedge (1985-1990)⁴⁷. At the same time, mainstream British politics had been marked by an especially right-wing turn, following the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and the ascent of "Thatcherism" following successive election victories in 1983 and 1987⁴⁸. This specific conjuncture – between an increasingly oppositional popular-music culture and a concomitantly reactionary political one – "made it quite easy", says Spencer, for *NME* "to extend music journalism into social and political commentary"⁴⁹. Elaborating on this point, Hewitt suggests that the radical, right-wing ethos of the Thatcher government – "and the environment and the atmosphere it created" – "really pushed us [the *NME* staff] towards a very strong, left-wing position"⁵⁰. Thus, the paper openly aligned itself with the Labour Party⁵¹, most notably by publishing two issues – in 1985 and 1987, respectively – that featured Neil Kinnock, the (then) Labour leader, as cover "star"⁵². Such endorsements were underscored by *NME*'s (usually approving) accounts of Labour Party conferences, as well as its publication of interviews with leading left-wing figures, such as Ken Livingstone, Tony Benn and E. P. Thompson⁵³.

It is clear, then, that the specific context of the time played a crucial role in prompting *NME*'s political coverage, and leftist orientation⁵⁴. However, the paper's penchant for social commentary, and left-wing views, had a much longer provenance, dating back to the early 1970s when *NME* had sought to rejuvenate itself – following a period of decline – by recruiting a series of writers (such as Nick Kent, Ian MacDonald and Charles Shaar Murray) from the British "underground" press, a coalition of "alternative" publications, such as *Oz*, *IT* (*International Times*) and *Friends / Friendz*, which accrued a special profile in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an oppositional, and expressly youth-cultural, voice⁵⁵.

46. Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 131.

47. See Daniel Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down: The Music and Politics of Rock Against Racism, 2 Tone and Red Wedge*, London, Picador, 2016.

48. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988.

49. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

50. Paolo Hewitt, interview with the author.

51. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

52. Paolo Hewitt, "The Neil Kinnock Interview", *NME*, 27 April 1985, p. 12-14; Denis Campbell, "Neil's Wild Years", *NME*, 13 June 1987, p. 24-25.

53. Tony Parsons, "The Dignity of Labour", *NME*, 15 October 1983, p. 8; Andrew Tyler, "Dread Ken: A Capital Leader", *NME*, 9 April 1983, p. 16-17, 43; Nick Martin, "Jobs, Peace, and Other Pipe Dreams", *NME*, 1 May 1982, p. 19-20; Goldman, "E. P. Thompson", p. 27, 53.

54. Lucy O'Brien, interview with the author, 10 June 2019; Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author, 27 May 2019; Paolo Hewitt, interview with the author.

55. Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 56-57.

A key aim of the “underground” press was, in the words of Mick Farren (a contributor to *IT*, who later relocated to *NME*), to cover issues that had been overlooked by mainstream outlets, and thus “provide a forum for people who are excluded from mass media”⁵⁶. Significantly, its coverage of social and political issues was accompanied by articles on popular music⁵⁷. Such coverage served not only to leaven the press’s more “serious” commentaries, but also to attract investment in the form of advertising revenue from the music industry⁵⁸.

NME’s self-conscious effort to incorporate the staff, as well as the ethos, of the “underground” press in the early 1970s⁵⁹ brought a “broader political and cultural span” to the paper⁶⁰, which (re)positioned itself as a quasi-counter-cultural platform⁶¹, with expressly extra-musical interests, a point epitomised in (former editor) Tony Tyler’s injunction that articles in *NME* should “not just [be] about the music”, but “about all of the things that the music’s about”, which at that time included, of course, social and political issues⁶². The paper’s recruitment of “underground” staff continued, moreover, across the decade⁶³, with *NME* sustaining, as Long explains, “the ethos, style and content of the underground press well past punk, up to the end of the decade [the 1970s] and beyond”⁶⁴. Indeed, at the point that Spencer became editor (in June 1978), at least six of the paper’s writers/contributors had come from the “underground” press, including Nick Kent, Charles Shaar Murray, Mick Farren, John May, Barry Miles, and Pennie Smith⁶⁵.

Significantly, the political coverage that had appeared in the “underground” press had included a considerable amount of commentary on the Irish conflict⁶⁶, with key papers devoting front covers, as well as feature articles, to this topic⁶⁷.

56. Mick Farren, cited in Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 47.

57. The “underground” papers also engaged with issues such as South Africa (*IT*, no. 37, 9-22 August 1968), the Black Panthers (*IT*, no. 35, 12-25 July 1968), Rastafarians and Black Power (*IT*, no. 122, 27 January-10 February 1972), and state surveillance (*IT*, no. 142, 17 November-1 December 1972). For examples of its accounts of popular music, see *IT*, no. 53, 28 March-10 April 1969; *IT*, no. 82, 3-16 July 1970; *IT*, no. 109, 29 July-12 August 1971.

58. Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write...*, p. 73-74.

59. Nigel Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press, 1966-74*, London, Routledge, 1988, p. 183.

60. Charles Shaar Murray, cited in *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week...*, p. 144.

61. John Street, *Rebel Rock...*, p. 83-88.

62. Tony Tyler, cited in Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 71.

63. Over the course of the decade this included Nick Kent, Charles Shaar Murray, Ian MacDonald, Mick Farren, Penny Reel, Barry Miles, John May, Joe Stevens, Pennie Smith and Barney Bubbles (Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 65, 74-75, 123, 128; *A Hidden Landscape Once a Week...*, p. 170, 178).

64. Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 123.

65. Anonymous, “T-Zers”, *NME*, 10 June 1978, p. 63. See also *NME* masthead on 10 June 1978, p. 63.

66. Nigel Fountain, *Underground...*, p. 97, 134-139, 162, 167.

67. For “underground” press articles on the Northern Ireland conflict, see, for example, A Special Correspondent, “Military Intelligence Predicts... Civil War!”, *IT*, no. 78, 24 April-7 May 1970, p. 1-2; Anonymous, “Ireland for the Irish – England for the Pigs?”, *IT*, no. 122, 27 January-10 February 1972, p. 12-14; Jonathon Green, “Bringing the War Back Home”, *IT*, no. 123, 10-24 February 1972, p. 11; George Snow, Rosemary Bignell, “George Snow’s Ireland Pics”, *IT*, no. 128, 20 April-4 May 1972,

This coverage often evinced an overt sympathy with the experience of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland⁶⁸. Indeed, there was an apparent perception, amongst readers, that the “underground” press had signalled an allegiance with militant Irish republicanism. In this context, letters appeared in *IT* objecting to the “underground” press’s “support” for the IRA, and encouraging contributors to distinguish between the ideology of Irish republicanism (which many readers had endorsed) and the actions of the IRA (which they often disavowed)⁶⁹.

Despite this view of the “underground” press as championing the IRA, though, many of its writers held highly ambivalent views on the conflict. Reflecting on this point, Jerome Burne, a contributor to *Friends / Friendz* and *IT*, relates: “The IRA was always a problematical issue. On one hand we weren’t in favour of violence, but we were obviously against the British Army. We wanted to overthrow the State, but we weren’t quite sure that we wanted a lot of bombers. That was a tricky one”⁷⁰. In a similar vein, Dick Pountain – who played a leading role at *Oz* – recalls attending “appalling all-afternoon meetings in order to make up our minds what our attitude to the provisional IRA was”⁷¹, a point echoed by another *Oz* contributor, Nigel Fountain, who recollects debates about “the right line to be taken on the issue: Was it to be support for the IRA? Support for a socialist Ireland? Critical support for the IRA? And *which* IRA?”⁷².

Similar quandaries would surface at *NME* in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Spencer points, in this context, to his “personal attitude to the Northern Ireland problem” at that time, suggesting that this was “that there was no place in that dialogue for someone like me”. He goes on:

It was a mess, and where did one engage with it? Were you on the side of Stormont and British troops? Were you on the side of the IRA? No. [...] Neither. A pox on both

p. 26-29, 44; Kevin Mellows, George Snow, “Bloody Sunday, Bloody 1973”, *IT*, no. 147, 8-23 February 1973, p. 10-13; Richard Trench, “A Nice Kid...”, *IT*, no. 154, 17-31 May 1973, p. 3. The conflict also featured on the cover of many “underground” press papers. See, for example, *Friends*, no. 25, 8 March 1971; *Friends*, no. 28, 3 May 1971; *Friendz*, no. 18, 6 January 1972; *Friendz*, no. 21, 17 February 1972; *Ink*, no. 21, 2 November 1971; *Ink*, no. 25, 31 December 1971; *Ink*, no. 28, 11 February 1972.

68. See, for example, “Ireland Resists Aggression”, *Ink*, no. 28, 11 February 1972 and “Solidarity with the People of Derry”, *Friendz*, no. 21, 17 February 1972. Elsewhere, *IT* published a cover featuring images of British soldiers in riot helmets rendered in a playful pop-art style and illustrated with the caption: “Bang, You’re Dead!” (*IT*, no. 123, 10-24 February 1972).

69. One reader would inform *IT*: “I’m getting fucking sick with the way the underground press supports the IRA. Are you too damn swollen up in Revolution against the Establishment that you cannot see what a load of lying, murdering bastards the IRA Provisionals are?” (“Letters”, *IT*, no. 120, 30 December 1971-13 January 1972, p. 14). Meanwhile, other readers would endorse “the support the underground press gives to the IRA”, whilst qualifying this with criticism of “the tactics of fear, murder and repression” that they felt had been adopted by republican paramilitaries in Northern Ireland (“Letters”, *IT*, no. 123, 10-24 February 1972, p. 2).

70. Jerome Burne, cited in Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961-1971*, London, Pimlico, 1998, p. 362.

71. Dick Pountain, cited in Jonathon Green, *Days in the Life...*, p. 375.

72. Nigel Fountain, *Underground...*, p. 97.

their houses. [...] So, it was very hard to find a way to engage with that, and really, it wasn't *our* problem. It wasn't a thing that affected us⁷³.

Notwithstanding the fact that *NME* had, of course, engaged with issues beyond the immediate orbit of its staff, it is clear that the Troubles had, by the late 1970s, extended – via the IRA's bombing campaign – into English cities, and thus the conflict had undoubtedly come to "affect" the lives of its writers and readers. With this in mind, it appears that *NME* was – in spite of its overt concern with political issues – initially reluctant to address the Northern Ireland conflict. An inevitable problem with this was, of course, that the paper's continuing lack of engagement with the Troubles would become (in the context of its concomitant coverage of other political themes) increasingly conspicuous and, by extension, questionable. Moreover, in the absence of any focused account of Northern Ireland, the conflict would nevertheless come to penetrate the discourse of the music press through other narrative means, some of which were not unproblematic. Perhaps most striking, in this regard, was the practice – evident across the British music press in the 1970s – of reporting on British bands on tour in Northern Ireland, in which the spatial locale was deployed as a dramatic backdrop, usually via images of the band members in Belfast, alongside reports that invoked the conflict, with journalists noting the presence of armed soldiers, military vehicles, and bombed-out buildings⁷⁴.

Although this sort of coverage had been evident since the early 1970s, its best known instance centred on the visit of The Clash to Belfast in 1977, an event that attracted widespread attention, appearing on the front covers – and inside pages – of both of *NME*'s weekly competitors, *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*⁷⁵. The currency of such coverage functioned, first and foremost, at the photographic level, hence the images of The Clash (that illustrated both the covers and feature articles in *Sounds* and *Melody Maker*) depicting the band members in close proximity to armed British soldiers and Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers, amidst conspicuous forms of surveillance apparatus. Such images were underscored, in the accompanying reports, by semantic invocations of Belfast's oppressive ambience, laying stress on "steel barricades", "barbed wire fences", and "endless devastation"⁷⁶.

Significantly, *NME* sought to distance itself, at the time, from such coverage, affording the event (only) a short news item, with the acerbic headline: "Clash Visit Belfast for Picture Session" (which nevertheless included a photograph from

73. Neil Spencer, interview with the author (original emphasis).

74. For examples of this practice, see James Johnson, "The Sonic Warlords in Belfast", *NME*, 24 March 1973, p. 28; Anonymous, "Rolling out the Blarney Stone", *Record Mirror*, 3 May 1975; Angie Errigo, "Feelgoods Triumph in a Po-Go Zone", *NME*, 8 October 1977, p. 15-16; Allan Jones, "What the El!", *Melody Maker*, 25 March 1978, p. 3; Jane Suck, "Vicarious Thrills + Pol-a-Ticks: Crossing the Irish Sea with the Adverts", *Sounds*, 18 February 1978, p. 16-17; Colin Irwin, "The Jewel in the Crown", *Melody Maker*, 15 December 1984, p. 24-25, 31.

75. Giovanni Daddomo, Caroline Coon, "Clash in the City of the Dead", *Sounds*, 29 October 1977, p. 25-27; Ian Birch, "Clash Lose Control...", *Melody Maker*, 29 October 1977, p. 30-32.

76. Giovanni Daddomo, Caroline Coon, "Clash in the City of the Dead", p. 27; Ian Birch, "Clash Lose Control...", p. 30.

the trip)⁷⁷. Moreover, the paper would subsequently remind its readers, in its first focused feature on Northern Ireland (in October 1980), that The Clash had “found time [on their short trip to Belfast] for some holiday snaps and a *Melody Maker* front cover”⁷⁸. Despite its critical response to such reportage, though, the *NME* had itself – only two weeks prior to the Clash coverage in *Sounds* and *Melody Maker* – published a similar account of another British band’s (Dr. Feelgood) visit to Northern Ireland, embellished with an image of that group behind (what the accompanying photo-caption called) a “bomb-guard in Belfast”, and commencing with a stand-first stressing that the interview took place “behind the Ulster barricades”⁷⁹.

This was, moreover, not the first time that *NME* had traded in such tropes. In fact, the paper had arguably helped to beget the very practice of tracking British bands’ visits to Belfast, as evidenced by a piece (on Hawkwind) in 1973, in which the local setting, and the effects of the conflict, are consciously stressed, with *NME* noting “shops, houses and bars [...] blasted into ruins”, whilst spotlighting a British soldier (“his rifle waist high”) who “looked as nervous as hell”: “It was obvious the whole city was a war zone”⁸⁰.

Whether such coverage was born of a wish to acknowledge the conflict (rather than simply ignore it), or an opportunistic attempt to exploit the Troubles as a compelling backdrop, it is clear that this tendency would, by the late 1970s, come to be seen, at least by *NME*, as questionable. Thus, the paper would retract from this practice, even while its competitors continued to pursue it into the 1980s⁸¹. Reflecting on this point (with four decades hindsight), Spencer suggests that music-press photos of bands “posing with British troops” became, from his perspective, “problematical”⁸². This point is echoed by Danny Kelly, a subsequent editor of *NME* (and staff writer in the 1980s), who explains that such coverage “didn’t say anything about what was going on, except there was a sense of danger”, and thus risked trading in “a kind of ‘danger chic’”⁸³. Such material would, of course, make *NME*’s lack of overt commentary on the conflict seem (even) more questionable, as Kelly explains: “The danger is if you don’t write something serious and political, you end up using Northern Ireland as a backdrop, a dramatic backdrop to things”⁸⁴. Rather than restricting invocations of the conflict to this “dramatic” capacity, then, the subject required (as Spencer increasingly came to recognise) a more upfront approach⁸⁵.

The paper’s pursuance of this approach was expedited, according to Spencer, by two concurrent developments: first, the arrival at *NME* of a Belfast correspondent, Gavin Martin, who brought to the paper a legitimising local voice, and, second,

77. Anonymous, “Clash Visit Belfast for Picture Session”, *NME*, 29 October 1977, p. 9-10.

78. Gavin Martin, “Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality”.

79. Angie Errigo, “Feelgoods Triumph in a Po-Go Zone”, p. 15.

80. James Johnson, “The Sonic Warlords in Belfast”.

81. See, for example, Jane Suck, “Vicarious Thrills...”; Colin Irwin, “The Jewel in the Crown”.

82. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

83. Danny Kelly, interview with the author, 20 August 2019.

84. *Ibid.*

85. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

the emergence of a Northern Irish punk “scene”, which called for coverage of the conflict as part of the bands’ social context⁸⁶. These concomitant shifts would precipitate the paper’s first feature article on the conflict (albeit in the context of an account of Belfast’s music scene), in a piece entitled “Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality”, written by Martin, in October 1980. The publication of this piece was, however, preceded by the intervention of the Derry letter-writer cited above, which in turn provoked a plethora of letters that addressed the Irish conflict. Three such letters would be published in one issue in September 1980, before the staff felt compelled – by the sheer volume of subsequent letters – to convene a dedicated “Gasbag”, focused solely on the conflict, in October of that year. In conjunction with the Martin feature, this special issue of “Gasbag” served as *NME*’s first focused engagement with the conflict. Before addressing Martin’s piece, then, I will explore these letters page debates. The letters surveyed here, and throughout the article, present a range of interpretive frames through which the Troubles were viewed, pointing to what scholars have called “a ‘meta-conflict’, a conflict about what the conflict is about”⁸⁷. The readers thus invoke existing (exogenous and endogenous) explanations, rehearsing republican, unionist and socialist views, with some letters claiming that the conflict was essentially sectarian, whilst others called for the withdrawal of British troops. Alongside such perspectives, though, many readers spotlighted the absence of debate in Britain on the conflict, critiquing mainstream media coverage, and issuing highly “active” responses, suggesting a far from passive audience.

1980: “Now we’ve got a platform [...] what are we going to do about it?”

A number of letters appeared in “Gasbag” in September 1980 that were clearly prompted by the comments of the Derry reader (cited above), and which extended the latter’s critique of the inadequate coverage that the Irish conflict had received in Britain’s media. The first letter begins, significantly, by endorsing the Derry letter-writer, and noting their own “surprise” to see such a letter in *NME*: “[...] perhaps this is the beginning of something big?!” they speculate. The key point of the letter, though, is to highlight “the way ignorant / misinformed journalists either evade any controversial involvement with the province [...] or denounce the ‘evil’ terrorists whilst knowing little or nothing about their cause”. In addition, this reader would insist that it was incumbent on *NME* not merely to intervene on this matter, but to act as a pioneering platform: “I think it is about time you”, relayed the reader, “as the custodian of the humanitarian ideals that are so dear to all of

86. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

87. John McGarry, Brendan O’Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 1. For a survey of such frames, see John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1990, p. 117–206.

us, took the lead and *did* something”⁸⁸. The second letter (from a reader in Cork), echoed this view, observing “the ignorance of the people of Britain [...] of their position in our country”, before issuing an “appeal to all British readers of *NME*”:

Your government, through your army, is occupying part of my country. They are doing this in your name. Are you aware of this? [...] People [...] are being killed every day and every day because of your silence the killing will continue. Only public opinion in Britain can change the situation. Won't you help?

This reader concluded by stressing that “an informed public debate in Britain would get the ball rolling”, noting: “Now is the time for it to start”⁸⁹. A key part of the discourse at this point, then, is the perceived lack of debate, and the necessity for such exchange, and the question of where and how it might occur. The third letter (from Ormskirk, in England), drew on a different strand of contemporary commentary on the Troubles, which saw the conflict as essentially sectarian, and presented the “problem” as Catholics and Protestants not being able to “live together”, prescribing – as a remedy to “religious war” – the erection of “integrated schools and housing estates”⁹⁰.

It is, of course, unclear to what extent these letters were selected by *NME* to reflect a certain view, but it would certainly seem, from the editorial ripostes – issued by Monty Smith – that the paper broadly endorsed their sentiments. The views expressed in these letters (calling for increased coverage of the conflict, and critiquing sectarianism) were sufficiently palatable for a paper such as *NME* to accommodate, and tacitly endorse. The paper's response to these letters, issued through Smith's bold-type remarks, perhaps serves as a clue to *NME*'s (then) current view. A key theme, in the retorts, is the deflection of readers' questions onto other communicative sites. Thus, following the first letter's call for more informed media coverage of the conflict, Smith turned the question back onto the readers: “Now we've got a platform [...] what are we going to do about it?”⁹¹. Similarly, Smith reacts to the second letter – which resounded the reflections of the first – by redirecting the enquiry onto mainstream media outlets, rhetorically rerouting the reader's appeal: “please [...] so-called uncensored media, when is it going to happen?”⁹².

Although this response seemed at variance with the “underground” ethos that had informed *NME* since the early 1970s (in which “alternative” outlets actively undertook coverage of overlooked issues)⁹³, Smith did, at least, make clear that the conflict would continue to be “discussed in these pages [i.e. ‘Gasbag’] as long

88. The letters appeared in “Gasbag now!”, Monty Smith (ed.), *NME*, 20 September 1980, p. 58.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. If the mainstream media failed to provide adequate coverage of an urgent issue, then it was the task of the “underground” press to afford space to this, rather than summoning that mainstream to do more (see Mick Farren, cited in Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 47).

as you're prepared to voice your opinions"⁹⁴, even if this (once again) placed the imperative on the readers. This letters-page exchange, in any case, served as *NME*'s first tentative foray into addressing the conflict.

Significantly, the paper received an even larger volume of readers' letters on this topic over the next two weeks, prompting the paper to curate a dedicated issue of "Gasbag" – focused solely on the Troubles – in October 1980 (fig. 1). This arguably acted as *NME*'s first self-conscious account of the conflict, for while it adhered to the editorial sentiments of the September "Gasbag" in placing the imperative on its readers, it was, atypically for a letters-page debate, announced via a cover-line on the paper's front page (stating simply "Northern Ireland"), and featured – again uncharacteristically for "Gasbag" – its own themed title, "The Irish No-Joke", and illustration: a photograph of armed British soldiers next to young children⁹⁵.

It also included, against convention, an introduction and epilogue, authored by that week's "Gasbag" editor, Charles Shaar Murray. It would not, however, offer editorial comments in response to the individual letters (the letters page was typically punctuated with pithy ripostes to each letter). Indeed, the bold-type pull-out quotes that appeared in this "Gasbag" – more often associated with a feature article – were drawn from the readers' views. Consequently, "The Irish No-Joke" was a letters page that bore many of the graphic and editorial qualities of a feature article, thus elevating it – if only visually – to the status of an *authored* piece, and in turn appearing as the paper's *own* response, rather than one generated by its readers.

At the same time, the paper's preface stressed the value of readers' views over editorial interventions: "[...] we're turning this week's Bagospace over to your letters", relayed Murray, "without the customary editorial refereeing"⁹⁶. Thus, if *NME* had, in the September issue, summoned mainstream media to take up the task of tackling the conflict, then it was now – in light of the sheer volume of letters that the paper had received on this topic – turning to the readers to speak on the topic, suggesting that the paper's inchoate stance on handling the Troubles was to harness its readers' views. This was underscored in the page's sole editorial comment, located in a lengthy, bold-type coda, which disavowed the very possibility of *NME* expressing a collective view: "There's no such thing as a consensus on the subject of the British 'presence' in Northern Ireland, here at *NME* or anywhere else". Notwithstanding this contraction of the conflict to "the British 'presence'", Murray went on:

Speaking as one person offering one person's opinion – and not claiming to represent the *NME* collective – I deplore the bombings, the terror, the violence inflicted on innocent

94. "Gasbag now!", Monty Smith (ed.), p. 58.

95. The photograph had previously appeared in a photo essay in the journal *Camerawork* in 1978 (Anonymous, "British Troops on Irish Streets", *Camerawork*, no. 9, March 1978, p. 10). The article that introduced this photo essay addressed media coverage of Northern Ireland, noting: "The best weapon in any propaganda campaign is not biased information, but ignorance. No one gets excited about something that they do not know is happening [...] Northern Ireland has been very badly reported in the British Press" (*ibid.*, p. 9).

96. "Gasbag: The Irish No-Joke", Charles Shaar Murray (ed.), p. 62.

Page 62 — New Musical Express 4th October, 1980

HELLO. This week's Bag boasts an acute shortage of smart-ass one-liners, and the old verse-chorus-verse-chorus format stays in the cupboard for a second week. The reasons for this will, we hope, become obvious.

Two weeks back, Monty Smith ran a few letters in this space discussing various aspects of life in Northern Ireland — letters which, in turn, had been prompted by last one's solitary Bag correspondent three weeks previously who criticised NME's lack of coverage of the subject. Mr O'Smith invited NME readers to state their (various) cases.

The resulting mail has completely swamped all other topics. So we're turning this week's Bagpage over to your letters without the customary editorial refereeing. — CSM

□ Perhaps all those in favour of the troops coming out of Northern Ireland could bribe the Government by threatening to fast unto death. Gwynfor ("I can't help it") Evans

□ It seems to me that Lenny Bagder's letter (20.8.80) is a classic example of "the ignorance of the people of Britain" that Liam (same Gasbag) complains of. Does he really think that people just murdered just because they go to the wrong church on Sundays?

Unfortunately this is a belief 'supported and encouraged by' us — yes, you and me — government and people alike because it is in their interest to do so. No government likes its own people to think of it as one of invasion and oppression. There can be no doubt that the minority in Northern Ireland have been oppressed since the British invasion of Ireland, and that the main reason for this oppression was not intrinsically because of their religion (Catholic), but their nationality (Irish — the conquered nation).

I do not offer any immediate solutions but feel that we will get nowhere until we stop uncritically ourselves that the war in Northern Ireland is a purely sectarian one, so attaching ourselves from blame. Much as I sympathise with the unionist point of view — they have known no other home but N.I. and it has been a part of Britain throughout their lifetime — the fact remains that they are the descendants of an invading force, supported by an army of occupation.

Throughout history oppressed nations have revolted and struggled for their freedom. Why should it be any different in Northern Ireland?

As for the question "how can a murderer be a political prisoner?" this again ignored the fact that there is a WAF going on in Northern Ireland, at least in the eyes of those taking part in it. I am not trying to glorify terrorists but we must face facts. Whether or not you agree that there should be a war is irrelevant. If a German soldier shot and killed an English soldier in World War I, would Lenny Bagder have had that soldier tried for murder? Of course not, he would be a prisoner of war, a political prisoner.

The reason the war in N.I. is not presented in a similar light is because my government has not the courage to admit that a nation has been so wronged by it and its predecessors that it will take up arms and wage war. Rosie, Liverpool

□ Lenny's opinions are those of the typical liberal Englishman — i.e. the problem is all due to these horrible little religiously prejudiced fishermen. Why can't they be like us? The troops are in Ireland to protect

"The troops are not in Ireland to protect the Irish. Anyone who thinks that is an idiot . . ."

the Irish from themselves. The troops are not in Ireland to protect the Irish. Anyone who thinks that the British Establishment would waste a single drop of blood to help the troops is an idiot. They are there to protect British strategic, imperialistic aims. It is important to remember that it was a British not Irish government which made religion a matter for discrimination and hence politics. The real losers, always, are the native Irish Catholics. The origin of the Irish joke is very simply the inability of the native Irish to accommodate the alien Anglo-Saxon culture forced upon them by the British rulers.

There can be no real peace in Ireland until the British realise that the Irish people have a right to self-determination, and the presence of 15,000 foreign British troops prevents the establishment of a just constitution which can reconcile all groups in Ireland. The British will not do this because they are scared of the eventual Irish nation.

Meanwhile the Irish will continue to look upon the British as enemies. I personally do not really think they are.

The only way forward is for

"You let me go if I'll write to Gasbag about you."

The Irish no-joke

Edited by
Charles Shaar Murray

clear thought by everyone concerned and the rejection of bankrupt stereotypes on both sides. Unless there is an opening of minds to Irish problems by the British public (an extremely unlikely occurrence at present), in whose hands the real power lies, there may well be another 800 years of "troubles" to go with the previous 800 years. Jimmy, Edgeware.

□ The Northern Ireland problem is not as simple as pulling the British troops out and handing over Northern Ireland to Eire. The 1984-ice existence is a terrible consequence of a mainly religious problem. Protestants fear persecution in a United Irish state. John

Bull talks of humanitarian ideals, but at present in Eire there is no divorce, no abortion, limited freedom of worship, contraceptives are

On the other side of the coin, the Catholic community in Ulster already suffers much persecution and intimidation. It has to bear the brunt of the

difficult to obtain, non-Catholics cannot hold important civil service posts and there are no equal rights for women or non-Catholics. And the Roman Catholic church has the right to censor the press so these matters are not discussed. Moreover, after an Eire Protestant, Senator Billy Fox, demanded these in the Dublin senate, six IRA terrorists murdered him at his farm.

insecurity of Ulster Protestants and the British Army. The Catholics are economically exploited, with little chance of improvement in the situation since jobs and wealth are largely run on a sectarian basis. The Protestant majority and Catholic minority therefore distrust and resent each other, a situation in which terrorism thrives (my mummy's window-cleaner left Derry

after threats of knee-capping for not paying the IRA protection money). The situation could be eased by economic help for Catholic areas, an increase in joint community co-operation in Northern Ireland, a lessening of the oppressive handling of Catholic youth by the British Army and the liberalisation of some of the reactionary laws in Eire (start campaigning, Liam).

The British and Eire governments should then start talks with Northern Ireland leaders. The churches could also exert a greater influence on the men of violence. Their ambivalent attitude to sectarianism does nothing to diminish the violence they pretend to deplore.

The problem is more a human than a nationalist one. John Lennon, Warrington.

1984

Danny Baker recently remarked that, for better or worse, this is the age of the fact, not the opinion — implying, amongst other things, that agreement being at an all-time low, we stand more chance of reviving it by calmly facing facts than by indulging in ever more frenetic exchanges of opinion. In articulating me for making a fetish out of Judgement Day, last week's correspondents conveniently ignore the high fact-to-opinion ratio of the articles in question.

"One surplus unemployed person" wonders why I should bother to assemble in a single place facts and opinions available in isolation elsewhere. The answer is pretty obvious. Impact.

Moreover, I can't agree with him that "any averagely well-read person" would be aware of those facts and

to have come as something of a revelation to most people I know. As to "plagiarism", I'm aware that I'm neither George Orwell nor Stanley Milgram, but fail to grasp why that should disqualify me from drawing on their ideas in the interests of making a point.

Moving into more general areas, A. Whyte claims to be unable to understand why I should wish to write something that declines to nourish his illusions. The explanation is not that insupportable. To borrow his own words, I hoped "to make people aware of their situation and encourage them to realise that they can think for themselves and be themselves". I differ from him in not having quite such a rosy opinion of human nature.

As to leaving my victims to stare in

episode (the original Part 3) which dealt with the possible appearance of a neo-Fascist populism of the centre in Britain — the "mystical belief in itself" which Orwell maintained must bolster any ruling party.

The charges against me of encouraging Fascism would have been more difficult to make had this section appeared. As it is, the rumour is understandable. If untrue.

As to "Diamond Dog" and his peculiar thesis in favour of stupidity, I can only ask him whether it's better to be forewarned with unpleasant knowledge than to be kept vaguely happy with insipid lies? His disinclination to face facts seems, in any case, to be something of an intellectual hobby, the reference to the "fashionable bile" allegedly spread about by Spengler arguing that he has never not much further

only three months ago in this organ the Marxist band Gang Of Four were to be heard quite clearly claiming that they "don't believe in the individual" and that the only option available for an honest person is to leap into the nearest collective and commence chanting forthwith. By Karl's rigorous standards, these boys are fit for Broadmoor.

Since I nowhere claim that individualism is being used in a political sense, Karl's subsequent fulminations are effectively a private matter between ourselves.

Finally: I've tried to discover some inner meaning to Martin Hughes's letter, but have eventually decided that, like his hero arch-bishop Karl Popper, it is as banal as it first appears. Totalitarianism and democracy aren't the same thing, he seems to tell us. We should have 1988

Fig. 1 — NME, 4 October 1980, p. 62.

people who are on a firing line through no fault or choice of their own. But at the same time, I believe just as wholeheartedly that the solution to the Irish "problem" must be an Irish solution. What happens in Ireland should be a matter of concern to England, but interference and occupation should not be the means by which this concern should be expressed. If this view seems contradictory, that's because it is contradictory⁹⁷.

97. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the paper's readership expressed, across eight epistles, more forthright positions. One such letter (from a reader in Liverpool) critiqued the then prevalent view, promulgated by "government and popular media", that the conflict was simply sectarian, before making a not uncontroversial claim about the provenance of Ulster unionists:

[...] we will get nowhere until we stop deceiving ourselves that the war in Northern Ireland is a purely sectarian one, so absolving ourselves from blame. Much as I sympathise with the unionist point of view – they have known no other home but N.I., and it *has* been a part of Britain throughout their lifetime – the fact remains that they are the descendants of an invading force, supported by an army of occupation⁹⁸.

A second letter (from Edgware in London) echoed this view that the conflict should not be seen as simply sectarian, assailing the outlook of "the typical liberal Englishman" – who perceived "the problem" as "religiously prejudiced Irishmen" – and arguing for "an opening of minds to Irish problems by the British public". This reader thus reiterated the calls, in the previous letters, for wider understanding of the conflict, born of an implicit view that media outlets, such as *NME*, could play a crucial role in this. They went on, moreover, to challenge the claim that the "troops are in Ireland to protect the Irish from themselves"⁹⁹, a point underscored by a large pull-out quote, extracted from the letter, declaiming "The troops are not in Ireland to protect the Irish. Anyone who thinks that is an idiot", that served to bequeath, alongside the page's only illustration – a large photo of armed British soldiers facing young children – a sceptical view of the British military presence. Other letters would chastise the role of religious institutions in the conflict, claiming that the latter's "ambivalent attitude to sectarianism" had done little "to diminish the violence they pretend to deplore"¹⁰⁰.

The fact that extracts from each of these letters were selected by the paper to appear in bold-type quotes perhaps offered an insight into *NME*'s own view, with one reader problematising the presence of the British Army, whilst the other rebuked the role of the Church. Neither of these views was especially controversial at the time: there was a sizeable Troops Out Movement in Britain, which had been founded in 1972, and enjoyed some support on British university campuses¹⁰¹. The final letter in the special issue (sent from Dublin) takes up the theme of British ignorance, arguing that "the British people are [...] 'shielded' from the truth about Northern Ireland"¹⁰².

Other letters offered more conservative views. One of these (from a reader in Newtownabbey in Northern Ireland) expressed a moderate unionist standpoint,

98. "Gasbag: The Irish No-Joke", Charles Shaar Murray (ed.), p. 62.

99. *Ibid.*

100. *Ibid.*

101. See Aly Renwick, "Something in the Air: The Rise of the Troops Out Movement", in *The Northern Ireland Troubles in Britain...*, p. 111-126.

102. "Gasbag: The Irish No-Joke", Charles Shaar Murray (ed.), p. 63.

whilst positing that readers outside of Ireland might not be “sufficiently well informed of the situation to put forward a constructive argument”, and advising *NME* to “not mix politics and music”¹⁰³. This, then, was the obverse of the letter-writer from Derry; for rather than summoning *NME*, and the wider British public, to engage with the conflict, it counselled the paper to eschew commentary on it.

Regardless of this appeal, *NME* continued to address the topic, with the following week's issue offering a five-page feature article (entitled “Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality”), by Gavin Martin (fig. 2).

As with the previous week's letters page, this article was announced via a cover-line on the paper's front page, stating “Ulster's Alternative” – a pun on the celebrated Stiff Little Fingers' song, “Alternative Ulster” (1978), the title of which was sourced from a Belfast fanzine, founded by Martin. The fact that the latter was now a contributor to *NME* clearly gave the paper confidence to increase its commentary on the conflict. Martin, who was raised in a family with “a very committed trade union” outlook (in a Protestant milieu in Bangor, Co. Down), was “driven”, says former *NME* writer Stuart Cosgrove, “by a sense of cross-community balance”¹⁰⁴. Certainly the comments that Martin made on the conflict in *NME* were suffused with anti-sectarian, socialist sentiments.

The stand-first that announced Martin's debut article relates that *NME* had “asked” him “to give [the paper] an account of rock amid the rubble”¹⁰⁵. This, then, was the justification for *NME*'s first full piece on Northern Ireland: framing “the rubble” as part of the context for “rock”. Significantly, Martin would seek, at the outset of his piece, to distance it from press coverage of The Clash in Belfast, critiquing reports of that event¹⁰⁶, and stressing that his account was a corrective to the conventional ways in which the conflict had been configured in music-press discourse. Although the article is chiefly concerned with popular music in Northern Ireland, Martin prefaces it with a reflection on Troubles, and it is this section that I focus on here. “For the past 11 years”, relates Martin:

[...] people in Northern Ireland have lived in the dark shadow of terrorist disorder. In terms of geography, history and politics it is a situation unique this side of the equator. Disregarding the rights and wrongs of the political collusions, religious confusions and military confrontations [...] one thing's for sure: the ordinary and the innocent (regardless of their mode of worship or political allegiance) are the ones who have had the hardest time of it¹⁰⁷.

The piece's central point regarding Northern Ireland is what Martin calls “the acute paucity of alternatives” available to the public beyond the highly binarised political culture (nationalism / republicanism or unionism / loyalism). However,

103. *Ibid.*

104. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author; Gavin Martin, interview with the author, 18 March 2019.

105. Gavin Martin, “Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality”, p. 31.

106. *Ibid.*

107. *Ibid.*

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NORTHERN IRELAND

WAR GAMES
Right: 'Stiff Little Fingers' first publicity shot, taken between the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road. They took a taxi there.

INDOOR GAMES
Below: Rudi on home turf — the Harp Bar pool table. L-R: Ronnie Matthews, Brian Young, Graham Marshall. Pic: Alastair Graham.

TOURISTS
Left: The Clash visit Belfast. The gig was cancelled, but they found time for some holiday snaps and a Mafody Maker front cover. Pic: Adrian Beest.

NATIVES
Below: Rudi on home turf — the Harp Bar pool table. L-R: Ronnie Matthews, Brian Young, Graham Marshall. Pic: Alastair Graham.

THE FANTASY

AND THE REALITY

Gavin Martin has been NME's Belfast correspondent for the past three years. When, earlier this year, he announced his intention of moving to London, we asked him to give us an account of rock amid the rubble. This is his story.

PRE-1977 and as far as Belfast is concerned music is as dead as a dodo. Local groups are little more than quaint antiquities headbanging their way through the cosmos each Saturday afternoon in the reactionary confines of the Pound Music Club.

Every year audiences are given the uninspiring anaesthetic of Irish messiah Rory Gallagher. The only performer to regularly play Belfast, his concerts are treated as an annual Second Coming. A chance to reaffirm old rites, relics and retardation; it preserves the inertia.

The industry on the English mainland barely gives Belfast a second glance, running scared from the barrier created by the Irish Sea and fearful of the city's strife and savage inner turmoil. The north of Ireland is strictly no-go, daddy.

No one really wanted to know about this place. Local record shops didn't supply returns for the national chart and the home-based promoters were solid business men afraid to take risks.

What it all meant was the micks remained hicks from the sticks.

ONE HAS TO LOOK back to the mid-'60s to find any degree of creativity on the Belfast music scene. Then it had revolved around venues like Sammy Houston's Jazz Club and the Maritime, featuring local groups like Van Morrison's Them and The Belfast Gipsies. In those days even The Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan found time to put a Belfast date on their tour sheets.

It had taken the best boom of the early '60s to encourage those early day Belfast minstrels. It was to take a much harder struggle to establish the '70s revitalisation.

For the past 11 years people in Northern Ireland have lived in the dark shadow of terrorist disorder. In terms of geography, history and politics it is a situation unique this side of the equator. Desegregating the rights and wrongs of the political collusion, religious confusions and military confrontations — do you want the five-minute argument or the five-hundred-year one? — one thing is for sure: the ordinary and the innocent (regardless of their mode of worship or political allegiance) are the ones who have had the hardest time of it.

You're bound to have heard all about Belfast as a paranoid's paradise — being searched every time you go into a store, guys with walkie-talkies and guns all over the show and people cowering terror-struck when they see an unattended car or a mislaid parcel. Mr Orwell's 1984 floorshow starts here, folks! Madmen and their Luger! Can't move in the place for bullets!

It's all so much headfiddle.

Continues over

Fig. 2 – Gavin Martin, “Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality”, *NME*, 11 October 1980, p. 31.

the article also informed readers that the region had “the worst unemployment figures, the lowest wages and the worst housing in the UK”, implying that this might help explain some of the background to the conflict. What Martin – and, by extension, *NME* – ultimately offer in this piece is a class-based critique of the conflict, underscored with an explicit anti-sectarianism:

What the Northern Ireland situation amounts to is a lot of young people being used as "pawns in the game." Whether that young person be in the British Army, the Provisional IRA or the UVF, chances are they come from one of the most deprived areas in the UK (N.E. England, Scotland or Belfast) and have been thrown in at the deep end of a struggle which does nothing but keep the lowlife fighting among themselves¹⁰⁸.

For Martin, then, "the problem" in Northern Ireland was "social, not sectarian"¹⁰⁹. Consequently, the first real standpoint that *NME* would assume on the Troubles – in a focused, feature article – was to frame the problem in class terms, through a broadly socialist lens. The article – alongside Murray's "Gasbag" – received praise from the paper's readership for drawing attention to the conflict. However, *NME* was also rebuked, in this period, for its lack of sustained engagement with Northern Ireland. Thus, in a letter that appeared in June 1981 (shortly after the death of hunger striker, Bobby Sands), a reader – again from Derry – praised *NME* for the "increase in the number of mentions that Northern Ireland" had received in the paper, whilst at the same time chastising it for the lack of any "serious attempt to explain / deal with / open discussion on the real situation":

Last November we had a Gavin Martin article ["Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality"] which was a short round up of Belfast music and said nothing about the outside world in the north at all [...] Do you really believe that The Outcasts and Rudi [two of the bands covered in Martin's piece] are more important than H-Block [...]¹¹⁰?

Notwithstanding the fact that Martin's piece was much more than "a short round up", and had engaged with "the outside world" (as outlined above), the point to note here is *NME*'s response to this letter, which laid stress on the forum-like nature of the paper in addressing such issues, before suggesting – somewhat surprisingly – that if readers wished for a "serious attempt" to address the conflict, then they could peruse a bookshop. "I believe that papers [...] like *NME*", explained Ray Lowry – that week's "Gasbag" editor – "should at the least provide a forum for discussion of the wider issues affecting the lives of their readers and those of the people whose doings they chronicle"¹¹¹. However, he then proceeded to rebuff the reader's plea for *NME* to make a more "serious attempt" to engage with the conflict, suggesting: "Bookshops are full of publications detailing the history and present conditions in N. Ireland"¹¹².

Perhaps this was an admission, on Lowry's part, that the music press was not commensurate to the task of covering an issue as complex as the Northern Ireland conflict. Whether or not this was the case, it clearly echoed Smith and Murray's reactions (outlined above), which offset similar appeals by, first, calling on the mainstream media to do more, and, then, rallying readers to submit their views. In directing the latter towards the bookshop, *NME* again seemed engaged in an act of deflection.

108. Gavin Martin, "Northern Ireland: The Fantasy and the Reality", p. 32.

109. *Ibid.*

110. "Miserable Old Bagger", Ray Lowry (ed.), *NME*, 6 June 1981, p. 58.

111. *Ibid.*

112. *Ibid.*

Following this period of intense – if somewhat anxious – coverage of the Troubles, *NME* underwent a period of apparent withdrawal from the conflict (indeed, it would be more than three years before the paper offered its next substantial address, in November 1984). Significantly, the fact of the paper's renewed reticence on Northern Ireland would itself provide the focus of readers' letters to *NME*. I will explore one key instance of this, before addressing the 1984 article. In March of that year, a letter from a reader (in Galway, Ireland) chastised the paper for its lack of coverage of Northern Ireland: "Whilst *NME*'s position on Thatcher, Reagan and those far off political revolutions is quite clear, the only indication of recognition of the war in the six counties, usually just in passing, is from the bigoted Tory drivel of [Julie] Burchill and [Tony] Parsons"¹¹³.

That week's "Gasbag" editor, Paolo Hewitt, offered a response that perhaps served as an insight into a prevalent *NME* view. "The situation in Northern Ireland is a complex matter", explained Hewitt, "and one that I *wouldn't comment on*"¹¹⁴. This admission would, in turn, attract its own ripostes. The first of these (from a reader in County Mayo, Ireland) argued:

Hewitt's reply [...] summed up British attitudes to N Ireland. Paolo wouldn't comment on it, brushing it away as a complex issue [...]. The British media neither knows nor wants to know fuck all about N Ireland [...]. Make no mistake, if you support present British policy you support repression and discrimination on a sectarian basis. [...] Are you awake? Do you care? You mouth liberal platitudes but I don't think any of you give a monkey's. Howsabout interviewing Gerry Adams or Donny [sic] Morrison¹¹⁵.

Meanwhile, another reader wondered why *NME* was reluctant to comment on the conflict when leading figures on the British left had felt able to express views on it: "If, as Paolo Hewitt said last month, the situation [in Northern Ireland] is 'too complex' to comment on, how come Ken Livingstone and Tony Benn have such a good understanding of the subject?"¹¹⁶. Hewitt's response to this query was marked, once again, by a defensive reticence:

Just because *I* won't be drawn on a subject doesn't automatically mean that there is a "left wing media silence". If Susan Williams [a pseudonym of *NME* writer Steven Wells, who was associated with the Socialist Workers Party] or any number of *NME* writers had answered the letters that week, you'd have got the comment you seem so desperate to receive¹¹⁷.

Reflecting on this point (with thirty-five years hindsight), Hewitt says:

113. "Gasbag", Paolo Hewitt (ed.), *NME*, 10 March 1984, p. 58.

114. *Ibid.* (emphases added).

115. See "Gasbag", Penny Reel (ed.), *NME*, 7 April 1984, p. 42. Danny Morrison was at that time Sinn Féin's publicity director.

116. "Gasbag", Paolo Hewitt (ed.), *NME*, 28 April 1984, p. 51.

117. *Ibid.* (original emphasis).

I remember thinking, it was such an explosive situation, and I just didn't feel that I could make any comment about it in the way that I could maybe make a comment about Thatcher's government or the coal-mining strike. [...] I just always thought, "woah, woah, woah, I'm not wading into this"¹¹⁸.

Regarding the reaction that this provoked from *NME* readers, Hewitt recollects, of his outlook at the time:

I would've just thought, "I've made my position clear, I'm not getting involved in this, and you trying to goad me with this isn't going to work, cos I'm not going near this". [...] People are dying. It's serious. It's not, you know, "shall I be a vegetarian?", you know "Up the Animal Liberation Front!". [...] People were dying¹¹⁹.

Elaborating, retrospectively, on this reticence, Hewitt explains: "I didn't feel like I had any right to get involved with it. I really didn't. I didn't have any experience of it". In this sense, he suggests that he would have deferred, at the time, to the Northern Ireland-born writers at *NME* (such as Gavin Martin and Sean O'Hagan), who, he says, had "lived through it [the conflict]"¹²⁰.

Following this period of apparent caution regarding commentary on the Troubles, the paper would publish, in November 1984, its first full feature article focused solely on the conflict, entitled "Bomb Culture". Significantly, this article – which seems to have been prompted by the IRA's bomb attack on the Thatcher Cabinet at Brighton in October 1984 – was authored by Andrew Tyler, who had been a regular music writer at *NME* in the 1970s, before leaving the paper to report on social issues for mainstream news outlets¹²¹. Tyler would, however, return to *NME* in the early 1980s as an occasional contributor of (non-music) articles, addressing social concerns, such as unemployment, drugs, and the resurgence of the far right¹²². By November 1984, then, Tyler had acquired a profile, at *NME*, for "serious" commentary, and was seen, says Stuart Bailie (who wrote for *NME* in the late 1980s and early 1990s), as "more like a news reporter who dropped in and out of the *NME*" rather than an in-house music writer¹²³. Deploying Tyler (as opposed to one of the paper's music writers) to address the Troubles afforded *NME*'s next intervention on this topic more gravitas, enabling the publication to comment on the conflict more precisely. I will address this article here.

118. Paolo Hewitt, interview with the author.

119. *Ibid.*

120. *Ibid.*

121. See Andrew Tyler, *My Life as an Animal: A Memoir – Adventures, Music, Animal Rights*, Tonbridge, Loop, 2017, p. 195.

122. See, for instance, Andrew Tyler, "CND Fights March Ban"; Andrew Tyler, "W.O.R.K. No No My Daddy Don't..."; Andrew Tyler, "Turning to Green"; Andrew Tyler, "Mandela: 21 Years of Forced Silence"; Andrew Tyler, "Sending Down the Lawless"; Andrew Tyler, "Return of the Anti-Nazi League"; Andrew Tyler, "Britain on the Junkheap, Part One...".

123. Stuart Bailie, interview with the author, 5 June 2019.

1984: “Troops out?... Who can argue?”

Tyler’s four-page piece, which was signposted via a striking cover-line on the front page, reading: “Gunpowder! Northern Ireland – A Suspect Device?” (fig. 3), appeared three weeks after the IRA’s bomb attack on the Thatcher Cabinet at Brighton’s Grand Hotel (on 12 October 1984), which took the lives of five people and injured thirty others.

The attack provoked widespread anger in Britain, and prompted public calls, from figures such as Lord Denning, for the perpetrators to be “hanged for high treason”: “They are just as guilty as Guy Fawkes was 380 years ago”, said Denning after the attack¹²⁴. This, then, was the immediate context for *NME*’s emotive cover-line, invoking Fawkes’ “Gunpowder plot”. Although it is difficult to ascertain the process by which the piece came about (Tyler passed away in 2017), Spencer suggests that “it was probably Andrew’s idea”, pointing to the paper’s practice, at the time, of asking writers to provide “the lead as to what [*NME*] should be doing”¹²⁵. Moreover, in Tyler’s posthumously published memoir, he reflects on his mid-1980s contributions to *NME*, noting that the paper “was receptive to substantial pieces from [him] that hit the right socio-political spot”, citing – specifically – an article that “looked at Northern Ireland politics”¹²⁶, suggesting that he proposed the piece.

In any case, *NME* would explicitly link the article (fig. 4) – via a bold-type stand-first – with the (then very recent) Brighton bomb, whilst querying prevailing views of the conflict:

We all know the IRA are nuts, they bomb Tory cabinets don’t they? But are they also nuts in Barnsley, Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side... Or is there a lesson to be learnt from life in Northern Ireland. Andrew Tyler went to Derry to find out¹²⁷.

Although the piece is trailed, in the byline, as a visit to Derry, it details the author’s time in both Derry and Belfast. However, Tyler states that it was in Derry that he “spent most of [his] time for this article” – citing his “four days” in that city – and an image from Bloody Sunday (illustrating the centre-pages of the piece) highlights this locale¹²⁸.

Crucially, the article is framed as an intervention against the coverage that the conflict typically received in the British media, with Tyler critiquing press and broadcast accounts. In this context, he observes that the Troubles have been explained to the British public

124. See Trevor Kavanagh, “Hang the IRA Bombers Says Big Sun Poll”, *The Sun*, 19 October 1984, p. 1; Anonymous, “Denning Calls for Use of Treason Law”, *The Times*, 18 October 1984, p. 2.

125. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

126. Andrew Tyler, *My Life as an Animal...*, p. 111.

127. Andrew Tyler, “Bomb Culture”, *NME*, 3 November 1984, p. 29.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 30–31.

Fig. 3 – NME, 3 November 1984, front page.

[...] by a particular kind of media coverage designed to spread weariness. All sections of the popular press practise it but none more efficiently than television news which offers up *the* most precise propaganda images [...]. These Irish, the images are saying, they are fucking crazy animals. We hold them apart¹²⁹.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 29 (original emphasis).

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BOMB CULTURE

We all know the IRA are nuts, they bomb Tory cabinets don't they? But are they also nuts in Barnsley, Brixton, Toxteth, Moss Side . . . Or is there a lesson to be learnt from life in Northern Ireland. **ANDREW TYLER** went to Derry to find out. With ex-Undertones guitarist John O'Neill his guide, he talked to musicians, politicians, two former IRA men convicted of murder and the Northern Irish people.

PICTURE THIS: night time in a fixed spooky terrace house in a 'mixed' northern suburb of Belfast—home of Jim Cusack who covers the 'violence beat' for the Dublin-based *Irish Times*.

Jim and Terri Hooley—Belfast's punk Svengali—and myself have just shot round the corner for a bottle of brandy, several cans of Harp lager and then a tour of some of the city's creepiest streets: The Ardoyne, the Protestant Shankhill and, across an acre of rubble, the Catholic Falls—Jim manoeuvring the car smoothly along the silent, empty streets.

They call this section Murder Mile, he says—flesh stripped from bones, limbs removed in the bad old days—and indicates a new fortress of a police station like those the Romans would have erected against the Scots.

The suicide rate among the Royal Ulster Constabulary is extraordinary, I'm told, so is wife beating.

In the shadows is one of those new 'factories' that seem to do no business but act as a buffer between Catholic and Protestant streets.

"What we're doing now," says Jim, "you could say is fairly rash."

He means simply driving down the Shankhill this time of night and U-turning for the return through the Ardoyne. We could be intercepted by locals and then what would we have for defence but our protestations that we are neutrals—one Catholic, one Protestant and a Jew—here to soak up the bloody morbid atmosphere and compare it with the images on TV screens?

Back at Jim's house the fire flickers and Hooley begs permission to remove his glass eye which has been burning in its socket for hours. Thus unencumbered he gets to his feet to tell a story from a curiously violent past when he was known as The Hatchet Man; curious because who would have expected it from the 'hippie' owner of the Good Vibrations record shop and label.

It's about going to an enemy part of town years ago, his raincoat thick with weapons, to take on 17

hard boys . . . and getting them to back off. The story leaves me engrossed, even thrilled, but what was it? Was it intended to compete with Cusack's stream of grimy brutal tales and his analysis of current trends? Was Hooley playing the one-eyed Mad Irishman for a rep of the spilt, easily bored English press?

NORTHERN IRELAND's most entrancing export for some years—let's face it—has been its outbreaks of bloody anguish. And yet we urbane English, Brighton bombings notwithstanding, are beginning to tire of it all. Soldier Shot Dead? One paragraph page 4 if you please. The struggle has always been about arresting attention but we English cannot be arrested anymore except by links, alterations, exaggerations, or the blowing up of Tory Ministers' wives and so this is what we get.

The soap opera of Norman Tebbit's recovery will be good for a few weeks' coverage and there'll be no shortage of photogenic posturing from a Prime Minister who is clearly determined to stand firm against the many problems of her own making. But there are few such outrages or opportunities for heroism in Northern Ireland itself anymore, since those engaged—we are to suppose—are animals and their quarrel intractable, ancient and senseless.

These aspects are explained to the mainland public by a particular kind of media coverage designed to spread weariness. All sections of the popular press practise it but none more efficiently than television news which offers up the most precise propaganda images . . . men in hoods firing over tri-colour draped coffins, the tears of widows, the appeals of Bishops, the flaming cant of the main protagonists, the unfrilled deliberations of Old Etonian colonels under fire . . .

These Irish, the images are saying, they are fucking crazy animals. We hold them apart. So what is England really scared of? And why is there this sustained campaign to over-develop the sectarian element while playing down more familiar political tensions?

Whatever we may read in the Daily Mail about the twisted perversities of the IRA, that is not the British establishment's own view of their foe. A 1978 secret Defence Intelligence Staff report described a strata of provisional IRA leadership that comprises "intelligent, astute and experienced terrorists who provide the backbone of the organisation". As far as the 'rank and file' were concerned

"evidence . . . does not support the view that they are merely mindless hooligans drawn from the unemployed and unemployable. PIRA (the Provisionals) now trains and uses its members with some care."

As to the IRA's political arm, Sinn Féin, this organisation's astonishing growth since the hunger strikes seems to have run ahead of the authorities' attempt to blacken it. The emerging theme of the British campaign is that SF is a fraud upon the Catholic community; once it is unmasked as a front for the IRA—a body loathed by all decent republicans—then its support will wither.

This is unerringly close to the 'enemy within' theme being enunciated in the mining dispute. The men of Barnsley and their families couldn't possibly be rebelling against the cold politician hand of McGregor, Thatcher and co.

What we rarely get on the mainland is Sinn Féin's avowed doctrine which, aside from the siren call for 32 county autonomy, also includes non-recognition of NATO, plus a range of gay, feminist and community-based policies that puts them roughly in the same camp as Livingstone's GLC.

Is it all a front for something unerringly psychotic? I'm hardly the final authority, but the consensus view, got from experienced journalists in the North, from students, musicians, a community worker, from a woman working on the candy counter at a Derry store, from several GRC youths, a taxi driver, as well as Sinn Féin's own journals is that it is a many-stranded thing. In the rural areas, it can express Irish nationalism of the most brutal, clanish type . . . all the way up to the sophisticated line invoked by the likes of Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison who have had their thorough political education and are now tutoring the new recruits. And let there be no mistake, I am informed, it is the Adams circle who are running the show.

In tandem with Sinn Féin's leftward hike Cusack of the *Irish Times* reports that there are factions of the key loyalist groups associated with violence—the Irish Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force—that are also beginning to deduce a class struggle, which would make not the Catholics their enemies but the big bosses and the Ulster establishment.

Such a two-way drift begins to conjure up the prospect of a Catholic-Protestant working class coalescence that has traditionally been considered 'impossible'. The 1978 Defence Intelligence Staff report—mentioned earlier—described such an idea as an "improbability". Attempts, it said, had been ending in failure since 1922.

There are those who say these failures are not

CONTINUES OVER

Fig. 4 – Andrew Tyler, "Bomb Culture", NME, 3 November 1984, p. 29.

In countering this, the piece – which is written from, and addressed to, a community overtly hailed as “we English” – claims that media caricatures of the IRA as “twisted perverts” and “mindless hooligans” are at odds with “the British establishment’s own view”, citing a Defence Intelligence report that characterised the IRA leadership as “intelligent, astute and experienced”¹³⁰. Indeed, the article proceeds to invite sympathy for Sinn Féin by stressing the party’s commonalities with the cosmopolitan Labour left (a constituency with which *NME*, of course, identified):

What we rarely get on the mainland [*sic*] is Sinn Féin’s avowed doctrine which, aside from the siren call for 32 county autonomy, also includes [...] a range of gay, feminist and community-based policies that puts them roughly in the same camp as Livingstone’s GLC [Greater London Council]¹³¹.

Such comments had the effect of steering *NME* away from the strictly class-based, anti-sectarian stance on the conflict that they had offered in 1980, intimating – instead – at inchoate affinities with Sinn Féin, by emphasising aspects of that party’s outlook that echoed with the views of *NME*. In this context, the paper, via Tyler, expressed respect for “the sophisticated line [of socialist thought] invoked by the likes of Gerry Adams and Danny Morrison”, underlining this by accentuating Sinn Féin’s leftwards shift, and claiming a concomitant shift among loyalist groups, leading Tyler to speculate that a future class-based coalition could serve to fracture the violent sectarianism associated with Northern Ireland. “In tandem with Sinn Féin’s leftward hike”, relayed Tyler,

[...] there are factions of the key loyalist groups associated with violence – the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force – that are also beginning to deduce a class struggle, which would make not the Catholics their enemies but the big bosses and the British establishment¹³².

This shift pointed, said Tyler, to what he called “a two-way drift” away from sectarian politics and towards “the prospect of a Catholic-Protestant working class coalescence that has traditionally been considered ‘impossible’”¹³³. If this passage returned the piece to the outlook offered by Martin, then the ensuing portions would position it towards a more republican view.

Here Tyler records an exchange with Christie Tucker, who is described as an “IRA activist” who had been imprisoned for “eight years in Long Kesh”; Tucker, in turn, acquaints Tyler with Tommy Collins, who, as *NME* notes, had been engaged

130. Andrew Tyler, “Bomb Culture”, p. 29.

131. *Ibid.*

132. *Ibid.* This was perhaps a reference to the Progressive Unionist Party, a left-wing initiative associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force, that had emerged in the late 1970s (James W. McAuley, Scott Hislop, “Many Roads Forward: Politics and Ideology within the Progressive Unionist Party”, *Études irlandaises*, no. 25-1, 2000, p. 173-192).

133. *Ibid.*

in “armed struggle” before being imprisoned for IRA-related activities¹³⁴. They then both converse with Tyler, “on their own behalf, not for any republican organisation”¹³⁵. In this context, Tyler relates that the “roots of anger” for both men lay in “the civil rights era” of the late 1960s¹³⁶.

Perhaps in an effort to offset orthodox accounts of the Troubles, the article is not particularly critical of IRA actions, endeavouring instead to clarify (what it calls) the “announced republican strategy”, which is “not”, stresses Tyler, “to harass random Protestants” but “to hit select targets, such as the British soldiers who were killed just before and after I was in town”¹³⁷. The piece also seeks to repudiate received ideas about republicans being socially conservative or sectarian, noting that neither of its republican interviewees “hold Vatican views on abortion or contraception” or “have hate for Protestants”¹³⁸. Tyler does detail, however, that Tucker and Collins “continue to support the Provos’ war against the bulwarks of unionism”¹³⁹.

Towards the end of the fourth – and final – page of the piece, Tyler ponders, as an (apparent) afterthought: “But what of the fears on the Protestant side”¹⁴⁰. This reflection is followed by a relatively short interview with Gregory Campbell, who at the time was a Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) councillor on Derry City Council, and is described, in the piece, as the “chief political mouthpiece” of Derry Protestants¹⁴¹. While Tucker and Collins – who are granted a much longer interview – appear in a large photograph, the succinct segment on Campbell lacks any corresponding image. In its absence, he receives an unflattering descriptive portrait, with *NME* imparting that Campbell “espoused the politics of thuggery”, adding that this “turned” Tyler’s “stomach”¹⁴². “On such a dismal note we cannot bring this piece to a close”, reflects Tyler, before wondering: “Troops Out? Who can credibly argue against it?”¹⁴³.

This overt support for Troops Out, alongside the article’s implied affinity with Sinn Féin (and uneven handling of Tucker/Collins and Campbell), signalled a shift in *NME*’s stance, with the paper broaching a partisan view. This provoked consternation among some *NME* readers, not least in Northern Ireland. Stuart Bailie, a music journalist from Belfast (who later wrote for *NME*), felt at the time that Tyler’s piece had espoused a “very heavy”, “hardline left” point of view: “essentially the message was ‘Troops Out’ [...]. And I remember at the time there were intakes of breath [...] in Belfast. It was like, ‘Oh Jesus, you know, this is what they [*NME*]

134. Andrew Tyler, “Bomb Culture”, p. 30–31.

135. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

136. *Ibid.*

137. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

138. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

139. *Ibid.*

140. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

141. *Ibid.*

142. *Ibid.*

143. *Ibid.*

think”¹⁴⁴. Similarly, Barry McIlheney, who at the time wrote for *Melody Maker*, and had been raised in Belfast, recalls discomfort at Tyler’s piece, and *NME*’s broader treatment of the Troubles. Reflecting on this in 2019, McIlheney explains:

The basic problem with the *NME*’s coverage of the war in Ireland was that it automatically adopted the prevailing and simplistic pro-republican narrative of the day. Broadly, if you were anti-apartheid and pro-Palestine – and who in their right mind wouldn’t be? – then you were by definition pro-republican. Ergo anti-unionist. Which meant you were clearly setting out your stall against a million people. Among them a host of music-loving, *NME*-reading, anti-apartheid, pro-Palestine kids such as me. So when something like Andrew Tyler’s infamous “Bomb Culture” piece appeared [...] it was hard not to feel that your favourite magazine in the world had already made its mind up and that “sorry son, but you’re no longer welcome here”¹⁴⁵.

The piece aroused an array of letters, several of which appeared across two issues of *NME*. Many of these took umbrage with Tyler’s view, expressing objection to the article’s portrayal of Ulster Protestants: “Pity the poor misguided protestants’ oozes like festering pus from your article Mr. Tyler”, observed one reader. Others sought to rebut the piece’s endorsement of Troops Out: “Troops out? Who can... argue...? I can, I’m British – I want to be British”. Elsewhere, the fact that Tyler had not been raised in Northern Ireland was perceived as a problem¹⁴⁶. Other missives dismissed Tyler’s detection of a socialist drift among loyalist groups (“there will never ever be a significant movement of Protestants towards full-scale Socialism”), whilst rejecting his claim that the republican movement was non-sectarian: “Sinn Féin’s support for the ‘armed struggle’ is a campaign of genocide against the Protestant population”¹⁴⁷.

In light of these objections to the republican leanings of the “Bomb Culture” piece, and the fact that its author was not from Northern Ireland, it seems significant that the writer that would act as editor of the letters page in which the first batch of post-“Bomb Culture” letters appeared was Sean O’Hagan. The latter had been raised in a republican milieu in Armagh, Northern Ireland¹⁴⁸. O’Hagan has explained that as a youth he often engaged – alongside his peers – in confrontations with the police and military: “I spent many a Saturday in the early 70s”, he recalls, “throwing stones and bottles at the RUC and British Army patrols that regularly skirted the housing estates, playing cat-and-mouse with the snatch squads who hit the ground running from the backs of Saracens and Land Rovers”¹⁴⁹.

144. Stuart Bailie, interview with the author.

145. Barry McIlheney, interview with the author, 26 July 2019.

146. “Gasbag”, Sean O’Hagan (ed.), *NME*, 17 November 1984, p. 62.

147. *Ibid.*

148. Sean O’Hagan, “Northern Ireland’s Lost Moment: How the Peaceful Protests of ’68 Escalated into Years of Bloody Conflict”, *The Observer*, 22 April 2018; Sean O’Hagan, “The Day I Never Thought Would Come”, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2007.

149. Sean O’Hagan, “An Accidental Death”, *The Observer*, 21 April 2002.

Deploying the paper's only writer who, at that time, came from a republican background in Northern Ireland to deal with the readers' responses to "Bomb Culture" perhaps served to extend the shift – signalled in that piece – in *NME*'s stance on the conflict. Strikingly, O'Hagan countered the criticisms levelled by readers at Tyler by citing the sectarianism that had sparked the civil rights initiative in Northern Ireland in the 1960s, arguing that: "[...] the 'No Surrender' mob wish for a return to a past which included discrimination against Catholics when it came to jobs, homes and the right to a separate cultural identity". He went on:

Your "Ulster will always be British" tack is about as helpful as "No Surrender" – at least Tyler presented a case whilst you fall back on the kind of sloganeering that helps no one, offers nothing and should have been ditched years ago¹⁵⁰.

Moreover, the last letter that appeared in this "Gasbag" – and which served as the final word, so to speak – espoused a republican view:

After your much-needed (but long overdue) article about the problems of Northern Ireland, I'm sure that you'll receive many letters from outraged readers whose main contribution will be a knee-jerk condemnation of your truthful and sympathetic portrayal of the Republican struggle. You will probably be denounced for speaking with IRA and Sinn Féin supporters, who will be predictably described as "Religious bigots, murderers and psychopaths" [...] I would therefore like to say that your article was not only serious and intelligent, but also productive; it actually gave practical suggestions (eg the Troops Out movement) rather than indulging in an orgy of hand-wringing and empty moralising. It was also well-researched and (rare for the *NME*) unpretentious¹⁵¹.

Not only was this letter granted a privileged place at the end of "Gasbag", but it also received no remark from O'Hagan, thus implying endorsement. The readership's reaction to "Bomb Culture" would, however, continue in the next week's paper. Significantly, the first missive to appear there came from a musician, Paul Burgess (of the Belfast punk band, Ruefrefx), who explained that – prior to the publication of "Bomb Culture" – he had been contacted by *NME* with a view to him accompanying Tyler in Belfast:

When researching your piece for "Bomb culture", you professed a wish to spend some time in Belfast with myself as your guide. However your time in Derry overran and you returned to write the article, as I feared, comparatively "mono-informed"¹⁵².

Burgess then chastised the paper's inadequate engagement with "the Protestant working classes", suggesting that its effort to cover the latter via "a brief drive down the Shankill Road, and a talk with some hard line Paisleyite" was – "in an article of this size and importance" – "criminal negligence". His main objection to the piece

150. "Gasbag", Sean O'Hagan (ed.), *NME*, 17 November 1984, p. 62.

151. *Ibid.*

152. "Gasbag", Andy Gill (ed.), *NME*, 24 November 1984, p. 58.

centred, then, on “what it omits”. Another letter from Belfast expressed a similar view, claiming that Tyler was “risking his reputation by spouting about Ireland after a two-minute visit”, before concluding: “Why is it that the only protestant permitted to speak in the article was the most reactionary you could dig up?”¹⁵³.

This was, perhaps, the first time that *NME* had been chastised for the way in which it had handled the conflict, for most complaints on this topic in the past had addressed the paper's *lack* of attention to it. The Tyler piece, though – with its overt asymmetries – provoked criticism not only for its preferential view of republicans, but also for the way it portrayed Protestants. Significantly, Tyler would recall, in his memoir, that his research for this piece had included a meeting with an “English soldier who'd been posted to Northern Ireland”, and who had “a compelling story to tell”¹⁵⁴. If such an interview took place, it did not appear in the article.

Although it had taken *NME* four years – following Martin's feature – to return to Northern Ireland, the paper would come back to the topic much more quickly after the “Bomb Culture” piece. As mentioned above, a letter had appeared in *NME* in 1984 enquiring why the paper had not interviewed Gerry Adams, then president of Sinn Féin, or Danny Morrison, who at the time was Sinn Féin's director of publicity. Whether or not it was prompted by this reader, by 1986, the paper had sought to speak with Adams, after contacting Morrison¹⁵⁵. This endeavour would lead, moreover, to the curation of *NME*'s special issue on Northern Ireland, which came together through rather complex (not to say contradictory) means. I will explore this issue here.

1986: “Perilous waters... without a map”

NME's coverage of the conflict peaked with the publication of a special themed issue on this topic in 1986. The driving force behind this issue, which featured five distinct articles focused on Northern Ireland, seems to have been Stuart Cosgrove, who was then a leading figure at the paper through his role as media editor¹⁵⁶. However, in the period after Spencer's departure as editor in 1985¹⁵⁷, Cosgrove accrued even greater power in the *NME* office, emerging as a dominant voice after the appointment of Spencer's replacement, Ian Pye, who was seen by staff as a somewhat ineffectual editor¹⁵⁸. Indeed, though Pye was formally in charge of *NME*, Cosgrove would often act, suggests Gavin Martin – who was then a senior writer at the paper – as “the major force in deciding editorial policy”¹⁵⁹.

153. *Ibid.*

154. Andrew Tyler, *My Life as an Animal...*, p. 111.

155. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author; Lucy O'Brien, interview with the author

156. *Ibid.*; Mark Sinker, interview with the author.

157. Neil Spencer, “Ten Years in an Open Plan Office”, *NME*, 20 July 1985, p. 3.

158. Danny Kelly, interview with the author; Mark Sinker, interview with the author; Paul Gorman, *In Their Own Write...*, p. 310.

159. Gavin Martin, interview with the author.

During this period, Cosgrove felt that *NME* “should do more on Ireland”, sensing, along with O’Hagan, that “this subject was being virtually ignored”, not least by the British left (with which the paper was, of course, bound up), who often seemed, says Cosgrove, “reluctant to deal with Northern Ireland”¹⁶⁰, a point confirmed by the fact that Britain’s leading left-wing journal, the *New Left Review*, failed to publish a discrete piece on this topic during the 1980s¹⁶¹.

As Cosgrove explains, there were two specific motivations for *NME* extending its coverage of the Troubles. First, there was, he says, “a vested interest element to this for the paper” in that a number of bands then popular with *NME* readers hailed from the island of Ireland and had, in various ways, invoked the conflict, and thus some coverage of this was required to contextualise their work¹⁶². Second, Cosgrove felt, in his capacity as media editor, that it was part of his “job spec” (as he puts it) to address contemporary media issues, and “one of the biggest [such] issues around”, he says, was media coverage of Northern Ireland. “The more establishment mainstream media [at that time] were rock solid scared of Ireland”, recalls Cosgrove¹⁶³. In this context, his wish for *NME* to address the conflict was informed by a broader concern with “subjects that the mainstream media seemed frightened of”, with Northern Ireland becoming, during that period, the key current-affairs issue that “spooked people”¹⁶⁴. Part of the immediate context for this – in the months leading up to *NME*’s special issue – lay in the BBC’s *Real Lives* crisis, which had unfolded during the previous year¹⁶⁵.

This crisis centred on a planned BBC television documentary on the Troubles entitled *Real Lives: The Edge of the Union* that (controversially) included an interview with Martin McGuinness. Prior to the announcement of the film, Margaret Thatcher had made a (now famous) speech, calling on media to “starve the terrorist [...] of the oxygen of publicity”¹⁶⁶, which sent a clear signal to journalists seeking to engage with the conflict. Her government would, indeed, intervene with the *Real Lives* film, leading to its withdrawal, and prompting a highly publicised BBC strike¹⁶⁷.

The controversy had begun when the (then) British Home Secretary, Leon Brittan – who felt that an interview with McGuinness could “give succour” to Sinn Féin and the IRA – expressed his concerns to the BBC, whose Board of Governors conceded that the programme should not be broadcast in its intended form¹⁶⁸. This, in turn, provoked a high-profile strike, in which “2,000 BBC journalists

160. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

161. Sam Porter, Denis O’Hearn, “New Left Podsnappery...”, p. 131.

162. For an account of such musicians, see Sean Campbell, “‘Agitate, Educate, Organise’: Partisanship, Popular Music and the Northern Ireland Conflict”, *Popular Music*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2020, p. 233-256.

163. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

164. *Ibid.*

165. *Ibid.* For an account of this context, see Robert Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”...*, p. 251-259.

166. Robert Savage, *The BBC’s “Irish Troubles”...*, p. 253.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 251-259.

168. *Ibid.*, p. 254, 256.

and staff staged an unprecedented walk out and NCA [news and current affairs] programming on television and radio was blacked out"¹⁶⁹. Although the planned programme, including the McGuinness interview, would eventually be shown, the issues that the controversy raised – about the media's capacity to cover Irish republicanism – became a key censorship issue in Britain at that time (as evidenced by the introduction of the "broadcasting ban" in 1988).

The *Real Lives* crisis was, then, part of the immediate context for *NME*'s 1986 special issue. Planning for the issue appears to have begun with Cosgrove seeking an interview with the leadership of Sinn Féin¹⁷⁰. The "motivation" for this was – in the words of the former *NME* writer Lucy O'Brien – to "get the voice of the IRA and Sinn Féin" in the paper, and thus afford them "a platform, at a time when they were being denied a voice"¹⁷¹. This suggests that the inclusion of such views in the *NME* did not constitute an overt endorsement; rather it sought to ensure that republican perspectives were publicly aired. In this context, Spencer reflects that, during his editorship of *NME* (1978-1985), none of the writers "held any brief for Sinn Féin". "I can't think of anybody ever sticking up for those people", he relates, only conceding that there might have been "a sort of possibly misplaced sense of romanticism" towards Irish republicanism¹⁷². Cosgrove extends this point, explaining that while *NME* was "not a republican paper", "it was perceived that republican communities [...] were more attuned to the values of the *NME*". "Of the various traditions within Northern Ireland", he suggests, "the republican movement was closer to the *NME*", not least because unionist politics "tended to be further to the right"¹⁷³.

In any case, Cosgrove made contact with Morrison at Sinn Féin's office in Belfast, with a view to meeting Adams¹⁷⁴. However, this plan would gradually switch, says Cosgrove, "for a whole range of reasons", not the least of which was the fact that *NME* wished, in his words, "to report from Derry" (because of its musical associations with bands such as The Undertones and That Petrol Emotion), more than Belfast¹⁷⁵. Cosgrove's interview would, in turn, be with Martin McGuinness, a native and resident of Derry. McGuinness was also, as Cosgrove notes, "a hugely controversial character, a hugely divisive character", and a figure, he says, "that the British state truly hated". In this context, "getting an interview with him wasn't simple", says Cosgrove: "we had to negotiate it"¹⁷⁶. Once arranged, Cosgrove travelled to Derry, where the interview was staged in the city's Bogside, a republican enclave. He recounts the complex arrangements that preceded the rendezvous:

169. *Ibid.*, p. 256-257.

170. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author; Lucy O'Brien, interview with the author.

171. Lucy O'Brien, interview with the author.

172. Neil Spencer, interview with the author.

173. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

174. *Ibid.*; Lucy O'Brien, interview with the author.

175. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

176. *Ibid.*

I was taken to a small house in the Bogside [...] [and] they put a kind of blindfold around me [...] over my eyes [...] to slightly disorientate me to where I was going, and then I was led out the back door, and up through a back stairwell of a garden, and into another house, and then round another house, and up to a third house, and then brought out to this road where a car was parked. I get up to the top and I'm put into the back of this car. By this time, the face mask has come off. And I'm sitting right behind this man, who's in the passenger seat, and I'm in the back seat [...]. The guy in the passenger seat was Martin McGuinness [...]. So we began the interview¹⁷⁷.

The conversation was marked, says Cosgrove, by “a degree of caution, even nervousness on both sides”. McGuinness seemed “very tense”, he reflects. Similarly, Cosgrove was, not unexpectedly, quite anxious: “‘Shitting it’ might be the best colloquial expression”, he recalls¹⁷⁸. Consequently, the dynamics of the interview were somewhat circumscribed. In this context, Cosgrove explains: “I wasn’t going to exactly argue or threaten him or anything like that ’cos it was not that kind of environment”. However, it seems that there was also a degree of compatibility between much of what McGuinness said – in terms of his political views – and what Cosgrove at the time felt. Reflecting on this (with more than three decades hindsight), Cosgrove suggests that:

The only thing I can remember sort of disagreeing with him about [was the phrase] “I take my politics from home, and my religion from Rome”, and whilst it’s a nice little kind of catchphrase, I kind of felt it let him off the hook on what I would call the less savoury elements of kind of Vatican theology at that time, issues like abortion or contraception¹⁷⁹.

For Cosgrove, these were issues that “made you question whether as a progressive politician taking your religion from Rome is always necessarily the best thing to do”. “But that was the only thing that I remember him saying that I felt was contentious”, Cosgrove says. “The rest of the things were kind of fairly mainstream republican politics [...]. I’m a Scottish republican myself so I didn’t find a lot of it kind of challenging”¹⁸⁰. To be fair to Cosgrove, though, he did refer, during the interview, to the fact that his cousin, Philip Geddes, had been killed in the IRA bombing of Harrods in London in 1983. Although McGuinness’ response to this point was, he says, “respectful”, Cosgrove decided – “for reasons now buried in time” – to exclude this exchange from the article¹⁸¹.

After the interview had concluded, Cosgrove evidently informed McGuinness of his wish for the published article to be featured on the *NME* cover, suggesting that the potential for this would be assisted by a striking image that evoked the interview’s themes. Recounting this point, Cosgrove explains:

177. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

178. *Ibid.*

179. *Ibid.*

180. *Ibid.*

181. *Ibid.*

I said to Martin McGuinness, "Martin, one of the things that we actually need is photographs". And I said "there's a debate that we might put this on the front page". I always knew that was going to be fairly tricky because the *NME* didn't really like politics on the front cover, they preferred bands. And so I had this conversation with him and I said: "We're looking for what might make a good photograph for the *NME*", and he said to me, jokingly: "Do you not think I cut it as an *NME* front cover star?" And I said: "well, no, not really". And he said "what could you do?" And I said "I know it may be a wee bit of a cliché, but we could take some young active service volunteers and maybe photograph them against the graffiti or the Derry walls or something like that" [...]. So we chatted about that and within maybe something like ten minutes his team had assembled four young men in balaclavas who were armed. They were armed volunteers¹⁸².

At this point, the photographer who had accompanied Cosgrove to Derry took shots of the four figures for the proposed *NME* cover, although none of these subsequently appeared in the issue, either on the front cover (which in the end featured the Irish boxer, Barry McGuigan), or in the McGuinness piece¹⁸³. Instead, the interview was illustrated with a conventional photograph of McGuinness outside a republican information centre in Derry.

Before addressing the article, it is necessary to first of all note that, prior to its publication, a significant change emerged in *NME*'s conceptualisation of the piece, with the paper electing to append an additional interview – with an Ulster unionist figure – in order to afford some ostensible balance to its McGuinness coverage¹⁸⁴. As Cosgrove explains, this wish to complement the McGuinness piece with a corresponding exchange with a unionist spokesperson "came about out of the crude kind of BBC idea of balance", and hence was "a fudge", in the sense of an unsatisfactory equivocation¹⁸⁵. The paper would, then, seek to amend its initial ("underground"-informed) impetus for the McGuinness interview by re-conceiving the coverage, from an editorial perspective, within a quasi-public-service framework, and with concern for "balance".

This shift appears to have emerged from the office of the then editor, Ian Pye. Mark Sinker, a contributor to *NME* in the 1980s, suggests that Pye often "dealt with conflict" in the paper by "moving around" articles in "a bureaucratic way, so that they balanced"¹⁸⁶. In the ensuing effort to offset the McGuinness interview by adding an exchange with a unionist MP, Gavin Martin was dispatched to Belfast to speak with Peter Robinson, the (then) deputy leader of the DUP, who at the time was seen, says Martin, as a unionist equivalent of McGuinness. "They decided that

182. *Ibid.*

183. It has, moreover, proved impossible to locate the photographs. Those that appear in the issue are credited to Susan Elliot. She politely declined a request to be interviewed for this article.

184. This anxiety to produce coverage that appeared balanced often permeated Troubles coverage, particularly in scenarios where republicans had been offered a platform. For an account of "balance" in relation to media coverage of the conflict, see Robert Savage, *The BBC's "Irish Troubles"*..., p. 110-151.

185. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

186. Mark Sinker, interview with the author.

they needed to leaven it”, relates Martin, “and put the other side of the equation”. This wish to extend coverage to (what Martin calls) “both sides of the thing”¹⁸⁷ was, of course, entirely reasonable, particularly in light of the criticism that the paper had received, in 1984, for its asymmetric treatment of the conflict. The plan to append the Robinson piece was, nonetheless, problematic in two key ways. First, as Martin explains, the plan for him to conduct the interview was “a rather crass bit of typecasting”: “the nominal Protestant in the office was seconded to go over” and meet Robinson¹⁸⁸. Second, it is clear that Martin, in marked contrast to Cosgrove (who had, of course, wanted to interview McGuinness, and sympathised with at least some of his views), had no wish to speak with Robinson, and was not, as Cosgrove notes, “a fan” of the DUP¹⁸⁹.

Moreover, while Martin recognised that part of the reasoning for the McGuinness article emerged from a concern with censorship¹⁹⁰, he is, in retrospect, sceptical of the coverage. “What the hell was the *NME* doing, really, interviewing these people?”, he wonders, adding: “Perilous waters to be treading in without a map”. “What was the goal or the aim?”, asks Martin, expressing regret for his involvement in the piece: “It makes me sick to my stomach to think that [...] we were giving propaganda space to these two poisonous men”¹⁹¹. Whether or not *NME* should have offered a platform to such figures, it is clear that the reason for including the Robinson interview (to contrive a sort of balance) was in the end undermined by the fact that Cosgrove’s account of McGuinness was quite sympathetic, while Martin’s portrait of Robinson was hostile; thus, if “balance” was achieved, it was only through the fact that both politicians appeared, rather than via the way that they were viewed or handled.

This points to a crucial flaw in the special issue: *NME* set out, in this effort, to critique mainstream coverage of the conflict, and afford space to sidelined views (specifically those of Irish republicans). However, in the process of production, the issue was repositioned towards a (more) “public-service” approach, albeit unsatisfactorily. This raises a key dilemma regarding *NME*’s role: was it a counter-cultural platform (like the “underground” press on which it drew), or was it a “public-service” outlet, addressing issues in quasi-balanced ways. Whilst the paper had expressed emphatic views – in partisan ways – on key political themes (such as the 1984-1985 miners’ strike, or Apartheid in South Africa), on the question of Northern Ireland, it could not speak unequivocally.

This wish to seem “balanced” was rendered explicit in the paper’s layout and presentation of the McGuinness and Robinson interviews, which appeared – in the end – as a single piece, with a shared stand-first, on the same double-page spread, as if the interviews had been conceived and conducted at the same time, thus bequeathing a veneer of (preplanned) editorial / ideological balance on *NME*’s

187. Gavin Martin, interview with the author.

188. *Ibid.*

189. Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

190. Gavin Martin, interview with the author; Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author.

191. Gavin Martin, interview with the author.

part. Ironically, though, the contrived proximity of the published interviews had the effect of amplifying the prevailing predilections of the *NME* office at that time, which – whilst not overtly republican or pro-IRA – were perceptibly more disposed to the politics of Sinn Féin than they were to the values of the DUP.

The paper's preferences were pronounced across the McGuinness/Robinson piece (fig. 5). Even its byline displayed a subtle bias, chronicling that Cosgrove "met with McGuinness in the Bogside", whilst Martin "interviewed Robinson at Stormont"¹⁹². This is underscored by certain graphic qualities. Each side of the double-page spread is illustrated with two images; the left, focused on McGuinness, features a photo of the famous "Free Derry" wall, as well as a middle-distance shot of McGuinness (taken by *NME*), wearing a plain sweater, and facing the camera, outside a drab building (with mesh windows), whose signage reads: "Republican information centre". Conversely, the Robinson piece, on the right-hand page, is illustrated with a (Press Association) close-up of a besuited, bespectacled Robinson, looking somewhat stern, and glancing off camera, alongside an image of Belfast City Hall, bedecked in a banner that reads: "Belfast Says No", and captioned with the (at the time) widely-circulated joke: "But the man from Del Monte says 'Yes!'"¹⁹³.

Whilst the respective photographs of McGuinness and Robinson present a clear contrast, the distinction between (and positioning of) the location shots is more striking, with the "Free Derry" wall appearing at the top left-hand side of the double-page feature (thus framing the interviews), while the "Belfast Says No" photo is placed at the bottom right-hand side, thus pictorially punctuating the piece. The geo-political binaries invoked here (Derry/Belfast, republicanism/unionism) thus commence with an image conjuring "freedom", and culminate in one connoting negation.

This visual scheme is echoed in the respective interviews. Though the McGuinness piece does not shy away from his association with paramilitary activism (noting that he is "alleged [...] to be Chief of Staff of the IRA")¹⁹⁴, the article seeks to make sense of (rather than dismiss) its interviewee's politics. It explores four key themes: the mainstream media's coverage of the conflict (and its treatment of Sinn Féin); the legitimacy of political violence; McGuinness' political formation; and the perceived tensions between Catholicism and socialism.

The feature begins with a critique of media accounts of Sinn Féin, referencing the *Real Lives* film, and reflecting on the restricted coverage received by the republican movement, whilst stressing *NME*'s wish to intervene against mainstream reportage. Thus, Cosgrove explains that "Whilst the Provos engage in a war with the British army, Sinn Féin struggle to promote their Republican socialist cause against an establishment media which is directly opposed to all they stand for"¹⁹⁵. If the tone here

192. Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O'Hagan, Gavin Martin, "Those Petrol Emotions", p. 24-25.

193. At the time, a popular television advert for Del Monte orange juice featured the catchphrase: "The man from Del Monte, he says yes!"

194. Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O'Hagan, Gavin Martin, "Those Petrol Emotions", p. 24.

195. *Ibid.*

Fig. 5 – Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O'Hagan, Gavin Martin, "Those Petrol Emotions", NME, 10 May 1986, p. 24-25.

invites sympathy, it also suggests affinities between the outlook of *NME* and that of Sinn Féin, both of whom, at the time, saw themselves as espousing a “socialist cause against an establishment media”. However, the key way in which *NME* addressed the conflict – in this special issue – was via an anti-censorship stance. Rather than overtly taking sides, then, the paper set out a case for granting space to the republican view, on the grounds that it was more marginalised (or mischaracterised) in the mainstream mediascape. In this context, Cosgrove quotes McGuinness, in the piece, explaining:

[...] there is very heavy censorship of the Sinn Féin position, of the Republican position generally, and [...] people haven't had the opportunity to make a fair assessment based on the facts. The media has not given Irish Republican spokespersons the opportunity to articulate our policies, in the same way they have afforded opportunities to, for example, Ian Paisley and the Unionists.

Consequently, for McGuinness, “the Republican position is virtually unknown”¹⁹⁶. The latter also points, in the piece, to overt censorship of Irish republicans on British media platforms, citing the apparent practice of “British newspapers and British-based television companies making programmes about Ireland without ever contacting a spokesperson for the Republican movement”. In this way, the British Government had, McGuinness claimed: “[...] very cleverly engineered a situation where we cannot either be seen or heard through the media”¹⁹⁷. This suggestion (that Sinn Féin had been subjected to *de facto* censorship) was, of course, the very premise on which *NME* had conceived the interview, though this wish was, of course, obscured in the paper's gradual switch towards “balance”.

A more problematic theme than this was, of course, that of paramilitary violence. On this point, McGuinness was unequivocal: “[...] the IRA have the right to use armed struggle to end what I believe to be an evil form of government in this part of Ireland”¹⁹⁸. At this point in the exchange, Cosgrove poses a brace of questions related to the Harrods bombing. The first seems to hail very much from Cosgrove's own point of view (in that his cousin had been killed in the bombing): “[...] many people, including people who are sympathetic to Republican politics, see your defence of the armed struggle as part of a policy of violent actions that includes indiscriminate bombings like that which occurred at Harrods”. Cosgrove appends this point with his most combative query, probing Sinn Féin's socialism: “Surely you don't justify that [bombings of retail stores] in the name of socialism?”. Stating that “the bombing of Harrods was seen by almost everyone in Britain as an atrocious act”, Cosgrove suggests that the attack was “of a different status than violence between the IRA and members of the British army”¹⁹⁹. At this point, McGuinness replies that “After the Harrods bombing you did have a statement from the IRA saying that this particular type of operation was not acceptable to them”. Thus, while McGuinness

196. Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O'Hagan, Gavin Martin, “Those Petrol Emotions”, p. 24.

197. *Ibid.*

198. *Ibid.*

199. *Ibid.*

“unambiguously defends” (as Cosgrove notes in the piece) “the killing of ‘legitimate targets’”, he adds that “there shouldn’t be civilian bombings” (a nuance that perhaps made the Sinn Féin position on paramilitary action more palatable to *NME*)²⁰⁰.

The article then turns attention – on a separate page, thereby extending the interview in a manner not afforded to Robinson – to its final two points: McGuinness’ political formation, and the possible tensions between Catholicism and socialism. The first of these undoubtedly has the effect of rendering McGuinness more relatable to the reader, and summons sympathy for the standpoint he has reached. “What personal events led to McGuinness’ politicisation?”, ponders Cosgrove. In turn, McGuinness suggests that the “significant step” was “the situation at the time of the Civil Rights campaign in 1968 when we were demanding ‘one person, one vote’ and [...] the Unionist establishment were not willing to grant it”. “That led”, he relates, “to a stand-up battle between the people of this area [the Bogside] and the RUC, who would constantly invade the area, beating people in their homes”. Such events had, he recalls:

[...] a traumatic effect on me. Out of the trauma came a realisation that what was happening was not simply a question of the right to vote, it was about the national question, and my opinion that there would never be peace in this country until that was resolved.

This realisation was underlined, he says, on 9 August 1971, the day that internment was introduced in Northern Ireland. “My life changed absolutely [on that day]”, McGuinness says: “I was just working normally, like any other person; but then my home was raided by British soldiers”²⁰¹. In light of the fact that such comments appeared during a period in which the British government (and much of the country’s mainstream media) were seeking – in Max Pettigrew’s words – to “depoliticise and de-legitimise the motivations of the republican movement by representing republicans as ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals’”²⁰², this piece – in common with the Tyler feature two years earlier – presented an alternate view, ascribing reason to republicanism.

The final topic explored by *NME* in the piece is how McGuinness reconciled Catholic teachings with socialist policies. In this context, Cosgrove wondered if the historical association of Irish republicanism with both Catholicism and socialism contained “a contradiction”. At this point, McGuinness deployed the above-mentioned line – “we take our religion from Rome and our politics from home” – with which Cosgrove took issue. Nevertheless, McGuinness did concede, in the interview, to encountering certain dilemmas in assimilating his faith and politics. “I have problems within the church with certain aspects of Catholic theology that do not square with my socialism”, he explained, pointing to the view of the Church on “homosexuals” and “divorcees”²⁰³. Such concessions (whether consciously or not) helped bequeath an impression of Sinn Féin that was less at variance with the outlook of *NME*.

200. Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O’Hagan, Gavin Martin, “Those Petrol Emotions”, p. 24.

201. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

202. Max Pettigrew, “The ‘Oxygen of Publicity’ and the Suffocation of Censorship...”, p. 234.

203. Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O’Hagan, Gavin Martin, “Those Petrol Emotions”, p. 27.

The tone of the Robinson piece is quite different. It begins with a quote from the latter invoking his "love" for "the monarchy, the flag, the symbols of the state" (situating him in opposition to the "underground" values of *NME*), while Martin informs readers that "Robinson is so keen to prove his Britishness that he [...] will fight against British law in order to stay British!". In marked contrast to the amenable and open-minded introduction that *NME* afforded McGuinness, then, Robinson is flagrantly mocked. At the same time, though, Martin is keen to castigate – in a manner which mirrored much of his commentary on the conflict – both the DUP and Sinn Féin: "Robinson's brand of politics", he explained, "is every bit as dogmatic and dangerous as Republican extremism"²⁰⁴.

It seems clear at this point, then, that Cosgrove and Martin hold different views: the former had not characterised McGuinness – who, as Sinn Féin deputy, and alleged Chief of Staff of the IRA, could be viewed as an "extremist" – as remotely "dogmatic" or "dangerous". In contrast, Martin sees Robinson's "fiery rhetoric and barely veiled threats" as exacerbating the conflict, claiming that "hypocrisy, contradiction and illogic are recurring undertones in [Robinson]'s polemic". Martin also lays stress on Robinson's support for the Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign, an initiative that would have been starkly at odds with the ethos of *NME*²⁰⁵. In what is perhaps the most damning line in the piece, though, Martin relates that Robinson "looks the politician most likely to cross over" the "fine line between militant Unionism and paramilitary activity"²⁰⁶. Thus, though relatively little attention was paid in the McGuinness interview to his alleged role as IRA Chief of Staff, special reference is made, on the adjacent page, to Robinson's paramilitary potential. If some sort of "balance" had been achieved, then, by adding the Robinson piece, it was only through simple inclusion, rather than treatment or handling. Of course, *NME* was not, at the end of the day, a "public-service" outlet, but a left-leaning, youth-cultural platform with a special debt to the "underground" press. Thus, it was unlikely to be equitable in appraising the DUP against Sinn Féin. In the process of producing the 1986 special issue, the paper became caught in a conundrum regarding its own ethos and codes, initially conceiving the coverage through an oppositional lens, before switching, once the McGuinness piece was complete, towards a sort of "public-service" stance. Ironically, though, the adjacent placing of the McGuinness and Robinson interviews that this shift brought about only served to foreground *NME*'s preferences. This would, in turn, prompt multiple letters of complaint.

Significantly, Sean O'Hagan would (again) respond to the readers' views. The first such letter (from a reader in Lossiemouth in Scotland) enquired: "When will hacks of the music press and *NME* in particular stop pontificating on 'the troubles' in N. Ireland? We read article after article full of endless clichés that say and solve

204. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

205. The Save Ulster from Sodomy campaign was launched in the late 1970s by Ian Paisley, the then leader of the DUP, in an effort to prevent the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Northern Ireland.

206. Stuart Cosgrove, Sean O'Hagan, Gavin Martin, "Those Petrol Emotions", p. 25.

nothing". Such articles "invariably adopt", the reader claimed, "the trendy pro-Left wing (ie Republican) stance and portray any Loyalist viewpoint as the ramblings of some neo-fascist crackpot". The reader then chastised the "hacks" who had issued commentary on the conflict for being "naively ignorant of the facts and totally unqualified to write about the problems of Ulster"²⁰⁷. O'Hagan's response stressed the original aim of the special issue. "The N. Ireland articles weren't out to 'solve' anything", relayed O'Hagan, but were instead "an attempt to rupture the prevailing media silence that hangs over Britain's longest war". With regards to the view that *NME*'s writers were "ignorant" and "unqualified", O'Hagan explained: "Both Gavin and myself were born and bred in Northern Ireland"²⁰⁸.

A similar missive (from a reader in Edinburgh) staged a short parody of the McGuinness / Robinson interviews, reducing the exchanges to a pair of highly exaggerated questions in order to highlight the paper's bias. A comically uncritical one for McGuinness ("Well, Martin, tell us how Sinn Féin has been pursuing the struggle for a free and just Ireland ridden of British oppression?") was followed by a menacingly sectarian one for Robinson ("You raving Ulster proddies are all the same. The sooner our boys, the Freedom Fighters in green, get you, the better!") before the reader exclaimed, in their own voice: "And Republicanism has got bugger all to do with socialism"²⁰⁹. This question of whether Sinn Féin could be considered socialist emerged in many readers' letters following the special issue. In this context, one reader (from Belfast) explained: "I am sickened to read that Martin McGuinness in any way considers himself a 'socialist'. His references to 'our socialism' are McGuinness-speak for largely unjustified acts of murder and intimidation, part of a concerted campaign of violence". The reader then went on to enfold Robinson in their socialist critique of sectarianism: "[...] people like McGuinness and Peter Robinson promote the politics of working class division along sectarian lines [...] The cause of socialism in the province will be continually held back as long as it is associated with people like McGuinness"²¹⁰.

While Gavin Martin would, at least in retrospect, express a similar view, O'Hagan endeavoured, at the time, to advance a case for Sinn Féin's socialism. "I personally think", he replied, "the issue of self-determination for Ireland has a great deal to do with socialism and the idea of Britain dividing a country, then upholding the 'Britishness' of the colonial state is, surely, the vast antithesis of socialism". For O'Hagan, then, "the *ideals*" that had been "espouse[d]" by "the republican movement" should "find favour with any socialist"²¹¹. Three other letters appeared in that week's issue, sequenced after the critiques outlined above, and which praised *NME*'s coverage in the special issue, stressing that it was "refreshing to find argument and analysis from both points of view", and applauding the paper

207. "Big Baad Bag", Sean O'Hagan (ed.), p. 50.

208. *Ibid.*

209. *Ibid.*

210. *Ibid.*

211. *Ibid.*

for the "time, space and group of writers" that it had "devoted" to the topic²¹². More letters appeared in the following weeks, including one (from Kenilworth in England) that took exception to *NME*'s habit of using "Gasbag" to host debates on the Troubles: "When I pick up the *NME* it pisses me off to find a letters page devoted entirely to Northern Ireland", the reader explained²¹³.

In the six years since 1980, then, "Gasbag" had gone from registering readers' complaints about *NME*'s lack of engagement with the conflict, to printing claims that it had granted too much space to this issue. Indeed, the paper would begin to withdraw from this topic, publishing its final piece on the conflict in March 1987, addressing (again) the issue of inadequate media coverage, and describing Northern Ireland as "the British media's enduring blind spot"²¹⁴. This article thus returned *NME*'s engagement with the Troubles to the debate initiated by the reader from Derry in August 1980²¹⁵, exploring a theme (the paucity of media reports) that served as a safe and uncontroversial means by which to address the conflict. Subsequent invocations of the Troubles would be restricted to *en passant* comments by outspoken writers such as Steven Wells²¹⁶. Indeed, when major events related to the conflict occurred, such as the Gibraltar killings in March 1988, or the "broadcasting ban" in October 1988, they were addressed via short news items, rather than lengthy articles²¹⁷. Furthermore, *NME* would turn, at this time, away from politics *per se*, following a series of personnel changes that its publisher, IPC, forced on the paper in reaction to a front page endorsement of Neil Kinnock in the 1987 General Election, as well as in the aftermath of a withdrawn censorship cover later that year (that saw many staff, including Cosgrove, leave *NME*)²¹⁸. By the end of the 1980s, then, the paper had exchanged its "highly politicised" outlook for what Simon Reynolds has called "a more tabloid, populist" ethos²¹⁹.

Conclusion

Although *NME* strove to engage with the Irish conflict, it could not achieve consensus on it among its staff or readers. As Danny Kelly observes, coverage of any social conflict that is "in the nature of civil war" (such as that of the Troubles in Northern Ireland) will necessarily attract claims that it is "biased one way or the other". "That's the problem of reporting what's going on in Northern Ireland", he

212. *Ibid.*

213. "Big Baad Bag", Steven Wells (ed.), *NME*, 21 June 1986, p. 54.

214. Denis Campbell, "A Deafening Silence", *NME*, 21 March 1987, p. 34.

215. *Ibid.*

216. Steven Wells, "God Save Us from the USA", *NME*, 11 June 1988, p. 29.

217. Anonymous, "Strummer Slams 'State Terrorism'", *NME*, 21 May 1988, p. 5; Anonymous, "Pogues Fall from Grace with Government", *NME*, 19 November 1988, p. 3.

218. Pat Long, *The History of the NME...*, p. 171-173; Stuart Cosgrove, interview with the author; Lucy O'Brien, interview with the author.

219. Simon Reynolds, "Return of the Inkies", *New Statesman and Society*, 31 August 1990, p. 26.

explains, “whichever way your piece leaned, you were going to get criticism”²²⁰. Moreover, Kelly questions the very possibility of a popular-cultural publication, such as *NME*, engaging with what he calls “serious” politics, suggesting that while “all writing about art has to be ‘small p’ political”, when such discourse becomes “properly political, overtly political, ‘big P’ political” – particularly in the pages of the music press – it seems, in his words, “clunky”²²¹.

Whether or not this is true, *NME* at least sought (and often struggled) to offer coverage of the conflict at a time when many “serious” publications eschewed it. The paper pursued a range of different positions on the topic, from deploying it as background in tour reports, to surveying readers’ views, shifting from reticence (i.e. not commenting) to redirection (encouraging other outlets to speak), whilst admonishing mainstream media coverage, before expressing anti-sectarian, class-based views, ahead of its endorsements of “Troops Out”, and signalling of affinities with republicanism, before it returned to the safer terrain of media critique. The paper’s shifting views and approaches were born, in part, of the practicalities of convening a weekly publication (to a tight deadline) in a collaborative (and often conflicted) workspace²²², but also point to a tension, at the heart of *NME*, between a wish to act as an oppositional outlet (for example by endorsing Irish republicanism), and an inclination to operate as a “public-service” platform (by presenting both republican and unionist views). The fact that *NME* did not overlook the conflict, nor adhere to the often simplistic coverage offered by much of the mainstream press²²³, is surely noteworthy. The content excavated here serves, alongside the insights afforded by the interviews, to illuminate the operations of a high-profile print outlet in its interventions on the Irish conflict, unveiling the issues that emerged when a music paper endeavoured to engage with political concerns. If other media outlets had made a commensurate effort to address the conflict, then perhaps the British public (both at the time and in the context of the recent “Brexit” crisis) might have accrued a more nuanced conception of the conflict, and Anglo-Irish politics in general²²⁴.

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220. Danny Kelly, interview with the author.

221. *Ibid.*

222. Len Brown, interview with the author, 20 July 2020.

223. For examples of this coverage, see Liz Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War...*

224. Stephanie Boland, “As Brexit Comes Closer, British Ignorance about Ireland Becomes Unforgivable”, *Prospect*, 27 November 2017; Megan Nolan, “I Didn’t Mind the English, Until Now”, *The New York Times*, 19 October 2018, p. 35.