

## Telling Hidden Stories

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It is long past time for us to include other voices in our understanding of this island.

I sat down recently to write something for Northern Ireland's centenary, rummaging through suitcases of family mementoes that my grandad kept. There was a lot of information about the war heroes in my family. A relative who was big in the UUP.

Very quickly my mind started to wander. It felt like I'd heard a lot of these stories before. They were fascinating. But I could close my eyes and trace their contours.

We're in Covid-19 lockdown at the minute and everyone is at home. In between trying to teach three times tables to my kids, mopping up milk and tears, I had a tiny moment of revelation.

What were the women in my family doing when Northern Ireland was formed? Were they out on the street waving flags? Or were they mopping up milk and tears too? I knew nothing about them. So I packed away the suitcase of war letters. And set myself an alternative question. What were my women's lives like in 1921?

What emerged was a cascade of hidden stories. Not only did I find stories that were not part of the public discourse about life on this island. But they were not even known by my family.

I found multi-generational families of female mill-workers. Often working since they were children. I found many shotgun weddings, teenage brides and mothers. I found families with 12, 13, 14 kids. Some of the mums died very young as result of their labours. It struck me how similar many women's experiences must have been at this time, on both sides of the border.

Half of the women in my family signed the 1912 Declaration, the women's version of the Ulster Covenant. This gave me a small insight into their political worlds. But I found many socially mixed families too. Through official records and newspaper archives, I was able to piece together the extent of religious intermarriage in the family. The suitcases gave up more clues. An Ulster Covenant found inside an Irish dancing book. A purse of mixed up Irish and British money. Photographs of my great grandmother with a close friend who was a nun. I discovered how my women held different friendships together, criss-crossing borders and sectarian divides.

These weren't stories I grew up hearing. Maybe the stories became smothered by the claustrophobia of the Troubles. Maybe it became unsafe to tell them. Maybe they weren't told because they happened in private homes rather than in public. But these stories changed the way I understood my own family history, as well as uncovering the extent of cultural mixing in a time of political division.

One surprising discovery was finding Protestant relatives who spoke Irish on Belfast's Shankill Road. Following up this small scrap of information on the census revealed a world I had no knowledge of. That one of the first northern branches of the Gaelic League was established on the Shankill. That 17% of Shankill Protestants spoke Irish at the turn of the twentieth century on some streets. The same proportion as on the Falls. And yet, over the course of the 20th century, the language fell away in the six counties, just as it did in the twenty-six. A hidden history that northern Protestants are only starting to reconnect with today through the work of Linda Ervine and Turas.

I'm currently researching for a book about modern Dissenters. Searching for the spirit of 1798 amongst 21st century Protestants. At the start, part of me wrestled with why anyone would be interested in this two hundred years old history.

But when I set the question - are there any Protestant Dissenters still out there, and what are they up to? - the floodgates opened. I'm discovering a vibrant tradition, with deep historical roots and many modern forms. It's found amongst the political left, amongst environmentalists, feminist and LGBTQ+ activists, within churches, trade unions, in the arts and in politics. It's a diversity that challenges profoundly the narrative of orange and green.

Guy Beiner has written beautifully about the hidden stories of 1798. How the violent aftermath of the rebellion made people fear to speak about it. But his book is also about how the ideas lived on. Amongst families. In private homes. Quietly spoken about in communities. Often, memories of 1798 were overwhelmed by sectarian politics.

When people tried to claim it for one side or the other, or tried to deny its nuance. While 1798 is publicly memorialised in the twenty-six counties, there are scant traces of it in the north's public landscape. But driving ideas underground does not necessarily drive them away. The stories are held on to by many, waiting for the rest of us to rediscover - should we think to ask the question.

Sometimes hidden stories cannot bide their time to be told. They erupt into the public sphere. The repeal of the eighth referendum in Republic of Ireland was a culmination of daughters, mothers, grandmothers' and families' remembrances of what happened to pregnant girls they knew, to women they loved. The topic may have previously been taboo. But as waves of private stories crashed into the public domain, silence became untenable.

Across all of the island of Ireland, we have accepted big public narratives into our sense of selves. In the north, we are constantly corralled into orange and green cages. In the south, until recently, civil war politics dominated. These big public narratives have forced almost everyone to define themselves in terms that we would not have freely chosen.

It is long past time for us to include other voices in our understanding of this island.

The past must be continually re-investigated from the ground up. Bringing in voices from women, working class people, Dissenters, LGBTQ+ people, Travellers, children, migrants - all of these and many more, who did not get to tell their stories the first time around.

We should not be afraid of digging deeper, of feeling uncomfortable or tackling taboos. In fact, telling hidden stories can be liberating. As they often highlight our common struggles, and bring nuance and layers back into falsely polarised debates.

What would happen if more of us posed alternative questions about the past? I suspect we might find that we are not divided in the ways we think we are.

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#### About The Author

Claire Mitchell is a writer and researcher based in Belfast. A former sociologist at QUB, she continues to publish stories about politics and everyday life. Author of two books and a wide range of journalism, essays and prose. Currently working on a book about Modern Dissenters, reimagining the ideas of 1798 for the 21st century. More at [clairemitchell.net](http://clairemitchell.net) / tweets @mrstooth

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