



US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Albert Cullell Cano

Project title: Post-Traumatic Peace. Liberal Peacebuilding, Transgenerational Trauma, and Identity Formation in Post-Brexit Northern Ireland

Summary of project:

The overall goal of the larger endeavour this project embeds itself in is to examine the intersection of liberal peacebuilding, transgenerational trauma, and identity formation in post-Brexit Northern Ireland (NI). The fieldwork funded through the summer grant and carried out in Boston and Washington DC for three weeks in July 2024 explored the evolving role of several US administrations and political periods in the NI peace process. While focusing on the brokering of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) as well as the preceding efforts in the long stretch from the beginning of the conflict to the final agreement and its aftermath, which the contemporary implications of the recent 25th anniversary commemorations, the project particularly assessed whether and how US mediators and policymakers have considered trauma healing and cross-identity reconciliation in its involvement in NI. More generally, this research will contribute to gain better insights into the US' broader strategic shifts in global peacebuilding initiatives in the 21st century.

I. Introduction

The fieldwork funded through the LSE Phelan US Centre PhD Summer Research Grant and summarised in the present report embeds itself in my larger PhD research. It focuses on the conditions of possibility of current issues of mental health and transgenerational trauma in NI set by and during the peace process, as well as its interplay with unresolved and frozen conflictuality in terms of ethnonational polarisation and undelivered cross-community reconciliation. As such, the present project set out to examine American contributions to and influence in the present state of things as a result of their role in lobbying for and ultimately brokering the 1998 peace agreement, together with all previous efforts and initiatives governmental, parliamentary, and private.

The main findings pointed to an overlooked intricacy of Irish American diasporic activity during and after the Troubles. Indeed, the scholarship tends to focus on the role of NORaid in funding the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), the Irish National Caucus and other parliamentary groups in lobbying for an end to anti-Catholic discriminatory legislation in NI, or the key contribution of Senator Mitchell in mediating and brokering the GFA. However, the data collected both in the archives and during the interviews and observation suggest a much more complicated entanglement of ‘peace discourses’ among Irish American diasporic groups—to the point of antagonism and outright opposition. Since the American contribution was key to the attainment of a ceasefire and a peace agreement, the project points to an intriguing interplay between the opposing discourses on peace in NI wrestling for hegemony and success in the American arena, on the one hand, and the persistence of national and political entrenchment and polarisation with affective and mental implications in NI.

II. Fieldwork summary

The fieldwork took place for circa three weeks, in Boston from July 8th to 23rd, and in Washington DC from the 23rd to the 28th, 2024. During that time, I engaged in archival research at the Burns Library of Boston College, the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, and the Catholic University of America Library; interviews with faculty from the Irish Studies programme at Boston College and representatives from Irish American

diasporic groups; and a participant observation experience at an Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAI) branch meeting in Glastonbury, Connecticut.

Archival research

Research at the Burns Library took place the longest, between July 8th and 15th. As I was not able to consult the so-called Belfast project records due to this collection being sealed under legal mandate, I mainly immersed myself in the Thomas P. O'Neill Papers collection. It consists of congressional archives belonging to the Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1977 to 1987. 'Tip' O'Neill was one of the so-called Four Horsemen, together with New York Governor Hugh Carey, Senator Edward Kennedy, and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, which founded Friends of Ireland in 1981, a congressional organisation promoting peace initiatives for NI. The collection provides a wealth of files documenting the Speaker's dealings with other pressure groups such as the Irish National Caucus, the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), the Ad-Hoc Congressional Committee for Irish Affairs, NORAI, and the Ireland Fund; grassroot groups from NI come to the US for institutional and/or collaborative visits, such as the Ulster Defence League and the Peace People Community; and the Irish and British Embassies and governments, as well as relevant figures—most critically that of John Hume. Additionally, I consulted the American Conference for Irish Studies Records and the Boston College collection of the AOH, which provided context on the academic and grassroot context of Irish American diaspora in the Boston area during and after the Troubles.

I spent two days at the Kennedy Presidential Library (16th and 17th July), where I had the chance to peruse through Edward M. Kennedy's Senate Files and specially the Adam Clymer Personal Papers collections. Clymer was Senator Kennedy's biographer and I could therefore have access to the interviews' transcriptions and summaries. All in all, this briefer archival stay built on the Burns Library findings, i.e. that the Four Horsemen, spearheaded by Speaker O'Neill, lobbied for a different and particular notion of peace in Northern Ireland than that of other diasporic groups, and campaigned in direct opposition to those other groups, regardless of their implication in PIRA funding.

Finally, in my time in Washington DC I consulted the Ancient Order of Hibernians Collection at the Catholic University of America. This provided further insights into the organisation and its role in promoting a United Ireland and preserving Irishness in both the US and NI.

Interviews

If the archival research centred around Irish American diasporic groups, including governmental and grassroots, during the leading-up to the GFA, the interviews focused on current efforts to contribute to the state of affairs in NI from the US. In this sense, the meetings were invaluable to understand the present context of Irish American diaspora and the continuity of the discursive arena that the archives revealed. Unfortunately, it was extremely difficult to find participants, and when the snowballing started to kick off it was already time to leave. However, the interviews carried out during my time in Boston already proved invaluable and represent stepping stones in the context of a possible return to the field while continuing with this project.

On July 10th I met with Professor Guy Beiner, director of the Irish Studies programme at Boston College; and a day later with Christian Dupont, Head Archivist of the Burns Library. They both helped provide a comprehensive overview of the academic context of Irish American diaspora, as well as names to context for further interviews. One of those was a leading figure from an AOH branch, who I had the pleasure to interview on July 18th in Scituate, an important enclave for Irish American diaspora. This meeting was specially illuminating as it provided insights on the current political interests of the AOH, as well as other lobby groups—including the Irish American Caucus at the US Congress. Namely, these groups are mainly focusing on lobbying against the UK Legacy Act. Finally, I interviewed a historic member from the Ireland Fund; thus I learned about the history and continued activity of this organisation working to fundraise for and promote initiatives that contribute to peace and welfare in NI.

Participant observation

Other multiple interviews were conducted in the context of the observation, and to a lesser extent participation, I took part in in a meeting of the Connecticut branch of NORAIID in Glastonbury, on July 19th. These meetings have been taking place monthly and uninterruptedly ever since the Troubles. During the conversations before, during, and after the meeting, I could witness how active NORAIID has been after the peace agreement. Not only were their activities involved in more than just funding the PIRA, such as prisoner relief, and political lobbying, during the conflict; but they continued to influence at an everyday, quotidian level, and promoting peace through funding school facilities, sports equipment, as well as organisations such as PIPS, that work to prevent suicide in NI. This latter point was most interesting, as it ties rightly to my larger project of analysing the peacebuilding conditions for mental health and transgenerational trauma in NI. NORAIID continues to this day to fund initiatives that promote Irish reunification and peace at a grassroot level.

This experience also provided chances for further interviews with political figures in Washington DC. Unfortunately, as some were planned, they were cancelled due to them coinciding with President Biden's dropping out of the re-election campaign and the upheaval it followed.

III. Conclusion and future research

This project managed to provide an intricate and complicated landscape of Irish American diaspora during the Troubles and to this day. It has opened several more doors to continue the research and illuminate on transnational identification and activism. It has also provided venues to expand the research, not only in terms of contacts and leads, but I was informed of two more funding schemes I could resort to next year to continue the project, the Irish Studies Summer Research Grant at Boston College and the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium (NERFC) fellowship. All in all, I hope to present the research so far in a blog post and to expand it into a paper, as well as inform my PhD dissertation.