

The same difference

Ruth Smyth asks why Nationalist and Unionist traditions can't merge into one.

In Northern Ireland there is an effort to move away from the sectarianism principally between Catholics and Protestants. It is something that has plagued Irish politics for centuries and even, for a time, disguised racism because people focus on the penalisation of religious communities.

Following the devastation of the Troubles in the 1930s and particularly the late 1960s, most people want to forget the ethnic conflict of the Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries.

In helping to unite and give equal support to all belief systems, young people have become intrinsic to political agenda. Outreach projects, community programmes, youth organisations and integrated schools all contribute to creating the diversity Northern Ireland has pretended to lack in the past.

Despite this general push for a working peace, there is still going to be hatred on both sides. Perhaps it is down to a difference and uncertainty in Irish culture. In the latter half of the 1800s, there was a great movement to define what was meant to be Irish. This Cultural Nationalism fought to promote Irish Traditional music, dance, sports and literature, reviving the native Irish tongue, or "Irishness."

W.B. Yeats writing at this time came from the Protestant Ascendancy but regarded himself an Irishman. The exploration of Irish identity was to have a significant shape on his poetry and highlighted that religion wasn't completely associated with politics.

Now, however, giving preference to Rangers or Celtic automatically categorises which community a person may come from. The GAA national sports – Gaelic football and Hurling – are mainly attached to Catholicism. While a significant number of Protestants no longer define themselves as being Irish at all, but British.

Hurling is believed to have influenced other countries and cultures, if not transcending the identity crisis Yeats tried to dissolve. Canadian ice hockey may have descended from the game, and it is largely recognised in Continental Europe, Australasia and North America.

The resurgence of Irish Traditional music in the 1950s through to the 70s brought many instruments to the forefront of the music scene. The flute and tin whistle, uilleann pipes, harp, bodhrán, banjo and mandolin have all helped popularise Irish music, with many well-established players in America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

Irish dancing, generally played to such set music is known also in Canada and Mexico. In 2009, proving the strength of influence of Irish dancing, the World Championships will not be held in Ireland or Scotland. Instead, Philadelphia in the United States has been invited to host the competition.

All aspects of "Irishness" have managed to seed out into other customs, and there is a mix of new cultures still being regenerated into our developing society. So if people are learning to embrace each other and other lifestyles, what denies the amalgamation of Catholic and Protestant traditions specifically inside Northern Ireland?

About this article

This story was written by Ruth Smyth, 18, from Headliners in Belfast

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