“A Northern Identity Crisis - a view from a mixed up Ulsterman”

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Academy this evening. My name is Henry McCallum and I am a fifth year student. I have been listening and watching the Academies for a couple of years and I have been itching to stand up and do one myself.

When I was choosing a topic to discuss for the Academy, I was actually reluctant to choose a topic based on the north of Ireland. My initial feelings around this topic were of negativity, conflict, antagonism and division. It can also be a controversial topic for many.

I think that we can all agree that it has to be an unusual place when the name of a city, where people have lived for centuries, remains contentious i.e. Derry - Londonderry - L / Derry or stroke city.

Only in the north of Ireland can any situation seemingly be turned into a political / sectarian debate. Even covid has become political, with certain people wanting Irish rules and regulations and others wanting British rules and regulations.

In my talk, I will be tackling the subject of identity and nationality. I will also be looking back at the movement of people from and to Ireland over the centuries and the very strong connections between the north of Ireland and Scotland. I will also talk about how the preservation of the Gaelic Irish language is important. Also, I will talk about more modern day issues.

Why is identity such an important issue for people living in the north of Ireland?

Throughout Irish history the movement of people has been an important part of our culture. A lot of people believe that the plantation of Ulster was the first major movement of people between mainland Britain and Ireland but there have been countless movements of people amongst the British Isles before and after that. Yes, even a geographical term such as the British Isles, can have political connotations!

The Plantation of Ulster took place between 1609 and 1690 when the lands of the O'Neills, the O'Donnells and any of their friends were confiscated and granted to Scottish and English settlers. The province was predominantly Gaelic, Catholic, and rural. As a result the region was the most difficult for the English to control. The plantation was also meant to sever Gaelic Ulster's links with the Gaelic Highlands of Scotland. The Kingdom of Dalriada was one of these links. I will be talking about this later on. The Plantation of Ulster was a hugely significant event, however, I would like to refer to other perhaps less well known events which I believe are also relevant to the northern identity.

Nationality should be the simplest thing in the world. For the most part, it’s not something we choose, but where we happen to be born. I would like to start off by asking, “What is an identity?”

One definition is; the fact of being who or what a person or thing is. So what does this mean? One view is that identity means the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks or expressions that make a person or group.

For example, a Manchester United fan, if there are any left, means someone who supports a particular football club. One which is expected to play a certain type of football, whose team normally plays in red and perhaps whose supporters "eat a lot of prawn sandwiches", according to a certain Roy Keane, an Irishman of course. Who holds an iconic status in one of England's most seminal and iconic football clubs. It was in the same club, by the way, that George Best did pretty well, but do you consider George Best as Irish as Roy Keane? Or for that matter, are Rory Best or Mike Gibson or Willie John McBride as Irish as Brian O'Driscoll?

One can regard the awareness and the categorising of identity as positive or as destructive, for example, some in the north of Ireland see a British identity as positive whereas some see that same identity as destructive.

A psychological identity relates to self-image, self-esteem, and individuality. But there's more to it than that: culture and a sense of collective belonging shared by citizens of a particular nation often shape personal identity, too. Heritage, politics, language, music, flags, sport and religion can play a major role in how many people define themselves and their relationship to their nation. However, this becomes difficult when the place where you were born is so disputed and ambiguous; that's the Province, the North of Ireland, Northern Ireland or "Norn Iron" as some locals up there say, the North, Ulster, the Six Counties or the occupied Six Counties depending on who you ask.

Northern Ireland is a unique place as we are entitled to dual nationality. Those born in Northern Ireland, for the most part, are entitled to UK and/or Irish citizenship pursuant to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement between the British and Irish governments. Some of the audience may recall the Good Friday Agreement as if it was yesterday but I cannot claim any credit for it, because it was actually agreed more than six years before I was born.

The Good Friday Agreement provides that, "It is the birth right of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly (the two governments) confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland". As a result I can hold two passports. The fact that I can be both British and Irish may seem strange to some.

Northern Ireland is a place that is legally and constitutionally part of the United Kingdom as well as physically part of the island of Ireland. Post Brexit, as things currently stand, it remains part of the EU internal market and if you hold an Irish passport you are a European citizen.

About three quarters of Northern Ireland's population now possess an Irish passport. About 200,000 of those have made their first application since the Brexit referendum in 2016. Half the Unionist population hold Irish passports. Even the Paisley family and other leading unionists have Irish passports.

As an aside, my family has a connection with the late Ian Paisley. Before one of my grandfathers became a lawyer, he was a policeman and actually arrested Ian Paisley in the early 1970s in Armagh!

Brexit has been another very divisive topic and most people in the south of Ireland have been deeply opposed to. However, Brexit in my opinion, has actually brought a lot of people living in the north closer to an Irish identity. I know families that before Brexit would never have dreamt of applying for an Irish passport but now have them. Brexit has also raised the issue of the border again in terms of British and Irish identity when this had been settled by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The identity of people from the north of Ireland is an extremely complex topic. The question of identity in the last published census (2011) had three common answers, to the question being how do you identify yourself?; Irish, Northern Irish or British.

These are some facts and figures:

A. General population B. Protestants only C. Catholics only

It would have been expected that people of Protestant background would consider themselves British, and typically people of Catholic background consider themselves Irish. However, there are more and more people from the north of Ireland that consider themselves Northern Irish from both catholic and protestant background.

In the general population graph, being Northern Irish is chosen by 29 percent of the people, 'Irish' is chosen by 25 percent of respondents while 42 percent indicate that they are British. What is striking, however, is the even distribution of 'Northern Irish' across the religions. 28 percent of Catholics and 29 percent of Protestants feel 'Northern Irish'.

What does all of this mean? Northern Irishness does appear to be a real common identity, inclusive of both Protestants and Catholics. In the whole of the north of Ireland there are more and more people saying that they are “Northern Irish” due to social groups mixing and socialising. It will be interesting to see how these numbers change when the results of the 2021 census are published.

<u>The Movement of People Between the North of Ireland and Britain</u>

For me to understand my own identity, I consider that it is important to look back over the centuries to see how people have moved to and from Ireland.

<u>St Columba</u>

The story of St Columba has interested me for various reasons, perhaps because my father has bored me with it in recent years! As I’m sure you all know, St Columba is one of the three patron Saints of Ireland. Born in Donegal, he left Ireland for Scotland, not as a missionary but as an act of self-imposed penance as he had upset a local king by refusing to hand over a copy of the Gospels he had illegally copied. Full of remorse, Columba fled to the Scottish island of Iona in 563 AD. St. Columba however, was not the shy retiring type. He converted most of pagan

Scotland, known as the Picts, as well as northern England to the Christian faith. The story goes that Columba was prevented from completing the building of the original chapel, until a living person had been buried in the foundations. His friend Oran volunteered for the job and was buried alive. That's quite a sacrifice for any friend to make!

The monks of Iona were responsible for writing the Book of Kells which dates from 800 AD. Indeed the book of Kells was sometimes known as the book of Columba. Iona is where Columba eventually died.

On a personal note, my own surname, "McCallum", is of Scottish descent. Interestingly, it has been anglicised from the Gaelic- MacColuim; "son of Colum". So my surname translates as, "son or follower of Columba". This is where the history of my own family begins. So does my family hail originally from Ireland or from Scotland? Did my ancestors leave Ireland with Columba or become followers later? Who knows but, in my opinion, it is a perfect example of how people had travelled back and forth between Ireland and Scotland, for at least a thousand years before the Plantation of Ulster.

The McCallums settled mainly in the Bushmills area of Ulster - yes, the same place where the whiskey is made and home of the oldest licenced distillery in the world, dating from 1608. Indeed, a lot of my relatives are buried in a graveyard beside the distillery.

I have discovered that Bushmills whiskey is actually made from water taken from a stream known as the St Columb rill, a tributary of the river Bush. Another connection between St Columba and the McCallums!

Long before St Columba, as legend has it, Ulster was home to the giant "Finn McCool". Another giant, "Benandonner", who lived across the Irish Sea in Scotland, threatened Ireland. Finn retaliated by tearing up chunks of earth and hurling them into the sea. And thus, the myth of the Giant's Causeway was born. So there was even a link to Scotland in the mythical world. Perhaps this myth was the inspiration behind the recently proposed "Boris bridge", which was to be from the north of Ireland to Scotland. The project was recently scrapped, as it was projected to cost at least £20 billion and I suspect Boris has other things to worry about at the minute. But perhaps sometime in the future, we will get a new Causeway.

<u>The Kingdom Of Dalriada</u>

Iona falls into what was known as the Kingdom of Dalriada. The Kingdom of Dalriada was a Scottish / Irish Gaelic kingdom which reached its height in the 6th and 7th centuries. It was made up of the north coast of Ulster and the western islands of Scotland. The name Dalriada is still used today for example; there is a very good grammar school on the north coast that has taken the name.

The chief clans of the Dalriada were; O'Cahans, and MacUidhilin or MacQuillan, who held the territory of the sea routes, and had their chief seat at Dunluce castle, a famous tourist attraction on the north Antrim coast. There was a lot of trade and influence from one part to the other. Back in 7th Century Ireland, there was very limited transportation. It was then easier to travel less than 20 kilometres by boat over to Scotland than walk inland, which had a very basic road

infrastructure. Can you imagine how long and dangerous it would have been to travel by foot, or even by horse, from Dunluce Castle to the Kingdom of Kerry, some 500 kilometres away?

The Vikings

Unlike the south of Ireland, where the Vikings established a Viking kingdom as early as the 9th century, the north of Ireland experienced less trouble from the Vikings because the northern kings were powerful enough to resist the Vikings.

In the 10th and 11th century Larne was the centre of Viking activity. Rathlin Island, situated about a mile off the coast at Ballycastle, was the first recorded site of a Viking raid in Ireland in 795 AD. A third Viking site of interest along the Coastal route is Fair Head, a very prominent and distinctive rocky headland at Ballycastle. According to local legend, when a young Irish girl with long fair hair refused to marry a Viking lord, was pushed to her death off the cliff and brought the Viking lord with her. Since then, the headland has been known as Fair Head.

Trade routes between the north of Ireland and Britain and Scandinavia were set up. The main one was Larne and still to this day it is one of the busiest ports in Ireland. Trade routes encourage the exchange of cultures. Many historians believe that, despite being known for their extremely violent behaviour, the Vikings ultimately had a positive impact on Ireland by aiding advances in technology, language, metalworking techniques, art, and craftsmanship. It was also the Vikings who first called Ulster “Ulster” from the two Irish words Ulalidh and Tir (Land).

Reality of the North of Ireland

In the north of Ireland, sadly, the Irish language is very controversial. It has become a political topic. When Irish was first spoken there were no nationalists and republicans, or unionists and loyalists. It is an unknown fact that protestants are frequently credited with “saving” the Irish language; It is true that they were to the fore in many revival movements during the 19th century when the language was effectively diminishing. As English was displacing Irish as the language of the people all over Ireland, many Protestants held on dearly to something they cherished. In recent years there has been a surge of interest among Protestants in the language, for history shows that many Scottish Planters who settled here in the 17th century spoke Gaelic.

In Scotland it is pronounced GAA-Lic and in Ireland pronounced GAY-Lic. It is also compulsory in Scottish schools to study Gaelic from primary school. Most people living in Scotland were Gaelic speakers, and when they came to Ireland to settle or trade, they brought their language with them. This meant that a large majority of the north of Ireland picked up and learnt Gaelic. This is why Gaelic spoken in the Ulster counties sounds similar to Scottish Gaelic. It would be terrific if in the north we could view it as a shared Gaelic heritage, tracing our history from the Celts (who were neither Protestant nor Catholic) to the present day.

Flags, Marching, Bonfires, Painting Kerb Stones and Murals

Marching is viewed by the predominantly Catholic nationalist community in Northern Ireland as a provocative display of triumphalism. Bonfires were lit, the Orange Order says, across Ulster “from hilltop to hilltop” in celebration when news of William and Mary’s coronation reached Ireland and later to guide the king and his 15,000 troops as they landed in Carrickfergus and

marched into Belfast in June 1690. The commemorative “Eleventh Night” bonfires are also said to represent the camp fires of the king’s troops the night before the Battle of the Boyne.

The Parades Commission, born out of the Drumcree dispute, decides whether restrictions should be applied on contentious marches and has the power to ban parades outright. It accepts submissions and encourages dialogue between marchers and residents.

The months of scavenging for wood are often carried out by children and teenagers, as is the actual construction of the bonfire, which places these children at great risk. In summer 202, a teenager in Co Tyrone was airlifted to hospital after falling from a bonfire site. In Portadown, the collapse of a large-scale bonfire placed all those in attendance, including young children, at risk of serious harm.

Marching, bonfires and painting kerb stones is actually not supported by a large percentage of the Protestant community. The majority of support tends to come from working class areas where the young tend to not have much else to concentrate their time on. I have been fortunate enough to have come from a privileged background and have escaped painting kerb stones unlike my protestant working class neighbours.

I remember a few years ago going for an early train to Dublin and seeing three young boys, under the age of ten, with a paint brush in their hand. Each had one brush either with; white paint, red paint or blue paint. It was a very efficient technique as they were sitting on the curbside painting as fast as they could before morning traffic started.

Our family friend, who owns a local business near where I live, approached the local “men of influence” to persuade the locals not to paint the kerb stones that summer; red, white and blue. He thought such artwork was not good for business. He provided them with an incentive in the form of beer, as a thank you. Sadly, once the incentive had been enjoyed, the kerbs were freshly repainted. During the summer, we also have a considerable number of flags flying in the area. Any English friends visiting us are always surprised and confused as to why there are so many Union Jacks flying in the local towns. There’s a lot more red, white and blue than in England.

My mother worked in a clothing company in the north of Ireland in the 1990s. The employees were not allowed to wear the colours; blue and red or green and gold together to the workplace in case it caused offence.

I also remember the story that she tells about when she was talking to one of the female operators she noticed that she had the same engagement ring as her. My mum asked her who she was engaged to and the lady said a fellow female worker in the factory. She then went on to explain that her partner’s family were not very happy about the engagement. My mum said that she understood, as it was in the early 90s and same sex relationships were very much frowned upon, certainly in mid Ulster. The female said oh no that wasn't the reason. Her partner's family were not happy because she was a protestant!

Murals also play an important part in both communities, they even receive funding by the Arts Council. Some of them have become iconic, particularly these two. Murals have evolved in recent years, such as the Derry girls mural.

What About My Own Nationality?

I am from a Protestant background, from a family living in the north coast of Ireland. I would consider myself; an Ulsterman, a Northern Irishman and a person from the north coast of Ireland. I would not consider myself a “Brit” or a British person, I would lean further to being an Irishman. I would also consider myself European. I watch Irish rugby and love it. I am still finding out about my own nationality and expect it continually to evolve. I have both an Irish and a British passport. I feel dual nationality is the best way to describe my identity.

What does British mean to me? For me it means the birthplace of modern democracy, the monarchy, the rule of law, tradition, religious tolerance, freedom of speech, London, the NHS, Ian Fleming’s James Bond, the Aston Martin DB5, tea, the home of football. For others it means oppression, empire, exploitation, and arrogance.

What does Irish mean to me? For me it means green, weather, farming, music, Irish dancing, friendly people, St. Patrick’s day, the shamrock, religion, literature and of course Guinness.

What does Northern Irish mean to me? For me it is a combination of all the above plus a very distinctive accent, stubbornness, sectarianism, conflict, directness and most important of all home.

My own family identity is mixed. My great grandmother came from Boston when she was 13, the same age I came to Clongowes. She travelled by boat in the late 1800s to visit family in Ireland. Her father died on the voyage and she ended up staying in Ireland. Her brothers remained in Boston and she never saw them again. People are definitely confused when they hear this story. They don’t think of emigrating to Ireland from America. Maybe, my family has always been a little different.

Some of my mother’s side are believed to be Huguenots. The Huguenots were French Protestants or French Calvinists or Presbyterians. Persecution of the Huguenots in France began in earnest after 1560. Thousands of Protestants preferred exile to abandoning their religion (estimates suggest around 200,000) and French Huguenots fled all over the world, to Prussia (now part of Germany), Switzerland, Holland, North America, South Africa and, of course, Britain and Ireland.

The persecution of the Huguenots in France in some ways mirrors the sufferings of Irish Catholics. There was a novel written by Abbé Prevost, *Le Doyen de Killerine* (translated in 1741 as *The Dean of Coleraine, the name of my home town*). In the book, two sets of families, one Catholic from the north of Ireland and one Huguenot from France, decide to go into exile, meeting by chance at Dunkirk. Deploring their respective fates, they end up exchanging their properties.

In the north of Ireland, the Huguenots were mainly an economic influence and are above all credited with the development of the Irish linen industry, having brought from France new skills and techniques.

I decided to carry out some primary research for my talk. I asked my 40 fellow Clongownians in my year how they perceived me regarding my nationality. The results were actually rather surprising. 70% thought of me as Northern Irish, 20% thought of me as Irish, 10% thought of me as British. This suggests that the south of Ireland does not feel connected to the north.

My Experience Being A Northern Irishman Going To School In Kildare

My experience of being educated in the south of Ireland was not one that I was expecting. I remember the first time I visited the school, it was very daunting. When my parents “warned” the school that I was of “Protestant background”. To our surprise it did not appear to be an issue. They chose Clongowes because of the Jesuit ethos “men for others”. People at home were very shocked and confused from where I said that I was going to a Jesuit boarding school in the south. It has to be remembered that in the north of Ireland our education is very segregated, even our sports are segregated e.g. on the whole rugby tends to be played by protestants whilst G.A.A. tends to be played by Catholics.

Only 143 out of about 1000 schools in Northern Ireland have at least 10% of pupils from a protestant background and 10% from a catholic background. There are no Catholic or Protestant pupils in 287 schools-30%. This is according to analysis from the Department of Education school census figures carried out by the Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)

Sadly, even the students who attend the universities in Belfast tend to be segregated in where they live. For Queens and Ulster University Catholic students predominantly live in the Holyland area, it is an inner-city residential area located one mile south of Belfast City Centre. Its name is a reference to the street names of the area, such as Carmel Street and Jerusalem Street, which were inspired by the developer's trip to Egypt and Palestine in the 1890s. Protestant students predominantly live in the Stranmillis area.

Even wearing sports clothing can be divisive in the north of Ireland. Whilst not playing the sport it is not encouraged to wear the clothing in their free time as it can be seen to be making a political statement. In Dublin, it would seem totally natural to walk around in a rugby top or a GAA top, however at home you could be wearing the top in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There are two questions that can be asked in the north to see if you are from a catholic or protestant background. What is your name? And what school did you attend? There is also how you say the letter “H”, but that is not quite as scientific!

There are sports in the north that are integrated. My local Golf Club Portstewart is totally integrated. Rowing is very successful in my hometown having achieved gold medals in the olympics and it is integrated.

I feel I was received very positively at Clongowes. I was never made to feel an outsider. People were more curious rather than defensive. I would like to think that I was able to bring something

to Clongowes with my background. When I started Clongowes there were only 3 students in the whole school from the north and now there is 1, I am truly one of a kind!

In my experience to date, I find it fascinating the differences in our personalities. I find Northern Irish people tend to be much more direct and assertive, some might say aggressive whereas people from the south tend to be more gentle, positive and encouraging in their outlook to others. When my time finishes at Clongowes it will be interesting to see how I define myself, perhaps a hybrid of them all.

People who live in the north of England have a very different identity to people living in London. Is this not the same in Ireland? Are people who live in Galway and Killarney not very different from people living in Dublin?

Immigration to Ireland

Northern Ireland does not have many ethnic minorities. In fact it has one of the smallest ethnic minority populations within the European Union. Queen's University, the most prestigious and oldest university in Northern Ireland is the least diverse university in all the UK. The south of Ireland has a far larger number of ethnic minorities than the North. Data from the Northern Irish census in 2011 illustrates that only 1.8% of the population belonged to non-white minority ethnic groups, whereas 17.8% of the south of Ireland's population belonged to non-white ethnic minority groups. Is this because people perceive Northern Ireland as unwelcoming or is it as a result of southern Ireland's economic success? I can't help but think that a little more diversity up north would be a very healthy development.

Conclusion

So national identity for someone like me is quite complex.

It would be foolish to deny the subtle British influences in my upbringing (for example, the education system, use of sterling, miles not kilometres, NHS). Similarly, I would struggle to deny being Northern Irish, whether that be through simply emphasising my birth in the northern part of the island. I was brought up in a Protestant household which is neither strongly unionist or nationalist, so statistically I fit the so-called 'Northern Irish' demographic. However, as I grow up and continue to be educated in Kildare, my politics lean much more towards Irish nationalism, which further complicates my sense of belonging as a young person from the North who may not be viewed as 'truly' Irish by some.

The future is promising, the North is moving forward, as well as the South. There have been fantastic changes brought about by the Good Friday Agreement but I wonder if Ireland is fully ready to understand and welcome a Protestant Ulsterman whose identity and history is so different from nationalist Ireland.

Could there be integrated schools in Northern Ireland that are supported by everyone? Could the church and state be separate, as in France? What about flags and anthems? Could Protestants fully participate in the GAA? Could Irish history be taught the same way to Catholics

and Protestants? Could there be an all Ireland soccer team? Could a northern Protestant be Taoiseach, or captain of Clongowes?

And finally, to demonstrate how different Northern Ireland is there is the journey of Martin McGuinness and Ian Paisley. From sworn enemies to the "Chuckle Brothers", they became Northern Ireland's most unlikely double act. One was a former IRA commander, the other spent his life preaching “No Surrender! “ If they can come together and move forward, surely the rest of the country can do the same?

To finish up, Monica McWilliams, who was the only female signatory to the Good Friday agreement, also a family Friend, provided me with this poem for my academy. She found it whilst browsing in an antique shop.

It’s called the “History Lesson”

A Dutchman called Prince William
And an Englishman King James,
Fell out and started feuding
And calling each other names.

It was for the throne of England,
But for reasons not quite clear,
They came across to Ireland
To do their fighting here.

They had Scarsfield,
They had Schomberg,
They had horse and foot and guns
And they landed up at Carrick
With a thousand Lambeg drums.

They had lots of Dutch and Frenchmen
And battalions and platoons
Of Russians and of Prussians and
Bulgarian Dragoons,

And they politely asked the locals
If they’d kindly like to join
And the whole affair was settled
At the Battle of the Boyne.

Then William went off to London
And James went off to France
And the whole kabouch left Ireland
Without a backward glance.

And the poor abandoned people

Said goodbye to King and Prince,
And we're left with politicians
Who’ve been at it ever since.

Thank you for your attention, and I hope that you have found these reflections of this mixed-up Ulsterman informative and entertaining.