10 British, Irish, Left, Lost
Revisiting Northern Ireland's 'Progressive Bookmen'

Connal Parr

This chapter concerns the scene of Ulster Protestant writers in Northern Ireland who moved with ease between British and Irish cultures, as part of what Edna Longley has termed the 'cultural corridor': the space Northern Ireland exists in whereby its people can be part of overlapping and multiple identities.[1] It focuses on dissenting Protestant authors from middle- and working-class backgrounds who participated in British institutions, within an Irish literary culture that they also subscribed to. This is an important subject because the political and cultural images that exist in the broader United Kingdom of Northern Irish Protestants in present times, if any are held at all, normally alight on the retrograde and pious profiles of politicians from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), whose handful of MPs occasionally make a difference in the House of Commons, and who were commonly felt to have badly overplayed their Brexit hand.[2] The group of writers this chapter considers are the antithesis to this political current, and are even less well-known than the DUP in the wider British context. The authors discussed are uniformly male, as is unsurprising in relation to literary scenes and establishments before and after the Second World War – though it is worth mentioning that two women, Edna Longley and Gillian McIntosh, have written the key works about them.[3]

In an article in the *Irish Review* journal published in 1986, Longley coined the phrase 'Progressive Bookmen' to describe a set of writers from an Ulster Protestant (mainly Presbyterian) background, who were prominent in British institutions such as the BBC and were also on the Left politically, as socialists.[4] As opponents of the Unionist government of

[1] Edna Longley, 'Opening up: A New Pluralism', *Fortnight*, No. 256 (November 1987), 25.
[2] Feargal Cochrane, *Breaking Peace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
[3] Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1994); Gillian McIntosh, *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999).
[4] Edna Longley, 'Progressive Bookmen: Politics and Northern Protestant Writers in the 1930s', *The Irish Review*, No. 1 (1986), 50–57.

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Northern Ireland, they were supporters of the Labour movement and supportive of each other's careers and values.[5] Since Longley's original formulation, the culture she identified has been subject to significant scholarly reassessment, but also finds itself submerged by the resurgence of anti-colonial attitudes in Irish academia, along with rhetorical claims of imminent Irish 'unity'. Northern Protestant identity and history – sometimes called 'cultural Protestantism' – thus remains a key ingredient in the constitutional future of the island.[6] This is the historical environment revisited here, with the writers involved – in Longley's initial framing – being John Hewitt, Sam Hanna Bell, John Boyd, and Louis MacNeice (the latter the most well-known). Little awareness exists of Bell, Hewitt, and Boyd outside of Northern Ireland. The quality of Boyd's creative work is not of the same calibre as the others, but it should be pointed out that what Boyd lacked in literary originality he more than made up for with an incredible archive of correspondence – and two volumes of published memoirs – the second of which helps piece this scene together and places researchers in his debt.[7] As MacNeice's life and work have been well served, this chapter substitutes for W. R. Rodgers – lesser-known in recent decades, but arguably more politically progressive. Reasonably eclectic in their choice of form, the Progressive Bookmen tended towards poetry and memoir, though their other distinguishing professional contribution lies in broadcasting.

John Hewitt (1907–87) is well-known in local Belfast terms for different reasons. A prolific author, he also acts as a link to various cultural establishments in his own way, despite the left-wing and progressive causes that frequently landed him in hot water. (These days his name is kept alive through an annual Summer School, and a bar in the centre of Belfast, ironically named given his Methodist aversion to alcohol.) Insights on the Left Book Club from his posthumously published memoir *A North Light*, published in 2013, a quarter of a century after his death, are relevant. In a chapter entitled 'My Generation', Hewitt

[5] See, for instance, Louis MacNeice supporting the transmission of a BBC radio feature written by W. R. Rodgers entitled 'Here We Come To Cover A Man'. As there was a clear suggestion that the piece was liable to cause offence to 'devout Ulster Protestants and perhaps Catholics', MacNeice justified the case for its quality. Louis MacNeice, Letter to Laurence Gilliam (BBC Internal Memo), 20 January 1959, in Jonathan Allison (Ed.), *Selected Letters of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), 634–36.

[6] See Brendan O'Leary, 'Getting Ready: The Need to Prepare for a Referendum on Reunification', *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Analysing and Researching Ireland, North and South, 32:2 (2021), 22.

[7] Boyd's extensive archive is held in the Linen Hall Library. For a biographical overview, see Linde Lunny, 'Boyd, John', *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, December 2013. Available at: www.dib.ie/biography/boyd-john-a9573 (accessed 20 April 2022).

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claims there were few generations as 'well-informed on international politics as ours of the Thirties'.[8] He cites outlets such as the popular daily the *News Chronicle*, with A. J. Cummings and Vernon Bartlett, John Gunther's *Inside* volumes (large volumes politically profiling different world powers), the Penguin Specials by Edgar Mowrer and Genevieve Tabouis, and Claud Cockburn's *The Week*.[9] However, the baseline was the Left Book Club. It is worth drawing attention to at this point due to its British literary origin and culture, which can be seen to have pierced Northern Ireland. It co-existed alongside the Irish literary circles and influences that came from the south, which also flourished in 'the North', despite the border.

The essential trait of this group of Protestant writers was the ease with which they moved between British and Irish identities, comfortable as *both*, while also possessing their other major identity: left-wing and socialist politics, which they all subscribed to. At this time, there were homes for these authors politically. Some had contacts in British Labour circles, while others – such as Hewitt – were drawn to the local Northern Ireland Labour Party, which was founded in 1924 and enjoyed a level of political success in Stormont (Northern Ireland parliament) and local elections until, essentially, the outbreak of the Troubles. Hewitt was a branch delegate for the NILP and was active with his wife, Roberta, in it. In present times, there is no Northern Ireland Labour Party (it was dissolved in 1987), and the British Labour Party still refuses to run candidates in Northern Ireland, despite people in the region being permitted to join the party.[10]

Left Book Club

From 1936 to 1948, the London-based Left Book Club (LBC) was founded by the publisher Victor Gollancz, with the express aim to fight against 'war and fascism'.[11] Envisioned as a Popular Front organisation, its rallies and local meetings were purportedly more successful than the

[8] John Hewitt, A *North Light: Twenty-Five Years in a Municipal Art Gallery*, Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White (Eds.) (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), 66.
[9] Ibid.
[10] For a study of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, see Aaron Edwards, *A History of the Northern Ireland Labour Party: Democratic Socialism and Sectarianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).
[11] Gordon B. Neavill, 'Victor Gollancz and the Left Book Club', *The Library Quarterly*, 41:3 (July 1971), 197.

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Labour Party, and the influence of the Communist Party was particularly pronounced.[12] The LBC published cheap editions of a wide range of books, all designed for political education, and all being supported by a network of local discussion groups. Books were not posted directly to the members and were instead distributed through local booksellers. This saved the enigmatic Gollancz the burden of maintaining thousands of small outstanding accounts and helped retain the goodwill of booksellers. In Northern Ireland, this conduit was David (Davy) McLean, the main purveyor of left-wing literature in Belfast during the 1930s and 1940s, who owned and ran his own special shop. This 'Progressive Bookshop', as it became known, was set up in 1928 in Union Street in the centre of the city. McLean's ability to stock the LBC's titles meant that the orange linen and subsequently red cardboard-bound titles were posted out, with his shop becoming a traction point for those interested by progressive politics in Northern Ireland; a place where, generally speaking, such political stances were not encouraged and could even attract the attention of the authorities. The bookshop provided – as John Hewitt put it – 'the obvious channel for us'.[13]

At its peak in 1939, the LBC had around 57,000 members, registered with 4,000 British booksellers and agents.[14] Via Davy McLean, around 550 members cut through apparently unbreakable ice to register in Northern Ireland. Multiple accounts from political and cultural figures of note confirm their subscriptions. Importantly, there was no Irish equivalent of the Left Book Club. There were, of course, left-wing literary circles south of the border, as well as brilliant literary magazines such as Seán Ó Faoláin's *The Bell*. These were, however, uniformly small, disorganised, or later pressured into reticence by the strong influences of the Catholic and Protestant churches: always powerful barriers to left-wing political development. 'Orange and Green', that is, Unionist and nationalist politics, meanwhile, stifled the same in Belfast.[15] The Left Book Club, therefore, was a distinctly British institution that impacted on activists in Northern Ireland, heightening awareness of the

[12] Michael Newman, *Harold Laski: A Political Biography* (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2009 [1993]), 187.

[13] Hewitt, *North Light*, 66.

[14] Neavill, 'Victor Gollancz', 198.

[15] The significance of *The Bell* should not be underestimated. Under the editorial leadership of Peadar O'Donnell, it moved even further to the Left from 1946 to 1954. See Sean McMahon (Ed.), *The Best From the Bell: Great Irish Writing* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1978); Niall Carson, *Rebel By Vocation: Seán O Faoláin and the Generation of The Bell* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016). However, while *The Bell* published some of the great Irish writers of the mid-twentieth century, the number of its readers pales in comparison to the mass membership – and movement – of the LBC.

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Left, as well as political causes propagated by Gollancz. It became part of Northern Ireland's weird fusion of cultural influences, with a popular and progressive character that distinguished it from what was happening in the rest of the island.

Little is known, or survives, about Davy McLean, though he does have a written footprint. He contributed a pragmatic yet utopian vision of 'Socialism and Human Nature' to *The Labour Opposition of Northern Ireland* – a Labour newspaper published in the mid-1920s by a branch of the Independent Labour Party in Northern Ireland. His writing has awareness of how human beings are demonised and pushed into 'shady' – or criminal – actions by economic desperation. There is a humanity in McLean's socialism that seeks to eliminate profit and restore man (or woman).[16] In John Hewitt's life, McLean was a friend, providing both the venue that stocked his books and continuity between the beginning and the end. Towards the end of his life, he apparently became, as might be expected for a left-wing publisher operating in Northern Ireland, reliant on alcohol.[17] The latter substance raises an important theme of this chapter. Alcohol and drinking played its part as a vital socio-professional lubricant, with the environ of the pub providing secure intellectual space, as well as the rebellious and free-flowing creative juice essential to the writers considered herein. That the pub this circle frequently congregated in, The Elbow Room, was destroyed in a 1973 IRA bomb caps the literal and symbolic end of this scene.

The LBC bound together workers and intellectuals in a sometimes uneasy partnership. Its membership was mostly middle class, with an estimated 75 per cent of its members white-collared workers, Left intellectuals, and professionals.[18] Working-class support was less prevalent, and it did not gain a foothold in the major British trade unions. Things were different for it in Northern Ireland, where one former shipyard worker explained the involvement of workers in the Club's activities, as 'one of the Left Wing friends who with Davy [McLean] began and carried on for a time the lending library. We drew up a very noble and businesslike prospectus, and we subscribed a sum of money to buy a number of books to change the reading habits of our fellow-workers and do a bit of propaganda for the cause'. Key books included Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, as well as works by

[16] David A. M'Lean, 'Socialism and Human Nature', in Joe Keenan (Ed.), *The Labour Opposition of Northern Ireland* (Belfast: Athol Books, 1992), 166.
[17] W. J. McCormack, *Northman: John Hewitt (1907–1987): An Irish Writer, His World, and His Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 28, 109–10.
[18] Neavill, 'Victor Gollancz', 202.

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American socialist Upton Sinclair, George Bernard Shaw, and H. G. Wells. The shipyard worker, named Reginald Millar, emphasised it was a non-profit making business and explained how the group exploited the exchange rate. With the Austrian rate favourable to sterling, the shipyard workers 'sent to Austria', receiving small and cheap editions of classics and other books.[19] Accordingly, recalled Millar: 'The fame of the library spread throughout the shipyard and beyond – until we were halted by storage problems and the fact we were becoming unproductive joinery units. At last a long-suffering foreman delivered an ultimatum: the library must close – and it did.' The books were raffled to those who patronised the library.[20] Though this world may have been shut in the Yard, we should remember that other workers maintained their reading habits through investigations in Smithfield, an old second-hand market also in the centre of Belfast, seen as a Mecca for record collectors and readers. This travelled beyond the sectarian divide and arguably sets aside a particularly well-read caste of Belfast worker.[21]

Northern Ireland is almost totally absent from Jonathan Rose's standard, indeed magisterial *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (2002), even though the Protestant working class of Northern Ireland is an identifying part of the British working class. Nonetheless, Rose shows how the adult education initiative, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), associated with Ruskin College, sowed the dragons' teeth of postwar politicians who were passionately committed to adult educational advancement and government aid to the arts. The Labour general election victory of 1945 moved A. E. Zimmern to state that 'It is an England largely moulded by the WEA that has been swept into power.'[22] The new Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and at least 12 other members of the government had been WEA tutors or executives (around 56 WEA-supporters, teachers and students were sitting MPs).[23] Northern Ireland was not immune to this political dynamic. Between the Northern Ireland Labour Party, the Commonwealth Labour Party, and the Communist Party, the Left posted a record vote in Northern Ireland elections in 1945, which accompanied rapid growth in the adult educational movement. Hewitt was also a WEA tutor (who used to joke that

[19] *Belfast News Letter*, 11 October 1966, 3. [20] Ibid.
[21] Paddy Devlin, *Straight Left–An Autobiography* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1993), 63.
[22] Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010 [2002]), 292–93.
[23] Ibid.

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the Butler Education Act of 1944 was 'the legislation that turned so many potentially good bricklayers and plumbers into bad poets').[24]

A prevailing feeling among the Progressive Bookmen chimed with the postwar Labour spirit. Hewitt noted that the Left Book Club and McLean's Progressive Bookshop led to the discovery of 'a new array of faces, as like was drawn to like, iron filings to the magnet, for none of us realized that what seemed personal choice was simply the mass moving of a generation, just as inevitably to be dispersed before the decade was out; but playing its part in creating the mood which gave Britain the Labour Government of 1945'.[25] Despite being stationed in Northern Ireland at this time, he still felt he played his generational part in a victory for British Labour. This made sense, in part, because his personal feeling for 'dissent' was expressed in English radical influences including the Levellers, the Diggers, the Chartists, William Cobbitt, William Morris, and Tom Paine: 'these were my brand of man – men with whom I shared much more than with any Irishman I have ever read about or seen or known'.[26] Though he would later move to England, Coventry (suiting his Labour politics), his zeal for '45 reflects a British sensibility that was balanced with his recognition of being an Irish writer. In his poem, 'An Irishman in Coventry' (1958), Hewitt knows

> The faces and the voices blurring round me,
> the strong hands long familiar with the spade,
> the whiskey-tinctured breath, the pious buttons,
> called up a people endlessly betrayed
> by our own weakness, by the wrongs we suffered
> in that long twilight over bog and glen,
> by force, by famine and by glittering fables
> which gave us martyrs when we needed men.[27]

Hewitt's English radicalism often fused with his Irish sensibility. He later recalled being in London watching 'the King's horses / going about the King's business, never mine'.[28]

[24] John Morrow, 'John Hewitt', *Honest Ulsterman*, No. 85 (Summer 1988), 28. The 'Butler Act' was adapted into a Northern Irish context legislatively in 1947.
[25] Hewitt, *North Light*, 66.
[26] John Hewitt, 'A Question of Identity', in *A Critical Look at Independence: Papers From a Weekend Workshop at Corrymeela* (Belfast: The Workshop, 1976), 2. Linen Hall Library Political Collection.
[27] Frank Ormsby (Ed.), *The Collected Poems of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1991), 97–98.
[28] Ibid., 184. See his comments and outline of his 'hierarchy of values' – Ulsterman 'of Planter stock', Irishman, British, and European – in a symposium transcribed in the *Irish Times*, 4 July 1974, 12.

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Spain

At this point, Spain hovers into view. The defence of the Second Spanish Republic was the chief preoccupation and activity hub of the Left Book Club, as one Communist activist and monthly organiser remembered.[29] Fascinatingly, despite the traditional political cleavage and divisions in Northern Ireland, the LBC 'brought together so many activists in the political and industrial wings of the London movement'[30] – bridging, once again, a British political sensibility in an Irish setting. In a Northern Ireland context, the Spanish Civil War provided a rare moment of working-class unity, as volunteers from both Catholic and Protestant areas of Belfast went to fight for the International Brigades in Spain.[31]

John Hewitt was equally taken by the solidarity of Spain, becoming part of the 'Aid for Spain' committee, even going so far as to take in two Basque refugee children into his home (one of whom apparently made him, a most Protestant man, attend Mass).[32] In one unpublished account of the Spanish Civil War's social and political effect on Belfast, we learn that in 1939, 28 unofficial refugees (20 men, 5 women, and 3 children) came in from a flotilla of Republican-supporting boats that had been ordered to return to Spain, which had just fallen to General Franco's Army. Their captain refused, preferring to stay in Belfast, and so was instead taken in by the then-radical Labour (and Protestant) politician Harry Midgley in his terraced home in Duncairn Gardens, a working-class part of north Belfast. A house adjacent was rented as a home for the other refugees and came to be known locally as the 'Red House'. Several of these Spanish refugees married and settled in Belfast after the end of the Civil War.[33] Spain famously energised poets and writers, including Louis MacNeice, who visited the country before the War broke out, and who wrote in his long poem *Autumn Journal*:

> Spain would soon denote
> Our grief, our aspirations;
> Not knowing that our blunt
> Ideals would find their whetstone, that our spirit

[29] Malachy Gray, 'A Shop Steward Remembers', *Saothar*, 11 (1986), 111. See also Neavill, 'Victor Gollancz', 206, 208–10.
[30] Gray, quoted in 'Shop Steward', 111.
[31] Connal Parr, 'Honouring Belfast Men Who Died for Democracy of Spain', *Belfast Telegraph*, 10 November 2015, 20–21.
[32] McCormack, *Northman*, 53.
[33] Harry Robinson (son of Harry Midgley), email correspondence with Professor Graham Walker, 15 November 2004.

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Would find its frontier on the Spanish front,
Its body in a rag-tag army.[34]

Hewitt recalled this time coinciding with 'the dwindling pictures and dramas' of Left Book Club environs. As a Local Government Officer, he could not at this stage take much of a role in political terms, though his wife Roberta certainly did. In early 1937 he was asked to go to a pub called The Brown Horse, in Library Street, all slightly cloak and dagger. There he found three men waiting for him in a snug, three men who frequented the Progressive Bookshop, who Hewitt surmised were likely members, or at least Fellow Travellers, of the Communist Party. Together they launched a monthly political journal called *The Irish Democrat*, which would combine comment and analysis of national news with international events.[35] Hewitt became literary editor, looking after book reviews and writing under the pseudonym Richard Telford. He reviewed Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, as well as writing an 'inaugural manifesto, bidding the proletarian writers of Ireland to unite and deluge us with the stories, the verses, the reportage … born out of their immediate class and national struggle'.[36] This risked drawing the attention of over-zealous Unionist authorities. Aware that mail in Northern Ireland was under surveillance at this time, Hewitt was careful to post it in a specific way to avoid such attention.[37]

In the 1940s, the Progressive Bookmen continued publishing and promoted a Regionalist movement that emphasised the local history, character, culture, and landscapes of Northern Ireland. It was partly prompted by the War, which forced many to holiday locally, shifting their gaze, in an invigorating sense, inward. There is no need here to go into the specifics of regionalism (though its neutral ground was intended to accommodate Catholics and Protestants in Ireland). The more important detail is the fluid, multidimensional identity later explained by another Protestant poet, who called 'the North of Ireland' always

culturally exciting. One has to be tuned in all the time. One has to keep one's antennae in good repair. Ulstermen are all radio hams sending messages, little subtexts to each other. Conversation in literary London is bland by comparison. It is because of the confluence of cultures here, the Irish, the Scots, the English.

[34] Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998 [1939]), 21.
[35] Hewitt, *North Light*, 68.
[36] Ibid. The *Irish Democrat* later morphed into the monthly journal of the Connolly Association, a Communist-inspired Irish group that advocated for an end to Partition and often carried pro-IRA material. A horrified Hewitt considered this subsequent 'deplorable production' to be 'nothing to do with what we intended'.
[37] John Hewitt, '"No Rootless Colonist" (1972)', in Tom Clyde (Ed.), *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1987), 150–51.

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It's all unresolved … to use a geological metaphor, that English society [pre the miners' strike] is sedimentary; Ireland, and especially Northern Ireland, is volcanic. Ulster/Ireland is still working out what it wants to be and that's why it's a stimulating atmosphere.[38]

Though this judgement was made in 1983, it applies to the era and authors of this chapter, as well as now: Irish, Scottish, British, unresolved.

The BBC and Rodgers

One other very British institution housed the Progressive Bookmen: the BBC. Both John Boyd and Sam Hanna Bell were radio producers there, functioning 'as creative subversives or subversive creators'.[39] Boyd emphasised the primacy of the pub ('a better place for the germination of imaginative ideas than any BBC office') in creative terms,[40] while Bell was recruited to the BBC by Louis MacNeice, who joined during the War.[41] This is, of course, a striking number of Progressive Bookmen to be scattered throughout such an establishment. They were not without enemies. MacNeice in particular got backs up in the higher echelons with his ideas for political programmes.[42] The bigger problem was that Catholics did not attain higher jobs and offices at the BBC in Northern Ireland, with a sectarian Unionism dictating almost all aspects of production. They rose in the institution *because* they were Protestants; even if they were in no way categorisable within the staid, 'not-an-inch' intransigence of the harder edges of the Unionist establishment in Northern Ireland. The BBC was unquestionably a base of this political culture, with censorship practiced and Unionist power maintained in employment and programming.[43] The Progressive Bookmen had to negotiate this landscape carefully.

That being said, John Boyd (1912–2002), who began his job there in 1946, noted that it was striking how well the BBC seemed to be able to attract 'dissatisfied teachers and clergymen'.[44] One of these was W. R.

[38] For an outline of Regionalism see Connal Parr, *Inventing the Myth: Political Passions and the Ulster Protestant Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 90–92; Michael Longley, quoted in *The Honest Ulsterman*, No. 78 (Summer 1985), 21.
[39] Longley, 'Progressive', 56.
[40] John Boyd, *The Middle of My Journey* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990), 116.
[41] John Hewitt also found his way to being a member of BBC Northern Ireland's Regional Advisory Panel (*North Light*, 120).
[42] Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 217.
[43] Rob Savage, *Northern Ireland, the BBC, and Censorship in Thatcher's Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 172. See also Boyd, *Middle*, 74.
[44] Boyd, *Middle*, 90.

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'Bertie' Rodgers (1909–69), who entered the corporation as part of its later gentle reforms and endeavour to produce more inclusive broadcasting.[45] Born in east Belfast and raised by strict Presbyterian parents, he trained as a Presbyterian minister after taking a degree in English at Queen's University. In the late 1930s, he began to write poetry and released his debut collection to much acclaim in 1941. Personally, he was settling to be a clergyman in Cloveneden in Armagh, with a wife and two children. However, the rural idyll disintegrated quickly. The relationship with his wife Marie – a doctor – collapsed, the tensions and quarrels destroying the pastoral existence he was destined for. He then effortlessly acquired a post in the BBC and was involved in the features department in London, again with MacNeice. Both, after all, 'were Irishmen from Belfast, both were poets, and both were heavy drinkers who seemed to spend more time in pubs than in studios or their offices'.[46] Perhaps the most underrated and enigmatic of the Progressive Bookmen, Rodgers has been described, and criticised, for producing 'word drunk passages' and an abundance of ecstatic language.[47] In a radio talk called 'On Wiring a Poem', Rodgers said that 'Words are like county councillors: they have always hosts of relations who are looking for employment'.[48]

Rodgers's sermons were apparently well-regarded by his congregations, but his poetry, like his life, shifted from a tunnel of Calvinism to a life-affirming Christianity and exuberance of language.[49] One critic invented the term 'Romantic Calvinist' to capture a 'romanticist of words' – albeit, one whose eccentricity and verbal profusions meant that his considerable talents as a poet represented an 'ungathered harvest'; one that 'ran to seed'.[50] Prior to the Second World War, writers had made little effort to describe the culture or character of Northern Ireland – until Rodgers, along with the other names discussed in this chapter began to offer 'an alternative Protestant vision to the one portrayed by the government – one that recognised difference and dissension and one that recognised an all-Ireland perspective, as well as a distinctive Ulster one'.[51] Rodgers kept his hand in in London, publishing an article

[45] Savage, *BBC*, 273. [46] Boyd, *Middle*, 91.
[47] Frank Ormsby, 'Host of Relations: The Poetry of W. R. Rodgers', *Honest Ulsterman* (July/August 1970), 25. See also Boyd, *Middle*, 92.
[48] W. R. Rodgers, 'Balloons and Maggots', *Rann*, 14 (1951), 11.
[49] McCormack, *Northman*, 146.
[50] Terence Brown, *Northern Voices: Poets from Ulster* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975), 114, 127.
[51] Roger Courtney, *Dissenting Voices: Rediscovering the Irish Progressive Presbyterian Tradition* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2013), 338.

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in the *New Statesman* called 'Black North' where he denounced Unionist governments for their handling of community relations. Rather than cultivating positive contact, they used poor community relations to maintain power. In sentiments that would have alarmed members of his congregation, Rodgers made it clear that there were two distinct groups in Northern Ireland, and a triple barrier:

> It is one of religion, of race, and of class, all coincide. It separates Catholic from Protestant, Gael from Scotch settler stock, poor from rich. It operates from birth to death. Men of one group go through life having as little to do as possible with men of the other group. Each segregates itself: In every Ulster town you will find a Catholic quarter, and always it is the poorer one.[52]

These observations appeared in 1943, over two decades before Seamus Heaney enlightened readers similarly as to the state of Northern Ireland in *The Listener*.[53]

More generally, Rodgers belied the clergyman profile of wise serenity. Behind the calm, even suave exterior, safe in several establishments, was a pain numbed by alcohol and romantic turbulence. Rodgers 'was not at peace either with himself or his world', and was 'brilliant, inconsistent, and frugal in poetic output'.[54] His wife Marie's mental health deteriorated and she eventually committed suicide in 1953. Within months Rodgers had remarried, to Marianne Helweg, the former wife of the head of the features department in London, and they moved to Stoke-by-Nayland, Essex. This made things, as MacNeice said, more than a little tricky in BBC offices.[55] But rather than latch on to the gossip that trailed him, we should reflect briefly on Rodgers' output at the BBC, which featured a legion of superbly crafted features capturing Irish literary figures as well as Belfast life and lore.[56]

Rodgers' creative energies being diverted from poetry into broadcasting and radio is more than symbolic of his journey, and it reminds us of the influence of the scripted radio feature, which reached far wider audiences than his poetry ever could. This raises the question of listenership, which is hard to pinpoint exactly. In the early 1930s, licenses for

[52] Ibid.
[53] See, for instance, Heaney's 'Belfast's Black Christmas', *The Listener*, 21 December 1971, 857–58.
[54] Boyd, *Middle*, 92; McCormack, *Northman*, 11.
[55] Boyd, *Middle*, 93–94; McCormack, *Northman*, 147.
[56] Rodgers' programmes about notable Irish writers later became publications. See Louis MacNeice's letter to T. S. Eliot (7 July 1949) informing him of Rodgers' work on James Joyce (Allison [Ed.], *MacNeice Letters*, 521). See also W. R. Rodgers, *Irish Literary Portraits: W. R. Rodgers' Broadcast Conversations with Those Who Knew Them* (London: BBC Books, 1972).

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radios in Northern Ireland made up only 1 per cent of the total number in the UK. However, this increased fourfold by the end of that decade and does not take into account those who owned radios without a license (or those who had access to other people's radios). There was also a receiver discrepancy between the West and East of Northern Ireland. The weakness of transmitter signals, as well as the cultural disposition towards British culture, meant that the BBC's Northern Irish audiences were always more middle class and concentrated around the Belfast region. This was to improve with stronger transmitters during the late 1950s when it is known that access widened for listeners in the more deprived parts of Northern Ireland west of the River Bann.[57] Some of Rodgers', Boyd's, and Sam Hanna Bell's programmes (see below) occasionally reached significantly large audiences when they were picked up by the Overseas service. Despite this, Northern Irish listeners remained particularly loyal to their regional Home Service, with it being the one part of the UK where more listeners tuned in to regional content over the Light Programme.[58]

During the Second World War, Rodgers moved to Oxford to write and work for the BBC. Winding down his congregational duties, he resigned and joined its Features department in London. At the BBC he pioneered oral and literary history, culminating in the high point of his radio play *The Return Room*: described by some as 'the finest radio feature produced in Northern Ireland after the War',[59] and capturing the sounds and voices of a Belfast childhood. Originally given the working titles 'Return to Me' and then 'Return to Belfast', the piece itself is still one of the most vivid portraits of a lost yet inevitable cluster of Belfast streets that one will ever hear; voices, rhythm, the clanging of street.[60] Its production story was a tale in itself. In one moment, as Rodgers returned home to finish it with Sam Hanna Bell, a marathon drinking bender took place in which the producers managed to lose the one copy of the script. It turned up in a windowsill in Linen Hall Street, returned to the BBC by a friendly bus conductor.[61] Hymns were recorded at Gardenmore

[57] McIntosh, *Force of Culture*, 78.
[58] Richard Rankin Russell, 'Imagining a New Province: Seamus Heaney's Creative Work for BBC Northern Ireland, 1968–71', *Irish Studies Review*, 15:2 (2007), 145.
[59] Douglas Carson, 'The Pursuit of the Fancy Man: Sam Hanna Bell and W R Rodgers 1952–1955', *Honest Ulsterman*, No. 92 (1991), 18.
[60] In 2010, Belfast's Blackstaff Press published the playscript with illustrations and a CD of the recording. W. R. Rogers (with illustrations by Gerard Dillon), *The Return Room* (Belfast, 2010). Echoes of *The Return Room* can be heard subjectively and conceptually in Kenneth Branagh's 2022 black-and-white autobiographical film *Belfast*.
[61] Carson, 'Pursuit', 21.

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Presbyterian church and a legendary cast assembled. Professional actors were joined by over twenty children from Harding Memorial Primary School and St Comgalls in Divis Street. They recorded skipping rhymes, songs, and chants. The whole piece was recorded live after four days of rehearsals. Rodgers himself narrated, and the Overseas BBC service confirmed it would air the programme, promising a world-wide audience. It was broadcast at the end of 1955.[62]

Rodgers was still investigating his own origin myth, as an Ulster Presbyterian and hopeless romantic. In a radio 'Conversation Piece' (1942), Rodgers wrote that 'We are really a "split" people, we Protestant Ulstermen' – the suggestion being, that this split identity was not a weakness but a strength.[63] Nevertheless, the Calvinism he sought to escape had roared back in the form of another political leader of note, who began preaching – and winning over – the kind of congregation Rodgers once ministered to. The Reverend Ian Paisley was making inroads, frightening the Unionist establishment as much as ordinary Catholics, and stirring the Protestant working class with powerful oratory and plays to sectarian fear. By this point, Rodgers had moved to the United States, California, where he acknowledged Paisley – who had by now built a political base among the small farmers of north Antrim – in one of his last poems. The American connection binds Paisley too, who toured the Deep South and was granted an honorary doctorate by Bob Jones University in South Carolina. Rodgers pitches him as one of the 'old giants of Ireland', albeit one hamstrung by 'the blatter of his hand-me-down talk'. A surprising admiration enters, tainted by the ultimate smell of cordite:

> I think of that brave man Paisley, eyeless
> In Gaza, with a daisy-chain of millstones
> Round his neck; groping, like blind Samson,
> For the soapy pillars and greased poles of lightning
> To pull them down in rains and borborygmic roars
> Of rhetoric. (There by the grace of God
> Goes God.) I like his people and I like his guts
> But I dislike his gods who always end
> In gun-play.

While John Hewitt also acknowledged Paisley in verse (as 'Demagogue'), Rodgers could not resist an impish denouement to his sneaking regard:

> In fond memory of his last stand
> I dedicate this contraceptive pill

[62] Ibid., 23–24. [63] Cited in McIntosh, *Force of Culture*, 215.

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Of poetry to his unborn followers,
And I place
This bunch of beget-me-nots on his grave.[64]

Rodgers was, in fact, the one to die of bowel cancer in California in 1969, and even though Seamus Heaney read at his funeral, Paul Muldoon's tribute captures his ambition, matched by a vein of personal tragedy; his calling,

… a storm
For everything. He cannot face
That music. You called a poem
Your own, embraced
A symphony of accidents.[65]

The Man Flourishing

In response to this alternative culture, some might ask the question once directed in a famous moment to Gerry Adams: 'What about the IRA?' It was still around, though underground, its embers kept alive by a small set of dedicated Belfast republican families.[66] It was not until the mid-1950s that it mounted a serious campaign, Operation Harvest, known as the 'Border Campaign', which had petered out by 1962, depressed by internment measures, government attention, and Catholic indifference.[67] It took the communal violence of the summer of 1969 and the introduction of the British Army to re-awaken its political flame. The Progressive Bookmen succinctly viewed nationalist militants as a kind of mirror-image of stagnant Unionist politics: self-reinforcing 'obsolete clansmen'.[68] Irish nationalism, to them, as one of Ireland's dominant tribes, halted the advance of their tribe: the Labour movement. The Troubles and the intensity of the violence from 1970 onwards created a different set of circumstances and cultures that continue to define Northern Ireland's political character, burying the alternative viewpoints of the Progressive Bookmen beneath the debris of violent history.

[64] Ormsby (Ed.), *Collected John Hewitt*, 140; W. R. Rodgers, 'Home Thoughts From Abroad', in *Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1993), 98–99.
[65] Paul Muldoon, 'Rodgers at Loughgall', *Honest Ulsterman*, No. 16 (August 1969), 18.
[66] Devlin, *Straight Left*, 60; Brian Hanley, *The IRA, 1926–1936* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2002), 145–46.
[67] Brian Hanley, *The IRA: A Documentary History, 1916–2005* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2010), 120–42.
[68] Hewitt, 'No Rootless Colonist', 149. In the May 1973 local elections, Sam Hanna Bell's voting preferences were for the Northern Ireland Labour Party and the moderate Alliance party (Fergus Hanna Bell [Ed.], *A Salute from the Banderol: The Selected Writings of Sam Hanna Bell* [Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2009], 183).

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The arts in Northern Ireland, like trade unionism, was one of the few non-sectarian areas of life. In certain literary and journalistic pubs, one solicitor who drifted through this world noted that 'it was possible to meet interesting people who by no means belonged to the conventional Unionist world: established actors, authors, playwrights, and painters'. Far from Belfast being the 'black, boring, provincial city' many feared and stereotyped it as, the 1950s and 1960s turned out, in fact, to be a kind of lost golden age. The same man noted that 'below the grimy and conventional surface, it was a city bursting with a stimulating life of its own, fed by the conflicts hidden not far below the surface'.[69] The work of Sam Hanna Bell (1909–90) as features assistant at the BBC caught many of its hidden conflicts. His novels *Across A Narrow Sea* (1987), *A Man Flourishing* (1973) and – most famously – *December Bride* (1951) reflect abiding preoccupations of northern Protestant identity, hidden and inner rebellions, and the interacting of different cultures. *The Hollow Ball* (1961) concerns a young man, David Minnis, who begins working in the drapery trade during the 1930s at the same time trying to forge a football career.[70]

Reviewing the latter in the *Irish Times* in the year of its publication, Brian Friel heralded a skilfully-written novel that provided a rare and accurate portrayal of the Protestant working class – a people illuminated 'not through their sporadic abnormalities (religious and political fanaticism, phoney Sunday respectability) … but through their ordinariness, their love of home and one another, their need for security and attachment to place and familiar background'. This was, Friel interpreted, 'not the Ulster of slogan writers and Pope-cursers, nor is it the wholesome Ambridge like Ulster that the BBC NI would have us believe: but Ulster – or, at least, six counties of it – as it is'.[71] Friel's swipe at the BBC is telling because Bell did all he could through the organisation to subvert the images cursed. Born in Glasgow, giving him a faint outsider – if naturally connected – aura, Bell's Scottish father died when he was just eight years old, in an event that shaped his family, and three years later, just before the Partition of Ireland, he moved to live on his family farm just outside Belfast in a household ran by his maternal grandparents – who were strict Sabbatarian Presbyterians. The family

[69] C. E. B. Brett, *Long Shadows Cast Before: Nine Lives in Ulster, 1625–1977* (Edinburgh: John Bartholomew & Son, 1978), 66.
[70] Sam Hanna Bell, *The Hollow Ball* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1998 [1961]).
[71] Brian Friel, 'Northern Lights', *Irish Times*, 23 September 1961, 8. Another review by Deaglán de Bréadún on the book's reissue by Blackstaff Press paid tribute to Bell for his 'feel for the seedy and fractious word of Belfast radical politics at the time' ('Belfast redskin', *Irish Times*, 6 October 1990, 32).

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later moved to south Belfast, but the former agrarian and religious influences on his heart, and perhaps more importantly his ear, would later shape the *December Bride* novel. Some have argued that his work and output represents a vision of ideal Presbyterian principles.[72] The only novelist among the Progressive Bookmen, Bell appreciated the layered opportunities of the form. He enjoyed making readers work hard, no 'light reading' was in store, and he found the canvas of the novel appropriate for exploring the complications and tensions of Ulster Protestant identity.

Bell excelled academically (at All Saints Public Elementary School), and it was the experience of a range of occupations, including labourer, night watchman, salesman, and welfare officer, that led to his concentration on proletarian issues and the Belfast working class.[73] It made him determined to capture their voices in his later radio work for the BBC, and it also put him in touch with Left Book Club circles. Bell was fascinated by the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798,[74] which was mainly led by Ulster Presbyterians, and he co-founded his own journal *Lagan* with his flatmate John Boyd, all with the aim of furthering an Ulster literary tradition. But the pivot was his being recruited into the BBC by Louis MacNeice as Features assistant or producer, a post he would hold for a quarter of a century. Rather than blend into the establishment, Bell used his free-thinking and socialist views to charge his output, challenging the Unionist grip on the BBC, which at that stage employed no Catholic producers. He wrote about 40 radio scripts and ended up commissioning and producing over 250 others including works by John D. Stewart, the late Maurice Leitch, and his good friend Bertie Rodgers. Bell's most successful programmes were *The Orangeman* (1967) and *A Kist O whistles*,[75] the latter about the debate that overtook the Presbyterian church about the debate on the introduction of the harmonium or organ into worship. Other features looked at the most radical of the United Irishmen, James 'Jemmy' Hope, and Edward Bunting, who played a vital role preserving traditional music. Bell involved folklorist Michael J. Murphy in collecting folk tales, especially of the realm of 'the fairies'. Bell made innovative use of mobile recording units to collect

[72] Longley, *Living Stream*, 101–2. *December Bride* was adapted into a notable film in 1991 (Dir: Thaddeus O'Sullivan).
[73] Courtney, *Dissenting Voices*, 333.
[74] See Guy Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 521–22.
[75] Rex Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1984), 183, 207. See also Longley, *Living Stream*, 127.

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folklore from country people,[76] combining this with his recovery and preservation of urban Belfast street songs by Hugh Quinn and Sam Henry. He practically forced the BBC to broadcast two series of traditional folk music, working alongside Sean O'Boyle – of Armagh – to collect folk tales.[77] Bell followed this up with television series about the same music, his interest in folk customs flowering into multiple publications and programmes.

Bell was also a galvaniser, with one of his discoveries being the shipyard painter and playwright Sam Thompson (1916–65), following a chance meeting in the Elbow Room bar in Belfast.[78] Bell encouraged Thompson to write his 'yarns' down, eventually crystallising in Thompson's searing exposé of sectarianism in the shipyards, *Over the Bridge*, staged in January 1960 at the Empire Theatre. It was seen by an estimated 38,000 people over its six week run, with much of the audience made up of workers who had never been to a theatre before.[79] Aside from housing firebrands like Thompson, the Elbow Room should be viewed as a critical venue in the scene of the Progressive Bookmen. John Boyd praised time spent in its gregarious snugs,[80] even if it was a hazard to drink there directly after programmes. More generally, in a bygone age where pubs were engine rooms for some creative people, Boyd claimed that the Elbow Room

> was a gathering place for BBC staff who liked its relaxed atmosphere, which was such a relief from the stratified atmosphere of Broadcasting House where people moved along the corridors a little too conscious of their status and responsibilities: … a flurried secretary on the heels of her producer; an engineer poring over a technical manual; a commissionaire in a nondescript uniform directing people to studios and offices, with a message boy to guide them. Broadcasting House was all busyness: the Elbow Room – known as Studio E – was all relaxation. There, time came to a stop.[81]

Bell's diary, shards of which were published posthumously, recalled his standing at the doorway of the Elbow Room, which had since been named the Windsor Castle Pub, in November 1973 – in ruins following an IRA bombing. As 'the BBC's tavern' for over three decades, 'many writers and artists drank here.…It was the only pub that could really claim to be a convivial centre for artists, writers and actors'.[82] More than

[76] See Sam Hanna Bell, 'The Microphone in the Countryside', in Bell (Ed.), *Salute*, 3–7.
[77] Cathcart, *Most Contrary Region*, 155–56.
[78] Sean McMahon, *Sam Hanna Bell: A Biography* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999), 110–11. Bell would go on to produce all Thompson's radio work.
[79] Parr, *Inventing*, 87–90.
[80] Boyd, *Middle*, 89.
[81] Ibid., 90. See also McMahon, *Bell*, 134.
[82] 15 November 1973 entry, in Bell (Ed.), *Salute*, 185.

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symbolically, it had changed its name, gone downhill, and was eliminated by the conflict.

Conclusion

There are different reasons for the erosion of the Progressive Bookmen profile. The conflict that followed drives everything. One cannot but end, however, on anything other than the concrete political detail of the Unionist Party pushing the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act through the Northern Ireland Stormont parliament in 1954. This legislation codified the concept of Loyalty to the British crown as being an intrinsic part of Unionist cultural identity, giving 'symbolic and legal substance to the Unionist claim that Northern Ireland was the loyal British, as well as Protestant part of Ireland'.[83] Effectively banning the flying of the Irish tricolour, which Unionists claimed was a flag that could lead to disturbances, it also represented a legally-enforced diminution of the complex, multilayered identity that charged the writers discussed within this chapter. This was officially overturned many years later with the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, which reversed this cultural compression by recognising aspirations to Irish identity alongside British identity – either/or, or *both*.

Why revisit the Progressive Bookmen now? Since their original identification in 1986, it is a culture that has receded even further into view, demeaned by scholars who downplay the political radicalism of this group, the reputation of Northern Ireland as any kind of cultural region of note, and the progressive elements of Protestant cultural figures – often as part of a 'post-colonial' project that absurdly pitches Ireland the same as the developing world.[84] Conversely, significant biographical studies of recent times, such as John Bew's *Castlereagh* (2011), serve to reinforce British official identity portraits in Ulster Protestant history. Castlereagh's genealogy reflects elements of the 'New Light' movement, though his actions as Chief Secretary of Ireland, coercively suppressing

[83] Thomas Hennessey, 'Ulster Unionism and Loyalty to the Crown of the United Kingdom', in Richard English and Graham Walker (Eds.), *Unionism in Modern Ireland: New Perspectives on Politics and Culture* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1996), 123.

[84] In this reading, British institutions by their nature taint the radicalism of the writers, who are said to be a 'left-liberal Protestant intelligentsia [*sic*] that never seriously engaged Northern nationalist alienation'. Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel, and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 72. No mention is made, in this meagre analysis, of Hewitt's veneration of specific United Irishmen and women, or his, Rodgers', and Bell's anti-sectarianism and consistent denunciation of Unionist domination.

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the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798, literally illustrate the reverse: the crushing and suffocation of Presbyterian radical thought.[85]

Connectedly, a lack of confidence in the cultural and literary capital of the Protestant community of Northern Ireland pervades to the present day. Sam Hanna Bell later gave interviews with Irish media outlets talking down what he called the 'the Philistine world' of Belfast in the 1930s. In a 1977 interview he said that 'The Protestant writer could only turn in on himself or latch on to English Literature or compel himself, usually unsuccessfully, to join the wider sphere of Irish literature.'[86] Rodgers offered his view in verse, of the 'angular people, brusque and Protestant',

> For whom the word is still a fighting word,
> Who bristle into reticence at the sound
> Of the round gift of the gab in Southern mouths.
> Mine were not born with silver spoons in gob,
> Nor would they thank you for the gift of tongues;
> The dry riposte, the bitter repartee's
> The Northman's bite and portion, his deep sup
> Is silence.[87]

Many Protestants in Northern Ireland remain convinced by their apparent lack of literary ability and limited cultural horizons. On the other hand, the visions of Hewitt and Boyd reflect a more vibrant, indeed lionised society than is often painted. Boyd always swore by the 1930s. 'That was *my* time',[88] he wistfully told friends.

The Progressive Bookmen soldiered on in the BBC and elsewhere. They saw their communal fears come to pass, with the ferocity of violence from 1969 onwards sweeping away their raft. Rodgers passed on in 1969, as if he was not built for the decade of carnage that followed. In March 1971, Boyd delivered what many regarded as the first play about the conflict, *The Flats*, a sub-Seán O'Casey melodrama that would be improved on by most generations of Northern Ireland playwrights. Hewitt lived through the storm-centre, latter-day Baudelaire, wandering round the war zone, noting the bullet holes in the glass door of the newsagents where he bought his tobacco.[89] A mystic in the Ireland he feared. But Hewitt also enjoyed his later years when he moved back to Belfast in 1972, the deadliest year of the Troubles – confident in his

[85] John Bew, *Castlereagh* (London: Quercus, 2014 [2011]), 96–144.
[86] *Irish Times*, 29 December 1977, 8.
[87] 'Epilogue', in Rodgers, *Poems*, 106–7.
[88] Quoted in Ciaran McKeown, *The Passion of Peace* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1994), 1. McKeown's italics.
[89] McCormack, *Northman*, 234–35.

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isolation: 'I know I represent a strand of Ulster thought, of Ulster vigour. Ulster people like the truth, they are willing to stand up for it when they recognise it, and it is that courage for a lonely truth which expresses our vigour most clearly.'[90] He watched his city burn, picked up multiple honours, helped younger writers, attended some tiny Labour meetings, and died in 1987 leaving his body to science. Bell expired in 1990, and Boyd followed twelve years later. In among the passings and loss, the political self-constraints of Unionists are an abiding theme, continuing to play out in modern times and elections. It was observed that for many Ulster Unionists, 'safe cultural ambition constitutes the Ulster Orchestra playing Hamilton Harty in London [in front of] the Queen Mother'.[91] This does not, as this chapter shows, define the cultural history of the broader Ulster Protestant group, who have a different and richer culture within their DNA, and will continue their complicated negotiations in (and with) these islands.

[90] Hewitt, 'Question', 4. [91] Longley, 'Progressive', 56.

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