

<b>Institution:</b> Northumbria University at Newcastle		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 (History)		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Enabling Protestant working-class engagement with literary culture and creating new space for reconciliation in Northern Ireland		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> September 2016 – 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Connal Parr	Senior Lecturer	01/09/2016 – present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017 – 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Monolithic portrayals of working-class Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist culture in Northern Ireland underpin claims that it is limited to annual Orange Order rituals and averse to participation in the literary arts. Research undertaken at Northumbria University by Dr Connal Parr has overturned this view, revealing an overlooked and complex history of literary pursuits at the heart of Protestant working-class life. Working with a difficult-to-reach beneficiary group, recognised for its reticence when dealing with members from outside of the community, Parr's research has enabled new creative forms of reflective expression by working-class Protestants from Northern Ireland (including some from paramilitary backgrounds) and the formation of grassroots organisations such as the Thomas Carnduff Society. Consequent work with Northern Irish and cross-border communities, the International Fund for Ireland, and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs has helped to foster improved understanding and the discussion of Protestant working-class culture, enabling new public conversations and broader reconciliation efforts.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Unionist working-class identity and the related tensions associated with the formation, perception, and misconception of this identity, has been the focus of research undertaken by Parr at Northumbria University since 2016. By examining the 'Ulster Protestant imagination' through the prism of its dramatists and writers, Parr has recovered the vibrant cultural history of the Protestant working class, which had been deliberately downplayed by both Ulster Unionists and Irish Republicans in recent years [R1-R3]. This research provides a vital corrective to the tendency to equate Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist literary culture with middle-class or elite society, demonstrating that Protestant writers and playwrights provide a more complex portrait of Protestant working-class life in Northern Ireland – its humour and vitality, but also its dissent and division – than that suggested by its incessant and internecine political squabbles [R1-R3].</p> <p>Parr's study of the Etcetera Theatre Company – a drama group founded in 2013 that enables Ulster Loyalists to engage in storytelling – addressed attempts by former members of the Ulster Volunteer Force to write for theatre, and their rejection by the Unionist community [R2]. Parr has traced the sectarian legacy of conflict into the cultural sphere, and discussed Etcetera's first major production, <i>Tartan</i>, about sectarian youth gangs, which played across Belfast in May 2014 in venues from working-class community halls to the prestigious Metropolitan Arts Centre. This study outlined the potential of cultural activities such as those undertaken by Etcetera to address the present-day recruitment and exploitation of Protestant working-class communities by paramilitary groups, and hence for cultural activities to become a way of displacing physical force traditions [R2].</p>		

Highlighting the challenges that groups like Etcetera face, Parr demonstrated the important role that historical cultural figures can play by providing validation and inspiration for aspiring Loyalist artists. Studies include his 2017 monograph [R1] in which Parr explored the works of ten Protestant working-class figures, including St. John Ervine, Thomas Carnduff, and Sam Thompson, writing in the early to mid-twentieth century [R1, R3]. This work provided new insights into a highly reflective, multifaceted working-class culture, one deeply entwined with the Labour movement. It went on to challenge assumptions about the apprehension and despondency of this group by illuminating a progressive political DNA and a fiercely inventive cultural heritage [R1, R3].

Parr's research has also unpicked the defensiveness and defeatism often present within Protestant working-class communities. In particular, Parr has shed light on why Ulster Unionism and Loyalism – in contrast to Irish Republicanism – has failed to make more of its cultural resources. Owing to their reputation as a conservative cohort (and 'bad press' as ex-prisoners during the Troubles), Loyalists often refrain from putting their heads above the parapet and have absented themselves from the necessary articulation of their own story. This has left the way open for others to misrepresent Protestant working-class history and culture [R4, R5]. Related to this is the question of leadership. Parr has observed that the tendency of Unionist politicians to reduce Loyalist culture to the shibboleths and ceremonial practices of the Orange Order has wider repercussions. British left-wing attitudes to Northern Ireland, for example, are largely predicated on a reductive 'colonial' reading of Protestant working-class communities, failing to take account of their dissent, creative pulse, and occasional radical history [R4, R5].

Parr's exploration of the life of the late Loyalist political leader David Ervine (1953–2007) highlighted the barriers faced by working-class Loyalists in articulating a political vision that moved on from the negative - 'not an inch' - postures adopted by the Unionist parties' political leadership [R6]. Parr has further shown that this leadership's reluctance to promote or acknowledge the complexity of the Loyalist community's recent history, has on-going effects, and continues to inhibit the creative interrogation of their recent and not-so-recent pasts by working-class Loyalist playwrights and writers. The resulting hampering of engagement with the arts and restrictive interpretation of 'Protestant culture' in Northern Ireland has resulted in a focus on aspects of 'culture' that entrench division rather than reflective cultural engagement. Parr's work has challenged this narrow focus and opened new conversations and approaches [R4, R5].

Parr's research has received praise for its long-overdue consideration of more diverse Loyalist perspectives. Alex Kane, the prominent political writer and former Director of Communications for the Ulster Unionist Party, believed it to be among the most important explorations of Unionist identity to date. Kane observed how one of the most intriguing aspects of the work was the '*disturbing and self-defeating evidence that unionists are not comfortable discussing their own multi-layered identity*' (*Belfast Newsletter*, 18.11.17).

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

**R1. Connal Parr** *Inventing the Myth: Political Passions and the Ulster Protestant Imagination*. (Oxford University Press 2017) ISBN: 9780198791591 - Available on request

**R2. Connal Parr (2017)**, 'Etcetera Theatre Company: An Exercise in Ulster Loyalist Storytelling', *New Hibernia Review*, 20:4, 91-112 [doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2016.0059](https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2016.0059)

**R3. Connal Parr (2017)**, 'Something Happening Quietly: Owen McCafferty's Theatre of Truth and Reconciliation', *Irish University Review*, 47:3, 531-548 [doi/10.3366/iur.2017.0308](https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2017.0308)

**R4. Connal Parr (2019)**, 'From Stereotypes to Solidarity: The British Left and the Protestant Working-Class', *Renewal*, 27:2, 55–63  
[https://renewal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ren27.2\\_07parr-1.pdf](https://renewal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ren27.2_07parr-1.pdf)

**R5. Connal Parr** 'Gusty Spence: Agent of Conflict, Creativity and Change', in Fiona McCann (Ed.), *The Carceral Network in Ireland: History, Agency and Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 133–154 ISBN 978-3-030-42184-7 - Available on request

**R6. Connal Parr (2018)**, 'Ending the siege? David Ervine and the struggle for progressive Loyalism', *Irish Political Studies*, 33:2, 202-220 [doi/full/10.1080/07907184.2018.1454670](https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2018.1454670)

#### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Parr's research-led engagement with Protestant working-class groups in Northern Ireland and cross-border communities has promoted a more subtle and nuanced understanding of Loyalist culture and identity. This has helped instil confidence in playwrights and poets from this community in Northern Ireland (including former paramilitaries), so encouraging further creativity, and has also been the basis of enhanced cross-border, cross-community understanding.

##### 4.1 Enabling creative pursuits within Loyalist communities

Parr's research was central to the formation of the Thomas Carnduff Society (TCS), an arts organisation established in Summer 2019 to promote Protestant working-class literature through events, talks, and performances. Organiser Chris Thackaberry – former master of Dublin & Wicklow Loyal Orange Lodge – confirmed how Parr's research had a 'huge' effect in shaping the group's creation, '[it] really put scope onto Carnduff's work and how it is reflected within the community in a way [he] had not encountered before' [E1]. The 'inspiring' research helped Thackaberry and colleagues to see 'the necessity for a grassroots organisation that would actively focus in and around Protestant voices' [E1]. In December 2019, Parr was invited to become Honorary President of the society in recognition of the important contribution his research has made to a beneficiary group whose reticence in dealing with members from outside of their community is well known [E1].

The TCS provides an avenue for members of Loyalist communities to express their identity in a manner that more fully reflects their day-to-day lives than the reductive version they see on the news. As Thackaberry explained, 'that Protestant culture is not just about parading, or anything like that, rather the written word and life experience of people such as the writers Parr explores in his study' [E1]. The TCS quickly became a conduit for linking Protestant culture to wider Irish society. In August 2019, the society was invited by Unite trade union to read Carnduff's poetry to Harland & Wolf's workers, who were protesting against the possible closure of the shipyard that built the Titanic [E2]. A new collaboration with the prominent Republic of Ireland charity, Poetry Ireland, led to a joint event titled *Protestant Imagination: Time for Inclusion* – a direct reference to Parr's 2017 monograph – which was scheduled to be held in the Dublin Orange Hall but had to be cancelled due to the pandemic [E1].

The grassroots success of TCS is evident in their monthly 'yard sessions'. These 'open mic' nights allow writers to showcase their creative writing [E1, E2], participants noting how 'you get a truly genuine and largely unseen expression of Protestant working class culture, in all its complexity [at the events]' [E3]. The organisers noted how 'one of the main successes ... is encouraging individuals who would not previously have engaged with such texts – much less spoken about them in public' [E1]. For example, Thackaberry recalled how one participant 'was very quiet, almost embarrassed [when they first got up to tell their story] ... so for her to bring a piece to read really struck a chord with me. It felt like a real achievement' [E1]. Since September 2019, approximately 120 people from across the Loyalist community have attended the monthly events, including new and more established authors. Although the programme was paused in March 2020 because of the pandemic, given the longstanding reluctance of Ulster-Loyalists to engage in the arts, these sessions constitute a 'great success' [E1].

Bobby Niblock, a prominent TCS contributor, is a former UVF and Tartan Gang member who served time in Long Kesh Prison for a sectarian murder in 1975. A controversial figure, since his release Niblock has become a respected playwright, seeking to address his own violent past

through creative practice. Parr's research 'gave [Niblock] a big boost', enabling him to re-assess the value of his work: *'I continued to doubt myself all the time because of my background, thinking "who would want to read that?"'* [E3]. This validation was cemented through continued engagement with Parr's research, *'it helped me to realise the positives of what I, and others, are doing and the important role that it fulfils in shedding light on untold stories'* [E3]. Niblock's renewed confidence has helped inspire others, *'many from similar backgrounds'*, to *'actively' engage 'in the literary arts for the first time.'* Niblock's example has highlighted *'the long overdue need to share our thoughts and experiences of what it means to be an Ulster-Loyalist'* [E3]. Like all the beneficiaries of Parr's research, Niblock has learned that *'the arts and literature can explore and confront realities, which – as Connal shows in his research – many of our politicians refuse to engage with in a meaningful way'* [E3].

#### 4.2 Facilitating dialogue for reconciliation through understanding of Loyalist identity

In 2019, Parr played an instrumental role in the three-month, cross-community, cross-border 'Across the Lines' project run by Glens Centre, Manorbennet in the Republic of Ireland. Parr drafted the project's successful funding application to the International Fund for Ireland (IFI), which is jointly administered by the British and Irish Governments to help peacebuilding on the island of Ireland under the Peace Impact Programme, devised the programme, and led the public sessions [E4]. Each weekly session focused on an author that Parr had discussed in 2017 monograph. Additional support was secured from Fermanagh and Omagh district council in Northern Ireland following a further application by Parr, which further underpinned the project's cross-border reach.

'Across the Lines' brought together community members from North Leitrim and South West Fermanagh, either side of the border, and provided a safe space where conversations about past divisions could be explored openly, including how a deeper understanding of Loyalist culture can aid with the truth/reconciliation process. The Programme Manager for the Glens Centre noted that *'the research presented a new opportunity for focused discussion between communities and along the border area'* [E4]. Those who identify as Protestant in this cross-border region are in a significant minority, numbering in the low hundreds in Leitrim, but the programme successfully attracted participants from Protestant, working-class backgrounds (making up a third of the total of 160 participants), *'a good achievement as it can be challenging to engage individuals from a Protestant community in the border region'* [E4].

As the project coordinator writes, *'the culture of the Protestant community is more typically portrayed as monolithic i.e. Unionist, defensive, closed'*, but the discussions Parr's research facilitated *'presented a new opportunity for focused discussion between communities and along the border area'* [E4]. Participant feedback indicated how the research-led discussions made members of the Catholic community *'aware that the hurt is not all one sided'* and that the Protestant community has also *'struggled with its own sense of identity – that it too has to deal with loss and trauma'* [E4]. Despite having Protestant friends, one Catholic admitted that prior to the workshop they had never *'had this kind of conversation ... I would nearly go as far as saying this was inspiring! It's hard to put words to it, but I think it has given way to new thinking'*. One participant, *'delighted'* Protestants and Catholics attended, wrote there was *'never a moment of tension'*: all participants were *'attentive and generous and the discussions good humoured and lively'* [E4]. As the project coordinator observed, the programme took participants *'beyond media stereotypes and superficial portrayals'* [E4].

The Programme Manager for the IFI confirmed how Parr's work with the Glens Centre *'helped to create a lasting positive legacy for the participants and their wider communities'*, and the partnership will continue *'to play an important role in addressing the legacy of conflict, and current social and economic realities facing many rural communities'* [E5]. Given how *'a better understanding of the relationships and attitudes within those groups can help the process of reconciliation across the island [of] Ireland'*, the Glens Centre and IFI consider Parr's research as a model for further work [E5]. Future developments include options for extending the Glens Centre programme to new participants or to different regions of the island; the IFI's long-term strategy is directly informed by the *'vital evidence'* gleaned from their work with Parr, influencing



its new Connecting Communities strategy, which will embed arts and culture to facilitate new conversations and peacebuilding in the border region [E5].

The Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade also benefitted from the constructive dialogue fostered by Parr's research. Parr's *Inventing the Myth* was chosen as the centrepiece of the first event held in the Irish Secretariat's new Belfast building [E6]. It's Joint Secretary in Northern Ireland – responsible for promoting peace and reconciliation across the island of Ireland – noted how the event showcased Loyalist culture by using Parr's '*landmark study*' as the focus for a panel discussion, accompanied by performances of scenes from plays and playwrights that feature in his work [E6]. This approach ensured an audience comprised '*representatives of the two main communities in Northern Ireland, including some former combatants from both sides, as well as significant political and cultural figures*' [E6]. By putting the Secretariat '*on the map*' for those communities '*who might historically be suspicious of the Irish government's intentions in Northern Ireland*', the event's success provided the Secretariat '*a template for further cultural outreach ... undertaken in the following years*' [E6]. Parr's research thus helped to '*establish the Irish Secretariat as a venue for all communities in Northern Ireland to come together to engage in respectful dialogue and conversation*' [E6].

These benefits also enabled a new approach to dialogue in public fora. William Crawley – journalist and presenter of BBC Talkback, Northern Ireland's flagship current affairs programme – has credited the valuable public discussions enabled by Parr's work [E7]. Since 2018, Parr has been a regular discussant on the programme. Crawley has reported how '*our audiences, have benefitted greatly from [Parr's] expertise*', confirming how the research has helped to '*foster a new sense of understanding within and about Protestant working-class communities*' [E7]. These real-world insights are '*of such value*' and '*in a place with so many loud and uninformed voices competing for attention, it's a delight to have found a quietly brilliant scholar whose impact on our public conversation has already been significant*' [E7].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Ref.	Source of corroboration	Link to claimed impact
E1	Testimonial - Chris Thackaberry, Founder (Thomas Carnduff Society)	Research led to the creation and ongoing development of TCS
E2	News Article - Belfast Telegraph 16 Sept 2019	Research informed the TCS open-mic sessions, and work for Unite
E3	Testimonial - Robert Niblock, Playwright	Research provided validation and confidence to creative artists
E4	Testimonial - Project Coordinator (Glens Centre)	Research fostered new discussions among cross-border communities
E5	Testimonial - Funding Coordinator, (International Fund for Ireland)	Research fostered new discussions among cross-border communities
E6	Testimonial - Irish Joint Secretary, (Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade)	Research supported Irish Secretariat in outreach activities
E7	Testimonial - William Crawley, Presenter (BBC Radio Ulster, Talkback)	Research fostered new discussions BBC Talkback audiences