

Island cities: the case of Belfast, Northern Ireland

Abstract

The paper considers Belfast as an 'island city' with reference to issues of identity and economy and especially in connection with a series of statements from the 'Futures of Islands' briefing document prepared for the IGU's Commission on Islands meeting in Kraków in August 2014. Belfast as a contested space, a hybrid British/Irish city on the island of Ireland, exemplifies well how 'understandings of the past condition the future', whilst the Belfast Agreement which brought the Northern Ireland peace process to its culmination after decades of violence known as the 'Troubles' speaks to 'island ways of knowing, of comprehending problems – and their solutions'. Finally, Belfast certainly demonstrates that 'island peoples shape their contested futures'.

Keywords

Island cities • Belfast • Northern Ireland • islands • peace process

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Island cities

Are all cities situated on islands 'island cities'? In a strict geographical sense obviously they are, but if a set of criteria is established to define an 'island city', then only some cities on islands will have the necessary characteristics. This exercise is reminiscent of the debate carried on in island studies about what constitutes a 'small island'. Thresholds have been suggested relating to area and/or population size, but a strong case might be made to adopt an operational definition, put well by Françoise Péron who stated simply that a such islands are 'small enough to render to their inhabitants the permanent consciousness of being on an island' (Péron 2004, p. 328). Similarly, it might be suggested that an island city is one whose activities are carried out with a quotidian consciousness that they are performed within an insular setting. London, Tokyo, Jakarta and Copenhagen would be examples of cities on islands where their insular setting does not constrain or affect everyday activity. Their comparators would be mainland cities such as Paris, Beijing, New York and Stockholm, not Nassau or Las Palmas.

What then would be the operational characteristics of an island city? In the social sphere there might be a distinction from places elsewhere, with a local identity having developed. In economic terms such a city could be one that looked to the world beyond the island, its constrained setting providing neither a sufficient market for goods nor a sufficiently wide range of raw materials. Further characteristics might be sought from 'The futures of islands' briefing document prepared by the Commission on Islands for the regional meeting of the International Geographical Union in Kraków in August 2014 at which a version of this paper was presented. One pertinent phrase was 'island ways of knowing, of comprehending problems – and their solutions'. Another section spoke to 'understandings of the past condition the future' whilst a third significant expression was 'island peoples shape their

contested futures'. This paper seeks to find expression of such matters in the case of what will be argued is the 'island city' of Belfast, capital of Northern Ireland.

Identity

Belfast is a young city. Although there was a castle and some activities related to a fording point of the River Lagan as it enters the inlet of Belfast Lough, the modern settlement dates from 1603 when the land was granted to Sir Arthur Chichester by the English (and Scottish) king, James I, in recognition of Chichester's service in the wars in Ireland. So from its inception, Belfast, although situated on the island of Ireland, danced to an English tune; its very identity looked outwards. A major publication to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Belfast's charter of 1613 made this point clearly on its back-cover:

Belfast was a significant part of the story of Great Britain's rise to industrial greatness yet it was a city located not in Great Britain but in Ireland. It was one of the main theatres in which the conflicts of identity that have created modern Ireland were fought out yet both its politics and its industrial character set it wholly apart from other Irish towns (Connolly 2012).

So Belfast is situated on the island of Ireland yet has never been wholly Irish. Many of its people descend from migrants who came to Ireland from Britain from the 17th century onwards. Another migration pulse from both elsewhere in Ireland and Britain was in the 19th century when the city (so designated in 1888) industrialised thanks to engineering, chemicals and principally the manufacture of linen and the building of ships. Ireland as a whole lost population after its Great Famine in the 1840s, but, thanks to this industrialisation, Belfast's population grew massively, from 71,477 in 1841 to 349,180 in 1901; another way in which the experience of Belfast differed from that of its island.

Belfast's peoples come from two political traditions: the unionists (loyalists), largely of British descent, who are mainly Protestants and favour union with Great Britain; and the nationalists (republicans), mainly Roman Catholics of Irish origin, who would like to see Ireland as a whole free from British control. These competing groups inhabited (and still inhabit) separate, segregated parts of the city. In the 19th century Belfast was described as being 'a saturnalia of bigotry and ruffianism' (Anon 1865; see also Royle 2011) as unionists and nationalists clashed over political matters, principally the validity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland which had been proclaimed in 1801. After the First World War nationalists partially achieved their goal insofar as in 1921 26 of 32 Irish counties left the UK to form what has become the Republic of Ireland. The other six counties with a protestant, unionist majority became Northern Ireland within what then became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Belfast's nationalists and others in Northern Ireland found themselves in the 'wrong' country and there were violent struggles to change these circumstances, not least during the 30 years of the 'Troubles' from the late-1960s when civil strife led to 3530 deaths, 1521 of them in Belfast itself.

There is an island gloss to this political unrest given the seeming logicity of a politically united island, for few islands are divided (see the book on divided islands in which the present author has a chapter on Ireland (Royle 2013)). Northern Ireland became in the words of a perceptive traveller to the province during the Troubles 'a place apart' (Murphy 1979). This insular expression resonates with terms widely used in Northern Ireland for other areas of the British Isles – Great Britain is 'across the water', whilst the rest of Ireland is 'the South', both terms emphasising otherness and distance. To people living in Northern Ireland, it seems as if this distance is reciprocated for as an offshore part of the UK, Northern Ireland sometimes seems out of mind as well as out of sight of the controlling powers located in and somewhat focused upon London and Southeast England. Maybe this is why there is a growing trend towards the expression of a local identity. Whilst, unlike in Scotland, there is no meaningful pressure for political independence, in the 2011 census of Northern Ireland 29.44% of respondents recorded their identity as 'Northern Irish' as distinct from 'Irish' (28.35%) or 'British' (48.41%) (NISRA 2012). As to a Belfast identity, the local use of the term 'Belfastman' for a male from the city speaks to a distinction. In 'the South' there is variance between 'jackeens', smart, sophisticated if somewhat self-assertive urbanites from Dublin, and 'culchies', the slower but cunning country folk. This urban-rural division is found in Northern Ireland, too, with Belfast people being jackeen equivalents. In Frank McGuinness's powerful play about the Great War, *Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme* (1986), in the barracks where the soldiers are first gathered, two newcomers enter. They are cocky young men, swaggering, all bluff and banter. A recruit sitting quietly by the wall turns to a colleague and just says 'Belfast'.

Economy

As Belfast is an 'island city', its economy looked outwards. As a place of manufacture, this means it produced and still produces for export, not home consumption. Belfast had a considerable range of manufactures. An analysis of its industries in the 1890s (Royle 2007) identified 57 separate types of firms with at least 20 of them producing for export. Whilst Belfast made hats and gloves, boots and shoes, brushes and umbrellas amongst other goods for a local market, many other industries were export-focused including aerated water (Cantrell and Cochrane, now C and C, was a Belfast firm), chemicals and pumps and other engineering products. Belfast also made rather larger exported items such as ships. Harland and Wolff were one of three active shipbuilders at



Figure 1. Loyalist graffiti from the late 1970s

that time; the tragic RMS *Titanic* of 1912 was only one of many Belfast-made ships to ply the world's oceans, all the others, of course, having longer careers (Moss & Hume 1986). Also Belfast was 'Linenopolis', a name reflecting its predominance in the manufacture of linen cloth and goods. In the 18th century Belfast had been a centre where linen produced domestically in rural areas had been traded. When textile working began on a large scale in Belfast factories it was cotton that was the textile worked. However, in the 1820s a cotton mill rebuilt after a fire was recast as a linen factory; other manufacturers followed the trend and Belfast became 'Linenopolis'. There were over a hundred linen mills in 1901, employing tens of thousands of workers, mainly women. So a far greater proportion of working class women in Belfast worked outside the home than was usual for the time, granting them more freedom and control of their own lives and activities than was the case elsewhere, another distinction for Belfast. Their employers, the mill owners, banded together in the Linen Manufacturers Association, the records of which show just how focused they and their city were on an export trade:

- 1851: The Great Exhibition in London saw the "Ulster Linen trade very strongly represented by numerous exhibits".
- 1876: "The circular respecting the International Exhibition, Philadelphia, came under attention, and several of our members have made preparation to exhibit their manufactures".
- 1879: "At the Paris Exhibition the Staple Trade had its representatives in several members of our Association, all of whom gained prizes".
- 1888: "The Royal Jubilee Exhibition of British Products in Manchester last year was a great success... The exhibits, which were supplied by firms connected with the Staple Trade, represented the various processes through which flax passes" (Aiken & Royle 2013).

Linen is no longer made in Belfast and Harland and Wolff no longer makes ships. Instead the former shipyard repairs ships and oil rigs whilst manufacturing parts for wind turbines. The city's largest manufacturing firm today is the Canadian company Bombardier. This used to be Shorts, who built aircraft in Belfast from the 1920s. Whilst entire planes are no longer built, Bombardier's Belfast branch produces components for aircraft. It is the largest of a number of aeronautical companies in Belfast. The island city still looks abroad for its markets.

The future of islands

Let us turn now to the three phrases from the Commission on Islands 'Futures of Islands' briefing document to understand how

consideration of Belfast can illuminate that discourse. One was 'understandings of the past condition the future'. That the past influences the present and pushes on into the future cannot be challenged. Any city on any island, displays forms and features from its past; this is the concept of the palimpsest. Northern Ireland, the province of which Belfast is capital, is a territory whose very existence is a reflection of past activity, dating back to the first military incursions from England into Ireland in the 12th century. The English never managed to subdue the whole of Ireland by force and in the 17th century adopted an alternative strategy of trying to ensure a quiescent population by encouraging settlement from England and Scotland. This was the 'Plantation' and it was particularly prominent in parts of Ulster in the northeast of Ireland; the walled city of Londonderry is one prominent souvenir of the process. In addition, the two coastal counties of Antrim and Down were subject to private migration streams. This affected Belfast, which straddles the River Lagan, there the boundary between these two counties. These migrations ensured that there was a Protestant majority in Ireland's northeast, but the Plantation did not bring peace to the island and rebellions against British rule continued, most notably in 1798. After this, in 1801, Ireland was brought within the UK rather than being governed separately. This policy also did not bring quietude and, as was noted above, Belfast with its substantial Catholic Irish minority was especially prone to unrest (Royle 2011). Pressures for Irish withdrawal from the UK – Home Rule – grew during the 19th century and measures were introduced in parliament to bring it about but were defeated. The Great War postponed further progress but in 1916 the Easter Rising in Dublin with its proclamation of an independent Irish Republic brought matters to the boil once more. The bloody quelling of the rising by British forces only postponed change until the war was over. Also in 1916 was the Battle of the Somme, where on 1 July almost 5500 men of the 36th (Ulster) Division, many from Belfast, were killed. Most of those in this division were Protestants who before the war had joined the Ulster Defence Force ready to fight in Ireland to oppose Home Rule. After such sacrifices, it became politically impossible to consign Ulster's Protestants into a home-ruled Ireland whilst the Easter Rising had demonstrated the practical and political impossibility of keeping the rest of Ireland within the UK. Partition became inevitable and was duly delivered in 1921, although not without bloodshed and a civil war in the new state. Partition, the Troubles, all can be explained by the concept of the palimpsest, the past influencing the present. This is not quite the sense of the phrase from the Futures of Islands document, which states that '*understandings of the past condition the future*', but the ending of the Troubles certainly illustrate such understanding perfectly. The island city of Belfast played its part in the form of the 1998 Belfast Agreement, sometimes also called the 'Good Friday Agreement' the day it was signed, 10 April, being Good Friday that year. It had two parts: an accommodation between the local political parties and an international agreement between the British and Irish governments. This is not the place to detail the complexities; suffice it to say that the Belfast Agreement was the culmination of a long peace process ending the Troubles. Under it, the nationalists, the largely Catholic republican groups such as Sinn Féin, widely regarded as being the political wing of the paramilitary Irish Republican Army (IRA), abandoned the armed struggle in favour of engagement in purely political processes to try to secure their continued goal of a united Ireland. Sinn Féin took its place in a power-sharing devolved government of Northern Ireland, which still operates. At present the First Minister is the Belfastman Peter Robinson, once a hard-line unionist who was deputy to the initial First Minister, Reverend Ian Paisley of the Democratic Unionist Party. The Deputy First Minister has always been Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin, widely believed to have

been an IRA commander. There is no official opposition; power has to be shared. The Belfast Agreement and the peace process of which it was the culmination have been seen as a model for areas in conflict elsewhere. Since the agreement Belfast itself has had Lord Mayors from Sinn Féin, something that would have been unthinkable up to and during the Troubles. The first was Alex Maskey in 2002, who displayed both the Irish Tricolour and the British Union Jack in his office in City Hall.

The Peace Process was brokered by outsiders, by American and British politicians, but those on the ground who agreed to it were from the island of Ireland and thus it might be that the Belfast Agreement illustrates a second phrase from the Futures of Islands document: 'Island ways of knowing, of comprehending problems – and their solutions'. Belfast has changed since the Troubles. There has been considerable investment in transport and other infrastructure from new river crossings to public art. British and international hotel and retail companies have entered the local market. The economy is stronger, the social and entertainment opportunities greater. Northern Ireland has now a more positive place on the world stage, even hosting the G8 Summit in 2013. Belfast has tourism now; that was an economic sector almost completely closed to it during the Troubles. That some of the motivation for this is dark tourism in many ways does not matter. It is economic activity and the people who come to see the traditional murals and other remembrances of conflict inevitably will also be exposed to more positive images of what is an attractive city with its plethora of grand buildings and a splendid setting surrounded on two sides by mountains and a third by Belfast Lough. Making a virtue from disaster can be good business: Belfast's most recent and successful major tourist destination is the Titanic Building, a £100m project which opened in time for the centenary of the sinking of the *Titanic* in 2012.

'Island peoples shape their contested futures'

A final phrase from the Future of Islands document that resonates with Belfast is the more negative 'Island peoples shape their contested futures'. The power-sharing executive has not provided good government; agreement between the factions sharing power has rarely been seen. Nor has the city finally escaped its contested past. Mention was made above of the merits of dark tourism to Belfast. Dark tourism gives people a frisson of fear from being where something unpleasant but significant happened; at the least dark tourism can be instructive. A Polish example, visited by many delegates to the IGU meeting at which this paper was presented, is Auschwitz, dark tourism of the most sable, coal black, blackboard black hue. Dark tourism



Figure 2. The Titanic Building, 2013

usually commemorates past events, but not always in Belfast. Here the consumers of dark tourism visit not just historic sites, but those where the activity commemorated is still on-going. The Shankill-Falls peace line is one excellent example. Geographer Fred Boal wrote a noted paper about Belfast's Shankill-Falls divide just before the outbreak of the Troubles (Boal 1969). He discoursed upon the different activities and parallel lives of the Protestant people of the Shankill contrasted to the Roman Catholics of the neighbouring Falls. People read different newspapers, played different sports, worshipped the same Christian god but under different rites expressed in different buildings. And, of course, their political aspirations were different. There were few friendships and fewer liaisons across the divide. Come the Troubles in 1969 the Shankill-Falls divide became an interface, a site not just of tension but of actual violence. People withdrew from what had become a front line back into the relative safety of the more central areas of 'their' parts of this segregated city. Barricades were thrown up to stop penetration into the areas of the 'other'; barricades built by the communities who sought such safety as they provided. Over time, the authorities took on the task of building and maintaining the barricades, which became known as 'peace lines'. Fred Boal himself revisited the Shankill-Falls divide many times to record the changing architecture of the increasingly high and stark division. By the early 21st century the barrier had three layers: a concrete lower section of about 3 metres, topped by a solid metal fence of about 2 metres with then a wire fence of about another 4 metres. Today maturing trees have been planted on the Shankill side, which is open space, and the wall itself has been subject to graffiti in a manner reminiscent of West Berlin. This is where the tourists go, on open topped tour buses or especially in Belfast's notable taxi tours where visitors are given a vivid if usually one-sided commentary on political matters dependent on the views of their particular driver. It is on-going dark tourism for this is where people were burnt out of their houses, were assaulted; where riots happened, where deaths occurred and whilst the situation is more peaceful now, the peace line walls are still there, still separating people.

Conclusion

Belfast is an island city with an historical society and economy that largely looked outwards, whilst its story and current circumstances reflect much of the wording of the Future of Islands document. That Belfast has moved on was celebrated above: 'Island ways of knowing, of comprehending problems – and their solutions'. Yet perhaps only some of its tourists realize



Figure 3. Dark tourism to the Shankill-Falls peace line, 2014

that they are not in an open-air museum, that the Shankill-Falls peace line and the others in the city remain there because they still perform their original function of keeping the neighbouring Others apart. The authorities see the walls as presenting the wrong message, of trapping Belfast in its divided past. In 2013 a plan was announced from the Northern Ireland government to remove all of them within 10 years (Belfast Telegraph 2013a); in 2014 the British Prime Minister declared in parliament that the walls must be taken down (Belfast Telegraph 2014). However, such plans and declarations do not necessarily take into account the wishes of the local people. A report in the Belfast Telegraph (2013b) cited Adrian Johnston, chairman of the International Fund for Ireland, a body set up during the peace process, stating that his organisation could not put a deadline on re-building confidence: 'Interface walls can only be removed when the time is right and that time will be determined by the communities themselves'. 'Island peoples shape their contested futures' indeed.

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