

# **The Ulster Boys: reflections on masculinity within Northern Ireland's Protestant community**

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## **Introduction**

According to MacInnes (1998: 2), 'masculinity does not exist as the property, character trait or aspect of identity of individuals'. Rather, 'it is an ideology produced by men as a result of the threat posed to the survival of the patriarchal sexual division of labour by the rise of modernity' (p. 45). Whilst the influence of a perceived 'crisis of masculinity' can be overstated, it is irrefutable that many of the traditional sources of male (or, to be more precise, masculine) identity have been eroded throughout the western world (Seidler, 1997). That is not to say that new sources for the construction of masculinity cannot be found. Nor is it intended to imply that men have never previously experienced conflicts of identity. This lecture discusses the construction of masculinity and the related issue of conflicted identity within the context of Northern Ireland's Protestant community. It begins with some general observations and proceeds to discuss the trajectory of three celebrity Ulster Protestants, two of them sportsmen, and their respective engagement with conflicted identity.

As Sugden (1996: 129) notes in his sociological study of boxing, Northern Ireland, and, most significantly, its major city, Belfast, has always been regarded as a home to 'hard men'. According to Sugden, 'the "hard men" of the pre-1950s were those who worked in

the shipyards, mills and factories, inhabiting a proud, physically tough and exclusively male occupational culture which cast a long shadow over popular recreation outside the workplace'. Sugden is wrong about the mills in which large numbers of women worked over an extended period of time. He is right, however, to draw attention to the importance of the shipyards in terms of the social construction of masculinity in Northern Ireland particularly within the Protestant or unionist community. He is also correct in his assertion that over time the traditional 'hard man' was replaced, at least in working-class iconography, by the paramilitary. Again this was especially true for working-class Protestant or loyalist communities. Whilst there was (and has always been) room in the Irish republican movement for the cerebral. The main loyalist paramilitary groupings such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) were always more attractive to body-builders than to thinkers and so the names (and emotive nicknames) of Michael Stone ('Stoner'), Billy Wright ('King Rat') and Johnny Adair ('Mad Dog') came to replace the street-fighting men of years gone by including Buck Alec and Silver McKee in popular renditions of 'hard' masculinity (Sugden, 1996). To quote from Eoin McNamee's (2004) novel, *Resurrection Man*, a fictionalised account of the murderous activities of a loyalist gang (the so-called 'Shankill Butchers'), these men provided the means by which others 'could align themselves to unpredictable violence' (p. 27). The 1970s and 1980s were good to the men of violence who were regarded by many in their own close-knit communities as 'favoured and visionary....Defenders of the faith'.( p. 145). Indeed, for many young men during this period, for example those who were followers of local soccer teams, the paramilitaries

assumed heroic status, the terracing songs celebrating acts of loyalist violence (Bairner, 1999).

Even if this transition from one version of masculinity to another is linked in part to a crisis of masculinity, brought on above all by deindustrialisation, it must also be set within a political context in which identity is constantly (or at least perceived to be constantly) under threat. Ulster Protestants are, as Steve Bruce (1992: 7) notes, ‘predominantly descendants of the Scots (and some English) who settled in the north-east of Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’. According to Bruce, ‘that the settlers were of a different “race”, were of a different religion and were in economic competition with the native Irish meant that relations between the two groups were generally distant and periodically degenerated into open warfare’ (p. 7). This situation would be exacerbated in the twentieth century with Ulster’s Protestant population clinging tenaciously to the state that was set up after partition and to a position of economic superiority, both of which were increasingly under threat from Irish nationalism and deindustrialisation respectively. As poet and critic Tom Paulin, himself an Ulster Protestant, comments, ‘it was bizarre to grow up in a statelet that had no future. The root of it all is all is Calvinism. The sense of being persecuted and a member of an elect minority, feeding its persecution complex’ (McKay, 2000: 296). One of the more damaging results of this condition has been a lack of ease with ideas and an increasing inability to present an articulate defence of core beliefs, thereby explaining Tom Nairn’s somewhat hysterical description of the Ulster Protestants as ‘this particular band of

tonguetied sons of bastards' ghosts' (Nairn, 1981: 233). In the scarcely less measured words of Shankill Road born artist, Dermot Seymour.

Being a Protestant, for me, is like having no head, in the sense that you are not allowed to think. It is hard to hold an individual thought about anything...Out of that inability to think comes a lot of bizarre extreme behaviour, like the Shankill Butchers. (McKay, 2000: 302)

Perhaps it was this that led Geoffrey Bell (1976: 11) to comment, 'by all normal standards the behaviour of the Protestants of Northern Ireland is peculiar'. In modern times, this may well have been more pronounced as a consequence of political and economic change (Bairner, 2005a). Thus, according to Steve Bruce (1994: 39), 'the first and most obvious feature of the recent history of Ulster unionists is displacement'. This in turn has led to 'a decline from security to precariousness' (p. 40) and to 'a sense of inadequacy' (p. 62). A privileged group has increasingly found the basis of its privileges threatened by forces beyond its control. Thus, the tattoos of loyalist prisoners (Bairner, 2001) and the songs of loyalist football fans (Bairner, 1999) were simultaneously a celebration and a cry for help or, at the very least, for recognition. Elsewhere in the world of football, an outstanding example of the contested identity of Ulster Protestant men is provided by an examination of the life and times of the late George Best who died on 25 November 2005 as a direct consequence of his longstanding struggle with alcoholism.

## **George Best RIP**

At the peak of his career, George Best was unquestionably one of the world's greatest footballers. Furthermore, those who refer to Best in terms of wasted talent and a career that ended prematurely forget that he played almost 750 professional football games and also ignore the fact that few of the world's great players, and especially few forwards, have succeeded in maintaining peak performance levels over an extended period. Furthermore, as well as demonstrating his undoubted talent on the field of play, Best was also a celebrity who attracted widespread media attention not least because of an extravagant lifestyle away from the game.

Best was buried in his native city of Belfast on 3 December 2005. Although funeral attendances are difficult to gauge and fewer people lined the streets of east Belfast and assembled in the grounds of the Northern Ireland parliament building at Stormont than had been predicted, Best's funeral was undeniably the largest to be seen in Belfast since that of Irish Republican Army hunger striker Bobby Sands in 1981. The funeral service at Stormont was a curious blend of working-class Ulster Protestantism and show business – 'suffused as it was with the modern cult of stardom and the ancient tribal cults of Ulster', as described by Bryan Appleyard (2005) - perfectly capturing one of the central dualities in George Best's life (Bairner, 2006).

The purpose of this part of the lecture is to expand, in the wake of Best's death, upon two studies that have already been published (Bairner, 2004; Bairner, 2005b) and to focus, in particular, on the relationship between one of the world's greatest ever soccer player and his parental culture. Put simply, my main concern here is with George Best as an Ulster Protestant man. To this end, although the bulk of this discussion will centre on Best himself, the lecture also contains general comments on the relationship between Ulster Protestantism and identity formation, above all the social construction of masculinity, as well as specific references to other 'celebrity' Ulster Protestants, in particular the rock star, Van Morrison and former world snooker champion, Alex Higgins. Van Morrison's biographer writes, 'Here was a man whose social skills short-circuited some time back, forced to function in a world that operated along entirely unfamiliar lines' (Heylin, 2002, p.496). It is not overly fanciful to suggest that this description of Morrison could be equally well applied to the Ulster unionist family as a whole, and particularly to its male members, not least because crises of masculinity have so often been attributed to loss of control and status (Bairner, 1999; Bairner, 2001; Segal, 1990).

It is only since the start of the new millennium that academics and intellectuals have turned their attention to George Best. That they have done so at all tells us more about the celebrity status of David Beckham, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan and a handful of other media sports stars than about Best himself. As Cashmore (2002: 102) notes in his study of Beckham, 'no other footballer of the time got remotely the same kind of attention as Best'. According to Giulianotti and Gerrard (2001: 135), 'Best's celebrity celebrated the new working-class dream of individualism, easy consumption and spectacular mobility'.

However, whilst the relationship between social class and the problems that flow from rapid social mobility is clearly an important ingredient in the George Best story, it is equally important to recognise the extent to which class itself interacts with other aspects of an individual's material circumstances in influential ways. The experiences of growing up in a working-class community in Belfast in the 1950s and in the north east of England in the 1970s or in Essex in the 1980s and then becoming wealthy and idolised may certainly be compared. But we must also seek to recognise major differences that are rooted in local and temporal particularisms (being an Ulster Protestant man, for example) and are equally, if not even more, influential.

It is undeniable that Best, like a number of other controversial media football stars, was a victim of social dislocation – in his particular case from his working-class roots and also from his place of origin. In Best's case, it can be argued that he was also affected as a result of dislocation from his parental culture, by being an Ulster Protestant at a club, Manchester United, well known for its close relationship with Catholic Ireland (Bairner, 2004) and by having to come to terms with a world in which Irish Catholics customarily form strong bonds of attachment wherever they go in the world whereas Ulster Protestant migrants are often condemned to social atomism. Whilst all identities may be regarded as socially constructed and multivocal, social dislocation creates the conditions for specific forms of conflicted identity. To that extent, it will be suggested here that because of his partial separation from his parental culture, Best, like Van Morrison and also Alex

Higgins, revealed even more clearly than most the contingent and therefore fragile aspect of identity.

Andrew Parker has recently built on his earlier efforts to understand David Beckham by drawing upon psychoanalytical theory (Parker, 2004). Without fully accepting that we need to embark on a course in psychoanalysis in an attempt to understand the trajectory of the lives of media sports stars, it can certainly be argued that we need to familiarise ourselves with the material facts, in the broadest sense of that term, of an individual's life rather than assume that in considering the lives of media football stars, we are dealing with a collection of roughly similar types of people exposed to identical pressures and likely to react to these in the same manner. Although the pressures that confront them may well be similar, the stars themselves are inevitably very different and nowhere is this more apparent than when we consider their childhood experiences.

### **Belfast Boy(s)**

As Best (1991: 5) records in his first autobiography written with Ross Benson, he was born in Belfast on 22 May 1946 'into a solid, working-class family, Protestant by religion, decent and honest in its beliefs'. Joe Lovejoy (1999: 9) similarly writes, 'George Best was born into a solid working class background, Presbyterian *for those interested in such details*' (My emphasis). Only someone who is relatively unfamiliar with the labelling that dominates Northern Irish society could imagine that these facts might conceivably be



without interest, particularly if one's main concern is with the construction and contestation of identity. The question, 'what are you?', is regularly asked even if not directly as people negotiate their relations with 'the other sort' with countless different objectives, ranging from the romantic to the murderous. Lovejoy (1999: 15) describes the Bests as a religious family 'in an entirely non-political way' and as Free Presbyterian without 'any of the bigotry associated with Ulster sectarianism'. This is slightly at odds with Best's own account. In his later autobiography, Best (2002: 32) asserts, 'religion has never bothered me and there is no way you could ever call my family bigots'. However, he adds, 'if you were a Protestant, you joined the Orange Order, as I did, and my dad and grandad both had spells as master of our local lodge'. The fact is, of course, that not all Ulster Protestants join the Orange Order, a point that is forcefully made in Sam Hanna Bell's novel, *The Hollow Ball* (1961), which revolves around the life of a young footballer (Bairner, 2000). Indeed, Best (2002: 33) admits that, even in his childhood years, the Orange Order's Twelfth of July demonstrations constituted 'a sectarian festival'. Furthermore, although George Best grew up in the years before the troubles, he was conscious from an early age of those sectarian tensions that lay just beneath the surface of an apparently peaceful society and would come to the fore with deadly consequences in the late 1960s.

Indeed, Best cites sectarianism as one of the reasons why, having passed his eleven plus examination, he subsequently left Grosvenor High School and completed his education instead at Lisnasharragh Intermediate. According to Best (2002: 32), he was constantly subjected to sectarian abuse on his journeys to and from grammar school because

‘Grosvenor High School was in the middle of a Catholic area and the kids from the other schools, like the Sacred Heart and places like that, knew from my uniform that I was Protestant’. It should be added of course that Best also lists other factors that made his short stay at Grosvenor an unhappy one. These included having to travel some distance to his new school, no longer being with his old friends from the Cregagh estate where he lived and, above all one surmises, the fact that rugby union as opposed to soccer was the sport of preference at his new school. Best (1991: 14) writes, ‘in an indirect way it was Belfast’s religious barriers that made me into a soccer player’. Whilst this may be something of an exaggeration, it is undeniable that the young Best grew up knowing that in Belfast and in Northern Ireland more generally religious affiliation mattered.

Arguably religious differences were less important in Northern Ireland during George Best’s childhood than they had been in the past and would soon become again. As he notes, ‘the troubles had not started and on the Cregagh estate, the vast, sprawling council estate where I was brought up, Catholic and Protestant lived side by side and no one gave much thought to that’ (Best, 1991: 13). He recalls that his mother’s best friend was a Catholic. Yet, as he puts it, even then ‘everyone knew where they belonged’ (Best, 1991: 14).

It is worth noting that Jimmy McIlroy, a Northern Ireland player (and a Protestant), who was born in 1931, makes no reference to the religious divide in an autobiography written in 1960 (McIlroy, 1960). To a modern audience this might seem surprising not least given that McIlroy grew up in the village of Lambeg, a name popularly associated with

the Orange tradition and specifically with the bass drums that are beaten at many Orange Order demonstrations. Certainly another former Northern Ireland international player, Derek Dougan, born in 1938, is far more candid about religion and sectarian attitudes in his autobiography (Dougan, 1972). McIlroy's failure to make any reference to religious and political division may reflect in part the fact that he almost certainly grew up in an exclusively Protestant environment – the Catholic 'other' was scarcely an issue, given that to all intents and purposes it simply did not exist. It should also be noted, however, that McIlroy's youth was spent at a time of relatively tranquillity in Northern Ireland, a situation that was only beginning to change as George Best entered his teenage years. Finally one can also add that the memory plays tricks with all of us as Van Morrison's recollections of his childhood exposure to 'them and us' issues clearly reveals.

Born in 1945, Morrison also grew up in east Belfast which he recalled in 1986:

East Belfast was totally Protestant, there was a couple of Catholics. But...  
there wasn't any problems, there wasn't any friction or anything like  
that (Quoted in Heylin, 2002, p. 11).

Again one is struck by the air of blissful ignorance that is perfectly in keeping with the impression still fondly held by many Ulster unionists that their 'wee country' was an unproblematic place until a few republicans and left-wing fellow travellers decided to create problems at the end of the 1960s. What is abundantly clear however is the extent to which young Protestants such as Morrison and Best grew up in virtual isolation from the

Catholic community in Northern Ireland. A closer acquaintance with Catholics was about to emerge, however, as they took the first tentative steps along those career paths that were to bring them fame and fortune together with troubled lives.

### **A question of identity**

Of course, the conflict in Northern Ireland has never been solely or even primarily about religion. National identity is what really matters. In this respect, Best's story is similar to that of so many people who have grown up in the pro-British tradition of Northern Ireland but have become largely indistinguishable from other Irish people in the eyes of outsiders. His first wife, Angie Best (2001), refers repeatedly to his Irishness – 'this little Irishman' (p. 6), 'this drunken little Irishman' (p. 19), 'the Irish charm' (p. 19), 'the wild Irish charms' (p. 19) and 'the charming little Irishman' (p. 56). As Best (2002: 302) recalled that was also the perception of the Metropolitan Police officer who arrested him in 1984 on a drink driving charge and addressed him as 'You little Irish wanker. You Irish scum. Another piece of Irish dirt' (Best, 2002: 326).

Best contributed to this particular reading of his identity, describing himself in Michael Parkinson's (1975: 61) biography as 'a mad Irish sod'. Burchill (2002: 8) confirms this view, comparing Tom Jones with Best and commenting that 'above all, these Celtic princes drank for Wales and Ireland respectively'. Others have referred to Best's Irish, and Celtic, ancestry in more analytical terms. For example, journalist and broadcaster

Parkinson (1975: 57) quotes that doyen of sports writers, Hugh McIlvanney who comments on Best:

I suspect that deep in his nature there is a strong self-destructive impulse. The Celts, whether Irish, or Welsh, or Scots, whether sportsmen or artists or politicians, have always been pretty strong in the self-destructive department. If hell did not exist the Celts would have invented it. Sometimes I think they did. With George Best I have frequently had the impression that he felt uncomfortable when things were going too well.

Parkinson (1975: 7) also pursues this line of inquiry when he suggests that ‘people who like theories about genes will be interested to know that Anne Best [Best’s late mother] is of pure Irish stock but Dick Best’s family were immigrants from Scotland’. One would certainly wish to question the very notion of pure Irishness contained in this statement. In other respects though Parkinson’s comment brings us closer to a more complex truth about Best’s identity. Whilst the Ulster Protestant can be dismissed in England as just another Irishman or, more generally, as a Celt, in Northern Ireland itself, his or her perceived identity is unlikely to be either Celtic or Irish. Indeed, even those Ulster Protestants who do want to celebrate their Irishness recognise the problems associated with their attempts at self-identification.

As Belfast librarian John Gray expresses the dilemma, ‘my imagined identity is Irish, and my desired identity is Irish, but I am very specifically Northern Irish’ (McKay, 2000: 71-

2). On the other hand, 'when I go to England it is not exactly a foreign country, but it is not my country' (McKay, 2000: 71). Caught betwixt and between, in matters of identity as in so many other ways, the Ulster Protestant community has come to regard itself as what David Dunseith has called 'an embattled minority' (McKay, 2000: 26) – with special and potentially dangerous implications for those men who wish to cast themselves in the role of defenders of family and faith. Although this does not apply to Best, Morrison or Higgins, it is to this community rather than to some imagined Ireland that they owe their 'national' identity. That said, all three men have, in their different ways, sought to reconcile themselves with particular readings of Irishness whilst, it can be argued, adhering in varying degrees to their community's traditional understanding of dominant masculinity.

Far more than football, or sport in general, music in Northern Ireland in the 1960s was relatively successful at transcending ethno-sectarian division. Then, the band that first brought Van Morrison to the attention of a wider audience, played regularly at St Theresa's Hall in nationalist west Belfast even before the band had acquired any Catholic members (Heylin, 2002). Indeed for much of his musical career Morrison has sought to reconcile Ireland's two main cultural traditions. Making a similar genealogical error to that made by Burchill, Parkinson and McIlvanney in relation to Best, a former acquaintance of Morrison, Hilary Sanderson, recalls, 'He was always searching, inquisitive. I felt that he definitely wanted to go back to his Celtic roots' (Quoted in Heylin, 2002, p. 353). Paddy Moloney of The Chieftains folk group is even more certain

when he comments, 'I think...Van was searching for his Irish roots' (Quoted in Heylin, 2002, p. 416).

It was this quest, albeit for largely imagined roots, that led Morrison to work with another Irish folk band, Moving Hearts, in the early 1980s and with The Chieftains themselves between 1987 and 1989. But Morrison is not Celtic by origin or even Irish in the same formal sense that southern Catholics such as Moloney are or, somewhat more problematically perhaps, northern nationalists perceive themselves to be. Indeed, since no identity category can be wholly unequivocal, Morrison's ambivalence towards his Irishness is perhaps simply an example of a widespread phenomenon, namely the contested nature of Irishness itself (Kiberd, 1995).

According to Heylin (2002: 431), 'possibly the experience of playing in Ireland itself served as a reminder of the north/south divide that separated Morrison's own band...from Moloney's'. That is certainly how the relationship is recalled by Arty McGlynn, one of Morrison's band at the time:

...it was a mismatch...We're all from Northern Ireland, and Van is very Northern...[so] there was a culture of tension on [that] tour  
It was the first time this had ever happened, these two extremes...  
There was huge frictions, no doubt about that.  
(Quoted in Heylin, 2002, p. 431)

Kevin Conneff of The Chieftains also recalls difficulties during that period:

There were times where he [Morrison] would get into a mood, usually alcohol was involved, and I didn't want to be near him.

(Quoted in Heylin, 2002, p. 431).

Irish but not entirely comfortable in the company of other Irish people, Morrison at that time was a one-man microcosm of the liberal tendency within the Ulster unionist tradition. As he moved to Manchester United, Best was also about to begin a journey during which the combination of Irishness (and more generally Catholicism) as expressed at Manchester United. and Scottish Presbyterianism would inevitably influence subsequent events.

A Catholic ethos undeniably dominated Manchester United during Best's great years transmitted by manager Matt Busby, his assistant Jimmy Murphy and players such as Pat Crerand, Nobby Stiles, and the southern Irishmen, Shay Brennan, Tony Dunne and briefly, Johnny Giles. Writer and journalist Eamon Dunphy who also spent a short time at the club believes that it was Busby who had actually given Manchester United its Catholic identity. According to Dunphy (cited in Scally, 1998: 90), 'Matt identified character with Catholicism, and he believed that character was the key to success in professional sport'. This was surely an alien environment for a young Ulster Protestant to find himself in. It is true that Best was to be followed to Old Trafford by an eminent group of players whose background he shared. These included Jimmy Nicholl, Sammy



McIlroy, David McCreery, Tommy Jackson and Norman Whiteside. It is Best, however, who continues to stand head and shoulders above the rest not only the eyes of Ulster Protestant Manchester United fans. By the end of the 1990s in a poll conducted by a supporters' magazine, he was voted second in the all time list of Manchester United greats with only Eric Cantona ahead of him. The fact that he is one of theirs' has inevitably been an added source of pride for his co-religionists. Nevertheless, his origins did not turn Northern Irish Catholics against him or the club that he played for. But how well prepared emotionally was Best to deal with the triple dislocation that he had suffered?

### **Being a celebrity 'Prod'**

Describing the travails of certain sports stars, Whannel (2002) makes reference to Critcher's (1979) use of the concept of 'dislocation' to describe soccer stars for whom remaining working-class was not an option but who nevertheless sought to resist incorporation into a middle-class way of life. According to Whannel (2002: 51), 'George Best is the archetypal dislocated football hero whose talent, personality and background were insufficient to withstand the pressure, both on and off the field'. Best's dislocation, however, was not rooted solely in an inability to negotiate rapid social mobility; he was also dislocated both spatially, and it will be argued, culturally. Like many other players in the years after the abolition of the minimum wage, Best was faced with the problem of dealing with unaccustomed wealth. But he was also a young labour migrant who had left

behind family and friends in the quest for sporting success. In the opinion of his first wife, 'George was too young at the age of fifteen to go off to Manchester United; I think he should have been made to finish school' (Best, 2001: 57). Indeed his first visit to Manchester lasted only one night before homesickness set in (Best, 2002). Had he decided not to go back, both English football and Manchester United would have suffered. One can only speculate though on the consequences for Best himself, just as one can only refer speculatively to another possible source of his dislocation – the fact that he found himself separated from his parental Ulster Protestant culture.

The Calvinism of Ulster-Scottish Presbyterianism is a difficult influence to shake off. At its most sinister it is the world of R. L. Stevenson's 'Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', that Manichean creation of which George Best was arguably a modern incarnation. As his first wife recalls, 'when he was drunk, George could go either way – nastiness and meanness, or flirtation – but when he was sober he was quiet and withdrawn' (Best, 2002: 58). He is clearly capable of jealous rage as is acknowledged by his second wife who also admits that their relationship was punctuated by instances of domestic violence (Best, 2005). Whannel (2002: 113) refers to Best's 'objectification of women' and there can be no doubt that his approach to gender relations was often reprehensible. Indeed, according to Whannel (2002: 127), Best's faults and failings are such that his life 'has been transformed into a moral homily – a warning, like a nineteenth-century moral tract, concerning the dangers of giving way to emotion, desire, hedonism and alcohol'. Nevertheless, Best's chosen way of life did not lead to universal condemnation. But it has clearly been at odds with some of basic precepts of his parental culture.

Growing up in a good-living and God-fearing Protestant family has tempted many a young man (and woman) to use alcohol to overcome personal diffidence with highly unpredictable consequences. In this respect, Best had more in common with Morrison, who includes Best in a list of exiled Irish geniuses in his song, *Too Long in Exile*, and with former world snooker champion Higgins, also ‘a product of his time and upbringing in Protestant Belfast’ (Borrows, 2002: 17), than with some of the English-born football players along with whom he has tended to be categorised.

Higgins was born in Belfast in 1949 and, although raised in the south of the city, experienced a similar Protestant working-class upbringing to those of Best and Morrison. Arguably his resultant demons have proved even harder to exorcise than theirs. This draws admiration in certain quarters – for example from Liam Gallagher of Oasis:

What about that Alex Higgins?...He’s off his tits. All that money and fame and shit and he’s blown the lot. What a fucking way to go. I hope that happens to me. One big fucking blowout. Top.

(Quoted in Borrows, 2002, p. 1)

In the relatively staid world of professional snooker, however, Higgins’s increasingly erratic behaviour came to be regarded with growing unease. Alcohol abuse, a suicide attempt, drugs and domestic violence all began to feature prominently in the Higgins saga. In 1990, Higgins decided to vent his anger on fellow Northern Irish professional, Dennis

Taylor, a Catholic from Co. Tyrone. According to Higgins, despite playing for Northern Ireland in international competition, Taylor was ‘not fit to wear...the red hand of Ulster’ (Quoted in Borrows, 2002, pp. 276-7). It is reported that he then threatened to have Taylor shot on the occasion of his next visit to Northern Ireland (Borrows, 2002).

Borrows (2002: 277) seeks to partially explain Higgins’s behaviour with reference to his parental culture.

It was a curiously sectarian and uncharacteristically patriotic deliberation from an avowedly apolitical creature. Somehow he had fallen into that alien groove. It could have expressed a need to crawl back into the protestant womb in which he grew up or, more likely, to be a childish attempt to hit out with whatever weapons might be to hand.

One suspects that the two possible explanations are not mutually exclusive and that Higgins’s apparently infantile difficulty with presenting himself to the outside world are closely linked to his roots.

According to Angie Best (2001: 7), George had ‘an amazing brain, but he was never given the opportunity to use it’. It would be highly invidious to compare George Best with the psychopathic loyalist killers who terrorised Belfast in the 1970s and were mentioned at the start of this lecture. But his behaviour was, at times, undeniably bizarre

and extreme. Moreover, Best was by no means alone in this respect amongst the Ulster Protestant community's celebrities. For example Keith Altham, an NME reporter who first met Van Morrison in 1965 comments, 'the most disturbing thing about Van is that he's disturbed and it's something to deal with someone like that' (Quoted in Heylin, 2002, p. x-xi). One feature of this unfamiliar world was the fact that it was not one to which many Ulster Protestants belonged. George Best must have experienced a similar feeling of exposure to the unfamiliar when he left Northern Ireland as a boy to join Manchester United.

### **The Best of times**

Best and the other celebrities with whom he can be compared grew up in Belfast before the troubles and had left their native shores long before the end of the 1960s when the simmering tensions of which they had only partially been aware reached boiling point. Despite those tensions, the 1950s were a relatively tranquil period in Northern Ireland's turbulent history. As Patterson (2002: 183) notes, 'attitudinal change was in part a reflection of important social developments. The post-war improvement in living standards meant that the arrival of the 'consumer society', while not displacing traditional fixations, drained them of some of their emotional centrality'. Best reflected on this when confronted with the violence of the 1970s. He writes, 'the streets were no longer full of kids kicking a ball about but of British soldiers and tanks' (Best, 2002: 173). One of his cousins was killed, caught in crossfire and almost certainly struck by a British army bullet. Yet in many ways this was a world from which Best had managed to escape. Had

he been growing up a decade later who knows how things might have turned out? But as things turned out, Best found it relatively easy to speak and write about Northern Ireland in ways that pleased even the most exacting of community relations activists.

This leads to an important aspect of Best's cross-community appeal. He comments, 'creed and colour have never been an issue for me. I just believe in each to his own, unless that involves hurting someone else, which is wrong whichever religion or political dogma you believe in' (Best, 2002: 34). With specific reference to his birthplace, he suggested, 'you would have to be pretty naïve to come from Belfast and believe that there is only one religion doing wrong and it is not the one you believe in. There is good and bad on both sides and it takes two to make a war, which is what we've had in Northern Ireland for all these years' (Best: 2002: 233). Best received death threats during his playing career purportedly from republicans. Loyalists on the other hand offered to help him to escape from the open prison to which he was sent in 1984 for a drink driving offence aggravated by assault on a police officer (Best, 2002). He declined the offer and consistently avoided becoming embroiled in the ethno-sectarian divisions that have dominated life in Northern Ireland since the formation of the state. Not for Best the descent into sectarian abuse that characterised Higgins's confrontation with Dennis Taylor.

It is also important to recognise that in this respect Best practised what he preached. At the personal level many of his closest friends in football were Catholics, including Pat Crerand and the late Shay Brennan. Moreover, in terms of sports policy, his call for an all-Ireland national team appears ecumenical in the extreme. This personal association

with Catholics also leads us to a far more contentious theory about Best's personal appeal and also the complexity of his engagement with being an Ulster Protestant man.

It is difficult to argue this point without appearing to imply that Ireland is a nation of drunks. Undeniably though, Best's drinking habits, while explicable in part in relation to his Calvinist upbringing, certainly brought him into contact with a way of life more commonly associated, at least in its relatively guilt free manifestation, with Irish Catholic society. Although Irish Catholicism has its temperance wing, seldom in the modern era has this been either as strident or as influential as the anti-alcohol lobby associated with Free Presbyterianism. Much has been made of David Beckham's transgressive power – 'new man' and 'gay icon' (Burchill, 2002; Cashmore, 2002; Whannel, 2002). But Best has also behaved transgressively by taking the stereotype of the Ulster Protestant – the churchgoing abstainer who 'hauds it in' – and turning it on its head (Bairner, 2004).

Whilst many Ulster Protestants, even those in the public eye, might appear repressed, wary of strangers and anally retentive, Best frequently defied the stereotype or at least gave the appearance of doing so. Time and again, he, and also for that matter Morrison and Higgins, have beaten the 'authentic' Irish at what has traditionally been regarded as their own game and imitation, as they say, is the sincerest form of flattery. Furthermore, comparing Best with Alex Higgins in terms of fielding difficult questions at sportsmen's dinners, the latter's biographer comments, 'Best also had charm enough to deal with the situation, whereas Higgins felt compelled to lash out' (Borrows, 2002: 334). But all of this is to dwell simply on the public face of George Best. One wonders how at ease with his conflicted identity Best was as he sat alone drinking and wrestling with his various forms of social dislocation.

Even in death, George Best's critics were quick to express their views on the way he had led his life. According to Marcel Berlins (2005: 7), 'Best's latest manifestation as a violent, woman-beating drunk had been paraded before us for years, forcing us to make the constant comparison between the god that he once was and the pathetic figure that he had turned into'. Even less forgiving are the comments of Carole Malone (2005: 31) with reference to the public reaction to Best's death – 'this national outpouring of grief for a wife-beating alcoholic who was 100 per cent responsible for his own death is frankly ridiculous'. Many of George Best's difficulties in life are almost certainly linked to his working-class, Ulster Protestant background. He has been socially dislocated in at least three ways – from his class, from his place of birth and, at a symbolic level, from his parental culture.

Yet, in terms of how we should understand George Best, Van Morrison and Alex Higgins, it would be fair to say that they never fully broke away from the ambiguities of their Ulster Protestant heritage. Best himself was a man who was Irish although not Irish in the same way that other people are Irish. Here was a drunk renowned for his hard work on the training ground. A charming man (certainly far more so than either Alex Higgins or Van Morrison) who was prone to bouts of introspection and, on occasions, violence. A man who was consistently attracted to women (and they to him) but who appeared to have enormous difficulties relating to them. His uncertainty about his Irishness was undeniably a common characteristic of his parental culture. It is more speculative to claim that his relationship with alcohol and his particular expressions of masculinity were similarly connected to his lineage. At the very least, however, with these suggestions in



mind, we can start to move on from superficial readings of George Best either as loveable Irish rascal or as moral bankrupt. This was a man who was obliged from a relatively early age to confront the challenges posed by his triple dislocation. As a much loved footballer, he rose to these challenges in a variety of ways. As an individual, however, the strain of being George Best and of dealing with the conflicted identity which this implied presented insurmountable obstacles which in the end he was unable to overcome.

Had any one of these celebrities been born a decade later, the trajectory of his life might well have been very different. This is not to imply that all working-class Protestant men, born within in a certain time period, engaged in acts of loyalist violence. But we should not assume either that simply based on the evidence of what they became, none of these men had the potential to get drawn into the world of this new category of 'hard men'. After all, the capacity to demonstrate the characteristics of traditional 'hardness' were not an essential requirement.

William Alexander Ellis Giles – 'Billy' – was born into a working-class Protestant family in east Belfast in 1957. In 1982, Giles killed a Catholic workmate, Michael Fay, shooting his victim in the back of the head and putting his dead body into the boot of his car. He was arrested, gave a full confession and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Billy was a small, quiet and courteous man when I got to know him in the 1990s whilst he was still a prisoner. He was released from jail in 1997. On the morning of 25 September 1998, he hung himself. In his suicide note, he wrote, 'My mind became diseased. The moment the gun went off that day of 18 November '82, it was too late' ((Taylor, 1999: 10). Another

tortured Ulsterman, and few people's idea of a 'hard man', like Best, Billy Giles wrestled with his demons and lost.

### **Conclusion: towards a 'new' Ulster Protestant man?**

The loyalist paramilitaries represented a new breed of 'hard men' within working-class Protestant communities with guns at their disposal instead of bare knuckles. With the current cessation of widespread paramilitary violence, whether temporary or permanent, space has undeniably opened up for the construction of a new Ulster Protestant masculinity. No occupation or workplace can now be described as inherently Protestant. Policing, for example, is now an activity engaged in by members of both communities on increasingly equal terms. The paramilitaries have all but lost any quasi political *raison d'être* that they once enjoyed. Many have made major contributions to the work of peace-building and cross-community reconciliation (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Those who remain wedded to the mythology surrounding the 'hard men' of the troubles era are now widely seen, even in their own communities, to be little more than criminals and, additionally, lacking the almost mythical reputation that was attached to their predecessors in the immediate post-World War Two era.

Despite all of this, however, as the evidence presented in this lecture suggests, even those Ulster Protestant men who have achieved great global success in their chosen professions have struggled to communicate other than by virtue of their skill on the football field, the snooker table and the stage. If there is such a thing as a general 'crisis of masculinity', it

has been compounded in this case by a concomitant 'crisis of Ulster unionism'. The latter served as an excuse, a justification for many, for the acts carried out by the men of violence. If (and I emphasise the word 'if') Ulster unionism's crisis has now been partially resolved, at least in the short term, 'crisis of masculinity' on its own becomes a wholly unacceptable explanation for taciturnity, irrational behaviour and violent acts.

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