

The Laughter of The Gods

In summer 2021, two UISCE International Volunteers wrote forty short papers as an overview of Ireland's history: From the ancient mists of time to the present day. Among many interesting points that emerged was that of a pattern of conflict, or resistance, between the northern part of Ireland, Ulster, and the rest of the island, often the westerly area towards Connaught. This is evidenced down the millennia by events such as the following, among others.

- The ancient Sligo-based Battle of Moytura.
- The Black Pig's Dyke, a defensive rampart which roughly follows Ulster boundary.
- The Tan Bo – that epic conflict between two bulls, one “borrowed” by Connaught's Queen Maeve, and the other from the King of Ulster.
- The Battle of the Books, between the men of Ulster and Connaught that led to the “saving of Western civilisation”.
- The Flight of The Earls, The Ulster Plantation, The Jacobite Williamite Wars, The United Irish Rebellion, The industrialisation of Ulster, Partition, The Troubles and, most recently, the EU Brexit process.

Even the landscape includes an interface of resistance, where an ancient geological fault, between the northern region and the rest of Ireland, creates pronounced difference in landscapes. For millennia humans have shaped landscapes; and now we recognise more thoroughly how landscapes also shape societies and cultures.

There appears to be a pattern of resistance; as if “the ancient gods” have a script, a one-act play about Ulster, which, maybe for their entertainment, they offer each set of actors that come on to “the stage of history” to present an interpretation of the script. Down the millennia, almost every interpretation offers the now seemingly predictable re-enactment of violence; and thus, the story of Ireland has become too often more tragic than inspiring; except, of course, for the Battle of the Books, from today makes a useful study as to the components that transform conflict.

Fast forward to the present, and possibly one reason why the 1998 Peace Agreement resonated so deeply with the vast majority of people across the island is that, at the very core of our being, we realised that something more substantial than just a mere political agreement had been achieved. Had we collectively acknowledged, to some meaningful degree, that maybe we need not be subjugated to the underlying powerful forces that, for millennia, have affected, effected, and often afflicted each social grouping occupying this island, especially the northern region.

Whilst it would be folly to attempt to overcome such enduring tectonic forces, a more sensible, creative and productive approach is to discover how best to work with, even to harness and direct, the immense dynamics; and that is what UISCE is about – Understanding Ireland, socially, culturally and economically. So, instead of merely participating in the regurgitation of a predictable story of conflict, we might instead gain insight into the dynamics at work. We might even dare to imaginatively co-create new ways forward that bring about enduring change, more than mere respect, but a profound generosity that seeks to secure what is best for all. This is impossible without a commitment to creatively and sensitively explore and understand deeply dysfunctional patterns of resistance, to engage with change and the challenge of trusting the “other” to some substantial degree.

Keith McNair

Director

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