



National Museums in Northern Ireland

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Summary

As with Irish history as a whole, the history of Northern Ireland is contested. It is also marked with tragedy and suffering, especially during the ‘Troubles’ from the mid-1960s to 1998 (and is still, for some, a challenging place to live). In brief, the entire island of Ireland had been more or less dominated by the British state since the Norman period (twelfth century AD), but it had its own parliament from very early in this history until 1800. From the seventeenth century a ruling elite, often descended from English or Scottish families, governed the country. This elite saw themselves as part of the wider British leadership but despite loyalty to Britain, and their Anglican faith (Anglicanism is the established form of Protestantism in the UK), they were nonetheless willing to stand up for their rights as Irish magnates, and regarded Dublin (now in the Republic of Ireland) as their capital. Known as the ‘Protestant Ascendancy’, their power declined in the nineteenth century. Most of the Irish population were Catholics, and British rule disadvantaged them. In the north-east, the growth of industry around Belfast and the predominance of Dissenters (Protestants who rejected the Anglican Church) gave rise to a society keen to preserve its British character whilst suspicious of British rule. With the collapse of British power in the south from 1916 onwards, Protestants in the north armed and prepared to fight to retain their identity. The First World War intervened, but the island was partitioned in the 1920s between the Republic in the south and Northern Ireland in the north-east.

At the establishment of Northern Ireland then, a sizable part of its heritage (in Dublin museums) was lost, removing access to key cultural objects. Divisions in Northern Irish society between Catholics (generally in favour of an end to British rule) and Protestants (generally in favour of retaining a link with Britain), has in many ways rendered the past problematic and contested. Perhaps as a result of this difficult past, there has also been an absence of policy guidance for museums in Northern Ireland, and for various reasons, expenditure on museums was relatively low. Northern Ireland gained a national museum relatively late, and on the basis of impoverished collections, but did create the Ulster Folk Museum and Transport Collection, and the Ulster Museum (both in 1961/2).

Sectarian violence flared between the two communities during a period known as the Troubles (c. 1967 to 1998) with riots, bombings and assassinations. The Northern Ireland parliament was abolished and direct rule from London was imposed, with the British Army deployed to aid police.

With the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ of 1998, the UK government, working with Northern Irish groups and with help from the government of the Republic of Ireland), brought the Troubles to an end and devolved many aspects of government to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Although isolated atrocities and occasional civil unrest still occur, and the Assembly has been temporarily suspended on several occasions, the situation is improved and further development of national museums has taken place, with the Ulster Museum winning a major

award in 2010 (BBC News 2010), despite limited progress towards a coherent government strategy for national museums.

Summary table, Northern Ireland

Name	Inaugurated	Initiated	Actors	Ownership	Type	Values	Temporal reach	Style Location
Ulster Museum Belfast, National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI)	1962	1962	Parliament of Northern Ireland, Belfast Corporation	Dept. Culture, Art and Leisure, Northern Ireland Assembly	Fine Art, Applied Art, History, Archaeology, Ethnography, Numismatics, Botany, Zoology and Geology	Universal knowledge with national (prehistoric and historical) artifacts. Northern Ireland positioned within the UK.	Cosmic time (geology); pre-historic to modern (history)	Neo-classical building, winning design of competition (1913) completed 1929. Modernist/cubist extension (1964). Solitary location in Botanic Garden, Belfast.
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (NMNI)	1964	1958	Parliament of Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast	As above	Folk museum and transport museum	Predominantly national	Mainly late 18 th to 20 th c.	Original buildings (for exhibitions) with modern functional buildings (transport collections), Located in countryside outside Belfast.
Armagh County Museum (NMNI)	1973	1973	National status the result of local government reorganisation initiated by London	As above	Art, Archaeology, Crafts, Social and Military History, Natural History, Transport, Costume, Folk Life, Fine Arts	County and town of Armagh	Pre-history to present	Distinctive building, with a neo-classical portico, built in 1834 as a school. Centrally located on the Mall. The museum of a British regiment (Royal Irish Fusiliers) is also sited on the Mall, Armagh.
Ulster American Folk Park (NMNI)	1976	1976	Unionist politicians and north American industrial magnates	As above	Folk museum (emigration)	Unionist (Protestant) Diaspora in N. America.	Mainly 18 th and 19 th c.	Open air museum, buildings form the exhibits. Situated near the town of Omagh.

Introduction

The historiography Northern Ireland is problematic and contested (Coohill 2008: 4; see also Dixon, 2008: 18-20). It is problematic, since as Bardon (2005) notes, ‘it has often been said the Irish history, even from the earliest times, is current affairs’ (Bardon 2005: xi; see also Derby 1983: 13). To quote Foster (1993):

”Ulster” was the original nine-county Gaelic province. “Northern Ireland” is the truncated six-county statelet. “The North” is the lost land of the Republic's platonic 32 united counties, aspired to in perpetuity and dreaded in reality. The name you use betrays whether you think it should exist at all.

Several recent initiatives have attempted to address this difficult history. For example, the Consultative Group on the Past was established in 2007 ‘to find a way forward out of the shadows of the past’ (Duffy 2010). Its recommendations were presented in 2009. Another initiative, ‘Healing through Remembering’, a cross community project, collaborated with the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen’s University Belfast to survey collections of conflict related artefacts, including those in the care of National Museums Northern Ireland.

National museums in Northern Ireland have, therefore, a challenging context in which to present history.

Geography and administrative regions

Traditionally, Ireland as a whole has been divided into four provinces (Ulster, Connacht, Leinster and Munster). Ulster, in the north east, is made up of nine counties and is closest to northern England and Scotland, which has had some implications for settlement, since the sea journey is shortest here. Northern Ireland is made up of six counties from Ulster: Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone. Three other counties in Ulster (Cavan, Donegal, and Monaghan) are part of the Republic of Ireland.

The current population of Northern Ireland is around 1.8 million, which is nearly one third of the population of the island of Ireland. Belfast is the largest city, with a range of industries.

The entire island of Ireland became part of the kingdom of the English monarchs after Norman feudal lords intervened in local disputes in the 1100s. It had a parliament until this was abolished in 1800, after which Irish MPs sat at in the British parliament at Westminster. Northern Ireland was founded through British legislation in 1920, during the Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921, sometimes known as the Irish War of Independence). It had its own Parliament of Northern Ireland, until this was abolished in 1973, after which it was ruled directly from Westminster until 1998. Then, as a result of the ‘Good Friday Agreement’ (or Belfast Agreement), the current Northern Ireland Assembly, a devolved legislature, was established. The Good Friday Agreement forms the basis of the current government and legislation of Northern Ireland.

Some key terms:

The complex views and standpoints on national identity held by the Irish in the past, and the citizens of the Republic of Ireland and of Northern Ireland today, are politically sensitive and best used with precision. ‘Northern Ireland’ (occasionally abbreviated to ‘N.I.’) is the formal name of this part of Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland

Executive are both based at Stormont, near Belfast, as was the Parliament of Northern Ireland in the past. Hence the government of Northern Ireland is sometimes referred to as ‘Stormont’.

‘The North’, ‘the North of Ireland’ or ‘the six counties’ are terms often used by people in the Republic of Ireland, and are favoured by ‘nationalists’ (those who want British rule removed from the island). Unionists (in favour of being part of the UK) dislike these terms. More extreme ‘republicans’ (those who would might use violence to end British rule) sometimes refer to Northern Ireland as ‘the occupied territories’.

Northern Ireland is sometimes referred to as the ‘province’, but the term can be confusing because the Gaelic province of Ulster includes counties now in the Republic. ‘Ulster’ is sometimes used in the media, by organisations such as the BBC (Radio Ulster), political parties (the Ulster Unionists) and by National Museums Northern Ireland (the Ulster Museum; the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum; and the Ulster American Folk Park). Some nationalists dislike the term, because the Gaelic province of Ulster includes counties in the Republic. The naming of the city and county of Derry or Londonderry is a matter of dispute. In this report, the city is referred to as Derry/Londonderry, and the county as Londonderry.

Partition

The division of the island into two countries is referred to as partition. In the (all Ireland) election of November 1918, Sinn Féin (a nationalist party) won an overwhelming majority, and sought independence. However, a large proportion of the population in the north east of Ireland preferred to remain part of Britain. With the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War, violence broke out in the north and sectarian battles took place in Belfast and elsewhere. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921 brought hostilities to a close and partitioned the island, but attacks in Northern Ireland continued and led the British to respond by sending troops and arming the police. The years 1920-22 saw hundreds killed in the region in protracted disorders.

The Government of Ireland Act 1920 provided for parliaments in Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. It was never implemented in the south, and MPs from that part of the island withdrew from the British parliament at Westminster. The south eventually became the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland continued to send MPs to the Westminster parliament as well as to the new Northern Irish parliament, which opened in June 1921. This had large Unionist majority and Sir James Craig (1871-1940) was the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. A series of measures passed in the decade after partition, such as removing proportional representation and awarding an extra vote to the owners of businesses (who were mostly Protestants), helped secure the Unionists a permanent grip on the administration. A grand neo-classical parliament building was opened at Stormont in 1932. Protestant control could be seen in many aspects of life in Northern Ireland: for example as the education system developed, Catholics schools received less funding than Protestant schools (Bardon 2005: 501-505).

Two communities?

Northern Ireland is often seen as being made up of two communities – Catholic and Protestant – which were polarised before the foundation of the state. An understanding of the identities of these communities is useful in assessing national museum provision. Bardon (400) argues that the two communities had emerged by the mid-nineteenth century. Contemporaries argued that Protestants were descendants of the seventeenth century settlers and ‘Anglo-Saxon in race’.

Catholics were 'Celtic' or 'Gaelic'. This division, he argues, is still believed by many, although it is most likely that the separate peoples of the seventeenth century have become very intermingled. Furthermore, whilst the Irish nationalist movement has long drawn on a Celtic past for inspiration, Unionists have recently been claiming some elements of that past as their own, referencing post-Roman groups such as the Kingdom of Dal Riada. There has also been a growing interest in Ulster-Scots, a dialect or language (its status is disputed), shared by parts of north-east Ireland and south-west Scotland (Nic Craith 2003: 70 ff).

The division into two separate and complete communities appears to have increased since the establishment of a separate Northern Ireland in 1920. The Catholics felt as if they were a beleaguered minority in Ulster, whilst the Protestants saw themselves as a beleaguered minority in Ireland. The two communities are divided by religion, and 'fear was, and continues to be, and underlying feature of tensions in the north' (Bardon, 2005: 406). They tend to live in different neighbourhoods, attend different schools, shops, clubs and associations, and different churches, often working in different places and professions (Coohill 2008: 157-158). Each community has a separate history, religion, and system of education and is also residentially segregated (Nic Craith 2003: 26).

To generalise about the two communities: the Catholic Northern Irish tend to look to the Republic for their examples; they see themselves as 'Irish'; they have strong links with their neighbourhood, 'the thirty-two counties' and the (Catholic) north American 'diaspora'; and they value their European identity. For Protestants, being 'British'; being committed to Unionism; having links with England, Wales and Scotland; and links with Scottish and Northern Irish communities in Canada, are all significant (Nic Craith 2003; 8).

Sectarian organisations exist, based in the two communities. Besides paramilitary groups, organisations such as the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys have large memberships from among the Protestant community.

Formal relations between the governments of Northern Ireland and the Republic in the south have generally been good, with some collaboration on transport and energy projects. However, Northern Irish governments have always had to be aware of Unionist sensibilities, so that when Prime Minister O'Neill allowed the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the Easter Rising (an Irish uprising in 1916) to go ahead, he was subject to bitter criticism from Unionists (Bardon 2005: 634).

It is important to note that the Catholic community claims that Northern Irish governments have discriminated against them at every level. Unionists have tended to argue that this discrimination did not exist, or was at least greatly exaggerated, and moreover that in some cases has been confused with reasonable attempts to maintain order and a stable society. Bew, Gibbon and Patterson, in *The State in Northern Ireland* (1979) argued (from a Marxist standpoint), that whilst discrimination was calculated and deliberate, it has been exaggerated by some nationalists, and furthermore some government officials at least endeavoured to be even-handed.

Given the impact of the Troubles, policymakers have sought to alleviate conflict by improving community relations in Northern Ireland. Crooke (2007: 96-7) quotes evidence to suggest that, from the 1990s, there was a shift in focus from the two main communities to a wider view that included other minority groups. However, state-led community relations efforts have been accused of attempting to 'manage conflicts with blandness', ignoring power structures.

Finally, it is worth noting that the two main communities have ‘leveraged’ their history to very different degrees, perhaps summed up by this comment by a Unionist:

Let’s face it – the Republicans have really got their act together, especially their “Irish heritage”. It has given them a sense of purpose and sustained them through times of adversity.’ [...] ‘But us? Oh no – we stumble from crisis to crisis, even though we possess an equally legitimate heritage, it seems no bloody use to us. It’s high time we got our act together. (Hall 1994, cited Nic Craith 2003: 165-166)

This has, perhaps, had implications for overseas perceptions and tourist visitor numbers, as one observer recently commented:

... the Loyalists never controlled the narrative. And they still don’t. Ireland was seen to be staging a romantic and just struggle for freedom. The Protestants, with their northern majority, refused to join the Irish Free State, not out of love for the English, but through mistrust and fear. Their case was very human, but short on nobility. And, in the current context, extremely low on tourist potential. (Engel 2010: 35)

So, whilst the nationalists, including Republicans in Northern Ireland, have a long tradition of utilising their past, it could be argued that the history of the Protestant community has not been useful to them. Perhaps also it has been ‘corralled’ by the Orange Order and other groups such as the Apprentice Boys to the point where it can no longer be deployed and celebrated more widely. In any case, Nic Craith (2002) explored two recent attempts by the Protestant community to connect with the past: first, claims that the Cruthin, the people living in the north-east of the island, were driven out to lowland Scotland in the seventh century, and this group were the source of Scots immigration back to the area from the 1700s. Secondly, she notes the promotion of Ulster-Scots as the language of the community. These activities are ‘essentially generating a new tradition or a new fund of cultural symbols in Northern Ireland’ (Nic Craith 2002: 94).

Though there is some debate as to the definition of Ulster-Scots, it has received official recognition by the UK government as ‘a regional or minority language’ for the purposes of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. An Ulster-Scots Agency, founded in 1998 as a result of the Good Friday Agreement, it aims to ‘promote the study, conservation, development and use of Ulster-Scots as a living language [...] and to promote an understanding of the history of the Ulster-Scots. (Ulster-Scots Agency 2010). The DCAL in Northern Ireland and the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the Republic of Ireland jointly fund it.

The Troubles and the Good Friday Agreement

In the 1960s, the Catholic community was protesting about a range of discriminatory activities, and small demonstrations were being broken up by strong police action. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association was founded in 1967 and campaigned for equal rights for all, and although it was largely a vehicle for Catholic grievances, it did not dispute the existence of a separate Northern Ireland (Coohill 2008: 172-73). In the 1950s and 60s, Rev. Ian Paisley rallied Unionists and he eventually emerged as their spokesman. These disturbances escalated into a period of conflict (c.1967-1998) marked by shootings, bombings and other violence in Northern Ireland, sometimes spilling over into the rest of the UK, and known as the Troubles. The British

government, ruling Northern Ireland from Westminster, made many attempts to restore order and regional government, but these failed until 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement between the British and Irish governments and most Northern Irish political parties, and later endorsed by referenda in both Northern Ireland and the Republic, came into force.

This resulted in the current arrangements for government in Northern Ireland, and to a large measure ended the Troubles, though there are still occasional violent incidents.

National museums and cultural policy in Northern Ireland

The early origins of the collections and institutions that now make up the national museums of Northern Ireland can be found in the activities of the learned societies, originally part of a wider, all-Ireland context. These organisations were very closely associated with the 'Protestant Ascendancy', the largely Anglican, land-holding grandees of Ireland, themselves part of the elite of British society. Dublin was regarded as the centre of political and intellectual life of the Ascendancy (Bardon 2005: 213), which also dominated Ireland's parliament. This met in Dublin, until it was abolished in 1800, after which Irish MPs sat at Westminster.

The Protestant Ascendancy

Members of the aristocracy and the wealthy middle classes in Ireland met to discuss and categorize types of knowledge and to promote these for the benefit of their individual standing in society and for society as a whole. Crooke (2000: 70-73) suggests that such societies, by the end of the 1780s, also reflected Anglo-Irish insecurity, and served as an attempt to insert themselves into Irish history. Bennet (1995: 19) cites a 1795 publication, Patrick Colquhoun's *Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis*, as evidence that culture was being enlisted to serve the government of what were termed the 'subordinate classes'.

The formation of the Armagh Museum tends to support this approach (it was to be part of the national museum from 1973, and is likely to revert to local authority control in 2011). The museum owed its genesis to four members of a Juvenile Reading Association, who founded the Armagh Natural History and Philosophical Society in 1839. The Society had its own museum and Lord John George de la Poer Beresford (1773–1862), Anglican Archbishop of Ireland, as a patron. Although it had difficulties in the later 1840s, by 1850, it had a library and a museum in two rooms in the home of a private individual, Mr. John Gibbs. This limited the space for the Society's work. A building in Armagh, previously used as a school, became available, but was found to have an order against it for non-payment of rent. Beresford paid for the rent and costs of obtaining the building, with the help of James Caulfeild, third Earl of Charlemont. The Rev. Dr. T. R. Robinson opened the building on 29 January 1857 with a lecture. The museum was installed in a balcony that ran around the lecture room. A caretaker's house was built against the rear wall of the building (Weatherup 1982: 51-2).

Public lectures were offered, the varied subjects including: 'Armagh Marble'; 'The Feudal System'; 'The Italian Republics'; 'Slang'; 'The Circulation of Blood'; 'The Gas Meter'; and 'Spenser and the Faerie Queene'. Clergy delivered many of the lectures, and classes were organised, so that in 1889 for example classes on art, botany and the study of the microscope were running (Weatherup 1982; 52). The society flourished until the First World War, after which membership dropped from nearly three hundred (1892) to about one hundred in 1920, and the

museum suffered accordingly. In 1931 the Armagh County Council acquired the building, enabling the Society to run the reading room whilst it rejuvenated the museum. The most important part of the collection were archaeological specimens ('Celtic antiquities') collected by a Mr. T.J. Tenison, a noted local antiquarian who was vice-president of the society in 1859. The collection had been valued by a curator from the Royal Irish Academy (Weatherup 1982: 53-55).

Thus, whilst not initiated formally by the government, and having some popular support, it was the Protestant Ascendancy that enabled the museum. Beresford, Anglican Archbishop of Ireland, was a key patron. He was born in Dublin, the younger son of the second earl of Tyrone (George de la Poer, 1735-1780) and Elizabeth, née Monck (c.1741-1816), an established Anglo-Irish family. Beresford was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, and enjoyed a successful career in the Church of Ireland, becoming archbishop of Dublin in 1820, and primate of all Ireland in 1822. He also had a political role, and was appointed a privy councillor in Ireland in 1820. In 1829 he became vice-chancellor of the University of Dublin, and was elected to the chancellorship in 1851; he supported the Church Education Society, which effectively promoted Anglican control of education, as a riposte to the national schools organised by the government, and he opposed the 1829 Catholic Relief Act. This Act repealed the Penal Laws and enabled Catholics to take their seats in the Westminster parliament (Grant 2004). James Caulfield, third earl of Charlemont, another significant patron, was similarly the son of the Anglo-Irish elite, educated at Trinity College Cambridge in England, MP for County Armagh 1847-57, and Lord Lieutenant of County Armagh 1849-64. The Caulfield family likewise had long records of involvement in Irish politics: James' ancestor, the soldier Sir Toby Caulfeild (d. 1627) had received estates in Ireland under Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century (Hunter 2004). In addition, we should note that many of the lectures, in the early days of the society at least, were delivered by Anglican clergy (Weatherup 1982: 52), who were themselves often dependent on the Ascendancy for preferment.

However, the power of the Ascendancy was waning in the nineteenth century: rising nationalist agitation and the increasing power of the commercial classes undermined it, and a series of land and rent reforms initiated by the British government from the end of the nineteenth century, aimed at pacifying Ireland, virtually destroyed the power of the landholders.

As noted above, the collection forming the basis of the Armagh County Museum was initially looked after by a caretaker in the mid-nineteenth century. But by the 1920s, the founding society of this museum was 'moribund' and its collections were in a dilapidated condition (Miers 1928: 203), a sign that the Ascendancy was a thing of the past.

The situation improved in 1931 when Mr. T.G.F. Paterson was appointed by the County Council as curator, who began a catalogue of the collection and went on to publish on the collections before his retirement in the 1960s. From this time occasional, strategic purchases were made with a view to complementing the existing collection (Weatherup 1982: 55).

Victorian Britain and museums

Meanwhile, in the later nineteenth century, Belfast had begun to industrialise rapidly, and this change in the economy marked the region out from the rest of Ireland, which remained largely agricultural. This tended to align Belfast with urbanisation and industrialisation elsewhere in

Britain, where a rising commercial and middle classes had the leisure and resources to pursue new interests, often forming societies to further their aims.

In Belfast, societies such as the Belfast Naturalist's Field Club (BNFC), played a key role in the establishment of collections and museums (their own museum was founded in 1830 and would become a major element in the Ulster Museum). Here, the role of Protestant, often Presbyterian middle classes, rather than the landed aristocrats of the Ascendancy, was critical (Presbyterians made up the majority of dissenting Protestants). Foster (1990: 61-62) notes that the societies

... were preponderantly middle-class affairs. Medical men, academic men, and Protestant clergymen were to the fore in the BNFC, but these professionals took their place, in numbers and influence, behind Belfast businessmen, especially members of ship owning families and more especially linen manufacturing families. [...] There were fifteen founding office-bearers in the BNFC in 1863: eight were businessmen or sons of manufacturers. At the top, the BNFC reflected the make-up of class and economic power in Belfast.

Whilst the BNFC and many other Belfast societies did not formally discriminate on the basis of religion, the economic and political realities meant that a higher proportion of the Catholic population was poor, and moreover Catholic energies were often and necessarily diverted into political causes. These factors limited Catholic participation. By contrast the Protestants had funding to support their collections, the leisure to meet, to study, and to publish their findings, and Foster sees this as 'species of power' (1990: 62) accruing to this urban elite.

These examples (the Armagh Museum and the BNFC) demonstrate the close involvement of the elites in founding, or in enabling the learned societies to flourish, and can be interpreted as a means to power and control as museologists and others have indicated (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; Bennet, 1995). The Ascendancy had seen itself as Irish, and looked to Dublin as the centre of intellectual and political life. It also saw itself as British, and loyal to the monarchy and empire. This was reflected in the Armagh Museum, which was clearly able to look to Dublin for assistance, for example in the form of the RIA's help in valuing finds, and in publishing its proceedings in Irish journals such as *The Irish Naturalist*. This collaboration faced increasing challenges as the nineteenth century progressed, recognised by the President of the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club, who said in his address of 1896 (Carpenter 1896: 57):

The one feature which helps to make the last two years memorable, is the realisation of fellowship among our workers in different parts of the country which has culminated in the establishment of the Irish Field Club Union. It is a hopeful sign that the differences, which in Ireland array province against province and race against race have no power to hinder the mingling of the naturalists of the north with their brethren of the south.

Impact of partition

When nationalism finally overwhelmed British control of the south, there were therefore serious implications for Northern Irish collections, the museums that held them, and the policies that provided for those museums. Since the intellectual life and leadership, and physical collections themselves, were largely based in Dublin, they were no longer easily accessible, or subject to influence, from Northern Ireland following partition. Later, with the suspension and then the abolition of the Northern Ireland parliament in 1972, control of the area passed London (the Westminster parliament). There was still representation from Northern Ireland there via

Northern Irish MPs. However, all issues affecting Northern Ireland had to compete in a legislative programme with British affairs, this in an assembly where many of the other MPs had limited knowledge of and interest in Ireland. This may have affected legislation including that relating to museums.

Finally, the Catholic/nationalist minority remaining in Northern Ireland identified closely with the island of Ireland and the emerging Republic in the south, rather than the United Kingdom, and some members of the community regarded the existence of Northern Ireland as a continuation of British occupation of part of Ireland. Therefore, even if it was able to voice its views in a democratic forum, the concept of a national museum for Northern Ireland has been of limited interest to this part of the community.

Policy from the establishment of Northern Ireland to the start of direct rule (1973)

Partition in 1921 saw the National Gallery of Ireland, situated in Dublin, become part of the Irish Free State. These collections in Dublin then formed part of the Republic's heritage, and Northern Ireland had no share of it, even when the objects originated in the north east. For example, the Broughtier hoard, found in the county of Londonderry in 1896, was (after legal disputes between the British Museum and the RIA), kept by the RIA in Dublin, and became part of the National Museum of Ireland. A copy exists in the Ulster Museum. Similarly, at partition, Northern Irish museums such as the Belfast Municipal Museum and Art Gallery (which, we now know, was on a trajectory to become a national museum) did not receive any of the paintings in Dublin.

The need for a national collection was noted in the Stormont parliament as early as 1927 according to the Hansard for Northern Ireland (1927: 1468-1469), when Northern Irish MPs discussed as an example, a fifth century gold cup, held in the safe of a local church: it should be kept in 'the National Museum of Ireland or in the Ulster National Museum'. The comment is interesting in that the National Museum at that time was in Dublin, in the Irish Free State, whilst there was, at that time, no formal recognition of the Ulster museum as a national museum.

The losses consequent on partition were remembered for many years among those with an interest in museums in Northern Ireland. It was argued by some that the functions of the national museums had devolved upon the Belfast Municipal Museum and Art Gallery after partition, and it is clear that some Northern Irish MPs were of that opinion: they argued that since museums in Edinburgh and Swansea received grants from central UK government, so should that in Belfast (Hansard N.I. 1929: 348-349).

After partition the Northern Ireland Special Arbitration Committee was set up to make awards to compensate for the loss of cultural amenities, and this reportedly included £400,000 to be made available for museums, according to Harford Hyde (1907-89), MP for Belfast North (1950-59), who claimed that the funds did not reach the museum, but were spent on security (barracks, prisons etc.) instead (Hansard HC 1954: 1351). In fact, at Stormont, Northern Ireland MPs had demanded that the money be made available for museums in the late 1920s. Belfast MPs in particular, perhaps seeking national funding for the city's museum, were vocal - T.G. Henderson (1877 – 1970), accused the government in 1930:

I understand you have allowed the Imperial authorities to take about a quarter of a million of money away from you. You asked for £900,000 in respect of the construction of schools, for

teaching young men who are going in for agriculture, and also to build libraries and museums, and you were responsible for allowing them to take £450,000 or £500,000 from you. Had you got that £500,000 we would have been able to secure £100,000 to finish our museum. But you were too soft - and that is putting it very mildly. The Free State was not as soft as you were. (Hansard N.I. 1930: 46)

In 1947, a Northern Ireland MP raised the matter again for Queen's University (which for various reasons might be considered to have an interest in a national museum). She argued that Stormont should vote funds for a national museum and art gallery based in the Belfast Museum (Hansard N.I. 1947: 788). See also debates in Vol.15, col 2074 (1932); Vol.16, cols 857-858 (1933); and Vol. 27, cols 2876-2 (1944).

A survey of the Hansard for Northern Ireland for these years suggests that in the years following partition, 'museum' was as likely to be a pejorative word in the Northern Ireland Parliament. An example was when an MP suggested that money could be saved by 'confining. the ceremonial aspects of parliament to a museum or some place of antiquity like that' (Hansard N.I. 1928: 942). However, by the 1950s and '60s, there are clear signs of a growing interest in museums.

Responsibility for the Armagh Museum was transferred to the Ulster Museum following a reorganisation of local government in 1973, apparently because the cost of the museum bore too heavily on the new Armagh District Council (Hansard HC 1973: 369-94). Its national status was not therefore a strategic decision, but a pragmatic response to changes resulting from administrative change.

Until direct rule, the British government appears to have taken little interest in museums in Northern Ireland, a symptom of a more general neglect. In one view, successive administrations:

left the Province in very large measure to its own devices, utterly failed to react to evidence of mounting tensions, did very little to keep themselves informed about developments virtually next door, seldom used their ultimate power to initiate Westminster legislation, or to use the power of the purse and other means of influence. (Bloomefield 2007: 16)

Ulster Folk Museum

The first formal national museum in Northern Ireland was the Ulster Folk Museum, created by the Ulster Folk Museum Act (Northern Ireland), of 1958. Academics at Queen's University, particularly Estyn Evans (1905–89) were key in this development. Evans, appointed to a post in geography at Queen's University in 1928, developed a strong reputation for geographical studies and particularly the distinctive folk cultures of Ireland.

The 1958 Act was introduced to the Northern Ireland parliament by the then Minister of Finance, T.M. O'Neill:

This is a small and, perhaps, to some hon. Members an unexciting Measure. I trust, however, that as a result it will not be the occasion for the generation of any heat or passion. Folk museums are essentially the children of Northern Europe. This type of institution first manifested itself in Scandinavia, since when both Holland and Great Britain have followed suit. I personally would like to think that Her Majesty the Queen, who was so impressed by the museum in Oslo, should before too long have the opportunity of visiting a museum here

which would show in similar manner our interest in the lives of our forbears.
(Hansard N.I. 1958a: 487)

By linking his opening words to a visit by the British monarch, it could be argued that he was anchoring the concept of the museum in a Unionist context. Only one MP (a Mr. C. Stewart), representing Queens University, raised the issue of the theme of the exhibits, arguing that should be 'entirely Ulster, entirely Irish in every conceivable aspect, that is, Ulster and Irish in its conception, in its execution and in its administration' (Hansard N.I. 1958b: 492). Since in debates at this time 'Ulster' was used for Northern Ireland, and 'Ireland' for the Republic, Stewart may have been seeking to broaden the scope of the museum beyond the Protestant community. In any case his request was met with a jest and other members did not comment on this issue. The local authorities and the Ministry of Finance would select the new museum's trustees, with one representative from Queen's University. Given Protestant domination of the political apparatus in Northern Ireland, the trustees would presumably have reflected those views.

Belfast Corporation clearly had an interest in the success of the venture and the Stormont debate on the bill acknowledged a debt to the council's efforts and those of the county of Antrim. The open-air museum at Stockholm (Skansen), was quoted as an example (several members had visited the site and others were aware of it); several speeches referred to fears of losing 'our traditions in a 'supersonic age', which threatened individual communities. There was also some wrangling over costs to local authorities and the siting of the museum.

Ulster National Museum

The tone of one Westminster debate in 1954, touching on the status of the Belfast museum, suggests that the British government regarded the status and future of the Northern Irish museums as a matter purely for Northern Ireland (Hansard HC., 1954: 1355/6), and it was Stormont that promoted the city's museum to national status as the Ulster Museum in 1962, by the Museum Act (Northern Ireland) 1961. O'Neill (whose policy was generally to reconcile the divisions in Northern Ireland), took credit for the Act:

There were a lot of letters backwards and forwards over the past 35 years between the Government and the Corporation, the Corporation wanting money for the museum and the Government explaining that as it was a municipal institution there was very little they could do to help.

I decided that perhaps yet another attempt might be made. I went down to the City Hall and visited the Lord Mayor. He agreed with me that we really ought to make yet another effort to see if we could not do something about it ... (Hansard N.I. 1961: 3155)

In late 1965, the UK's Standing Committee for Museums and Galleries presented a report on Northern Ireland's national museums, addressing the level of purchase grants; the question of co-operation between themselves and those in Great Britain; the stimulation of public support; and the status of the directors.

Policy following the abolition of the Parliament of Northern Ireland

With the abolition of the Northern Ireland parliament in 1973, responsibility for policy lay with the British government in London. A debate in the House of Commons on 6 February 1973

raised several issues (Hansard HC 1973: 369-94): first, charging for admission (as was usual in museums elsewhere in the UK during the Conservative administration of 1979-1997), was also opposed, because there was more poverty in Northern Ireland, and life was in any case difficult during the 'distressing circumstances' of the Troubles; there were objections from Rev. Ian Paisley, a prominent Unionist leader, that proposed changes to the make-up of the Trustees of national museums would limit representation by Belfast Council; and finally, some MPs wanted regimental museums to be centrally funded, since if a local authority came under nationalist control, its museum would be governed by people hostile to the British army.

Ulster American Folk Park

This period also saw the development of the Ulster American Folk Park in Omagh. Although Irish emigration to north America is well known, it is usually the experiences of Catholics from the southern parts of Ireland, emigrating during the famines of the nineteenth century, that are remembered. An earlier emigration, by the Scots-Irish of the north and east of Ireland, still represented prominently in areas like the Appalachians, also took place. The emigrants were often Protestants, specifically Presbyterians. It is this aspect of Northern Ireland's history that was celebrated with the opening of the Ulster American Folk Park.

The Scotch-Irish Trust of Ulster founded it in 1976 as part of the American Bicentenary celebrations, with funding from the Mellon banking family. The Mellons came from Ulster and Thomas Mellon (1813 – 1908) was born in Ulster, in County Tyrone, and emigrated with his parents to Pennsylvania. His boyhood home is a major exhibit at the museum. Further support was provided by Enterprise Ulster, a non-departmental public body founded at a time of rising unemployment in Ireland, in 1973 (and abolished in 2007). This organisation was tasked purely with creating employment through any activity that it thought was of environmental, amenity, cultural, community or social value.

The formation of the park appears to owe little to formal government, either in Westminster or Stormont. Rather, it can be described as the result of one group in the Northern Irish community leveraging Ulster-American connections, together with some loosely targeted regional aid. A key person in the establishment of the Park was Eric Montgomery. Montgomery was an information officer in the Northern Ireland administration (a senior position). He had played a role in setting up Enterprise Ulster, and also helped obtain government funding for the Ulster Scot Historical Society (now the Ulster Historical Foundation). He was also pivotal in developing close links with the Mellon family (Montgomery 1965: 2). It can be assumed, given his key role in the administration in Northern Ireland, that Montgomery was a Unionist. Certainly more than one Unionist web site refers to a 1959 memorandum by Montgomery, arguing for 'Ulster' as the formal name for Northern Ireland (Anon n.d.). As noted above, the name of the state is a politically charged issue.

The park was, originally, focussed on the Scotch-Irish tradition in Ulster. The visitor is encouraged to follow an emigrant trail, a route that includes the thatched cottages of Ulster, parts of a full scale emigrant sailing ship, and the log cabins of the American Frontier. It is a 'living history' museum with costumed characters demonstrating traditional crafts. It also has a programme of Scotch-Irish themed activities. It has been criticized, for example by Brett (1996: 23), who argued that it was not 'Ulster American' but 'Ulster-Presbyterian American'. The

experience it presents is ‘pre-eminently that of the voluntaristic migrations, inspired in large measure by religio-political idealism; there is no sense of the beastly poverty that made the later, largely nineteenth century, population movements more or less a necessity of survival; and which were extensively Catholic’.

In defence of the museum, it should be pointed out that, given that it is sited in Northern Ireland, and to some extent the story of the Mellon family, it is correct to focus on the Scots Irish experience. Furthermore, it does include some aspects of the Catholic experience. As Brown and Patterson observed in 2000 (158), ‘the curators are acutely aware of the gaps in their representations’ and use accompanying literature to present a more complete picture.

The museum also houses the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS), established in its present form in 1998. This developed from the previous Centre for Emigration Studies at the Park, bringing together and building on three main elements: the Library, established in the early 1980s; the Irish Emigration Database Project, begun in 1988; and the Masters degree in Irish Migration Studies, taught since 1996. The CMS is managed by the Scotch-Irish Trust of Ulster via a committee of Trustees including representatives of DCAL, Queen’s University and the University of Ulster.

Reviews by the Westminster government

By the 1970s and 1980s, the British government was taking an interest in museum provision in Northern Ireland, perhaps part of wider discussions addressing education, which was problematic due to the split community. Several reports were commissioned during this period.

Regional Museums Northern Ireland (Department of Education 1978), known as the ‘Malcolm Report’, and the *Museums and Galleries Commission Review of Museums and Galleries in Northern Ireland* (1983) provided both a ‘snapshot’ of museum provision, and some recommendations for the future. The Malcolm Report was largely concerned with regional, rather than national museums, but noted (28) the absence of any positive government policy for a regional service, and went on to recommend a three tier approach: national museums, regional museums and ‘display centres’. It also recommended that the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum be merged to create the National Museum of Ulster, together with the return of the Armagh County Museum to the local authority (31).

The 1983 *Review* cited the Malcolm Report’s concern for under-provision, and argued that there were fewer museums in Northern Ireland, given its size, than in other parts of the UK:

there are no more than six museums in the full ICOM sense, in the whole of Northern Ireland. Two are medium sized by U.K. standards, and there are four others, which are small, two with a staff of less than four.’ [...] ‘only two of these (the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) are multi-disciplinary institutions staffed by professional scholars trained in museum work, and capable of initiating research on their collections. (Museums and Galleries Commission 1983: 19)

The report concluded that Northern Ireland spent £3.5m on national museums, as opposed to £6.5m for the National Museum in Wales and £9m in Edinburgh (20). The Review was in favour of national museums, and recommended merging the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum into one national museum: ‘Their enhanced status should bring with it the same national and international recognition as the national institutions in London, Edinburgh

and Cardiff (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1983: 2). The disparity in funding can be explained in part by differences in population, but it may also be that Scotland and Wales were able to promote a nationalism that appeared to be much more unified than Northern Ireland's; they could also define Scottishness and Welshness in contrast to, or in opposition to Britain, which would be problematic for Northern Ireland.

The Malcolm Report (27-28) also noted that museums in Northern Ireland had difficulty in recruiting and keeping trained staff; sometimes posts remained vacant, or the museum had to provide its own training. The Museum and Galleries Commission's Review (2) noted that in general standards in museums were lower than in the rest of the UK.

Against a very difficult background, a third report, *A time for change. A review of major museums in Northern Ireland* (Wilson 1995) was prepared for Michael Ancram MP, then Minister of State responsible for Education in Northern Ireland, recommended amalgamating the Ulster Museum, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and Ulster-American Folk Park, which was carried out in 1998.

The Good Friday Agreement and after

Following the Good Friday Agreement, legislation (the Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland Order, 1998) set out how National Museums of Northern Ireland would operate, but this was mainly concerned with governance at a high level, specifying a Board of Trustees of between 12 and 15 people. It did require the Trustees to 'have particular regard to the heritage of Northern Ireland' in carrying out their duties. The Troubles, which had only recently subsided, were part of that heritage and difficult for museums to address. As Crooke (2007) noted, any work around recent history could be challenged, given its contested nature, whilst engaging with formal community relations exercises means that the museum can be seen as legitimising the government. Initially, museums avoided contention and aimed to be oases of calm in a troubled society, but from the 1990s, museums engaged with community relations and began to address the Troubles in their exhibits (Crooke 2007: 98).

W5 ('Who, What, Where, When, Why'), Science centre

W5 is a Science Centre built as part of Belfast's Odyssey leisure complex. The complex was a 'Millennium Project', one of hundreds funded by the Millennium Commission. The Odyssey Trust Company, a company with charitable status, was established in 1997 to bid for the fifty per cent funding offered to such projects by the Commission. In total, eighty-three per cent of the complex was publicly funded, and the Science Centre, funded from this public money, was opened in 2001. W5, funded by the Odyssey Trust and DCAL, leases and runs the Science Centre. W5 itself is a limited liability company registered in Northern Ireland and is accepted as a charity. It is a wholly owned subsidiary of NMNI and the Directors of the Company are made up of Trustees of the National Museums Northern Ireland and the Chief Executive, who is the Accounting Officer.

Besides being a leading visitor attraction, educational centre and corporate facility, W5 claims to 'support the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's aims to create a confident, creative, informed and vibrant community'. As a government subsidized centre without permanent collections, and managed by the NMNI, it is something of an anomaly.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and museum policy

The establishment of Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in 1999 gave Stormont control of Northern Ireland's museums. DCAL is responsible for National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI), which aims to 'promote the awareness, appreciation and understanding of art, history and science; the culture and way of life of people; and the migration and settlement of people' (DCAL 2010). It is responsible for the Ulster Museum, the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, the Ulster-American Folk Park, and Armagh County Museum (likely to return to local authority control in 2011). It is also responsible for some non-national collections: W5, a science centre in Belfast; Northern Ireland Museums Council, the main channel of government support to local (non-centrally funded) museums; the Armagh Observatory, an astronomical research institution founded in 1790 by the Archbishop of Armagh and the Armagh Planetarium, opened in 1968 with the intention of (widening public understanding of astronomy and earth sciences through shows and displays' (DCAL 2010).

In 2006 the Northern Ireland government published *A Shared Future* (Office of the First Minister & Deputy First Minister, 2006), providing a high level policy statement, confronting the issue of separate communities, and including the following policy objective: to 'encourage understanding of the complexity of our history, through museums and a common school curriculum'. Crooke (2007: 106-107) noted that there was little guidance on how this could be achieved, or indication of how it would be resourced, resulting in a certain weariness and cynicism among museum staff generally. There may well be fewer opportunities for staff development in Northern Ireland compared to England. The Northern Ireland Museums Council provides some training (especially for non-national collections), but there is a possibility that this body will be abolished. In any case, Northern Ireland's Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has argued that the training needs of staff will form part of the national policy when it is finalised (2010).

As this section indicates, during direct rule Westminster initiated some reviews, but these could be seen almost as 'holding actions' rather than far-reaching strategic documents, and Northern Ireland has lacked an overall, strategic approach to museums. DCAL instituted an inquiry into the development of a museum enquiry in 2008, and a consultation exercise was concluded in September 2010.

The challenges of a contested past

It might be assumed that the difficult and complex history of Northern Ireland has led to 'silences' within its national museum. There are two examples involving art works. First, a painting of the arrival of the protestant King William III (William of Orange) in Ireland by Pieter van de Meulen (the king's court painter) was purchased by the museum in 1933. However, it appears to show his arrival being blessed by Pope Innocent XI. This apparently represents papal support for William as an ally against Louis XIV of France. Shortly after going on display, it was vandalised by Scottish Protestants and was then kept out of sight (Devenport 2006). Devenport's report on the events, broadcast in 2006, drew some criticism on extremist websites.

A more recent difficulty occurred in 1978. Conrad Atkinson, an English artist, had created a painting known as *Silver Liberties: A Souvenir of a Wonderful Anniversary Year*. The painting referred to the events of 'Bloody Sunday', 30 January 1972 when British paratroopers shot demonstrators

in Derry, leading to fourteen deaths. In 1978, workers at the museum refused to allow the painting to be displayed (it is now in Wolverhampton Art Gallery in England). A British journalist on the *Guardian* newspaper raised the issue again in 2010. Referring to the major renovation of the Ulster Museum, he noted criticisms of the museum for its display on the Troubles, which was ‘muted and evasive’, and for missing the opportunity to display the *Silver Liberties* (Jones 2010). This coincided with the 2010 apology of Prime Minister Cameron to the people of Northern Ireland; initial enquiries into ‘Bloody Sunday’ now widely regarded as ‘rigged’, had largely exonerated the British, leaving a legacy of bitterness in Derry/Londonderry.

However, these media stories may be misleading. In fact the Ulster Museum does address difficult subjects that it might, in the past, have been reticent about, but in doing so it inevitably draws criticism. Its ‘Modern Ireland’ galleries explain difficult topics such as, for example, the role of Ulster Special Constabulary, or ‘B – Specials’ as they were known, an armed and almost exclusively Protestant reserve police force. Similarly, it has a gallery on the Troubles. The difficulty is that the presentation of any of these subjects is likely to be challenged. On 10 October 2009 the *Irish Times* description of the gallery was headed ‘Minimal Troubles at the Ulster Museum’. Whilst it features distressing images and video (of Bloody Sunday for example), it is restrained in its use of objects that might be associated with the horrors of the Troubles.

In 1998 both the Ulster Museum in Belfast and the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin mounted exhibitions about the 1798 rebellion. Cauvin’s analysis (2009) suggests that events were interpreted differently in the North and the South, and whilst these differences might appear subtle to an outsider, in Ireland they are heavily freighted with meaning.

Conclusions on national museums and cultural policy

The history of the National Museums of Northern Ireland can only be understood if they are studied in conjunction with the museums in the Irish Republic before 1922. Northern Ireland was not created in response to demands for independence by the inhabitants, but by an embattled British government seeking to impose order and retain control of Ireland as a whole. Thus, unlike museums in Wales and Scotland, Unionists do not stress difference from what they see as ‘the mainland’ (Britain), but similarity to it, and their difference from the Republic of Ireland. There was an understandable reluctance on the part of museums to engage with recent history, at least until the 2007 ‘Irish at War’ temporary exhibition in the Ulster Museum. This is changing with the Ulster Museum’s displays covering contested periods, including the Troubles, since re-opening in 2009.

In more detail, we can note the following constraints typify national museums in Northern Ireland:

- At the establishment of Northern Ireland in 1920, a sizable part of its heritage was lost, removing access to key cultural objects.
- The divisions in Northern Irish society have rendered the past problematic and contested, rather than something to be celebrated.
- There has been an absence of policy guidance on culture in Northern Ireland.
- For various reasons, museums in Northern Ireland were underfunded.
- Lacking a national museum at its foundation, Northern Ireland has had to create its own and this has taken time.

- The options for exhibition and display are constrained by the existence of the ‘two communities’ and the contested history of the province.
- The Troubles probably had a detrimental effect on both democracy and the development of a national museum.

The future of Northern Ireland’s museums remains challenging, particularly for the Protestant, Unionist communities. However, the recent achievements of NMNI, including the 22 per cent increase in visitor numbers in the five years to 2009, the recent reopening of the Ulster Museum, and winning a major Arts Fund award, are positive signs of a renewed dynamism.

Case studies in chronological order

National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI) is made up of:

Ulster Museum, in Belfast

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, at Cultra, a few miles north-east of Belfast

Ulster American Folk Park, near Omagh in County Tyrone

Armagh County Museum, at Armagh. (The Armagh County Museum has been part of the national museum since 1973, though likely to return to county control in 2011).

National Museums Northern Ireland was established under the Museums and Galleries (Northern Ireland) Order on 1 April 1998. A Board of Trustees oversees the work of NMNI. A Director & Chief Executive, reporting to the Board, leads an Executive Team of senior staff, and at this level the museums are largely run as a single organisation.

In this section, two of the national museums of Northern Ireland are explored in more detail. First, the current national museum in Northern Ireland was built around the Ulster Museum, itself owing much to the Belfast Natural History Society (founded 1801) whose collection formed a basis for its museum. Second, the Ulster Folk Park and Transport Museum has been chosen, as it was the first national museum where the format (a folk park) appears to have offered a chance to avoid sectarianism.

Belfast and the National Museum of Northern Ireland

Learned societies in Belfast were connected with the commercial classes. The Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge had been founded in 1788 (it is now known as the ‘Linen Hall Library’). It had been housing items on behalf of the Belfast Literary Society (founded in 1801) and thus played an early part in the formation of museums in Belfast. However, there was a major Irish rising against the British in 1798. This was non-sectarian, and in the north east many liberal dissenting protestants were involved, so its suppression had a negative effect on the learned societies of Belfast.

Later, the Belfast Natural History Society was founded in 1821 by a group of ‘respectable young gentlemen of that town’, in the home of Dr. J.L. Drummond (1783-1853), a Professor at Belfast Academical Institution (BAI). Its foundation might be seen as a wider movement in Victorian Britain, where the middle classes increasingly had leisure to devote to such pastimes. This society developed its own collection, apparently held at Drummond’s house until 1822 when it was housed at the BAI until 1822, and thence to rooms in the Commercial Buildings in Waring Street. The collection quickly grew too large, and the Society sought to plan and obtain estimates for a museum. The foundation stone was laid on 4 May 1830, the cost being met by public

subscription (i.e. an issue of shares), and the museum opened to the public on 11 January 1833 (Nesbitt 1979: 7-9). The building had a lecture hall and two rooms above, each forty-seven feet by twenty-seven feet for the collection ('P' 1833: 237). Other learned societies in the town contributed modest collections: the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge contributed its natural history collection in 1830 (its collection of antiquities going to the BAI, according to Nesbitt 1979: 7).

William Darragh, Curator of the Belfast Natural History Museum, retired aged 67 to a caretaker role, and was replaced by S.A. Stewart, ALS, FBSE, in 1881 (Nesbitt 1979: 19). Stewart was appointed as 'Scientific Curator'. By 1912 (before partition) Robert Scharff's comments suggest that a professional approach was being taken in museums when he told the members of the Belfast Natural History Society that:

The old popular conception of a Museum as a repository for curiosities has passed away and a new order of things has been established. Whereas not long ago Museums still existed, containing nothing more than an ill-assorted mass of rubbish [...] such ancient institutions are now looked upon as interesting and curious relics of the past. But almost every Museum started its early career in that manner. (Scharff 1912: 2)

Scharff served as Keeper of Natural History at the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin), before going on to be its Acting Director. He quoted United States practice, in particular G.B. Goode's *The Museums of the Future* of 1891. Goode had been Director of the Smithsonian, and advocated a shift from the museum as 'a cemetery of bric-a-brac into a nursery of living thoughts' (Langley 1897: 167). Whilst the Belfast museum was still a civic museum, it was clearly regarded such topics as within its interest.

The Natural History Society's collection was not limited to natural history: its first major exhibit was an Egyptian mummy, unrolled, displayed, and re-rolled in 1835 (Nesbitt: 1979: 12). Perhaps partly in response to the increasing breadth of its interest, a Belfast Naturalists Field Club was founded in 1863 (with many members in common with the Museum). In 1881, with the appointment of S.A. Stewart ALS, FBSE, the staffing of the museum was set on a professional footing (Nesbitt 1979: 19).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the museum was again short of space, and in addition visitor numbers had fallen. The society looked to the city of Belfast for a solution, and the Corporation adopted 'that part of the Museums and Gymnasiums Act (1891) relating to museums and struck a museum rate of 1/2d. in the £', providing funding to help it to take over the museum in 1909 (Nesbitt 1979: 22).

This brought the collections into the ownership of the Corporation's municipal museum. This had its basis in the Belfast Free Public Library, opened in 1888, and its gallery, opened as Belfast Free Public Library Art Gallery and Museum in 1890 (Nesbitt 1979: 21ff). The municipal museum had some help from the Science and Art Department of the South Kensington Museum in the form of financial aid and the loan of objects and cases. However, local and regional interests still had considerable influence: Nesbitt (23) suggests that Belfast's Government School of Art increased demand for increased art collections, for example, whilst the donation of 60,000 items by Canon John Grainger (1830-91) to the museum required the construction of an annexe.

By 1914, space was again an issue, and a site for new premises was sought. The city wanted the new buildings to be near the centre, but the nearest possible site was at the Botanic Gardens. Plans were laid for the new museum, but the outbreak of the First World War and then the Anglo-Irish War prevented real progress. However, in 1922, with the help of a loan from the Ministry of Home Affairs, and with wages paid by Ministry of Labour under its unemployment relief scheme, work was started in earnest and the new building. The museum opened in 1929 (Nesbitt 1979: 29).

By the 1950s, the museum was short of space and still required some work, but as noted above, it was finally possible for the museum to become formally a national museum and receive additional funding. Initially, the Board of Trustees consisted of four appointments by the Ministry of Finance, three by Belfast Corporation. In 1972 it was transferred to the Department of Education, despite some opposition, and shortly afterwards took over responsibility for Armagh County Museum.

Religion remains an important aspect of life in Northern Ireland, and in 2010 a protestant pressure group, the Caleb Foundation, wrote to the Ulster Museum's Director, and the Culture Minister of Northern Ireland, criticising the Museum's 'Nature Zone' over its explanation of evolution. The Culture Minister has also written to the Trustees asking for 'balance' in the museum's portrayal of evolution (MacDonald 2010; Anon 2010).

As noted above, history also plays a significant part in how communities in Northern Ireland define themselves. Some unionists point to prehistoric peoples, claiming that groups such as the Cruthin, who, (they say), pre-date the Gaels and were distinct from them (Adamson 1986). Thus even prehistoric history can be the source of sectarian disagreement, and museums such as the Ulster museum has to treat interpretation of such areas with some care. Similarly, a site such as Tara (now in the Republic of Ireland) has, for historical reasons, great significance for nationalists, which would mean its presence in an exhibition in the north might be difficult.

The Ulster Museum re-opened in the autumn 2009 after a £17m refurbishment, and has recently won the UK Art Fund Prize of £100,000 in 2010. In the press release associated with the award, the Chair of Judges said:

We were impressed [...] by how the museum's commitment to reaching all parts of its community is reflected in the number and diversity of its visitors. The transformed Ulster Museum is an emblem of the confidence and cultural rejuvenation of Northern Ireland. (Young, quoted BBC News 2010)

Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Interest in folk life in the north east (and elsewhere in Ireland) went back to the Gaelic Revival, but the founding and early success of the Ulster Folk Museum (now the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum) was the result of activities led by Estyn Evans of Queen's University and his students, in particular George Thompson and Alan Gailey who would each go on to serve as Director of the museum (Nic Craith et al 2008: 167). Evans himself was born in England and educated in Wales, before obtaining the first post in geography at Belfast, in 1928. He had a 'humanistic vision of the total inheritance of Irish heritage, irrespective of formal creeds ... Irishness was a complex fusion of processes operating at a variety of scales from the intimacy of locality to the wider embrace of the Atlantic world' (Graham 2004).

Following a visit to Skansen in Sweden, Evans promoted a similar concept for Northern Ireland. Sydney Stendall, then Director of the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, enthusiastically supported him and in 1946 the city granted agreed to lease five acres of land for a folk museum. However, it became clear that the project could not succeed as a local authority initiative, and William Scaby (Stendall's successor) urged the government to consider supporting the project. This resulted in the appointment of a commission to 'examine and make recommendations on the proposal to establish an Ulster Folk Museum in Belfast, illustrative of Ulster life, culture, arts and crafts of the past, and to enquire into the desirability of the establishment and maintenance of such a museum on a national basis' (cited McAuley 1990: 16). That the Parliament of Northern Ireland should sanction and fund the establishment of a new museum is notable. McAuley argues that it represented an effort to provide a venue where 'it was hoped that by highlighting our shared culture the museum could bring into perspective the conflict within the community, thus creating a forum for integration' (McAuley 1990: 17).

In debates about the legislation for the new museum on 13th May 1958 (Hansard N.I. 1958c: 648-650), we can detect the tension between nationalist and unionist views. Mr. Healey, Northern Ireland MP for South Fermanagh (1955-65) stressed that:

The collection should be considered from a national standpoint. After all, we are all Irish people and we are interested in the whole country. Tourists, particularly, are not interested in three, six or nine counties. They come here because they are interested in Ireland, and therefore, it is a good thing that the collection should be on a national basis. (Hansard N.I. 1958c: 648)

The MP, Cahir Healey (1877-1970) was a notable nationalist who had opposed partition, and in his long career had taken part in the Gaelic Revival, opposed conscription in 1918, was interned (jailed without trial) for working with the republican Michael Collins, and jailed again during World War Two (Phoenix 2004). His comment may represent the views of one of the leading nationalist figures of Northern Ireland. The Member for East Tyrone, Mr. J. Stewart (1889-1964), another nationalist, wanted the museum 'to include the history of this part of Ireland from 1782 until 1803 ... something of the glorious deeds of the Presbyterians in Northern Ireland' (Hansard N.I. 1958c: 649). He was referring to the role of radical Presbyterians in the rising of 1798, and linking that cause to the nationalism of the twentieth century. The debate included further references to the Siege of Derry (1689), the Battle of the Boyne (1690), and the role of William of Orange (1650-1702), by J. Hunter, MP for Carrick (a Unionist). Nonetheless, despite these tensions, Evans claimed that the Act had the enthusiastic support of both Unionist and Nationalist parties (Evans 1965: 355).

The Act establishing the Ulster Folk Museum required it to be concerned with the way of life, past and present, and the traditions, of the people of Northern Ireland. However, Alan Gailey, based at the museum and from 1986-1996 and its second Director, was reluctant to see 'two traditions' in Northern Ireland in the context of the Folk Museum and the material culture of previous ages (Gailey 1989: 145-147). 'A pot dug from an archaeological site ... is not a message. It bears direct testimony to the age when it was made and used. It is an objective record of the cultural performance that created it' (Gailey 1989: 149).

The reconstructed buildings at the park represent life around 1900 (i.e. before partition) and represent, perhaps, the nine county province of Ulster, rather than the six counties of Northern Ireland. A brief review of Evan's classic *Irish Folkways* of 1957 makes it clear that Evans at least regarded the old province of Ulster as having a unique character, not least because of its connections with south-west Scotland.

The Belfast Transport Museum was founded by the city of Belfast in 1954 when it gathered a small collection of vehicles and other artefacts, opening as a museum in 1962. However, the accommodation was regarded as inadequate and it was merged with the Ulster Folk Museum by further legislation in 1967.

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Annex table, Northern Ireland

Name	Inaugurated	Initiated	Actors	Ownership	Type	Values	Temporal reach
Ulster Museum Belfast, National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI)	1962	1962	Parliament of Northern Ireland, Belfast Corporation	Dept. Culture, Art and Leisure, Northern Ireland Assembly	Fine Art and Applied Art, History, Archaeology, Ethnography, Numismatics, Botany, Zoology and Geology	Universal knowledge museum, but national (Northern Irish positioned within the UK) prehistoric and historical artefacts	Cosmic time (geology); pre- historic to modern (history)
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum (NMNI)	1964	1958	Parliament of Northern Ireland, Queen's University Belfast	As above	Folk Museum and Transport Museum	Predominantly national	Mainly late 18 th to 20 th c.
Armagh County Museum (NMNI)	1973	1973	National status the result of local government reorganisation initiated by London	As above	Art, Archaeology, Crafts, Social and Military History, Natural History, Transport, Costume, Folk Life, Fine Arts, Transport	County and town of Armagh	Pre-history to present
Ulster American Folk Park (NMNI)	1976	1976	Unionist politicians and north American industrial magnates	As above	Folk Museum (Emigration)	Unionist (Protestant) diaspora in N. America	Mainly 18 th and 19 th c.
W5 Who, what, where, when, why	1997	1997	Private sector and government grants	Trustees	No collections	Science interactive centre	Science centre