

NOTIONS

THE LIVES OF IRISH WORKING
CLASS ACADEMICS



EDITED BY

IONA BURNELL REILLY, STEPHEN BAKER
& MICHAEL PIERSE

Notions

**Endorsement of *Notions: The Lives of Irish Working-Class Academics*
*Courageous, compelling, and challenging***

'*Notions: The Lives of Irish Working Class Academics*' is a significant, timely and very important book. Edited by leaders in this domain, Iona Burnell Reilly, Michael Pierse and Stephen Baker, the volume features the critical autoethnographies of 11 authors who identify as having an Irish working-class background. This collection is courageous, compelling and wonderfully challenging.

Social class remains a highly contested subject. In the context of what we know about the frequent invisibility of (and silence about) class and related discrimination in, through, and resulting from education, this provoking collection demands our attention to social class as a central structuring and consequential device. The focus is the contributing authors' journeys to becoming an academic as people of Irish and working-class heritage. This book is not an analysis of social class-based inequalities but instead invites the reader to critically engage with these individuals' lived, classed experiences through an autoethnographic approach in which relevant concepts and theories are interwoven to interrogate and understand life experience.

Whilst drawing on other aspects of their identities, such as religion and gender, each author reflects on what social class means to them relative to the circumstances of their own lives. It is interesting – but unsurprising given previous research on the matter – that most of the authors continue to identify as working class 'despite' becoming an academic, thus existing in highly liminal spaces. Given suggestions that engaging in higher education even as an undergraduate student 'makes one' middle class, maintaining a working-class identity as an academic demonstrates the strong and long-lasting influence of one's social background. Despite evidence of the 'suffering' that Bourdieu predicted would result from the habitus clash involved in working in a profoundly (upper?) middle-class culture as someone with working-class heritage, the contributors' rich narratives clearly demonstrate that becoming an academic does not necessitate relinquishing one's class of origin.

Compelled to engage via the brave, often highly personal and revealing accounts of life that reveal the long-lasting marks of structural inequalities in society, the reader gains unique insight into navigating an elitist and classist system. We see what class means and examples of how it is being lived in Irish and Northern Irish contexts, illustrating the impact of the complex particularities of Irish social, cultural and political history, including in a post-colonial context. We see identifications, disidentifications and confused identifications, and how class *happens* for people on symbolic, relational and interactional levels helping us to better interrogate the personal-theoretical nexus. We see the complexities of lived classed identities, as we read of people still trying to work out their 'place', as they weigh up the relative role of materiality and wider influences on one's original and emergent positionality. We see life examples of the highly classed mirroring, chameleoning and distancing behaviours reported in the empirical research literature, with which so many of those from working-class

backgrounds are familiar, that are often necessary to navigate structural exclusion. We see, hear and bear witness to the refusals, resistances and victories upon which the contributors reflect in recounting their trajectories. We see the significant resources, assets and ‘funds of knowledge’ that those of working-class heritage bring to academia and beyond, enabling us to continue to challenge and resist dominant deficit discourses about working-class ‘inferiority’. Knowing that the personal is political, this volume demonstrates the myriad ways in which these domains are inherently intertwined, as well as the material and emotional effects of class structures and processes.

Burnell Reilly, Pierse and Baker’s volume hits your core; irrespective of your ‘place’ in classed society, it is simultaneously refreshing and provoking, underscoring the travesty (and irony) of the exclusion of social class as a prohibited discriminatory ground, in legal terms, in both Ireland and the United Kingdom. This collection will undoubtedly appeal to many, including the academic community across diverse disciplinary areas and to all those interested in and oriented towards equality and social justice outcomes in and through education.

—*Professor Elaine Keane, School of Education, University of Galway, Ireland*

This is a timely and wholly welcome book which comprises a series of unique personal reflections on shared but individually distinctive career journeys made by Irish academics. These often frank and probingly self-reflexive testimonies traverse, challenge and disrupt the class boundaries and prejudices that are still a stubbornly persistent feature of higher education in Britain and Ireland in the 21st century. The book’s greatest strength is in how its contributors’ political, religious and cultural positions inflect and interrogate established assumptions about how class and ethnicity interact within third level institutions and affect the lives of their employees. At a time when universities on both sides of the Irish Sea are arguably no longer paying much more than lip service to the progressive principles of widening participation established half a century ago, the issues raised here have important implications for educational policy and practice more generally.

—*Dr Tony Murray, London Metropolitan University, UK*

What does it mean to be a working-class academic? Does such an identity even exist? What’s the trajectory from council estate to higher education? What is gained, what is lost? And how does this all play out in relation to other aspects of identity? These are all questions asked and explored in this fine collection of autoethnographic essays by Irish working-class academics.

Despite most of these stories starting in Ireland (both urban and rural areas and encompassing the Republic and the North), there is much in this collection that is relatable to my experience as a council estate kid who eventually became an academic. Many of the essays recount the lack of educational opportunities for young working-class people, the journey into higher education ‘beset by detours and dead ends’ (Deirdre O’Neill), the feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome, the everyday classism due to broad working-class accents,

the pressure to assimilate into middle-class culture and the constant pull back to working-class origins. These similarities show how class experience can translate across geographical regions, across different eras and circumstances. This is not to discount the specificity of the Irish experience though – some of the authors grew up in the shadow of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and others were impacted by the legacy of British colonialism both in Ireland and as members of the Irish diaspora in England, but the essays do reveal the commonalities between working-class academics around the world.

The choice of autoethnography as essay style allows for the lived experience of class to be conveyed, and it is within these lived experiences that the nuances of class emerge. As many of the authors note, while the idea of class as a concept, learnt through exposure to education can be transforming, it is through the lived experience that class is truly understood. It is the everyday that shapes us and the personal accounts in this collection build a vivid picture. Some of the essays, such as Vicky Brady's, point to the alienating effect of higher education on working-class people because the institutions are 'not built with working-class lives in mind'. This alienating effect also manifests in pressures on working-class academics to distance themselves from their class backgrounds, creating, what Stephen Baker describes as 'dislocation'. But amidst these negative impacts are the acknowledgements of the importance of working-class voices and what they bring to the institutions. As Sorca McDonnell outlines, working-class people bring 'cultural wealth' to the places that they work and 'care, empathy and solidarity'. Sheila Gaffney also points to the richness of storytelling and Michelle Kinsella champions the inclusion of anecdotes to illustrate the transformative effects of education.

Many of the authors find themselves drawn to the work of Bourdieu, which is understandable because ideas of cultural capital, of habitus and of cleft habitus are very common to the experiences of working-class academics. This comes through strongly in the essays. Marcus Free writes about his 'secret guilt' as a 'class defector', and Kieran McCartney describes the disconnect he experienced as a child, growing up on a council estate, but holding middle-class values, inherited from his mother. Keith Murphy recounts the accentism he experienced as a student with a broad Dublin accent, and his attempts at mirroring the middle-class students in order to fit in. Deirdre O'Neill relates these feelings of not fitting in to those of the Irish diaspora in England – who were not always welcomed. Being a working-class academic can feel like being a member of a group that isn't accepted for whom they are and the culture they bring.

Some of the authors, such as Declan McKenna, don't work in academia – and still feel uncomfortable with the ways in which higher education leads to changes, but others such as Aaron Edwards, state that, eventually, their working-class experience became an asset in the work that they do.

These essays are heartfelt and genuine, they provide the reader with an accessible way to understand the experiences of being working class in a higher education setting, both as a student (with many of the authors experiencing that rocky road to education mentioned earlier), and later as an academic. It isn't easy – but as the essays show, amidst the imposter syndrome, the lack of

belonging and the impact of the cleft habitus, being a working-class academic also means possessing a wealth of experience, of strong working-class values such as community, collectivity and solidarity and using this to inform teaching, research and the other work we take into the world. And sometimes something small makes it all worthwhile. Recently a student came to speak to me after a lecture. She was in tears. I had included some images of my old council estate on the slides, and spoken about the place that had made me. The student is from a similar high-rise estate in Sydney, and she had never heard anyone speak positively about council estate life. It was a transforming moment for her – suddenly she saw someone with a background like her, doing a job that she thought she'd never be able to do. My working-class background – my working-class identity was the connection, and maybe one day, that student will be doing the same thing for her students. This book shows the importance of talking about working-class experience and of demanding working-class presence in the academy. The authors show why they deserve to be there and the difference they have already made.

—*Dr Sarah Attfield*, Senior Lecturer, Creative Writing, University of
Technology Sydney, Australia
Past-President: Working-Class Studies Association

This page intentionally left blank

Notions: The Lives of Irish Working Class Academics

EDITED BY

IONA BURNELL REILLY

University of East London, UK

STEPHEN BAKER

Ulster University, UK

AND

MICHAEL PIERSE

Queen's University Belfast, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2026

Editorial Matter and Selection © 2026 Iona Burnell Reilly, Stephen Baker and Michael Pierse.

Individual chapters © 2026 The authors.

Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licencing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Centre. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83708-035-9 (Print Hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-83708-037-3 (Print Paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-83708-034-2 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83708-036-6 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

About the Editors	<i>xi</i>
About the Contributors	<i>xiii</i>
Foreword	<i>xvii</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xxi</i>
Prologue	<i>xxiii</i>
 Chapter 1 ‘Confin’d Within the Verge of Their Occupations’: Sectarianism, Class and the Contraction of Political and Intellection Horizons in UK’s Higher Education Industry	 1
<i>Stephen Baker</i>	
 Chapter 2 Tracing Threads of Precarity: Working-Class Lives, Academic Insecurity and the Labour of Belonging	 19
<i>Vicky Brady</i>	
 Chapter 3 Middle-Class Values Trapped in a Working-Class Academic	 35
<i>Kieran McCartney</i>	
 Chapter 4 Belonging and Solidarity in Working-Class Research	 47
<i>Sorca Mc Donnell</i>	
 Chapter 5 Not Knowing Our Place: Social Class, Structural Division and Hegemonic Control in Northern Ireland	 63
<i>Aaron Edwards</i>	

Chapter 6 On Not Getting Found Out: A Fugitive Class Identity in the Cultural Geography of Irish and British Higher Education	79
<i>Marcus Free</i>	
Chapter 7 ‘You Use Your Education Against Me’: Familial Dislocation as an Effect of a Higher Education	95
<i>Sheila Gaffney</i>	
Chapter 8 Clay-Footed and Curious: A Journey of Becoming	111
<i>Declan Mc Kenna</i>	
Chapter 9 A Class Negotiation Through the Lens of Education: Exploring Social Class and Inequality	127
<i>Michelle Kinsella</i>	
Chapter 10 Seen Butt Unseen	139
<i>Keith Murphy</i>	
Chapter 11 Double the Diaspora: On Being Second-Generation Irish and Working Class	155
<i>Deirdre O’Neill</i>	
Chapter 12 Epilogue	
The Change-Makers: How Irish Working-Class Academics Are Challenging and Disrupting Dominant Discourses in Higher Education	171
<i>Iona Burnell Reilly</i>	
An Afterthought: Silences and Shame in the Lives of Irish Working Class Academics	187
<i>Kathleen Lynch</i>	
Index	193

About the Editors

Dr Iona Burnell Reilly is a working-class academic and sociologist of education in the Department of Education at the University of East London. Her interdisciplinary research spans across Sociology, Education and Positive Psychology. Iona has previously edited *The Lives of Working Class Academics: getting ideas above your station*, a collection of autoethnographies, including her own. Iona is currently a Leverhulme Research Fellow, pursuing a research project called 'Exploring the lives and lived realities of working-class academics in HE' which intends to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of working-class academics in higher education across three Western countries: the United Kingdom, Ireland and Australia. Iona continues to teach, supervise, write and publish in the following areas of interest: social class inequalities in higher education; widening participation; and the experiences of the working class in HE.

Dr Stephen Baker is a Lecturer (for the moment) at Ulster University. He researches, writes and teaches in the field of media, culture and politics, with a particular interest in class. He has published various journal articles looking at the English working class in British television drama and a couple of co-authored books on media, war and peace in Ireland. An active trade union member, in his spare time he strums and sings with his friends in bars, and occasionally with his comrades on picket lines.

Dr Michael Pierse is a Reader in Irish Literature at Queen's University Belfast. His research mainly explores the cultural production of Irish working-class life. He is author of *Writing Ireland's Working-Class: Dublin After O'Casey* (Palgrave, 2011) and editor of the collections, *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), *Rethinking the Irish Diaspora* (co-edited with Trew, Palgrave, 2018) and *Creativity and Resistance in a Hostile World* (co-edited with Mahn et al., Manchester University Press, 2020). He has written extensively on Irish working-class writers and class in literature and culture.

This page intentionally left blank

About the Contributors

Dr Vicky Brady is a Lecturer in Roinn na Gaeilge, Mary Immaculate College. She completed her BA in English and Irish, MA sa Ghaeilge and PhD sa Ghaeilge at the same institution. She has taught Irish language and courses on various aspects of Irish language studies at MIC, the University of Limerick and Villanova University. Her research to date has focused on language planning and policy, with broader interests in sociolinguistics, particularly language rights, identity and inequality.

Dr Aaron Edwards is a Senior Lecturer in Defence and International Affairs at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst and an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. He holds a PhD in Politics and International Studies from Queen's University Belfast and is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. His main research interests are in international security, political identity and comparative ethnic conflict.

Dr Marcus Free lectures in Media and Communication Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. He has published widely in peer-reviewed journals and scholarly collections on the interrelationships between national identity, gender, class and race in television, film, print media and popular culture. He is co-author of *The Uses of Sport: A Critical Study* (2005), and co-editor of *Sport, the Media and Ireland: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (2020). He has guest edited a special issue of *Television and New Media* (2021), on contemporary Irish television, and a special issue of *Sport in Society* (2024), on 'Sport, the Media and Ireland: Intersections of Gender, Class and Geography'.

Prof Sheila Gaffney is a sculptor, and the Professor of Research (Emerita): Innovation & Development at Leeds Arts University. Her research encounters sculpture, life writing and psychoanalysis. It investigates their relationship through sculpture, drawing and scholarly writing. She has particular interests in the relationships that exist between the traditional processes of modelling and casting with identity formation, class, gender, and multi-generational ethnicity, exploring these themes through exhibitions, published articles and conference contribution. Her artwork was recently included in the survey exhibition *If Not Now, When? Generations of Women in Sculpture in Britain, 1960–2022* exhibited at The Hepworth Wakefield and Saatchi Gallery London.

Michelle Kinsella is a professional educator working across further and higher education, with a focus on grassroots community development. A proud working-class woman from inner-city Dublin, she has been awarded a prestigious PhD scholarship from Dublin City University and is dedicated to research that drives meaningful change. She is co-founder of *A Woman's Place* and hosts the podcast of the same name, creating space for women to share their stories on their own terms.

Prof Kathleen Lynch is a sociologist and Professor of Equality Studies (Emerita) at University College Dublin (UCD). She was elected as an Executive member of the *Global Forum for Rehumanizing Education* in 2025. She played the lead role in establishing both the Equality Studies Centre in UCD in 1990 and the UCD School of Social Justice in 2004. She has published extensively on equality in education, on social justice generally, and on the relationship between care and social justice generally. Her recent books include *New Managerialism in Education: Commercialisation, Carelessness and Gender* (co-authored with B. Grummell and D. Devine) (2012, 2015); *Care and Capitalism* (Polity Press, Cambridge 2022). Her forthcoming book *Beyond Human Capitalist Education* will be published in 2026 by Routledge.

Kieran McCartney is a Staff Tutor and Senior Lecturer in Education at the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport (ECYS). With over 15 years in higher education, he specialises in using technology for teaching, learning and assessment. His research focuses on mobile education and how digital tools enhance engagement and performance. Kieran has a background in commercial management and sport and exercise science and teaches across multiple faculties, including STEM and Business. As a Senior Fellow of the HEA, he has led on international projects, including ERASMUS, promoting innovative, tech-enhanced teaching and student-centred learning environments.

Dr Sorca Mc Donnell is a working-class academic from Dublin. She worked with children and families in community-based projects across Dublin before becoming an academic. She is a Lecturer in TU Dublin, teaching on Early Childhood Education, and Social Care programmes. Her doctoral research is titled '*Do you mind me askin', but how did you get in here?*' A collaborative inquiry exploring class and education in Ireland, from the perspectives and experiences of working-class women who have attended higher education, this research centred voice and story and highlighted the importance of solidarity and a collective approach to challenging class inequality particularly in Irish Higher Education.

Dr Declan Mc Kenna grew in a border village in a working-class family, an experience that deeply shaped his educational journey and commitment to equity. He earned a PhD in Education from the University of Limerick while working full-time. His career spans frontline youth work, policy advocacy and curriculum development, and he currently works in the Further Education and Training Sector. Declan has published on the transformative and emancipatory nature of education and policies pertaining to Early School Leaving. He advocates for

inclusive education, drawing on his lived experience to inform both his scholarship and professional practice.

Dr Keith Murphy is a Lecturer in Allied Social Care at Technological University Dublin. He holds a BA, a Higher Diploma in Teaching, a Master's in Education and a PhD in Anthropology. As a neurodivergent academic, Keith brings both personal and scholarly insights to his work on neurodiversity, inclusion, equality and diversity in educational and care settings. He has published articles, appeared on television and presented at national and international conferences, advocating for more inclusive and equitable systems. His interdisciplinary background allows him to explore the intersection of anthropology, education and social care, with a focus on empowering marginalised voices, especially those within the neurodivergent community.

Dr Deirdre O'Neill is a Senior Lecturer in Film Theory and Practice at the University of Hertfordshire. Her book *Film as a Radical Pedagogic Tool* explores how a radical pedagogy of film grounded in everyday realities of the working class provides a critical engagement with and a materialist understanding of how society is organised. She co-coordinates the Inside Film Project <http://www.insidefilm.org>. Deirdre is founding and principal editor of *Journal of Class and Culture* <https://www.intellectbooks.com/journal-of-class-culture>. Deirdre's current funded research project is working with serving prisoners: *Democratising Cultural Production: Knowledge Exchange and Prison*. Her forthcoming book *Cinematic Space(s) of the Working Class* (co-editor; EUP). EUP will be published 2025.

This page intentionally left blank

Foreword

In *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies*, Janet Zandy offers an invitation: ‘let us imagine what it would be like if the history and culture of working-class people were at the center of educational practices’ (2001, p. xiii). How would our academic system differ if working-class life and culture were the norm rather than the exception, if the voices of the working class were at the centre rather than on the margins? How would both academics and students benefit from a greater focus on social class, and how might this emphasis help change not only the academy but society in general? These are some of the questions that emerge as one considers the importance of Working-Class Studies and the academy. It is important for faculty and students to develop a class awareness that will allow them to more fully consider the complexities of their own identities and how socio-economic class impacts society. Accordingly, providing opportunities for working-class academics to share their voices is essential because it places working-class experience more at the centre of institutional culture. A text like *Notions: The Lives of Irish Working-Class Academics* therefore proves invaluable as a way to promote greater class consciousness in the academy and afford institutions with more opportunities for transformative education.

Notions joins an impressive canon of other texts that focus on working-class academics. Much of this emphasis began with Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey’s *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (1995); there was also C.L. Dews’s seminal collection, *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class* (2010). Teresa Crew published *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics* (2020) just three years before Iona Burnell Reilly’s *The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station* (2023), a precursor to this collection. This sampling of texts demonstrates both the interest in and need to address the lives of working-class academics. Anyone who shares this identity knows how challenging it can be to align worlds that are at once public and private, familial and academic, working class and elite. *Notions: The Lives of Irish Working-Class Academics* adds greatly to this conversation while simultaneously providing a focus on Irish academics specifically. This cross-disciplinary collection, which includes scholars from Ireland, Northern Ireland and England, offers a diverse and inclusive collection of stories, reflections and narratives that reflect working-class academic experience and all its complexities. These are stories that are authentic, moving and powerful. Each chapter

presents the experience of an individual, but the overall narrative the collection provides is universal in its message.

As a working-class academic myself, I know the importance of providing space for those voices so often left on the margins. As working-class academics, we are often learning to navigate complicated institutional terrain ourselves while also helping our working-class students as they acclimate to the academy. As a first-generation college student in Texas many decades ago, I remember vividly my own sense of disorientation as I struggled to find my way academically and socially. It was overwhelming at times, learning to abide by the proper class and cultural 'rules', and it was not until I enrolled in Dr Gary Tate's 'Working-Class Literature' course in the fall of 1996 that I began to feel more at ease. Dr Tate spoke openly about his own working-class background, something I had never heard another professor discuss. And in his course, I read works by people who felt familiar to me, whose stories and voices were not unlike those of my own family. For the first time in my life, I began to think about my own socio-economic class and how it had impacted my decisions, education and view of the world. This course opened my eyes to complicated notions of community and belonging and helped me to discover aspects of my own identity I had not considered before. Now, as a faculty member and a scholar of Working-Class Studies for over 27 years, I try to provide this same safe space for my own students. While I assign working-class texts in my courses and lead a centre that celebrates working-class culture, I also talk about my own working-class, first-generation college student status and hope that I can support other students in the same way Dr Tate encouraged me.

Notions: The Lives of Irish Working-Class Academics promotes the same sort of support and community. Burnell Reilly points out in her Prologue, 'this collection is not supposed to be an analysis of social class or social inequalities but rather a collection of the lived experience of class'. These lived experiences offer insights into working-class academic culture that can inform our research, teaching and sense of belonging. As Renny Christopher suggests, Working-Class Studies requires a revision of both institutional narratives and classroom practices: 'we need to continue to transform the content of the curriculum by introducing a focus on the history, culture, and cultural productions of the working class. By so doing, we can transform higher education into something that works for, instead of against, the working class' (2005, p. 220). This perspective makes clear the importance of making a space for the voices of working-class academics in both theory and practice, and this is exactly what we find in *Notions*. The chapters in this collection are personal and communal, specific and universal; they establish working-class academic culture as a way forward to transformative education.

It is an honour to be asked to contribute a few words to this remarkable project and to demonstrate the international scope of this collection. The editors and contributors of *Notions* have constructed an incredible narrative that is not only relevant to Irish working-class academics but also to all scholars in the field. By giving voice to these writers and scholars, *Notions* places at centre the 'lived

experience' of working-class academics and ensures their voices are not just heard but celebrated.

Lisa A. Kirby
Professor of English and Founding Director,
The Texas Centre for Working-Class Studies
Collin College, Plano, Texas

References

- Christopher, R. (2005). New working-class studies in higher education. In J. Russo & S. L. Linkon (Eds.), *New working-class studies* (pp. 209–220). Cornell University Press.
- Zandy, J. (Ed.). (2001). *What we hold in common: An introduction to working-class studies* (pp. xiii–xv). Feminist Press.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my parents, Philomena and Maurice, who both valued education and instilled that value in me – Philomena, in particular, for those years she spent rearing me on her own in challenging circumstances, the everyday heroism of a caring mother. Thanks to my wife, Brenda, and my boys, Emmet, Senan, Donncha and Jarlath, for their patience, support and encouragement. A big thanks to all those teachers and coaches along the way whose gentle words of encouragement make all the difference at key moments in life; mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí! Lastly, like Steve, I am grateful to Iona for lighting the spark here. I wrote a chapter for *The Lives of Working Class Academics* thanks to her encouragement, and that has brought me beyond my own disciplinary boundaries and into connection with fresh perspectives, ideas and opportunities to work with great people, not least those published in this book. Go raibh maith agaibh go léir.

Michael Pierse

I would like to thank Iona, who got the ball rolling on this collection and invited me to be part of it. My involvement has given me hope and courage. Its contributors, whose stories I have listened to and read with close attention, have had a profound impact upon me, encouraging me to face questions about my experience of higher education that I have sometimes shrunk from. I am grateful to all involved in *Notions*.

I'm indebted to my teachers at all levels of education. There are three in particular I'd highlight: Irene Miskimmon, Alan Paxton and my (tor)mentor and friend, David Butler.

Bad times require good company and I have benefited from the camaraderie of fantastic colleagues who do the most extraordinary work in a failing university sector. Many of them have listened patiently to me rehearsing, over and over again, the argument I present in my chapter in this collection.

I want also to thank my friends, neighbours and comrades, who have kept alive in me the spirit of enquiry and who give me cause for optimism – Claire Mitchell, William Jordan, Maurice Macartney and the people at Trademark Belfast, past and present.

Above all, thanks to Kitty, who saw potential in an aspiring songwriter, even if it wasn't musical potential, and encouraged him to go back to school.

Stephen Baker

I would like to thank all of the authors who have contributed to this book. Without their wonderful, creative, powerful and insightful chapters, we would not have a book. We the editors owe the contributing authors a huge debt of gratitude for giving up their time and energy in order to produce the autoethnographies that make up this anthology. This is a special and unique collection, only possible because of the collaboration of everyone involved.

I would also like to thank my good friend and colleague Marie Quiery who originally inspired the idea for the book. In addition, everyone who attended the symposium at Ulster University, Belfast, in December 2023; coming together there as a collective group to share our ideas in this shared space, enabled our creative energy to flow. It was through this initial debate and discussion that people felt able to share their valuable stories and experiences.

A special thank you goes to Michael and Steve, my co-editors. This has been a wonderful, collaborative experience for me, and I have thoroughly enjoyed working with them both. I have fully appreciated all of their insights along the way, as well as the expertise that they both brought to the process. Teamwork makes the dream work.

I am grateful to my friends and family, especially Cormac and Jodi, for their everlasting and enduring patience and support. Above all, I am grateful to my father for instilling in me a class conscious, critical and curious mind. His early life growing up in Ireland and subsequent emigration experience to England shaped his life in ways that influenced mine; I value that influence enormously as it enabled me to broaden my perspective – politically, historically and socially.

Iona Burnell Reilly

Prologue

The aim of this book is to bring together Irish working-class academics in order that they share their experiences of the sector of higher education, in both Ireland and Britain. This collection builds on a previous collection of autoethnographies focused on British academia (*The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above your Station*, 2023). The contributors in the previous book were based at various universities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, in both the older traditional elite/Russell Group universities and the newer Post-92 universities. The contributors in this book are based at universities in Ireland, including some of the older universities, as well as some newer technological universities, and universities in England and Northern Ireland. The editors wanted to be as inclusive as possible about what it means to identify as Irish – including members of the diaspora, second generation and from either side of the border. This inclusivity is necessary given Ireland's histories of both emigration and partition.

Ireland's history and social class system is distinct and different from that of Britain, though interconnected with it through the history of colonisation (Convery, 2017). Although Share et al. comment that 'Irish society is often thought of as a classless society' (2007, p. 170), what emerges from these stories are a range of fascinating experiences of the social class system in Ireland, both North and South, compared to how it is experienced in England, and other parts of the United Kingdom. Share et al. also note that 'While the issue of social class has been central to European sociology and its analysis of capitalist modernity, we cannot take for granted that it is as important in Ireland or that it operates in the same ways' (2007, p. 170). Some of these ways, including the complexities and tensions of how social class operates, are apparent in the authors' accounts of their own working classness. Creating this space for working-class people to share their stories and their experiences is also an empowering and emancipating experience. Lynch (1999) has been critical about the lack of sociology on class in Ireland, and also advocates for sociological approaches to research that empowers those who are participating whilst also addressing issues of power.

As editors, we each have a long-standing interest in social class inequalities. Michael's interest emerged from political activism in his late teens in inner-city Dublin, and then his exposure to narratives of class in an undergraduate course entitled 'British Working-Class Fiction' when he studied English Literature at Trinity College Dublin. This led to a PhD in Irish working-class literature, which in turn has led his research into wider questions of culture and class in Irish life.

Stephen's introduction to working-class organisation and politics was as a young shop steward for the Transport and General Workers' Union. This was before going to university as a mature student. He now researches and writes in the field of media, culture and politics, and specifically, the representation of the working class in television drama, but he has long wanted the opportunity to organise his thoughts and write something about his experience of studying and working within the UK's university sector. He says that co-editing this collection and, in particular, contributing a chapter to it, has provided a welcome opportunity to read, think and write about two systems that have had such a profound influence on his identity – class and higher education. My own interest stems from my experience as a mature working-class university student. I was born and raised in East London, my father and his family were Irish migrants and we lived in a traditional working class and Irish diasporic community. My doctoral research project many years ago focused on the experiences of a diverse range of working-class students who were first in family to go to university, in the post-widening participation¹ period. This led me into further research, writing and teaching in the field of the sociology of education. More recently I started to discuss with colleagues who are also academics, and who identify as coming from a working-class background, about how they experience being in academia – how they found their way there, what their journeys were like, what kind of experiences they had along the way and if they still identify as working class. I became even more interested in how the working-class experience higher education.

The working class traditionally are an under-represented group in universities. Along with women, people with disabilities and minority ethnic groups, we are relatively new and have very little history or culture in academia to identify with, often making higher education difficult terrain to navigate. Our history is largely one of exclusion and marginalisation. The story of widening the participation into higher education in Ireland is very similar to that of Britain – under-represented groups were shifted from the margins to the centre with the aid of policy changes, recruitment drives and funding incentives. Fleming et al. comment on widening the participation in Irish higher education:

the aspiration to open up third-level education to social groups that have been previously excluded from HE, such as mature adults, people from working class and ethnic minority backgrounds and people with disabilities, is in historical terms a very new proposal which reflects significant changes in culture and politics and the place of education in modern economies. (2017, p. 1)

It can be uncomfortable for some people to position themselves as working class, particularly in academia. Reay points out that 'to own an identity as

¹'Widening Participation' refers to the practice and policy initiatives in Higher Education that aim to increase the representation of under-represented groups in universities. One of those under-represented groups is the working class.

“working class” is among other things to accept one’s social inferiority’ (1997, p. 228), so for some this evokes feelings of being *less than*. In fact, the terms *working-class* and *academic* are somewhat paradoxical, reflecting the assumption that, since becoming an academic, we have moved away from our working-class culture and practices and assimilated into the middle class. For some, this may be true, for others, not so. The authors in this book discuss what social class means to them, and they each define what is meant by *working-class* in the context and circumstances of their own lives. It was never our intention to make anyone feel uncomfortable, but one of the requirements for contributing authors was to have a working-class background or heritage, and that is what underpins each of their autoethnographies.

This collection is not supposed to be an analysis of social class or social inequalities but rather a collection of the lived experience of class. The chapter authors have used theories and concepts to further explain and underpin their experiences, in keeping with the autoethnographical approach. Byrne notes that ‘Autoethnography, writing ourselves into our work, is a way to give voice to marginalized groups and contribute to democratizing academic culture and writing’ (2019, p. 146). In the previous publication, I commented that the advantage of autoethnography as a method of research ‘is to reveal and authenticate the power relations, the oppressions, the subjugation and the privilege within and between the stories of people’s lives’ (Burnell Reilly, 2023, p. xxi).

How we understand class in society will depend on the theoretical lens that we use to look at and examine it as a phenomenon. Some scholars might use Marxist theory or Weberian or functionalism or other perspectives to understand and explore the complexities of social class. I am drawn to Bourdieu and his analysis of class inequalities within education. I strongly relate to Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural capital’ (1984) and how legitimated ideas about what is valued and held in high esteem, particularly in education, have become synonymous with success. Each author has applied their chosen lens(es) to scrutinise their own, lived working-class experience. Anybody who studies social class is challenged by which theoretical lens to use in their analysis and it is possible to use two levels of understanding, one – individual people’s subjective and lived experiences, and two – the social structures and systems that shape and influence society and people as a collective.

This book would not have been possible without Steve and Michael, my co-editors, and I thank them for their valuable support, guidance and input. They both live on the island of Ireland, and I live in England so this collaboration has been a fruitful and rewarding cross-national and cross-cultural experience. I trust that you will enjoy reading the following chapters as much as we have.

Iona Burnell Reilly
University of East London

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.
- Burnell Reilly, I. (2023). *The lives of working class academics: Getting ideas above your station*. Emerald Publishing.
- Byrne, G. (2019). Individual weakness to collective strength: (Re)creating the self as a 'working-class academic'. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 12(1), 131–150. https://doi.org/10.1386/jwcp.12.1-2.131_1
- Convery, D. (2017). Writing and theorising the Irish working class. In *A history of Irish working-class writing* (pp. 37–56). Cambridge University Press.
- Fleming, T., Loxley, A., Finnegan, F., & Kearns, M. (2017). *Access and participation in Irish higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Lynch, K. (1999). Equality studies, the academy and the role of research in emancipatory social change. *Economic and Social Review*, 30(1), 41–69.
- Reay, D. (1997). Feminist theory, habitus, and social class: Disrupting notions of classlessness. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20(2), 225–233. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-5395\(97\)00003-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0277-5395(97)00003-4)
- Share, P., Tovey, H., & Corcoran, M. P. (2007). *A sociology of Ireland* (3rd ed.). Dublin Gill & Macmillan.

Chapter 1

‘Confin’d Within the Verge of Their Occupations’: Sectarianism, Class and the Contraction of Political and Intellection Horizons in UK’s Higher Education Industry

Stephen Baker

Ulster University, UK

Abstract

This chapter reflects on my experience as an academic from a working-class background in the north of Ireland, situated at the intersection of capitalism and colonialism, sectarianism and class. It acknowledges the dislocation experienced in transition from a working-class habitus to the social surroundings of professional middle-class life, but it also considers why such a transition might have been ardently desired in the first place, as a route out of a stifling conservative and sectarian milieu and into one that promised intellectual, political and cultural fulfilment. However, during my 30 years in the university sector, as a lecturer in the field of media and cultural studies, I have witnessed the imposition of free market nostrums that have diminished the space within which working-class experience and knowledge might be examined and expanded. A slavish dedication to industry and metrics has shrunk intellectual life on campus, devalued socially purposeful work and striven to confine the learning of working-class students within the verge of whatever future occupations they might anticipate. Having regarded working in higher education as a vocation, I explain here my growing political and ethical alienation from Universities UK and look to a future free of it.

Keywords: Work; culture; colonialism; capitalism; sectarianism; class

To make the Society Happy and People Easy under the meanest Circumstances, it is a requisite that great numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor. Knowledge both enlarges and multiplies our Desires. . . . The Welfare and Felicity therefore of every State and Kingdom require that the Knowledge of the Working Poor should be confin'd within the Verge of their Occupations and never extended (as to things visible) beyond what relates to their Calling. The more a Shepherd, a Plowman or any other Peasant knows of the World, and the things that are Foreign to his Labour and Employment, the less fit he'll be to go through the Fatigues and Hardships of it with Cheerfulness and Content.¹

When, in my mid-20s, I became an undergraduate student, I hoped that university would be my route out of the working class. Specifically, I wanted to escape a working-class Ulster Protestant heritage that I associated with backwardness, bigotry and ignorance. I was soon embarrassed by that mean-spirited ambition, but as a teenager I hankered after somewhere I imagined more convivial and cosmopolitan than the 'loyal wee town' I'd grown up in.² My sister had taken the path of many Irish migrants, leaving for the United States to make a life for herself. I hoped that a career as a singer-songwriter would be my ticket out. Things didn't pan out that way. I was discouraged by my girlfriend. She was very frank about my musical capabilities and ambitions. 'You're not very good', she said. 'But you're not stupid. Why don't you go to back to school and get some qualifications instead.' I took her advice and enrolled at a local college of further education (FE). I hadn't distinguished myself at secondary school and left with few qualifications, but I was older now and inquisitive, and I thrived in FE, helped by two fantastic teachers who encouraged me to apply for a place at university.³ And that, I thought, would be my escape route. Over 30 years later, I'm married to my candid girlfriend. We have two children, and we live in Newtownards, Co Down, the town I was desperate to leave, surrounded by the Ulster Protestant heritage I loathed.

This is a chapter about class and education, but it's also about culture, history and politics, concepts central to my research and teaching at Ulster University, the institution from which I graduated in 1997 and that awarded me a PhD in 2002. With the exception of a brief spell as an Associate Lecturer with the Open University and three years working at the University of Northampton, I've been employed at Ulster, on and off, for over 20 years. That's almost a 30-year

¹Bernard Mandeville (b. 1670 to d. 1733) from *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), quoted in Thompson (1991) *Customs in Common*, London: Penguin.

²The term 'loyal' refers to the combination of unionist politics and Orange and loyalist culture in my hometown.

³I want to acknowledge Irene Miskimmon and Alan Paxton, at the North Down and Ards College of Further Education. Among the many things they taught me, one was the love of learning.

association with Ulster University. So, I suppose, this is also a chapter about belonging. Except, for a long time I have been confused about where and with whom I belong. So, maybe this is a chapter about *not* belonging. Perhaps it's about alienation or just not fitting in. I know a lot of academics from working-class backgrounds can attest to feeling *out of place* in their employment, vocation and everyday life. Teresa Crew, in her study of working-class academics, refers to this as a 'cleft habitus'; a feeling of being in social limbo or split in two, trying to fulfil two roles and occupy two separate places that aren't commensurate with one another (2020, p. 32). My own distress, in part, is because of my ambivalence about the home and heritage I never properly departed and the career I can't properly occupy. It is an ambivalence rooted in the contradictions, variety and nuances of working-class life.

Class

In 1959, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams were brought together by the *New Left Review* to talk about working-class attitudes (1960). Both men were from working-class backgrounds, both had gone to university and both had recently published influential books. Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) reflected upon the changes to working-class culture in the face of mass-manufactured entertainment. William's *Culture and Society* (1958) sought to recover the idea of culture for the purposes of democracy, socialism, the working class and popular education (1979, p. 98). The backdrop to the conversation was the debates about post-war affluence, the perceived changes to working-class life and attitudes, and anxieties about the breaking down of old solidarities (Goldthorpe & Lockwood, 1963). However, as was clear from the exchange, variations in working-class life and politics predate the Second World War. Indeed, Williams and Hoggart observed how they had grown up in places that had 'very different ways of life', one from the other – rural Pandy and urban Hunslett, respectively. Williams would go on to make other distinctions, one being the 'high working-class tradition' that he associated with trade union solidarity and the struggle for democracy and socialism (1960, p. 28). If there is a high working-class tradition, then by implication there is a 'low' one also, although its aspirations and character were never elaborated on in an otherwise wide-ranging conversation. Instead, Hoggart mentioned his working-class grandfather, a man he described as possessing a self-conscious independence, who would 'down tools' and leave a job if he felt undervalued and who regarded himself a Conservative (Williams & Hoggart, 1960, pp. 26-30).

Hoggart and Williams' conversation took place over 65 years ago. I return to it here because it captures something about class that I recognised growing up and understand better today. The working class is not one thing. Being working class is in many respects a messy and dynamic lived experience. It is impossible to explain and understand this experience if we reduce it to a category or an effect of the social structure. Rather, as E. P. Thompson saw it, class is something that *happens* in history and between people. Thompson's project was to recover the

experience of the working class from ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’ and reveal the conscious efforts of people to make their own history (1963/1991, p. 12). No matter how peculiar we view people’s beliefs and actions in the past with our benefit of hindsight, those people did what they did in their own time, their aspirations in accordance with their experience and learning. Like Hoggart’s grandfather, my Dad’s political sensibilities were that of a working-class Tory. He was also a shop steward for the Transport and General Workers’ Union. I’m not aware he ever felt conflicted about this. He was an HGV lorry driver for an oil corporation, and like many of his work mates, he combined a spirit of independence characteristic of men who regarded themselves the ‘kings of the road’ with a clear understanding of the value of collective bargaining for better pay and conditions. In the 1960s and early 1970s, unionised tanker drivers enjoyed relative industrial power that enabled them to secure good wages and enjoy a degree of domestic affluence. However, by the 1980s, the political context had changed dramatically, as had our family’s circumstances. My Dad was forced to give up work due to multiple sclerosis, so my Mum took a job in a local factory to support us. We also had my Dad’s invalidity benefits, so were never poor, but I marked the change in our material circumstances, in the clothes we wore, the food we ate and my parents’ obvious anxiety. I could also discern the condescension of our lower-middle-class neighbours and read in the Tory press the derision heaped on people like us who were receiving benefits. The slurs in print were in lockstep with the Thatcher government’s attacks on the welfare state (Deacon et al., 1982; Morrison, 2019). Later, as a frequently unemployed youth whose family was in receipt of benefits, I took to heart the contempt of the Tories and their lickspittles in the press. Experience like this, as Thompson understood, doesn’t wait patiently to be summoned into attendance. It barges into people’s lives, often in catastrophic as well as benign forms. It can be the experience of riding high in the cab of an 18-wheel heavy goods vehicle or the experience of seeing your Dad’s working life cut short by a critical illness. It can be the experience of social shame or that of a bored unemployed youth. In the face of such experiences, old attitudes crumble and new ways of seeing are formed. Experience is what accounts for me being drawn to the ‘high working-class tradition’ and I felt it set me apart from and often against just about everyone else around me.

History

I grew up in Northern Ireland, a place created in 1921 by an Act of the United Kingdom (UK) Parliament that partitioned Ireland against the wishes of most of the people living on the island. A border was drawn that had no cultural or historic precedent, dividing six of Ulster’s nine counties from the rest of the island. It granted a degree of autonomy to Irish nationalists and republicans without properly satisfying their demands for sovereign independence. At the same time, it provided a privileged place for unionists and loyalists – northern Protestants – determined to maintain their ties with the British Empire, free from

the influence of a future Dublin government dominated by Irish Catholics. Partition delivered what James Connolly famously feared, 'a carnival of reaction both North and South' (1914). Most immediately it led to civil war in the south and pogroms in the north, and the eventual hegemony of conservative forces on either side of the border. In Northern Ireland, a reactionary and unionist elite ruled without interruption until 1972, when, amidst worsening violence and a deteriorating political situation, Westminster intervened and prorogued the Northern Ireland Parliament. This was during a period obliquely known as 'the troubles'. It was, in fact, a quarter of a century of bloody violence that resulted in excess of 3,000 deaths and almost 50,000 people injured before the declaration of republican and loyalist ceasefires in 1994 paved the way for a peace process and subsequently a political accord in 1998. The 'troubles' are often regarded as having started in 1968, incidentally, the year I was born, although there were acts of political violence and sectarian murders before then. But the 'troubles' that ran from 1968 until 1994 started when the Protestant state's forces⁴ and its loyalist supporters attacked civil rights demonstrators who had three key demands: democratic reforms within Northern Ireland and an end to both the sectarian allocation of housing and religious discrimination in employment.

Oliver MacDonagh writes that 'while the English do not remember any history, the Irish forget none' (1983, p. 1). He might have added that Northern Irish Protestants, generally, aren't taught much of it to begin with. I knew nothing about the history of colonialism in Ireland or the sectarianism that underpinned the formation of Northern Ireland. The past, in my mind, was a few decontextualised dates that demonstrated the inalienable supremacy of Protestants and demonstrated fealty to the British Crown – the Siege of Derry in 1688–89, the Battle of Boyne in 1690 and the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. This wasn't a history one was taught in school. It was imbibed as a child through the ritual of attending commemorations and parades. It decorated the gable walls of houses in the form of painted murals. It was there in the loyalist flag my father hung out the front of our house in July. It was contained in songs and stories and inter-generational family relations. I can remember as a child sitting with my grandfather, a Cornish man and veteran of the First World War, assembling red paper poppies that would be distributed and worn by our neighbours to remember the British war dead. The area of East Belfast where I was born carried the names of places where Ulstermen had sacrificed their lives for King and Country during the First World War – Somme Drive, Thiepval Avenue, Hamel Drive, Bapaume Avenue and Albert Drive. It was a version of the past that was present and enveloping, a version in which, as MacDonagh explains, northern Protestants see themselves as

⁴Sir James Craig of the Unionist Party and then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland said, '... in the South they boasted of a Catholic State. They still boast of Southern Ireland being a Catholic State. All I boast is that we are a Protestant Parliament and Protestant State'. 24 April 1934. Reported in: Parliamentary Debates, Northern Ireland House of Commons, Vol. XVI, Cols. 1,091–95.

an embattled and enduring people. Their historical self-vision is one of endless repetition of repelled assaults, without hope of absolute finality or without fundamental change in their relationship to surrounding and surrounded neighbours. (1983, p. 14)

Thus the ‘troubles’ were experienced as just another iteration of the past for a people who regarded themselves as already besieged, always morally superior and unfailingly loyal to a Protestant Crown.

Mixing Pop and Politics

There may be precious little substance to the history I grew up knowing, but it wasn’t shallow. It went deep, so I struggle to explain why I dissociated myself from it as a teenager. I don’t recall a damascene moment. Rather a dawning sense throughout my teenage years and early twenties that I was culturally and politically adrift from most of my peers. I had no religious faith by the time I entered my early teens. I didn’t care about where I’d spend eternity once dead. More pressing was the libidinal desire to live in the here and now. This was during the Cold War, and I feared dying (with everyone else) in a nuclear war between NATO allies and the Soviet Union. My interest in loyalist culture, its bands and bonfires, waned in my adolescence as I discovered popular culture – music, football, literature, films and television drama – most of it enabled by Britain’s welfare state and public service media. The Thatcher government of the period was inimical to the youthful post-punk and subcultural influences on my life, but it was the miners’ strike in 1984 and ‘85 that I remember as politically decisive for me. I identified immediately with the miners and their cause. I wrote to the British Labour Party and asked to join. I was disappointed by the reply, which told me that Labour didn’t accept members from Northern Ireland, but I was welcome to donate, and here, enclosed, was a poster of Neil Kinnock, which I dutifully hung on my bedroom wall along with posters of The Clash, The Jam and The Specials! I read Stan Barstow, Alan Sillitoe and John Braine novels; all stories of restless, angry young men trying to break free from the limitations of working-class life. I read Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and watched over and over again Stephen Frears’ adaptations of his screenplays, *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Frears, 1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Frears, 1987). They provided a tantalising glimpse into a multicultural milieu, its tensions and potential. My cultural tastes extended out into the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993), Jamaican ska and reggae and Tamala Motown. I was a teenage autodidactic curating an identity that I couldn’t reconcile with the loyalist culture and unionist politics around me. Loyalism was backward looking and sectarian. I regarded myself as modern in outlook and multicultural in my tastes. Unionist politicians talked a lot and bellicosely about Britishness but were conspicuously silent as the Tories decimated the British welfare state, British manufacturing and the organisations and infrastructure that maintained the lives of working-class Brits, of which, at this stage, I considered myself one. . . . despite

the Labour Party rejecting my application! I regarded the unionist politics of my family and neighbours as contrary to our collective class interest. Instead, I drew political inspiration from England’s radical traditions – from the Levellers, the Diggers, the Greenham Common women and the British Labour and trade union movement. Then in my early 20s, I read Robert Kee’s *Ireland: A History* and for the first time had cause to really question the threadbare and partial history I’d grown up absorbing. Kee’s book accompanied his BBC series, *Ireland: A Television History* (1980–81), produced in association with Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ). I was too young to appreciate the television history at the time, but when I read the book some years after, it offered a much more compelling explanation of Irish history and the ‘troubles’ than I’d hitherto encountered. Persuaded that partition had been at best a mistake and at worst an injustice, I was still nevertheless a working-class northern Protestant, living in a loyal wee town, where I was sure my neighbours would have little time for, or patience with, my multicultural socialism and many growing reservations about the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. As it happens, I probably wasn’t alone in my thinking. I was just isolated.

In her book *The Ghost Limb* (2022), Claire Mitchell – also a resident of Newtownards – writes about her feelings of political and historical dislocation in her hometown. She explains the ‘ghost limb’ as a part of her sense of self that she found hard to access, because when you live in a place of noisy and sometimes belligerent sectarian allegiance that you don’t subscribe to, you learn to keep your head down. You say nothing, lest you betray yourself. Radical, anti-sectarianism simply isn’t on the agenda in a place where politics is reduced to a binary choice. It is, as Macartney (2024) explains, like being put through a polarising machine that assumes responsibility for assigning us to either one of two denominations. Macartney knows what he’s talking about. He too lives in Newtownards. Here, you are either one thing or the other: for us or against us. In this context, Claire Mitchell speaks of what might be regarded as her own cleft habitus, feeling culturally Irish but a northern Protestant. As she puts it, ‘One foot in each camp. Trying to be whole as a person, while my heart and mind stretch across two sides of a divide’ (2022, p. 5). My own ghost limb takes the shape of a precarious belonging to the place I grew up in, where I still live, a place I know with a degree of intimacy. I offer this early autobiography because I think it’s important to understand that my experience of a cleft-habitus isn’t purely because I was a young working-class man migrating into middle-class professional life. I already felt conflicted. I thought university was my escape route out of this predicament. It wasn’t. It presented me with a new one. At the same time higher education would make me reappraise my relationship with where I’d come from.

Media Studies

I arrived on campus as a Media Studies undergraduate in 1994, the year of the republican and loyalist ceasefires. By the time the Good Friday Agreement had

been signed, I was writing a thesis looking at media coverage of the peace process. This was the era of global liberal peace strategies, which emerged with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. At their core, they equated economic liberalisation, globalisation and peace. The assumption being that violent conflicts across the world could be transformed through the redirection of societal energy away from war and into commercial activities, while at the same time remaking political antagonists as entrepreneurs and consumers. I argued that this model of peace and regeneration, applied to Northern Ireland, required the de-politicising of the region, underscored by a bland cultural diet. I accused the media of broadly conniving in and facilitating this lobotomising of Northern Irish society. As I submitted my thesis, it didn't occur to me that I was working in a sector that was guilty of the same.

The gradual marketisation of higher education in the UK that began in the 1980s has facilitated a growing anti-intellectualism on campus. It has designated students as customers rather than learners. Its dedication to managerialism and metrics is to such an extent that administration has grown at the expense of the research and teaching activities. It is as if control and measurement are ends in themselves. Appearances matter more than substance. Vanity building projects are populated by increasingly precarious, demoralised staff, while marketing departments buy advertising space upon which dubious and sometimes downright untruthful claims of 'excellence' are made about institutions. Everywhere the vocabulary of exchange-value sweeps aside the vocabulary of use value (Collini, 2017, p. 157), and the effects are nowhere more obvious than in the arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS), fields that are often critical of prevailing ideas and difficult to align with the economic demands of market-fundamentalism. Although the taste of politicians to routinely besmirch AHSS might feel unprecedented, as Joe Moran points out, the slights 'draw on resilient themes, rehearsed in various iterations for more than sixty years' (2022, p. 5). There is a longstanding refrain, he argues, that has at its core two questions: 'who should attend university and what should they study once there?' (2022, p. 23).

Media Studies and its students have long been in the cross hairs of policy-makers and commentators. Decried as a 'Mickey Mouse' subject for as long as I can remember, I was just starting my second year as an undergraduate when the *Independent* newspaper accused the subject of being

a trivial, minor field of research, spuriously created for jargon-spinners and academic make-weights. Students learn nothing of value because the subject doesn't know its own purpose, is unimportant, and because most people teaching it don't know what they are talking about.⁵

⁵Leading Article: 'How not to be a journalist'. *The Independent* (London), 31st October 1996. pp. 17.