

## *An Irish Family Feud* *by Kristina Flathers*

*I left class that first Wednesday with a headache, having heard words like “ethnonationalism” and “consociationalism” thrown around more times than I can count. Nevertheless, I was already yearning for next week, so interested was I in learning more about the conflicts discussed in my Comparative Conflict Regulation class, namely those of Israel and Northern Ireland. I knew that my professor, a well-dressed woman with three Ph.D.’s and an untraceable accent, would keep me engaged.*

*At the time, I could not have imagined how much I would see the effects of the Northern Ireland conflict outside the classroom. I first saw them in travelling to Ireland, where I had the incredible experience of going north and taking a political tour of Belfast. There, I witnessed a whole gamut of grim reminders about the conflict’s past and presence.*



*The Belfast police stations have all been fortified to withstand bomb strikes.  
Belfast, Northern Ireland*

*The most poignant of these reminders were some of the almost 2000 political and commemorative murals that have been painted in Belfast since the Troubles started in the 1970’s, as well as the uncountable signatures on the “peace walls.”*



*Clockwise from top-left: Unionist commemorative mural; Self-portrait, signing one of the peace walls; Unionist commemorative mural; Nationalist political mural.*

*Belfast, Northern Ireland*

*No big deal, of course I will see the political and social implications of the conflict when I visit its epicenter. What surprised me, however, was seeing its reverberations in places like Buckingham Palace—yes, London’s very own Buckingham Palace—and Edinburgh, Scotland.*

*Like many of you, I noticed early on that London has few “rubbish bins.” Walking to class from my internship, I passed the ever-touristy Buckingham Palace in search of a receptacle in which I could dispose of my apple core—not wanting to litter and get caught on CCTV.*

*My hands still reeked of apple when I asked my professor about this lack of litter-preventing bins that afternoon. Her response: the militant Provisional Irish Resistance Army (PIRA) had a penchant for planting bombs in bins, being responsible for over 20 bombings and attempted ones in London in the 1990’s leading up to the Belfast Good Friday Agreement of 1998.*

*Nobody in London has been spared from the subsequent security crackdown. While visiting later, I realized that even Buckingham Palace did not have an actual trash can in its yard, despite the massive security checkpoint at its entrance. Expecting a lavishly decorated and carved trash can, I instead found the usual clear plastic bag hanging from a thin frame. This was probably not due to a genuine security risk inside the palace, but a desire to empathize with everyday Londoners outside of the palace. Nevertheless, the effects of the Northern Ireland conflict have noticeably spilled over into London.*



*A trash "can," the transparent plastic bag showing that it is bomb-free.  
Buckingham Palace, London*

*It was not until I travelled to Edinburgh, however, that I realized how deeply the conflict affects family across the kingdom. Stepping out of Edinburgh Waverley Railway Station, I went immediately to the Princes Street Shopping mall, eager to explore an underground shopping mall. The clothes and accessories that they carried were as ordinary as you can get.*

*You could therefore imagine my shock upon recognizing the Red Hand of MacNeil, more commonly known as the Red Hand of Ulster, which we had just discussed in class, on an iPhone case sandwiched in between two others bearing Union Jacks. The Red Hand of MacNeil is one of the major symbols of the Unionist movement, referring back to the legend of the race to control Ireland. The Scotsman MacNeil, about to lose, was said to cut off his right hand and throw it onto the island, thereby reaching it first and winning.*

*The Red Hand of MacNeil still reminds the Unionists of the sacrifices that their ancestors made in securing the land for the United Kingdom. To the Nationalists who want to reunite Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic, the Ireland that we know, this symbol is anathema. Flanked by two Union Jacks, its placement could not have been random, either. Moreover, there were no Nationalist icons to be seen.*



*The Red Hand of MacNeil.  
Edinburgh, Scotland*

*The fact that it was casually sitting in a phone accessory shop in a mainstream mall begs another question for my professor: what are these symbols doing in Scotland?*

*Answer: during the Protestant Plantation of Ireland in the 1600's, London had sent many Scottish Protestants to settle the country. Just as we often maintain contact with our relatives who live far away, the direct family links between Ulster Unionists and Scottish Protestants are still strong today, and they have spread Northern Ireland's sectarian violence or "family feud," as I would say, into Scotland.*

*We see this through Scotland's divided civic associations, churches, and even football clubs. In Edinburgh, there are two St. Mary's Churches, one Protestant and the other Catholic. Glasgow's two professional football teams, Celtic and Rangers, both publicly further sectarian sentiments, as shown through the riots following the 1980 Scottish Cup Final. It is truly difficult to imagine just how ingrained the conflict is, when people from both sides speak the same language and look the same. The important thing, however, is that this conflict still matters very much.*



*Left: St. Mary's Episcopal Church. Right: St. Mary's Catholic Church.  
Edinburgh, Scotland*

*The Irish family has been feuding for centuries in this part of the world, and the evidence that I have found all over the United Kingdom is a constant reminder that it is ongoing. The good news is, however, that a fledgling peace process is in the works to deal with the past and move forward, so that words such as "ethnonationalism" and "consociationalism" will in the future only apply to concepts in Northern Irish history. That in itself is enough to make some of my headache go away.*