

## **REVIEW: CRIMES OF LOYALTY**

*Steve Bruce*

Ian S. Wood, **Crimes of Loyalty: a history of the UDA**, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006, 398 pp, hb, £60, ISBN: 0 7486 2426 0; pb, £15.99, ISBN 0 7486 2427 9.

There is nothing new about Ulster Protestants forming paramilitary organisations to defend their political position. The first Ulster Volunteer Force was formed in 1912 to intimidate the British government out of granting Irish separatists an independent sovereign Ireland. That UVF was extremely popular: it could field about 90,000 trained and organised men. It also had the support from the Ulster aristocracy and a good part of the British establishment. Open rebellion was avoided by the First World War. The UVF was enlisted en masse as the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division and it was nobly decimated at the Battle of the Somme. After the war attention was turned again to Ulster and the constitutional problem was solved by giving autonomy to three-quarters of the island and leaving the north-east, where the Protestants formed about two-thirds of the population, as part of the UK.

In the aftermath of partition there was a great deal of violence in the north, especially in Belfast. The UVF was re-formed, again with support from the Ulster upper classes and again it was incorporated in the state, this time as the Ulster Special Constabulary. From the 1930s until the Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s, Northern Ireland was relatively quiet. The IRA campaign of the late 1950s was so ineffective that there was no popular demand for a new militia.

Gusty Spence and a very small band of friends from west Belfast formed the current UVF in 1966. Unlike the previous versions it had no elite support and was not at all popular. The interesting point is that it predated the civil unrest. Like the football manager who is supposed to have told his players to get their

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retaliation in first, this was a case of Protestants responding to their fears of what might happen. The particular stimulus was fear that the IRA was planning an attack on Belfast City Hall at Easter to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Spence's UVF men collected a few old guns, drilled a bit, shot a drunk for singing republican songs, burnt to death an old lady when they torched the wrong house, and murdered a young Catholic barman. Spence was sentenced to life and was thus inside when the real Troubles began three years later.

Northern Ireland fell apart because the government was incapable of meeting Catholic demands for greater power and an end to institutionalised discrimination without losing the support of its own voters. The Stormont regime alternated between heavy-handed repression and compromise. In 1969 the British government stepped in and the army has been there ever since.

As the level of violence rose, the slogan 'Gusty was right' appeared on gable walls in the Shankill and working class men formed vigilante groups. Some of these became units of Spence's UVF. Others coalesced in area defence associations that federated as the Ulster Defence Association or UDA.

The UDA's finest hour was the 1974 Ulster Workers Council Strike. Most unionists were firmly opposed to the Sunningdale arrangement for sharing power with moderate nationalists and creating formal ties with the Republic. The British government determined to push ahead despite the lack of cross-community consensus and a group of loyalist workers and union leaders called a strike. UDA leaders such as Glen Barr played a major part in organising the strike and thousands of UDA men made sure it held by blockading roads and intimidating workers out of the factories. One UDA man gleefully recalled the ease with which he closed a very large plant. 'I just got on the Tannoy and I says – This is the UDA. Any cars still in the car park in five minutes get torched – and that was it. Silent as the tomb ten minutes later!'

But the strike was also the low point for the more thoughtful members of the UDA because it exposed their weakness. They could put a big mob on the street but they had no political influence. Barr was an innovator. While the UVF then stood simply for hyper-unionism, the UDA argued for negotiated independence. But no one cared. Unlike working class nationalists, unionists were not alienated from the state or conventional social institutions and had no wish to build an oppositional sub-culture. Even UDA members voted for mainstream unionists rather than for their own political representatives. After the strike, the UDA was sidelined and although by killing some 400 people

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over the next 20 years it played its part in keeping the pot boiling, its politics were of no interest until the ceasefires of 1994 paved the way for the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement.

To prove it was even-handed and not just boosting Sinn Féin, the British government constructed an electoral system that would allow the loyalist paramilitaries into politics. The UVF's front men did well, getting elected to the Assembly and becoming media darlings with their 'Macho gunmen for peace' stance. The UDA's front failed to attract any significant support or win seats. Although a decent young man, Gary McMichael (precisely because he was not a convicted terrorist with serious form) failed to lead his hard men, and the party gave up.

The UVF had a tight central command, but the UDA had always been a loose federation and, post-ceasefire, it fell apart in murderous feuds. The leading figure on the lower Shankill Road, Johnny Adair, tried to take over the organisation by having rival leaders killed, and he started a shooting war with the UVF. Eventually wiser and older men expelled him but not before his antics had cost the organisation what little good will it still enjoyed with the loyalist working class.

Ian Wood has produced a first-rate history of the UDA. It is thorough and it is detailed. It avoids the sensationalism favoured by those journalists who use the first person a lot and who bury their subject in a mountain of self-serving references to how they discovered this or that. But it avoids being dry by making sensitive use of a great deal of interview material. Wood has spent 20 years cultivating links with UDA men and has won the confidence of sufficient of them to give the reader a real feel of the world of the working class loyalist. And he is sensible in his judgements of such contentious issues as the extent of security force collusion. Further plusses are a handy chronology of the main events, brief biographies of the main UDA leaders, and a detailed index.

What is particularly admirable about the book is that, despite having achieved the degree of intimacy with many of his respondents that allows him to let them explain themselves to the reader, the author resists the temptation to go native. He never forgets he is writing about a terrorist organisation. The sad fact is that whatever potential the UDA may briefly have had to become an autonomous voice for working class unionists, a genuine defender of its people, its main legacy was to inflict far more damage on loyalist areas than the IRA ever managed. It was not republican bombers that laid waste to the lower Shankill

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Road; it was the drug-dealers, extortionists and gangsters of Johnny Adair's 'Simply the Best' unit of the UDA.

This is an excellent book that should be read by anyone interested in the Troubles. It should also be compulsory reading for anyone who wishes to claim that sectarianism is a significant feature of modern Scotland. There is a direct link: Wood has a good summary of loyalist support activity in Scotland which clearly shows how little of it there has been. But there is a much bigger indirect point. Despite the short distance and the close ties between Scotland and Ulster, the Troubles did not spread. This is hardly an honourable thought but Scots who wish to be reminded of what real sectarianism is and who want to feel pleased about their own country can satisfy both desires by reading **Crimes of Loyalty**.

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