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Soccer and Sectarianism: Derry City F.C. and Irish Nationalism, Sectarian Tension, and the Catholic Community, 1970-1985

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of Derry City F.C. in the sectarian conflict of The Troubles in Northern Ireland from 1970 to 1985. The experiences of Derry City as a soccer team were deeply intertwined with the pervasive sectarianism of Northern Ireland; through its sporting ventures, Derry City provided space to dream of a better future for Catholic nationalists in Northern Ireland.

In 1985, Derry City Football Club experienced a rebirth. Thirteen years after being pushed out the door of Northern Ireland's Irish League, the soccer team finally got a second chance to play in a top-level league, joining the Republic of Ireland-based League of Ireland -- the only team located in Northern Ireland ever to do so.[1] This seemingly mundane transition of a local soccer club from one league to another carries far more significance than noticeable at first glance. Derry City F.C. is a traditionally Catholic club, located in the deeply Catholic Republican neighborhood of the Bogside in the city of Derry.[2] The story of Derry City from the mid- to the late-twentieth century is deeply intertwined with the larger sectarian conflict of Northern Ireland; Derry City's experiences in the Northern Irish soccer league (confusingly called the Irish League) at times mirrored the worst sectarian undertones of Northern Irish society, while at other times seemed to offer a beacon of hope in an otherwise weary and divided society.[3] Derry City represented, for many Catholics in Derry, an expression of Irish nationalism and Catholic resistance against the British government and the Protestant-dominated government in Belfast. Derry City was never able to escape the political situation that engulfed its home city -- nor did many of those involved want the club to escape those circumstances at all.

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[1] Richard Ford, "Soccer helps heal the divided city," *The Times*, 21 February 1986.

[2] For clarity's sake, this paper will from now on refer to the football club as Derry City, and the municipality in which it was located as simply Derry. The town has two names: Londonderry and Derry, with Londonderry used more by Protestants and those in the U.K., and Derry used by Catholic communities and the Republic of Ireland. This paper will use Derry as it is focused on the Catholic community's connection with Derry City Football Club, a community which calls the town Derry.

[3] Soccer nomenclature in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is notoriously confusing. I will do my best to differentiate between the two with each mention in this paper, but will also provide a brief clarification here. The Northern Irish soccer league is called the Irish League, while the soccer league in the Republic of Ireland is the League of Ireland. Derry City was in the Irish League until 1972 and then joined the League of Ireland in 1985, where they remain today.

Background

The story of Derry City that this paper will focus on, during the 1970s and 1980s, occurred during a period of violence and extreme sectarianism in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland, a predominantly Protestant nation with a sizable Catholic minority, has been separate from the overwhelmingly Catholic Republic of Ireland since 1920, when the island of Ireland was partitioned; Northern Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom, while the Republic of Ireland became a sovereign state. Northern Ireland's Catholic population, generally with political leanings known as nationalists and republicans, have strongly preferred leaving the United Kingdom and uniting with the rest of Ireland, while the Protestant population have strongly desired remaining part of the U.K. The resulting sectarian tension, inflamed by socioeconomic divides and repression of the Catholic community, led to a decades-long period of low-level and irregular conflict known as The Troubles, which lasted from the 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Although there was occasional rioting and violence between partition in 1920 and the 1960s, it is generally accepted that The Troubles as a period conflict began in the second half of the 1960s, and certainly by the time British troops were deployed to Northern Ireland in 1969.[4] The predominantly Catholic city of Derry saw some of the worst violence of the Troubles, including the 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre in which fourteen people, all Catholic, were killed by British soldiers during a protest in the Bogside neighborhood.

Also located in the Bogside is Derry City's stadium, the Brandywell. Given the amount of political tension and violence that occurred in and around the Bogside, it was no wonder that Derry City's stadium became a political issue in and of itself. The stadium's location gave rise to additional issues because of the city of Derry's geography -- the majority of the city's Catholic

[4] Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal and the Search for Peace* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

population lived on the west side of the River Foyle, which ran through the middle of the city. Opposing team buses and fan buses had to travel across one bridge over the Foyle to get to the Brandywell with no alternative route, making the threat of fan violence especially dangerous for visiting teams given the potential for the team bus to get stuck on the wrong side of the bridge with one road blockage.[5] Derry City struggled to escape the political landscape of fractured Northern Ireland in every aspect of its experiences, from police presence at games, to the location of its stadium, to its very membership in the Irish League.

A Brief History of Soccer and Politics

The role of soccer in cultural, political, and social histories is a well-studied one that reflects the global popularity of the game. However, existing historiographies on European soccer or sport more generally are less exhaustive -- representing what some scholars have called "a glaring hole in the discipline," as most existing historiographies are limited to national contexts.[6] This section will provide an overview of two branches of historiography relating to the role of sectarian politics in the experiences of Derry City from the mid- to the late-twentieth century. First, this section will briefly discuss central debates in scholarship on the intersection of European soccer and politics, and second, this essay will explore the limited historiography on Derry City's experience itself and potential avenues for future scholarship.

A central tension in academic scholarship of soccer's cultural and political role is the degree to which soccer can influence a political situation versus simply reflecting the current

[5] Eamon Crossan, interview with author, September 30, 2020. Crossan was born in Derry and has regularly attended Derry City games since the 1980s. He also served on the board of Derry City for seven years in the 2000s.
[6] Christopher Young, Anke Hilbrenner, and Alan Tomlinson, "European Sport Historiography: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Sport History,* Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer 2011), 182.

conditions. For this debate, it is useful to look beyond the scope of Northern Irish soccer and politics and into the larger picture of European soccer. In a brief but extremely important article "Black, Blanc and Beur: French Football's 'Foreign Legion,'" Christos Kassimeris considers the case of the French national soccer team in the late 1990s and 2000s, which was seen as representative of France's multiracial society -- with Black, Blanc, and Beur representing the Black, white, and brown (of North African descent) players of the 1998 World Cup winning team. Kassimeris argues, citing the crucial work of Jon Garland and Mike Rowe, that soccer is fertile ground for the reflection of far-right racist anti-immigrant sentiments that exist elsewhere in society -- in this case, those of far right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen and his followers.[7] Garland and Rowe examine far-right hooliganism in England and come to a similar conclusion as Kassimeris -- soccer clubs are an efficient vessel for the projection of racist and fascist messaging.[8] Garland and Rowe's work is considered a seminal work in the political messaging and symbolism of soccer, and they reach a similar conclusion as Kassimeris; soccer is more an indicator of the existing political situation than a driving force in creating change.

However, this assertion that aligns more with Kassimeris and Garland and Rowe is not a universally accepted one. While scholars of soccer in Northern Ireland would not necessarily disagree with the idea that soccer alone is not enough to drive change, there are a few examples of works pertaining to Derry City, specifically that soccer was not only a reflection of the current period, but brought about change itself. Soccer was certainly viewed in the 1970s and 1980s as a potential political force, exemplified by articles in British newspapers like *The Sunday Times* and *The Times* with the titles "Soccer helps heal a divided city" and "In Derry, a Great Resurrection."

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[7] Christos Kassimeris, "Black, Blanc, and Beur: French Football's 'Foreign Legion,'" *Journal of Intercultural Studies,* Vol. 32, No. 1 (2011), 22.
[8] Jon Garland and Mike Rowe, *Racism and anti-racism in football* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrove, 2001), 88.

David Hassan, who has written about the role of soccer and identity in Northern Ireland, argues in his article ""A People Apart: Soccer, Identity and Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland" that soccer played a significant role as a self-actualizing force of Catholic identity in Northern Ireland on top of an expression of already existing Catholic nationalism. Here, Hassan seems to come to a slightly different conclusion than do Garland, Rowe, and Kassimeris. He argues that soccer in Northern Ireland, and through clubs like Derry City, did not just reflect existing sectarian tensions, but further inflamed them through the construction of a new aspect of Catholic identity. It is possible that Garland, Rowe, Kassimeris, and Hassan might not disagree at all and see that their works are able to coexist, but the different ways in which they discuss soccer and politics show the thin line between soccer as a reflection of societal forces and as a vital societal force itself. In reality, there are probably kernels of truth in both arguments. Soccer is simultaneously a strong political force itself, like Hassan argues, but not as strong as other forces and ultimately falls short when it is acting alone, like Kassimeris and Garland and Rowe argue.

Existing literature on Derry City is currently limited to two categories: histories of the club that are more accurately described as sports journalism written by lifelong fans and local journalists, and brief mentions of Derry City as an example of the role of sectarianism in sport in larger studies of Irish sports or soccer and politics. These brief mentions, like in Christian Koller and Fabian Brandle's *Goal! A Cultural and Social History of Modern Football*, and David Hassan's article "A People Apart: Soccer, Identity and Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland," discussed earlier, are valuable scholarship that help place Derry City's specific history in a larger context. These works mention Derry City's circumstances, usually the fact that they switched to the Republic of Ireland's league, that they were banned from playing at the Brandywell Stadium, and that Derry City has traditionally been considered a Catholic club. However, the analysis

usually stops there. While these works that use Derry City as an example are helpful, they lack the depth and attention to be considered robust works in histories of Derry City.

The other category of existing works on Derry City are the local sports journalist accounts that are not academic works at all. These include Derry journalist Garry Ferry's *Derry City Football Club 1928-2008: The Team I Loved So Well* and lifelong fan Frank Curran's *The Derry City F.C. Story*: *1928-1986*. These works are useful as local sources and to provide more detailed information on specific events, like fan violence at a specific game that academic articles do not go into similar detail on. However, the vast majority of these works is focused on the sporting side of Derry City -- whom they played, who scored, and the new signings for Derry City at the beginning of each season. While this is interesting for Derry City fans, it is less interesting from an academic standpoint. That being said, there is plenty of discussion of the political role of Derry City in these books when examined closely. It is simply impossible to discuss the sporting history of Derry City without discussing the fact that they were banned from their own stadium, bundled out of the Northern Irish league for sectarian reasons, and joined the Republic of Ireland's league despite being located in Northern Ireland. Histories like Curran's and Ferry's are helpful as sources, but deeply lacking in an analytical sense.

It is here that there is an interesting gap in scholarship and opportunity for new histories. More specific soccer histories are generally reserved for the large and famous teams -- like explorations of Dutch club Ajax Amsterdam's troublingly intertwined history with the Jewish community during the Holocaust in Simon Kuper's *Ajax, The Dutch, The War* or the multitude of academic articles on the world-famous Old Firm derby in Scotland. These works are important but tend to focus on clubs that have had continental or global sporting success like Celtic and Rangers in Scotland and Ajax in the Netherlands. While these are important histories,

slightly less world-renowned clubs like Derry City serve as worthy academic pursuits as well. Few historians would argue that the Troubles are not worthy of historical attention, and the popularity of sport in Northern Ireland makes it ripe for historical analyses in terms of religion, sectarianism, and politics. Derry City specifically was a symbol of the Catholic community in Derry, with a stadium in the heart of the predominantly Catholic city that saw some of the worst violence of the Troubles. A longer, academic exploration of Derry City's role as a reflection of sectarian attitudes of the Troubles, but also perhaps going against the tide of existing political currents, is a worthwhile historical pursuit that has not yet been done. There is a clear place in cultural and political histories of soccer for the story of Derry City; it just needs to be written.

Before diving into the story of Derry City, it is impossible to write a history concerning Protestant and Catholic sectarianism without discussing the Old Firm derby between Glasgow Celtic, founded by Irish Catholic immigrants to Scotland in 1887, and Glasgow Rangers, a traditionally Protestant club founded fifteen years earlier. It is considered one of the largest soccer rivalries in the world. Sectarianism runs so deeply that Rangers had a private policy to not sign Catholic players until 1989 and have yet to acknowledge or apologize for the policy; Celtic did not have a similar policy regarding Protestant players.[9] This policy was extreme even for the politically charged soccer environment across the British Isles in the late twentieth century. In Northern Ireland, traditionally Protestant clubs like Linfield and Glentoran routinely fielded Catholic players and vice versa for Catholic clubs like Derry City. Celtic represented a class of Irish immigrants that were economically and politically marginalized in Glasgow, while Rangers arose as the Protestant, or anti-Irish, depending on perspective, answer to Celtic's sporting dominance in the late nineteenth century. Bloody riots accompanied the Scottish Cup final

[9] John Flint and John Kelly, *Bigotry, Football, and Scotland: Perspectives and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 6.

between the two sides in 1909, and the fan violence became a regular occurrence accompanying meetings between the two teams.[10] Chants during games between Celtic and Rangers have traditionally been sectarian and extraordinarily offensive. A famous Rangers fan song, "Billy Boys," sings of Protestant loyalists being "up to their knees in Fenian blood"; Fenian is generally viewed as an anti-Irish Catholic slur. Celtic fan songs, on the other hand, are generally viewed by Rangers fans as condoning and celebrating IRA violence against Protestant civilians in Northern Ireland.[11] Celtic versus Rangers specifically invokes the violence of the Troubles in its chants and its tension -- that tension only increases in the case of Derry City, located in the heart of the city hit hardest by the Troubles.

Creeping Sectarianism -- Tension and Expulsion from the Irish League (pre-1972)

Derry City was founded in 1928, in place of the recently disbanded Derry Celtic football club; the club chose to change the name from Derry Celtic to Derry City to avoid the explicitly sectarian association of the name Celtic. The name Celtic, of course, came from Glasgow Celtic of Old Firm derby fame. Although Derry City's F.C. rivalries with traditionally Protestant clubs never reached the sporting heights of the Old Firm, they certainly had a similar tendency to descend into sectarian chaos. In 1971, rioting fans near the Brandywell, assumed to be Derry City fans, seized and burned the team bus of visiting club Ballymena United while it sat empty outside the stadium.[12] The subsequent coverage of the bus-burning incident, in which no one was hurt but Ballymena United were understandably unnerved, was the beginning of the end for Derry City in the Irish League. Coverage surrounding the bus burning incident varied

[10] Christian Koller and Fabian Brandle, *Goal! A Cultural and Social History of Modern Football* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 145-147.
[11] Flint and Kelly, *Bigotry, Football, and Scotland*, 9.
[12] Malcolm Brodie and Jim Gracey, "Like Old Times at Brandywell," *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 February 1981.

significantly depending on the newspaper that was covering it. British newspapers like *The Sunday Times* described the act as a "terrorist attack" while the *Belfast Telegraph*, despite generally being perceived as a Protestant unionist newspaper, refrained from using the words "terrorist attack," electing to describe the perpetrators as "rioters" rather than "terrorists."[13] Newspaper coverage of Derry City drove the attitudes of their opposition clubs, and descriptions of fan violence like that at the Ballymena match created an outsized perception of danger surrounding the Brandywell -- despite the fact that hooliganism and fan violence were far from rare in twentieth century Britain.[14]

There are important qualifications to an entirely essentialist understanding of Derry City's role within the conflict. While the conflict in Northern Ireland was undoubtedly sectarian and a strong majority of Protestants wanted to remain part of the U.K. and a strong majority of Catholics wanted a united Ireland, it would be disingenuous to treat these positions as the positions of all Catholics and Protestants, or to assume that religion was the only salient identity in Northern Ireland. In the case of Derry City, teams that were traditionally Protestant were not always opposed to playing games at the Brandywell. In 1970, only fixtures between Derry City and arch-rivals Linfield were played at a neutral location out of fears of fan violence, while all other games took place at the Brandywell as planned. After a 1970 game against Glentoran, Glentoran's club secretary announced that "after our visit to the Brandywell yesterday and the excellent manner in which our team and supporters were received we feel there is no need to ban any matches… police co-operation could not be better." The secretary, Billy Ferguson, went on

[13] John Hopkins, "The Black Cloud over Sporting Ulster," *The Sunday Times,* May 28, 1972; Niall Cunningham, "The Social Geography of Violence During the Belfast Troubles, 1920-22," *CRESC Working Paper Series, Working Paper 122*, March 2013, 5; Brodie and Gracey, "Like Old Times at Brandywell."
[14] Jon Garland and Mike Rowe, *Racism and anti-racism in football* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrove, 2001): 88.

to say that Glentoran would advocate for Derry City's right to play at the Brandywell at the next league meeting.[15] Glentoran had no need to advocate so strongly for Derry City, and despite being traditionally Protestant (although they had many Catholic players and fans), they did. The Glentoran example shows that sectarianism did not trump all else, and there were opportunities for cooperation between Catholic and Protestant clubs in Northern Ireland. While this paper focuses on the sectarian conflict, it is vital to note that sectarianism was not absolute and was also not the only factor in Northern Irish society.

Despite the support of many clubs including Glentoran, the writing was on the wall for Derry City after the Ballymena bus incident. Other teams in the league, particularly Protestant clubs like arch-rivals Linfield, refused to play at the Brandywell, and Derry City were forced to play their home games in the Protestant town of Coleraine over thirty miles away.[16] In 1972, Derry City resigned from the Irish League, citing years of discriminatory behavior from the league and opposition teams and recognizing the untenable financial situation of playing home games thirty miles from Derry. Despite a new report by the generally perceived anti-Catholic Northern Irish police (Royal Ulster Constabulary, or RUC) that the Brandywell was no more dangerous than any other Irish League venue, a vote by the teams in the league to re-allow Derry City home games at the Brandywell failed by one vote.[17] Eamon McCann, a prominent republican and freelance journalist, described Derry City's decision to leave the Irish League: "They [Derry City FC] resigned from the Irish League in 1972 after several years of what they regarded as discriminatory behavior by the football authorities in Belfast and they were right, absolutely right. And some of it was sheer religious bigotry. They didn't want to come to the

[15] "'End Brandywell Ban' -- say Glens," *Belfast Telegraph*, 29 December 1970.
[16] Hopkins, "The Black Cloud over Sporting Ulster."
[17] Peter Hutcheon, "So, where did it all go wrong for Derry City?" *Belfast Telegraph*, November 10, 2009.

Bogside to play their football."[18] McCann brings up important points in that the Protestant-dominated league lacked transparency in their decisions and saw Derry City as a problem to be dealt with rather than a member of the league; it must also be acknowledged that the burning of Ballymena United's bus and the fan violence at matches against arch-rival Linfield were legitimate reasons for safety concerns. Derry City quit the Irish League, but they did not have a real choice; it simply was not financially feasible to continue without home games. Derry City quit the Irish League feeling betrayed and discriminated against, unsure of where to go next.

The Nomadic Years (1972-1985)

1972 was a dark year for sport throughout Northern Ireland, not just for Derry City. In January 1972, British troops, brought in to be a more impartial peacekeeping force than the Protestant dominated Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), shot 26 unarmed civilians during protests in the Bogside neighborhood of Derry, killing 14. All of the protestors injured or killed were Catholic. It was the worst single act of violence of the decades-long conflict, and the soldiers responsible for shooting protestors, many of whom were fleeing or trying to help the injured, were cleared of wrongdoing by a whitewashed investigation.[19] Support for the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a militant Catholic Republican organization, shot up across Northern Ireland as Catholic communities viewed the sectarian tension as beyond the point of no return. By mid-1972, violence had driven sports in Northern Ireland to the breaking point. Two Irish League teams had bombings at their stadiums and were forced to play elsewhere, golf players were threatened by attackers assumed to be the IRA, and even Irish League clubs who could play

[18] David Hassan, "A People Apart: Soccer, Identity, and Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland," *Soccer and Society*, Vol. 3 No. 3 (2002), 77.
[19] Patrick Hayes and Jim Campbell, *Bloody Sunday: Trauma, Pain, and Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 1.

at their stadiums were on the brink of financial collapse because many supporters were too afraid of violence to attend games.[20] Although perhaps *The Sunday Times* article describing these events focuses too much on Republican violence against Protestants and less on police and military violence against Catholics, it is undeniable that sports in Northern Ireland (the author uses the term "Ulster," the British name for the six counties that constitute Northern Ireland) faced extraordinary challenges. In 1972, the violence terrorizing Northern Ireland reached the point where sporting events could not conceivably continue as normal. Derry City's contentious exit from the Irish League was perhaps partially a symptom of the heightened tensions across the country.

Derry City suffered significantly in the more than a decade between their unceremonious exit from the Irish League and their revival in the League of Ireland in 1985. Derry sports journalist and lifelong fan Gary Ferry described the "wilderness years of 1972-1985" as "undoubtedly a bruise on the club's history."[21] The club maintained that their goal was to rejoin the Irish League granted that they were allowed to play home games at the Brandywell, but privately many supporters and club officials were convinced that joining the League of Ireland was the only realistic option.[22] Derry City faced the challenge that the League of Ireland was reluctant to accept the club without the support of the Irish League, UEFA (the European football association), and FIFA (the world football association). The Irish League in particular was hesitant to approve Derry City's entrance with the fear that Derry City would be the first of many clubs to flee Northern Ireland for the more lucrative League of Ireland, while a representative from FIFA shared the concern that it was against FIFA regulations for Derry to play across the

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[20] John Hopkins, "The Black Cloud over Sporting Ulster," *The Sunday Times*, 28 May 1972.
[21] Gary Ferry, *Derry City Football Club 1928-2008: The Team I Loved So Well* (Derry:Cityprint, 2009), 94.
[22] Frank Curran, *The Derry City F.C. Story*, Ballyshannon: Donegal Democrat Ltd, 1986, 167.

Irish border.[23] This concern eventually evaporated, especially given that there was precedent of Welsh teams playing in English leagues and a Lichtensteiner club, FC Vaduz, playing in the Swiss league, to name a few existing exceptions. Eventually, the Irish League decided it was worth it to ditch the perennial problem that was the Derry City issue and lent its support to Derry City's entrance into the League of Ireland. The stage was set for Derry City's historic transition into the Republic of Ireland.

An Irish Nationalist Dream -- Entry into the League of Ireland (1985-present)

In 1985, after over a decade of aimless wandering, playing exhibition games and in local amateur leagues, Derry City joined the League of Ireland, the professional soccer league of the independent Republic of Ireland; Derry City remains the only team located in Northern Ireland to have ever played in the League of Ireland. Given the large percentage of Northern Ireland's Catholic population that dreamed of a united island of Ireland, Derry City represented a concrete manifestation of this dream -- the club was located in Northern Ireland, but played in the Republic of Ireland's league. Derry City crossed the border for every away game, starting thirteen years before the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent border demilitarization and relaxing of border restrictions. Derry's city center is a mere four miles from the border with the Republic of Ireland; through Derry City's venture into the soccer world of the south, nationalists in Northern Ireland could envision a world in which that border no longer existed.[24]

In exploring the aspirations that Derry City created for Catholic nationalists, it is important to look at the other side of the coin: Protestant construction of identity through soccer in Northern Ireland. Although this paper is focused primarily on Derry City and the Catholic

[23] Ibid, 168.
[24] Hassan, "A People Apart," 78.

community in Derry, the fates of Protestant and Catholic soccer supporters are deeply intertwined. Derry City is unique in Northern Ireland in that it is primarily supported by Catholics; most other clubs are primarily Protestant clubs. There are a few reasons for this imbalance: most simply, there are more Protestants than Catholics in Northern Ireland. That, however, is not the only reason. When soccer first arrived in Ireland and through much of the twentieth century, it was frowned upon by many in the Catholic community as a product of British cultural imperialism. Nationalists in Northern Ireland attempted to construct a separate sporting identity through the Gaelic Athletic Association centered on "true" Irish sports like hurling and Gaelic football.[25] While this stance has been relaxed as soccer has been recognized as global rather than exclusively British, the result is that soccer is still traditionally Protestant in its clubs and its supporters in Northern Ireland. This makes the case of Derry City particularly interesting -- it has become a fierce symbol of Catholic identity despite the fact that soccer has been historically avoided by the Catholic community in Northern Ireland.

Beyond the political aspirations that Derry City represented, the club's entrance into the League of Ireland filled a cultural void in Derry that had been empty in the thirteen years that the team was without a league to play in. *The Sunday Times* wrote of a "resurrection" in Derry and described the community response to the return of league soccer in Derry as "extraordinary." Amazingly, a club official estimated that 70% of the entire town's adult male population attended the Brandywell every Sunday. Attendance at the Brandywell routinely broke 10,000 per game at a time where the League of Ireland's average attendance for a match was around 1,500.[26] Derry City was not just a political football tossed back and forth between Protestant and

[25] Alan Bairner and Peter Shirlow, "Loyalism, Linfield, and the Territorial Politics of Soccer Fandom in Northern Ireland," *Space and Polity*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 171.
[26] Brian Wilson, "In Derry, a Great Resurrection," *The Sunday Times*, 19 January 1986.

Catholic interests; it was a central tenet of a hardened and weary community, demonstrated by the unmatched levels of engagement from the town once it finally did join the League of Ireland in 1985.

While Derry City's community support was undeniable, the religious makeup of their supporters is murkier. The vast majority of Derry City supporters were undoubtedly Catholic, much of which must be attributed simply to the fact that Derry City was in the Bogside and that Derry is a majority-Catholic city. The extent to which Protestants felt unwelcome at Derry City games, or had any interest in going at all, is a contested issue. Eamon Crossan, a former Derry City board member who has been attending games at the Brandywell since 1985, insisted that Derry City has long been a non-sectarian club with both Catholic and Protestant players and staff. Sectarians would frequently come to games to attempt to stir trouble only to find that the crowd was not interested in political messaging and was there to watch soccer, Crossan recalled.[27] A British newspaper article from 1985 notes an interesting dynamic in Derry's Protestant community:"Although the city's Protestant bishop brought the wrath of hardline loyalists on his head for attending a match on the Sabbath, the club detects a slow but steady drift back to the ground by Protestants."[28] This interesting snippet from an article in the London-based *The Times* provides insight into the fact that Derry City was seen by many as a potential avenue for reconciliation between the city's Catholics and Protestants, evidenced by the fact that a Protestant religious leader saw fit to attend a match; Derry City was clearly not universally seen as violently sectarian. However, the fact that hardline loyalists took issue with the bishop's attendance at the Brandywell clarifies that Derry City was still indeed seen as a Catholic club.

[27] Eamon Crossan, interview with author, September 30, 2020.
[28] Ford, "Soccer helps heal the divided city."

Derry City's sectarian reputation, even if it was an inflated version of reality, certainly followed the club everywhere.

Even the act of covering Derry City in local newspapers became a political act. While the traditionally Catholic *Derry Journal* carried in-depth reports of every sport going on in Derry, including "Protestant" sports and teams, the traditionally Protestant *Londonderry Sentinel* noticeably excluded coverage of Derry City from its sports section through much of the 1980s and 1990s, despite covering almost every other sporting event in Northern Ireland imaginable. Although this is unconfirmed, it is rumored that loyalist Protestant paramilitaries threatened the sports editors of the *Londonderry Sentinel*, making clear that covering Derry City would result in violent retaliation; whether because of this threat or for other sectarian reasons, the *Sentinel* avoided covering Derry's largest soccer team for the better part of two decades.[29] This alleged meeting drives home a larger point -- however hard some at Derry City tried to avoid its sectarian affiliation, going all the way back to changing the name away from the more overtly partisan Derry Celtic at the club's founding in 1928, a large portion of the Protestant community still viewed Derry City as a Catholic club at its core.

Many in the Republic of Ireland were not particularly interested in wading into the political activity of those in Northern Ireland. Eddie Mahon, who played for Derry City in the early 1970s described the hesitancy of people in the south: "Generally people in the south [Republic of Ireland] don't want to know about people in the north. That has spilled into football. I think they believe we are going to be throwing petrol bombs at their dressing rooms or something."[30] This left Catholics in Northern Ireland in an uncomfortable position -- not wanted in the north, ignored by the south. Derry City struggled to escape stereotyping from every

[29] Eamon Crossan, interview with author, September 30, 2020.
[30] Hassan, "A People Apart," 75.

direction; associations with the violent Catholic paramilitary IRA came from both Protestants in the north and their supposed Catholic allies in the south. The club's participation in the League of Ireland allowed a welcome distraction -- it was seen as a signal of things to come when Ireland was finally united, with the entire island part of the same nation. That legacy remains unfulfilled.

Conclusion

In 2016, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, commonly referred to as Brexit. This shock vote dug up familiar feelings of uncertainty for Derry City. The Good Friday Agreement removed visible signs of the border demarcation between Northern Ireland and Ireland as a key piece of the peace deal. With Northern Ireland leaving the EU as part of the U.K. while Ireland remained, the border that runs no more than four miles from the heart of Derry became a flashpoint as the only land border between Ireland and the UK; it became unclear how to avoid refortification of the border, despite the potential for violence and political unrest if that happened.[31] After twenty years of relative peace in Derry and sporting success for Derry City, including matches against some of the largest clubs in the world like France's Paris Saint-Germain, Derry has had to re-reckon with its complicated history and inseparable connection to the ethnopolitical tensions of Northern Ireland. ""We don't really know what's going to happen regards [sic] the physicality of a border and of course we would have concerns. People can talk and talk but we don't really know. We are hopeful things will be much as they are now. We aren't politicians; we just want to go and watch football," mused a longtime Derry

[31] Tom Edgington, "Brexit: What is the Northern Ireland protocol and why is it needed?" *BBC*, 8 September 2020.

City fan in 2019.[32] In 2019, just like in 1972, and in 1985, Derry City and its supporters are forced to reckon with the fact that they can't escape politics -- nor do many want to.

In many ways, Derry City reflected the inability of any part of Northern Irish society to escape the all-encompassing political conflict of the Troubles. The club was consistently at odds with the Protestant majority of clubs in the Irish League, leading to the humiliation of being banned from playing home games at its own stadium. The club eventually left the Irish League altogether, citing discriminatory behavior and what Derry City felt was an unfair stadium ban given that even the Northern Irish police (RUC) had declared the stadium as safe as any other sporting venue in the country. The club saw sporadic violence at home and away games, with primary examples being fan violence at games between Protestant arch-rivals Linfield and Derry City and the burning of Ballymena United's team bus by masked attackers in 1971. In all these ways, Derry City was a victim and an actor in the violent sectarian environment that engulfed Derry and all of Northern Ireland over the course of three decades.

At the same time, it is disingenuous and incorrect to think of the story of Derry City as one that simply followed the course of The Troubles and failed to overcome these challenges at every obstacle. At different times and to different people, the story of Derry City was also one of hope and resilience. Derry City provided an outlet for a community hardened by repeated violence that, in a city of around 100,000, was too often perpetrated against or by a neighbor. The fact that the number of supporters at Derry City games after joining the League of Ireland in 1985 was more than seven times the league average attendance, despite Derry only being the fifth largest city on the island of Ireland, is clear evidence of the centrality of the club to the community. Matches more often than not went off without incident, and in some cases,

[32] Ewan Murray, "'We just want to watch football': Derry City caught in Brexit chaos," *The Guardian,* 14 February 2019.

traditionally Protestant clubs like Glentoran even stood up for Derry City's right to play at its own stadium, demonstrating a peaceful sporting event despite the ongoing sectarian tension. And finally, Derry City provided an outlet for Irish nationalism, a front on which Republicans in Northern Ireland did not see much success. Catholics in Northern Ireland felt politically marginalized and brutally repressed by the RUC, the British Army, and Protestant paramilitary groups, and sometimes hung out to dry by the government of the Republic of Ireland. Derry City represented an alternative future in which the Catholic community of Derry was incorporated into the Republic of Ireland and considered equal members of a united Irish nation. Both as a distraction from the everyday slog of life in Derry during the Troubles and as an example of a Republican future, Derry City provided space for the Catholic community to dream.

Larger historiographical debates about the role of sport in politics project well on to the case of Derry City. In many ways, Derry City was the victim of a turbulent and violent political environment. The club felt singled out for discrimination by the Protestant-majority league just like how the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland felt persecuted. At the same time, Derry City transcended the heavily militarized Irish border to play in the League of Ireland at a time when many Catholics yearned for all of Northern Ireland to do the same. Derry City always had one foot in Northern Ireland and one foot in the Republic of Ireland, a predicament that afflicted the club in 1972 when it was pushed out of the Irish League, in 1985 when it finally joined the League of Ireland, and in 2016 when the club suddenly became the only club outside of the European Union that played in a league in the EU. Wherever political turmoil has gone, Derry City has seemed to find itself dragged along for the ride.

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