

Eleventh night bonfires are a double throwback. They carry an aura of a pre-Partitioned, urbanising Ulster, in which the remnants of a rural tradition have survived disingenuously in the life of a city. In our current moment, they are an out-of-sorts relic of the Troubles mentality, giving them a future which maybe as out-of-joint with the times as the Twelfth they prologue. The shapes which Eleventh night bonfires throw in John Duncan's photographs suggest a multitude of possibilities, each tempting a conclusion about why they are made at all – there are chaotic forms with no discernable pattern, there are aggressively squat and environmentally unfriendly stacks of pallets and tyres, there are sculptural attempts to reach the sky and rise above the urban and suburban skylines. They all want to be noticed, some insistently, some despite being crowded out by the 'regenerating' contemporary.

Trying to trace their lineage, or to give the bonfires a meaning beyond their communal assertion of Protestantism and loyalism, is a lightbulb around which anthropological moths have hovered and singed themselves for many decades. Our mythic forbears loved fire, as do those who go in search of human origins. J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* searches for a universal and primeval meaning for European 'fire festivals' and, of course, finds them to be ritualistic events of either worship or cleansing which were shared across the prehistoric sludge of the Western world. Early anthropology in general warmed itself with the conviction that communal fires were signs of the 'survival of something earlier'.<sup>i</sup> So it was with 'fire festivals' in Ireland, which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dabblers in the cataloguing of Irish 'customs' and 'rituals' imagined threading back to a pre-Christian Celticism which echoes reassuringly through a fractured history, for good or ill.<sup>ii</sup> Even more recent anthropologists find that

the only way to countenance the apparent primitivism of bonfires is to see them as the receding evidence of a once universal language of fire, marking the turning points of the calendar. ‘Largescale, fire-based public events are a staple feature of traditional celebratory life in Northern Ireland’<sup>iii</sup> writes Jack Santino, in 1996, without a hint of comedy. Implicit behind this impulse to generalise, mythicise and dehistoricise is a decent but myopic belief that a common humanity can be seen in shadow form behind the worst excesses of what then comes to be understood as a modern version of tribalism. But, wherever and whenever they came from, Eleventh night bonfires now are either a misunderstood expression of Loyalist identity,<sup>iv</sup> or, as Fionnuala O’Connor puts it, ‘a kind of communal sanction for anti-social behaviour’,<sup>v</sup> and whichever of these you choose, that’s what they have been for many decades, going back to the industrializing nineteenth century.<sup>vi</sup>

Like many aspects of Loyalist or Protestant life and culture in Northern Ireland, Eleventh night bonfires (building them, watching them) signify demarcations and changes in class and the perception of class, usually in unobtrusive ways. These bonfires, as John Duncan’s images and their sites remind us, are working-class labours. As such they were often off the radar of official Unionism. In the early twentieth century, for example, *The Belfast Telegraph* tended to mark the Twelfth with eulogies and op-ed pieces which waved the flag for the Orange Order. The *Telegraph*’s reporting of ‘The Twelfth’ was made up of anti-Free State rhetoric and the language of the resolutions passed annually at Finaghy. Of the Twelfth in 1920 the *Telegraph* praises the Order as a bulwark against ‘Radicals, Socialists, Nationalists, and Sinn Feiners’, but there is no mention of the night before. By the nineteen thirties the newspaper is able to use

photography more liberally and relatively instantaneously, but still there are no bonfires. The 'streets' are represented by the pristine and elaborate arches erected in Loyalist areas. In 1935, for example, the very prim Lady Elizabeth Annesley is seen at a ceremony in which she has cut the ribbon on the Orange Arch at Wolff Street on the Newtownards Road, her class status reassuring readers that all is well with the ideological bonds which hold together the likes of Lady Annesley and those who actually live on Wolff Street. It is only by the 1970s, predictably enough, that the comic-heroic exploits of children carting off collapsed sofas or guarding boneys become a staple of the *Telegraph's* photographic language. But times have moved on by then.

By viewing the bonfires without either their attendant children or the touch of urban-folkishness which is brought to an image by an anthropologic look at the working classes in action, John Duncan's photographs turn the bonfires into sculptural question marks. These images certainly document a cultural phenomenon. However, partly because they are photographed before the event, they are also able to dramatically represent change, and to wonder about the future. The pallets and tyres which dominate the 'better' bonfires suggest an altered social landscape in which 'scrap' may be less available and in which being seen (locally, politically) has a real importance. In some of the photographs it is even tempting to aestheticise the bonfires as architectural responses to derelict social spaces – the chaos created by the Ballywalter bonfire builders could be the set of Beckett's 'Breath', the Cregagh bonfire looks like an attempt to replicate Rachel Whiteread's 'House' in found materials. The bonfire at Duncairn Gardens is being squeezed by the regulation of public space, just as the Shore Road bonfire is falling off the pavement and verging on offending Lidl. The Tates Avenue bonfire puts one

finger up to 'South Studios' while enjoying its own irony at the expense of *The Irish News* and Sinn Fein. But the changing times have the last word here in the hoarding for 'The Tate Courtyard'. Duncan's photographs reverse anthropology's backward glance, which wants to understand bonfires as diachronically inevitable. Instead these are bonfires which are anachronistically threatened (and threatening). The confrontation between Days Hotel, the looming frontline fortification of a 'new' Belfast, and the Sandy Row bonfire is a raw representation of the unknown place which the bonfires, and all they stand for, will have in the future Northern Ireland.

Documentary photography has, of course, differentiated itself from the newspaper image by turning up self-consciously and thoughtfully after the event, the 'aftermath' image drawing attention to an ethics of consequences, and being a reminder of the permanency of things which the photo-journalistic image raises consciousness of only to discard the next day. In this set of images John Duncan reverses the aftermath trajectory, turning up before the main event, during the preparations. These photographs of bonfires are intended to remind us of something that is about to happen. They are images of the yet-to-come, not reminders of the soon-to-be-forgotten, and so they are questions, not statements. They wonder about the structures of these bonfires, since that is, on the surface, what they are photographs of. But more than this, they question the future and its structures, and ask whether the loyalism that brings them around every year, and is sustained by their symbolism, will fit into the larger scheme of things to come in Northern Ireland. Where can working-class loyalism find itself in Northern Ireland's future? Will it have to gentrify, repackage and commodify itself, with 'Orangefest' as its role model? In a time when the notion of community in Northern Ireland has been reified,

hollowed out and repackaged benignly through a mixture of good intentions and bad politics, Eleventh night bonfires are potentially an embarrassing sign of recalcitrance in a Northern Ireland which is unsure of whether its future is one based on shared spaces or the accommodation of ongoing and perpetual differences. The politics signalled by the bonfires press against the very limits of the limited thinking about 'community' which rippled out from the politics of the peace process, and which validates a vague idea of 'community', or plural communities, but has no sense of what a community really should be – except that it should not be what we see flying from the top of the Blackmountain Way bonfire. In John Duncan's photographs the bonfires are symbolic not so much of a community, but of the future idea of 'community' and its current paucity as a concept. They ask what a 'community' in Northern Ireland's future can, or will be allowed to, contain.

Since at least the nineteen fifties, the authorities have sought, half-heartedly, to regulate the nuisance which bonfires cause, though at the height of the old Stormont environmental laws on burning fires were suspended for the month of July. Eleventh night bonfires now have an ambiguous place in the 'new', post-historical Northern Ireland. As recently as 2005, in a Press Release to accompany a visit by Social Development Minister David Hanlon to Oaklee Housing Association in the Braniel, the new housing scheme was praised as transforming 'a potential infill site'. And in emphasising how much of a 'problem area' this site once was the NIO noted that 'it was used for example as a bonfire site and had no visual or amenity value', making the bonfire the ultimate sign of social valuelessness. Yet at the same time the NIO was

distributing advice leaflets on how to run a bonfire, beginning with a paeon to the Northern Irish bonfire which J.G. Frazer would have been proud of:

The tradition of bonfire celebrations goes back centuries. In early days the bonfires celebrated Light's victory over Darkness and marked our control over Fire and lighting the dark of night. Newer meanings came with bonfires burning away the old years and lighting the path with warm welcomes to New Years. Bonfires and beacons signalled through the dark and always around the bonfires warmly dancing were the celebrations. But celebrations like bonfires can get out of hand can lose the fun bring fear and pain and need control.

This 'advice' leaflet points towards the future of Eleventh night bonfires, at least as far as the rolling out of a new governance in the North is concerned. The poorly concealed equation here between accidental injury and political 'fear and pain' is intended to justify the need for 'control'. And vital for this common-sense approach is the utter inability to even name, never mind comprehend, loyalism and its ideas, history and prejudices. The assumption that we all know what's being talked about is used to wipe away the specifics of loyalism and sectarianism. The bonfires are imagined as cornered by the progress of history as it becomes non-history, as Northern Ireland faces its optimistic but unspecific future.

John Duncan's photographs constitute a series of reactions, by the bonfire-builders and then by the photographer, to this enforced anachronisation, in which Eleventh night bonfires are pushed into a revised version of the space and time which

they occupy in their 'community'. So the Glencairn bonfire spreads out over its available communal space, making a claim on the space as the living centre of a 'community' just as a cricket match does on a mythical English village green. The Sydenham bonfire, by contrast, is visually squeezed in a no-man's land of dereliction, and looks like it wants to burn a mobile phone mast rather than an effigy. It is the consistent and empathetically critical vision of John Duncan's work which allows these images to resist understanding the bonfires as either historical anomalies or lurid Troubles-tourist snaps. Duncan stands back far enough to be honest about his own observer position, putting varieties of emptiness between him and the bonfires. Yet he is close enough so that the viewer cannot avoid a feeling of implication. Duncan's photographs, individually and collectively, prioritise clarity of sight and a patience which follows from that clarity. Their palette, with that grey sky, multiple shades of greenery, and the textures of road surfaces, is itself a refusal to dramatise or sensationalise. These photographs are poised at the present moment, but they are turned towards the future.

And so in Duncan's photographs we see the jarring of what these bonfires once represented against what they might become, and how they might refuse the future. The NIO's advice leaflet would have us turn full circle and back to myth. In order to give the Eleventh night cultural legitimacy the reluctant admittance that 'Bonfires are one of the ways in which Northern Ireland people celebrate their history' needs the accompanying vagueness of the liberal, mythic, poetic, pseudo-druidic past, in which we are all at the mercy of the forces of Light and Darkness. The only dancing that is done here is in the tiptoeing of government rhetoric around what 'history', rather than myth, really means, and the aspiration to make history meaningless in all our tomorrows. John Duncan's

photographs of Eleventh night bonfires, rising from their ineffably historical and social environments, reveal the left-over cultural incongruities which the wish fulfilments of myth cannot explain away.

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<sup>i</sup> Charlotte Sophia Burne, 'Presidential Address', *Folklore*, 22: 1 (1911), 34.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, James Mooney, 'The Holiday Customs of Ireland', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 26:130 (1889), 377-427; D. H. Moutray Read, 'Some Characteristics of Irish Folklore', *Folklore*, 27: 3 (1916), 250-278.

<sup>iii</sup> Jack Santino, 'Light Up the Sky: Halloween Bonfires and Cultural Hegemony in Northern Ireland', *Western Folklore*, 55: 3 (Summer 1996), 213-231.

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, the testimonies gathered at [www.the-twelfth.org.uk/](http://www.the-twelfth.org.uk/).

<sup>v</sup> Fionnuala O'Connor, 'Tonight's the Night', *The Independent*, 11 July 1999.

<sup>vi</sup> Alan Gailey, 'The Bonfire in North Irish Tradition', *Folklore*, 88:1 (1977), 3-38 updates some of his folklorish predecessors and adds a more worldly-wise sense of Northern politics to the history of Northern bonfires; he also notes Ó Danachair's more practical explanation for the appearance of bonfires at certain times of the year as being 'a relic of a system of signal fires lit to announce far and wide the coming of the season day' (4).