

## Claire Mitchell

### reflection questions & episode transcript

In a typical year, Corrymeela's meeting rooms — and dining and welcome areas — are filled with people discussing matters of politics, history and religion that have separated them. During this time of Covid, we are providing you with a transcript of each podcast episode, along with some discussion questions, to aid your consideration of the themes which emerge. You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness within the group. It might help to choose one of the [Very Short Story Questions](#). As with any group process, if you are talking about this episode with others, make sure to check that people feel safe enough, that the time is right for them, and make it easy for anyone who wishes to keep their considerations to themselves, or for anyone who doesn't wish to join such a conversation.

1. Much of Claire Mitchell's work seeks to disrupt narratives that are overly simple and reductively singular by telling stories of dissent, surprise, challenge and diversity in the everyday. Are there stories — from within your family or community — of people who broke lines of religion, politics, place, and belonging?
2. Through study, and perhaps distance, Claire Mitchell found the capacity to start observing the politics and religion of the North, dedicating years of her life to this project. Have you had similar experiences where study or a new perspective has helped you to see more clearly? How/when have you sought out — or resisted — such new experiences or perspectives?
3. Claire Mitchell is keen to point out that examining Northern Ireland as a place still torn apart by sectarian politics is only one avenue of analysis. She sees the diversity she yearns for already: among parents at the school; neighbours; people she meets. What are the diversities that you see in your neighbourhood? What can be done to amplify and support these narratives rather than allowing them to be subsumed into singular or binary stories?

Claire Mitchell is a writer and sociologist. Her essays and articles — as well as links to her published books — can be found on her website: [clairemitchell.net](http://clairemitchell.net)

## *The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Claire Mitchell. Transcript.*

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

**Hello and welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. This is the fifth in a series of twelve episodes timed to coincide with this first year of Brexit and the centenary of partition in Ireland. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and over these interviews I'm talking to a rich lineup of guests, having conversations about Irishness and Britishness through the lenses of politics, history, art and theology.**

**On this week's episode, I'll be talking to Claire Mitchell, a writer and sociologist, who'll be telling me about her unconventional and surprising family background: *"What I have come to appreciate now is how anti-sectarian it was as an upbringing. I mean, we were definitely Protestant evangelicals, but the charismatic part meant bringing Catholic friends into our lives and worshipping with them"...* *"I mean, I never had a whiff or trace that there was any kind of Irish language in my family at all. And it's kind of very moving to me to discover that"*.**

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

**Hello, you're very welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast. My name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and with me today is Dr. Claire Mitchell, a freelance writer and former senior lecturer in sociology at Queen's University Belfast here in Northern Ireland. Claire has written widely on loyalism and evangelicalism and Protestant identity on the island of Ireland and she joins me from her home in Belfast. Claire, you're very welcome.**

**Claire Mitchell:**

Hi, Pádraig, thank you so much for having me.

**Pádraig:**

It's a real pleasure. What room in your house are we speaking to you from today, Claire?

**Claire Mitchell:**

I am in my little girl's bedroom, surrounded by Harry Potter books and world maps.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Fantastic, magic and travel, two fantastic things! Yeah, I like it. So I'd love to start with your personal background, Claire. I know you were raised as an evangelical; you moved away at some point and you started to study evangelicalism. What was the culture of your religion like growing up?

**Claire Mitchell:**

I suppose it wasn't really a traditional package of religion and politics in Northern Ireland. We were part of the evangelical charismatic movement: house churches and the like. So it was intense; it had shades of light and dark, I suppose. What I have come to appreciate now is how anti-sectarian it was as an upbringing. I mean, we were definitely Protestant evangelicals, but the charismatic part meant bringing Catholic friends into our lives and worshipping with them. It also came with political stuff, like I've always had an Irish passport; our politics was always very non-unionist.

And I don't think that was typical, during The Troubles, and it was quite a special kind of gift really, from my parents so-

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Well I was just going to say often 'evangelical package' comes with the imagination that it's automatically of a particular point of view, and automatically of a particular social group. And you're saying that that wasn't the case at all?

**Claire Mitchell:**

No, absolutely the opposite. I mean, I remember when the Anglo-Irish agreement happened, in the '80s. There was a day of protest, like a strike when everybody wouldn't go to work and wasn't going to send their kids into school. And I remember being in P5, and it was me and this other little boy from Community of the King. We weren't unionists, and it was the two of us sitting in a big cold classroom, opting out of that politics. So I didn't really understand that at the time, but I've really come to appreciate that. There was a lot of darkness there as well, because it was a supernatural upbringing. And even though my parents necessarily... it wasn't coming from them, once you leave to the wider structures of the church youth groups, and you kind of develop your own life with it, it was very much angels and demons and restriction and rules and quite damaging if you were - I don't know - LGBTQ or an independent woman or - you know - the consequences of sin were really high. Like, I remember my biggest fear when I was - I don't know, maybe eight or nine - was the antichrist coming back and that my faith wouldn't be strong enough to not get the barcode and join the underground Christian resistance. There was a lot of - I don't know - trauma, I guess with that. So when I went to college, I just got out of here and spent a long time kind of processing and recovering from that.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I was keen to ask you about college 'cause I know you did undergrad and PhD and maybe even more postdoc work in UCD in Dublin. What brought that decision?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Just doing the opposite of what everybody else was doing! I don't know, I had a bit of Celtic mist in my eyes, like... I knew I had this Irish part of my identity, and like it meant a lot to me reading Yeats and Heaney, and like it was a real inner world that I had developed listening to Irish language radio (I didn't have a clue what it meant). So there was a draw there, something that had to be explored. But you know, it was also freedom. And I didn't go to Dublin and explore the Celtic dimensions of my identity, I went to Dublin and I went on the piss. And I relaxed. And I didn't have to think about all of this stuff for a long time. You know, I just opted into that really easy Irish identity where I was maybe a minority and a bit weird because of that, but it was easy. It was pints and Whelan's and gigs and music, and it was... d'you know it wasn't as fraught as it is up here. But then obviously, I went and did a PhD in religion and politics and continued that.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

That's so interesting that you were able to bring that with you intellectually. Did it feel safer to explore those things south of the border?

**Claire Mitchell:**

I don't know if it was so much safety as kind of picking a scab would be a negative way to put it, or a positive way would be self-therapy. I had a lot of questions about the way I grew up. And a lot of questions with the way that religion interacted with politics in the North. And I just needed to explore that more and that was really a journey that started - yes, with curiosity - but also with a lot of, kind of anger, and you know, big feelings. But really, by the end of that process... [I had] dealt with things that, yeah, I felt settled about. And I liked evangelicals again! By the end of that project even... the kind of fundamentalist evangelicals who - d'you know - I would be so at odds with politically. It's interesting.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I was gonna ask, were there things that you learned about evangelicalism when you did your studies or you did your research and your PhD that you hadn't thought of before? And maybe tell us what the question you were exploring in the research was, as well.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Well, there were a couple of projects: I guess the one that made the biggest impact on me was work I did with Gladys Ganiel about evangelical journeys. And the idea for that really came from our Bible group (or youth fellowship) growing up and we were wondering why all the people who had the same kind of religious upbringing as us in the North, why some were complete atheists and heathens, why some had settled in more liberal congregations... And some had become evangelical pastors or worship leaders themselves- like, how can we have all ended up in such different places? So that was the real kind of jumping off point of curiosity. So we went and asked about a hundred people what was going on [and] found people converting and becoming more conservative. It was after Drumcree, and it was like [around] the agreements- [a] very kind of fraught political time. So a lot kind of tumbled out about politics as well.

What did we find? I mean - again - I started off because of my own political beliefs, which would be much more kind of a Protestant dissenter, than a unionist. I did struggle you know, with doing some of the interviews - very uncomfortable - people would often try to convert me. And it brought up a lot of difficult feelings. But you know, once you have such intimate human experiences with people; I mean we were asking them 'what's your journey over time? What are the things that have happened in your lives?' And they would feed us dinner and cups of tea, and you would go to the loo in their house; d'you know- that's so weirdly intimate, like their little soaps and what little pictures they have on the wall. And their worlds did start to make sense to me from the perspective of themselves and the things that they needed answered. So I really left, I mean just as strong in my own political dissent, but really, with an attitude of judge not, you know?

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. I'm so interested in how you, as a sociologist, in that project took stories and took those stories so seriously, that you began to investigate the tiny little phrase or the tiniest little word, and begin to see how that might indicate some aspect of identity, some aspect of a person's own kind of sense of change or sense of defiance. Story seems to be remarkably important to you and the work you do.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Everything is stories, isn't it? It's how I understand the world, I don't know why. My parents get frustrated talking to me sometimes 'cause they like to talk about philosophical things, and my husband gets frustrated because he wants to have different types of conversations. But everything for me comes back to anecdote, personal story- not gossip, but just, you know, the small interactions that make up all of ourselves. I love it.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

That's amazing.

**Claire Mitchell:**

You know, working with Gladys - who was herself a person of faith, even though I've moved away myself from the faith - it was a nice combination and we decided at the start that we were really just going to accept people's stories on their own terms. And if somebody told me they had voices in their head, and that it was the voice of God and the voice of the devil, that I wasn't gonna judge that in a scientific way. I was gonna accept it, and try and get inside their shoes and understand the world from their perspective. And I don't know that that particularly went down terribly well in the academic community. It wasn't really... you know, I don't remember really brilliant academic reviews off that book, but I felt that I had understood people a bit better. And I had humanised them, yeah. And hopefully vice versa.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

So you came back to Belfast to work in Queen's after you had done this research. It struck me in thinking about who you were when you came back, that in a certain sense these six levels of evangelicalism and the six groups regarding change (people who converted to it, folks who are deepening evangelicalism, those who maintain a steady faith, those who moderate their evangelicalism or try to transform it, or those who leave it) in a certain sense you went through most, if not all of those...

**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, multiple times!

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Oh, really?! In a circular way...

**Claire Mitchell:**

Well the conversion, you know- you like to do it age 4...6...8...10 just to keep it topped up.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Your children go to a Catholic school. That's quite a journey.

**Claire Mitchell:**

They do! Yeah, I mean, I would like to say we did it as a great act of peace and reconciliation; we just had an accidental encounter with the school and just really loved the community ethos of it. And yeah, it shouldn't have felt like a big decision to us because we're probably 'neithers/nones/nothings'- not taking part in that kind of communal politics. But yeah, it was a bigger kind of Rubicon to cross than I thought. I knew within a couple of hours that it was

100% the right decision. And it was dead funny 'cause you know, all the agonising we'd done... The Catholic system, oh, my goodness, we were just put to shame by the ordinary people who were just already living their lives like that, d'you know- not intellectualising it.

The school, it's full of people in mixed marriages... people having cross-community banter: one girl had a bad dye job one day calling herself Orange Lil (another Protestant at the school). D'you know there would be people in loyalist bands at the school. And I have just loved that kind of everyday ordinariness of the school gate and honestly, I think I have learned more about the north of Ireland standing talking to the ma's at the school gate and they've taught me so much in a way that I didn't really access I think with the academic work. So I don't know that we've got it theologically nailed down- my littlest, I think he still thinks that the priest is actually God. And, I did catch them trying to make bath water into holy water one night. So I don't really know what it's doing for their religious life, but at least they have a lot of options open to them.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah, I mean, even already in this conversation, like when it comes to evangelical charismatic communities and when it comes to the community around the Catholic school, you're already saying that the surface of those things actually betrays the fact that they're already full of diversity, and full of different kinds of people meeting each other with all kinds of unexpected political and social connections, and allegiances.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Oh, absolutely. Like, I think you can get drawn into like a Twitter parody of what it feels like to live and work and be in Northern Ireland. And you just look at the worst examples of trolls online, and you think that's what they're like and that's what it's like out there. But I really try to have a rich offline life. And anytime I get depressed, I just close the computer. I just walk out into the world and into the local shops and just be with people. And honestly, I'd talk to a lamppost. And if you are open- (I probably have on many occasions!)

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I'll keep an eye out for you!.

**Claire Mitchell:**

If you're open to the world, and curious, and non-judgmental and if you just open your mouth and go there, I have to say my experience of Northern Ireland is just not of the way it might seem to others, if you just looked at our political dysfunction.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

How interesting. I mean, it's rules for living, isn't it? To have a rich offline life- especially if you're involved in writing and putting opinion pieces out there, to make sure that you're not only living... Do you think that you're a growing number of people whose community life is already really rich and diverse in the midst of their political and religious allegiances, and where their kids go to school or where they work: that actually the diversity is already there it's just not being amplified?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, I do think that. Absolutely I think that. I mean, if you think about my parents bringing us up in the context of The Troubles, and they were really, definitely doing a politically different thing. But you know, we didn't have anywhere that we could go as kids that they felt would be safe to explore and express that. And then if I think about my life now, and you know I'm going for a walk with an exclusive brethren friend next week, and I'll meet my anti-vax friend at the school gate; my Muslim friend who I'm getting a cake off. And then I think about my children's lives, and the radical leap again that they're gonna take. Like, I don't even think they could tell you if they were Protestant or Catholic, you know, or how they fitted into all of that. And I don't think that's just us. As I said, ordinary people are kind of putting me - thinking in my house about being open - putting me to shame because I just think that's how most people live. There's just- isn't there a generosity of life in the North where, you know there are these big divisions, but we all have these creative ways of telling people: d'you know it's okay.

I remember my husband in the kitchen (we would say 'Derry' you know), and the tree guy came over, and I think he thinks we're Catholics 'cause [of] our kids' uniform and stuff. So Tim was talking about something: he'd been to 'Londonderry'. I was doing a double take, like: what are you saying that for?! But he was making an accommodation to the tree guy, because you know, his name is probably Protestant, where we live. And the tree guy came back and he fires out a sentence with about five 'Derries' in it, you know. Just to signal back to my husband: 'd'you know, that's okay. You know, you don't have to do that for me, and I accept who you are, and we can have this conversation freely'. I just love that. And I think that's the fabric of life here for me, that generous accommodation.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

As you think about your political life, you've become a member of the Green Party. What led you to that?

**Claire Mitchell:**

I'm not sure I want to say that now after seeing the Green Party government in the South! The Green Party came about just looking for a political home in the North. I don't know, I tried on the other/neither/Alliance kind of identity for a while. But I just love heritage and history and the island that we live on, and I just wanted something a bit more connected and a bit richer, I guess. Yeah, I've really found my tribe in terms of the friendships that I've made, and even - you know - I would live in a quite Protestant area, but I'm friends through the Green Party with trade unionists, and witches and ecologists and British Labourites and Irish learners and speakers, and d'you know it's just so diverse and I absolutely love that. And the connection with kind of landscape and heritage and taking that seriously has meant a lot to me. I haven't loved... First, I was quite excited to be part of an all-Ireland party and taking part in all the stuff in the South. But I think the Green Party here in the North - because of our context, because there haven't been like lots and lots of options for people who are opting out and doing different kind of left-wing politics - I think it's attracted a quite radical bunch of people in the North and it's maybe a bit different in the South.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

You were telling us earlier on about leaving your evangelical background behind, but it's not the only area where you've taken particular choices that might surprise some people so to speak. You've written quite brilliantly about your yearning for the Irish language, almost like a ghost limb. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, this one's been a real journey for me over the years. I mentioned earlier about having a touch of the Celtic mist going on when I was growing up. And you know, that's really great when you're 17 but when you're in your 30s and 40s, you kind of need a more mature version of that. But I have always, I have always just felt this kind of absence or pang for a kind of Irishness, however that's expressed... but I haven't had the kind of social options to explore [it].

I mean, I was telling somebody the other day, I remember having a wee lilac tape recorder. And I was about 14 or 15 you know, just from the Argos catalogue, and I'd sit in my room totally by myself. And I'd listen to John Peel on the radio and I'd listen to the Irish language programming. And, you know the way we'd make ourselves wee mix tapes back in the day? I used to record wee tunes from Irish language radio onto the mixtapes and then play them back. And this is a totally private kind of thing that I was doing. I don't think I'd ever really thought about it until this week. And I carried those tapes round with me and I just could not decode them. There was a song called Dónal Agus Mórag. And I didn't even know anyone called Dónal, I didn't know what Agus meant - even the simplest thing you know to ask - I'd nobody to ask: what is this song? And d'you know, even up to five years ago it would come on the radio ('cause I listen to Raidió Fáilte all the time, hoping to learn Irish by osmosis). My kids would go: "that's your song, Mummy like, that's your song!" and it took me to go to Turas a couple of years ago (Linda Ervine's Irish language programme in the Newtownards Road) to kind of start to join all these dots up and almost decode these little fragments that I've been carrying around with me.

The amazing part of it is that - Dónal Agus Mórag is just a gorgeous example of it - the more I have tapped into and tried to embrace and put meat on the bones of what an Irish identity is in the north of Ireland, the more it's unlocked the kind of Scottish dimensions as well. Like Mórag you know, that's a song about a couple here getting married on Rathlin Island. And the Irish they would have spoken would have been a mixture of Irish and Ulster and Scots and you know this beautiful blend. So that's what I kind of meant: coming to a more mature sense of what that Irishness meant was not like the Celtic mist, but it's very rooted in Protestant traditions and the mingling between Scots and Irish culture, and that's become interesting and important for me.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I noticed in your article that you were kind of almost awkwardly saying: 'Look, I don't believe in this kind of ghost limb of Irish'. But yet you then go on to ask these questions: 'What is this Irish shaped space? Am I making it up? How can you feel sore for the absence of something you've not quite known?' And it sounds like that's been with you for decades.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Oh, yeah, my whole life- absolutely. I mean, I talked about it in the piece as being a ghost limb and I can't really describe it any better than that. It feels like a phantom thing. And you know, you feel it in your heart. And you know, as a sociologist, that there's nothing; I wasn't looking even for an ethnic thing or a bloodline to be traced back. It was just a set of stories that felt important to me and I could not connect them up for a long time with things that happened in my story, and my family's journey, and I did, as the article goes on to-

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I was gonna ask about that bloodline. I know that your grandmother, Dora has an extraordinary story that you can tell.



**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, my granny. My granny was [a] lovely woman. And she was just very ordinarily Protestant and unionist. And I did not really question any of that until I was doing my ancestry recently. And oh my goodness, it just became addictive! I just wanted to look for the people who tapped into my story: the women's lives, the people who were seeming to do different things politically. And one of the things I had a kind of notion to see was it in there, was the Irish language. And yeah, in my Granny's family, I then came across a whole kind of strain of the family who come from The Shankill; well like they came from the Docklands in sailor time before that (which is quite religiously mixed, actually, at the time, and there were quite a lot of then Catholic inter-marriages and family). And then they moved to the Shankill, and whole family are Irish speakers. And very working class I would say really, a lot [of] the streets look like slums that they're living in, at the time- like a very hard life in many ways. It's just so fascinating. And they weren't really literate. You know- they're always signing documents with their mark. So, these memories then were paused... I find an Irish in the 1901 census [but] it doesn't, it's been erased, I don't know what happened to it. 1911- they're all just monoglots, speaking English. And I was trying to look at what's happening on their streets at the time, because [if] you look at the census, you can find that, and, you know, I can see the political context hardening in the North. And you can see a mural of Carson being thrown up on Dora's gable wall and their neighbour who's from County Kerry is shot for talking back whenever there's a curfew- talking back to the army. And you can just see how a family really struggling - multiple kids, getting dinner on the table - you just want to keep your head down, you know?

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah. This was all in the years before partition, so this was when it was all still the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and so there wasn't a North at that stage.

**Claire Mitchell:**

And then because those stories are not written down, right, because they're poor people's stories and they're women's stories and they're not official stories... and then the history that we've had since and then The Troubles; they weren't stories that were maybe talked about in families, they weren't memories that were passed on. I mean, I never had a whiff or trace that there was any kind of Irish language in my family at all. And it's kind of very moving to me to discover that. All of that said, I wouldn't have cared if there was no Irish in my family, because I believe that we all choose our identities, and maybe it was my parents who broke the chain. Maybe it was me.

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**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

**You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is Dr Claire Mitchell, a freelance writer and former senior lecturer in sociology at Queen's University here in Belfast in Northern Ireland.**

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I mean, interestingly, it sounds to me like you have active Irish speakers in your family history more recently than I do. I don't think that we had... I think it was my great great granddad who was the last one who was a first-language Irish speaker during the famine.

**Claire Mitchell:**

That's so interesting. And it's all over the Shankill as well. I looked up all their streets and between five to fifteen percent in all of their streets were speaking Irish around that time.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

You're learning Irish now aren't you- Turas with Linda Ervine. How's that going for you?

**Claire Mitchell:**

I love it, absolutely love it. I started by taking the kids. But, yeah- tryna make sure your kids aren't being mental whilst trying to learn a new language was quite hard! So I started going back myself and d'you know it just... a few things just really clicked in. They always start with place names, and you know they always start by talking about Ballyhackamore: 'Baile an Chacamair' (I don't [know the] right pronunciation) 'townland'/'the big poo'; which kind of takes our well-heeled East Belfast area down a peg or two and always ends in much laughter! But just realising that these anglicised versions of place names we use every day and the crossing the road and the way the water sweeps up over the field. And d'you know it just absolutely made sense to me. And then my friend Richard O'Leary pointed out at one stage that we speak Hiberno-English and all the things which maybe schools try to iron out of your speech d'you know - the colloquialisms and the informality - that it comes from the Irish. And actually, if you allow yourself to speak in your native tongue, you're repeating the Irish grammatical structure. And that actually makes it- it just opens up a portal into making Irish, for me, easier to understand. So yeah, little moments of revelation.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I remember hearing an instance of that where somebody around a table, speaking in English, said to somebody: 'you wouldn't pass me the salt, would you?' Where you're asking in the negative conditional, rather than saying: 'please pass me the salt'. But in Irish, you just, you do that as a kind of a way that you want to make it easy for a person to opt out. And by asking in the negative conditional... that's, that's much more frequent in the Irish language. But the way that people here speak English can sometimes seem a little bit like, why did you ask me for something by telling me that I probably wouldn't do it? I love that!

**Claire Mitchell:**

It's really generous, isn't it? It's just a softer way to speak. It's kind of funny, as well.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I'd love to hear from you about your opinion in your reading and your analysis about how Protestant identity has changed since partition. And is changing again, now obviously, as we're in 2021. What did partition and the state of Northern Ireland eventually do to Irishness amongst Protestants that you can see?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Swallowed it up, I think, is the answer. Made it retreat, become private. I'm reading an amazing book at the minute: Guy Beiner's *Forgetful Remembrance*. I feel like I've been reading it for years because I have- it's like 800 pages. But it's a beautiful book about how, you know, going back to the United Irish rebellion, that this kind of radical Protestantism has always existed. And it has - at some points in our history - it's been allowed space and freedom to breathe and it's been safe to tell those stories and be that way. And then other points in our history - and I guess after partition would be one of those - that space has contracted sharply, and it hasn't been safe to be this kind of Protestant. And I mean, what Guy Beiner finds is that it's still out there d'you know- people have little relics and mementos and stories and memories. And it's like you can't officially suppress that. And I feel like we're... partition closed that down. Maybe it opened up a bit. The Troubles certainly shut that down. And I kind of feel like we're in a moment that we can name that and voice that Protestant diversity. I mean, I think it always existed throughout The Troubles: I've described my upbringing, which is not a conventional unionist/Protestant package. It's always been there, it just... never gets space.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah, I am struck that you as a sociologist I'm sure heard many, many individual stories of absolute trauma from The Troubles. You know, the word 'troubles' can come into English from the Irish 'trioblóidí', which has a connotation of 'the bereavements' rather than 'a spot of bother'. And so to an Irish language ear 'trioblóidí', or 'the troubles' does carry a weightiness to it that isn't so light as an only English speaker would think. But the thousands and thousands and thousands of stories of grief and shock and injury and trauma, that certainly became a new culture in itself also over the latter part of the 20th century.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, I think so. And it's really sad, isn't it? I can even see that in my family, d'you know, where like, certain strains would have lots of mixed marriages and they would find ways to not fall out with one another and participate in each other's cultures. My granny was a champion Irish dancer and-

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Granny Dora?

**Claire Mitchell:**

No it was the other side of the family, the Newry ones- they had a lovely kind of weavy-in-and-out-of, converting every generation to the other religion. So... and then seeing other members of the family who were maybe B-specials and who... You know, I feel in an unusual position as a Protestant to have known people who have suffered loss and death of loved ones because of the IRA, but have also in my wider family circle being related to people in the security kind of ecosystem - I don't know what to call it - of the North who hated Catholics, and they were bigots. And I'm obviously not generalising that to everybody, but I don't think... I think that needs to be named by Protestants. And that's a very, very difficult thing.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Why is it difficult to name that?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Because it's your family. And it's your upbringing. You can be disloyal in your politics, hypothetically, but you can't throw Uncle Billy under the bus. Because we all want to think that our families were doing the right thing. And you know, in their heads, they probably were doing the right thing to the extent that they understood that. But I remember interviewing a distant relative for one of the projects I did, and he was sitting there with a history of Israel (*Airgun Weekly: A Buyer's Guide* on the other side of him) and he was showing me a Sinn Féin oath that he seized from a house. And he was really... he was, the way he told the story about ransacking the house.... I could just, I just put myself in the position of the family in that house and that kind of broke my heart. And that's something I can just say now 'cause he's not with us anymore. I don't know. It's very difficult. And also, you don't want to impugn like a whole force/security. You know, I'm not saying that this was everybody. I'm just saying it was real.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Yeah, I can understand that the threat of saying something that would be against your family would... might actually mean that people who would consider themselves to be quite mixed in their politics and religious and social views, that they nonetheless might keep quiet because of a fear of being seen to be disloyal to blood. And to trauma, I suppose.

**Claire Mitchell:**

And to trauma, because - d'you know - often when you find people who think like that, it's a story of loss as well isn't it for them and loss of loved ones.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

What do you think - I mean, there's trauma, but there's also fears or concerns, whether real or imagined - what do you think the strong opposition to certain forms of Irishness might be amongst some folks? What is the fear? Is it that the northern Protestant identity is going to be swallowed up as if that's somehow antithetical to Irishness, or what do you think a fear might be?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Well, I don't think all Protestants have that fear, I think probably more of them don't than do. I think during The Troubles, there was probably like a safety element... maybe going to an Irish language class in the places that I could have done that I wouldn't have been allowed to do it, because my parents wouldn't have thought that was safe. So there's probably a hangover from then. I think part of it is just sectarianism, to be honest with you. And I think it's really, really sad. Because I think when you disparage the Irish language, you cut off your nose to spite your face 'cause you lose the Scots; you become one of those people who disdains heritage. And it's a class thing as well, isn't it? 'It's not proper, it's not acceptable, it's uneducated, it's threatening'. And then I just think encounter is the thing that's missing. And that's why I think - I said it wrong, not 'Turr-rus' - Turas is so important because it provides space for encounter. And actually, what- (and it is mostly Protestants in my experience learning there). And what you find is that if you just open the latch on the door, and give it the tiniest little push, what you find is an Irish language community that is so generous and welcoming, and will never laugh at your stupid pronunciation, and has no expectation of you and is just delighted that you opened the door and thought to peek through. And I just think there is no fear. That's a shared language, it's a mingled heritage. And I do think more people are coming round to that. I think again, it's just a big, yucky political narrative, isn't it, that's become something that it's not really.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

How do you think that the Good Friday Agreement changed attitudes - whether that's softening them or entrenching - them amongst the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Amongst the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community...

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I suppose that's communities, really. Rather than one.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, well, a variety of different things happened, I guess. Politically, there was a shift. And over time we've seen an institutionalisation of binary politics of orange and green because that's what votes count and that's how the whole thing is set up. But that was incredibly necessary to institute that power sharing at the time. So we've had a political polarisation, we've had a situation with violence, which is lessening, and had real moments of former paramilitaries encountering difference and really engaging with things and then that's underpinned the peace process. But then it's fractured off in kind of toxic ways amongst minority elements in both those communities since.

I think what you've had on the ground, though, is absolutely an opening up of spaces for those encounters, and a safety in going places and doing things that you wouldn't have done before. So I think now, looking 20 years after the agreement, just the ecosystem of social relationships has changed. There's so many mixed marriages and relationships and dating; we had great fun over lockdown helping my friend guess on Grindr who was Protestant and who was Catholic and how we were gonna negotiate those introductions. That was fun! And I just think that that's how we live our lives, don't we? Going to Slimming World and the photography club, and you know, the dog groomer. And that all of those things, I think they are looser by the year.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I noticed that you are - while being very generous, I think within a kind of a Protestant narrative of the North - you also push that and challenge that. How has your confidence grown in terms of pushing and challenging nationalism as well? The more that you've come closer to seeing yourself through the lens of Irishness, have you found the capacity to be critical about Irishness as well and pushing the nationalist community about things that you would just see to be sectarian or small-minded?

**Claire Mitchell:**

Yeah, absolutely. I know, we've been focusing on the Protestant tradition and it's kind of easier to get under the bonnet maybe of your own community and story and dissect that. But absolutely, I mean my politics in some senses would be closer to Sinn Féin, for example, than some of the unionist parties. But I can say that and say I appreciate their role in the peace process and in politics now. I am delighted that Deirdre Hargey has been Minister for Communities because she's doing stuff that is looking after communities. But I think there is just a sectarian river that runs through Catholic and nationalist/republican communities for Protestants. I mean it's all of our problem. How it manifests itself is- oh my worst one is 'get the ferry to Scotland and we'll pay for your ticket... when there's a united Ireland'. There is a

complete sometimes dismissal of the pain that security forces' families went through: a kind of dehumanisation. That's problematic.

I don't buy into any of this rewriting history stuff, you know- 'republicans are seizing the narrative' because I think history was the official record and that has needed to be corrected, but there can be an uncritical view of the struggle, which I find problematic. And I just think there's also a disconnect in how many republicans (that maybe haven't met Protestants) think they're gonna be like... and then [what] they turn out to be like. In practice, those can be two different things. And I just think encounter can change that. I don't think anything is irreparably broken. But yeah, there's work to be done everywhere.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Brexit was a popular idea with some unionists, maybe even many unionists, but yet now it seems to be threatening the UK union. How do you think unionists are reckoning with Brexit and what might happen in terms of whether that's another go at Scottish independence, or whether that's a border poll?

**Claire Mitchell:**

I mean, I think most people would say at this stage, it was a fairly bad plan in terms of stability in this place. When I think about Brexit, I just think about carelessness and d'you know the lack of care and thought which the British state thought to treat Northern Ireland with, and that's upsetting. And I'm sure that is really upsetting for a lot of unionists, d'you know, seeing the land border protected and having to deal with a sea border. And that's a very - I mean, it's a functional thing in one sense isn't it? tariffs and paperwork and all - but it's an emotional and psychological thing. And I think that's hard. But that said, I do see an adaptation amongst different types of unionists and people that I'm quite surprised about.

Like you said, the reality is that English nationalism is becoming more of a factor politically. There's no way the Scots can wear that indefinitely. Things are changing, tectonic plates are shifting. And I do think that unionists... I mean, one of my fears about a united Ireland is that Fine Gael and the DUP will make this like 'super party', this right-wing kind of beast, that lefties like us... I even see like, there would be unionist leaning people in my wider family, who'd be sending me Fine Gael attack videos about Sinn Féin - I don't know- is that progress?! Or not? I'm not sure. But-

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Certainly they're unexpected alliances, aren't they? And that that could be interesting - if nothing else - to see how some of the parties in the Republic could make connections with some of the parties in the North.

**Claire Mitchell:**

What I think though is that like, in 2020, what does unity even mean? Because all our politics now is global. And all our politics in the future, because of plague, because of floods, because of our digital lives, all politics will be local, local, local. And these states - the nation states - are kind of 20th century constructions and they're the ones who will administer the stuff that's going to happen. But I just think politics with, especially climate change, is just gonna be unrecognisable in 20 years. And sure we'll stay in the union or do Irish unity - it's not a language that makes sense of the future to me.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

I know. Those will be subsidiary concerns, really, when you're looking at towns having to move certain parts because of flooding or different things like that.

I'd love to talk to you about your next book and your next project, looking at reviving radical Protestantism. I have a tagline for you Claire, that you might want to use. I've wanted to write a poem about this for years, but I actually think that the line is yours: 'It's time to put the protest back in Protestant'.

**Claire Mitchell:**

That's not mine but I'll happily-

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

No no, it's mine! But it's yours now... I've given it to you!

**Claire Mitchell:**

I'll happily rob it then. Yeah, no it's brilliant.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Good poets borrow, great poets steal. So work away, steal it!

**Claire Mitchell:**

Absolutely! I am determined to single-handedly bring back dissenterism, because I'm not bringing it back, like- I'm just giving it a voice. So what I'm doing at the minute is starting to work on a book about modern dissenters, which is that radical strain in the Protestant community that has always existed, that has in many political moments had to be silent. And which there is space now and it's safe and it needs to be given voice to. So what I'm doing (you know I like wee stories and just spending time with people) so yeah, I've just been gathering up experiences and relationships and God love all my friends getting shoved in a book against their will! But you know, I've just tried to live as a dissenter- I mean, that sounds weird. But I've been learning Irish for all these years; I've been part of the Green Party and trying to engage with environment and Ireland. I have a lot of Protestant nationalist friends who want to engage with that question via constitutional politics. I also have friends that I go grave hoking with - you know - like pulling back the weeds on the graves of United Irishmen, and just all the different ways... like feminist and LGBTQ activists (they're very radical Protestants); trade unionists, even socialist loyalists. I'm just interested in finding that spirit of dissent. And maybe dissent isn't the right word for it. But just giving voice and embodying and living and then introducing other people to this way of being a Protestant, which is all I've ever known. And, whilst I've studied other traditions, if you like, this feels like my tribe, my people, and I just want to share that because I think there's a lot in there that can muddy up the binaries in Northern Ireland, and make things more complicated in a good way.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Claire Mitchell, thanks very much for joining us for The Corrymeela Podcast.

**Claire Mitchell:**

Go raibh míle maith agat, Pádraig.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Tá fáilte romhat.

**Our guest this week was writer and sociologist Dr Claire Mitchell. You can find links to her writing and current projects on her website: [clairemitchell.net](http://clairemitchell.net). That's in our shownotes, too.**

**Don't forget to listen right to the end when Claire has some intriguing answers to our 'Very Short Story Questions'.**

**Thanks for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and I'll be back with another episode next week, when I'll be joined by a very special guest, the Edge from U2: *"music and rhythm were two things that I was fascinated with, from a very young age. I do remember playing biscuit tins to the music on the TV test card"... "I didn't develop a faith really through church. In ways you might say I was somewhat inoculated against faith by my early church experiences"*. So be sure to spread the word for any U2 fans you might know, and join us for that next week.**

**The Corrymeela Podcast comes to you with generous support from our funders: the Henry Luce Foundation, the Fund for Reconciliation from the Irish Government, the Community Relations Council of Northern Ireland and the friends of Corrymeela, who give monthly or annually.**

**The Corrymeela Podcast is a FanFán production. Thanks to researcher and producer Emily Rawling. The podcast was mixed by Fra Sands at Safe Place Studios.**

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:** Claire, could you tell us about a time when your national identity felt important to you?

**Claire Mitchell:**

So I'm going to be really annoying for these questions Pádraig, and question the terms of all of them. I don't know what national identity is because I don't really connect my Irishness necessarily with the Irish state, whose government I'm not necessarily loving. I feel more internationalist. But that said there was a moment early in lockdown- do you remember when the Republic of Ireland locked down a week before the British state? And I can only describe a feeling of physical pain, like a visceral helplessness. It was very traumatic. I can't really describe it- that the right thing was happening, like, in the South and we were institutionally bound to the British state, which kind of in a fashion got itself together a week after that, but that was a moment where national identity didn't seem hypothetical. It felt like life and death.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

Has anyone ever said that they thought that you were being disloyal to your cultures or your identities?

**Claire Mitchell:**

This question is hilarious to me. Because, yeah, all the time. I feel like the minute I hovered my hand over the keyboard to begin writing for a public audience three or four years ago, somebody else's hand was over the 'L' key



ready to type Lundy, you know. I've had that constantly since, and I love the term 'Lundy leash': Lundy is an insult for a Protestant who strayed too far away from unionist orthodoxy. And that's the feeling of being jerked back and pecked, you know, back into your row. But Lundy has become a word that I've almost kind of reclaimed, in the way that 'queer' was reclaimed, or the 'N' word which I don't feel that's a word that's mine to say, but I can say it with Lundy. Now when I hear somebody being called that - a disloyal Protestant - my first idea is, ooh they sound really interesting, bet ya I'd be good mates with them, tell me more! So it's not an insult to me.

**Pádraig Ó Tuama:**

You're putting the love back in Lundy and the protest back in Protestant,

**Claire Mitchell:**

Listen, I'm taking notes, you're writing my book for me.

*Transcription: FanFán Ltd*