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**Ballycross RFC:  
Sectarianism, masculinity and racism  
in a Northern Irish rugby club**

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

at

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by

**Thomas Kavanagh**



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## Abstract

This thesis is a study of Ballycross RFC, a rugby club in Northern Ireland. With a history of violent conflict and a society that remains largely segregated by religion, politics, education and housing, Northern Ireland provided a dynamic and complex context to this season-long ethnography.

As a British sport, rugby has traditionally been a Protestant domain and the Catholic minority population at the club were made very aware of this. Through the use of banter, sectarian statements that sought to maintain the status quo were justified with disclaimers of humour. A male-only environment, the rugby club provided members of Ballycross RFC with multiple discourses of masculinity. Problematic performances were frequent, but there was also evidence of more positive masculine identities. As an all-white club in a country with little ethnic diversity, I explore how discourses of whiteness function to highlight and ‘other’ those from different ethnic groups, and simultaneously strengthen in-group bonds.

Playing, training and socialising as a full member of the club, I utilised participant observation, focus groups and semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences of Ballycross RFC members. Through the use of a novella, I attempt to represent my experiences at Ballycross RFC and the complex, fluid, and at times contradictory issues of politics and identity in a Northern Irish rugby club.



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To Isla and Matilda,  
who never cease to amaze me,  
to make me proud,  
and keep me young.



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## Chapter One:

Chronicle of a ruck foretold

(An introduction)

## Introduction

Catholics and Protestants have had a troubled relationship in Northern Ireland. Colonisation, centuries of conflict, and thirty years of intercommunal violence have divided the two major communities and created an often-unwelcoming environment for ‘others’. Sport is situated within this tension, providing a forum for sectarian identification and confrontation, reflecting and sometimes inflaming the social divisions between Protestants and Catholics (Sugden & Bairner, 1993). Based on a season long ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club, utilising participant observation, focus groups and interviews, I investigate how young Northern Irish men understand discourses of sectarianism, masculinity and racism in a time of political uncertainty. I explore how individuals act to maintain in-group boundaries against the perceived ‘threats’ of nationalists, feminists and ethnic ‘others’ to the traditional dominance of white, Protestant men. I explore the use of humour as a means of reinforcing prejudice as well as alleviating tension, and I question whether these ubiquitous jocular interactions act to constrain notions of masculinity or whether they function to allow male friendships to express intimacy. Using an autoethnographic sensibility, I write myself into my novella of Ballycross RFC, illuminating the dominant themes through my fictionalised account, and reflexively acknowledging my position as author.

While there has been a significant decline in violence and much political progress in Northern Ireland since the conflict known as the Troubles (circa 1968-1998), the divisions of the past still play a significant role in contemporary Northern Irish society. Sectarianism especially still functions to structure identity, politics, housing, education and employment, if only through *de facto* processes. Racism

has been an unwelcome companion to sectarianism and has become increasingly visible as immigration has expanded in a more settled society due to the cessation of the Troubles and enlargement of the European Union. And, much like other western market-economies, issues of gender have been prominent throughout Irish/Northern Irish history, with men dominating statistics of violent acts committed, killings, deaths, and paramilitary membership, whilst also providing the majority of politicians and clergy. While much attention has been paid to high-profile incidents of sectarian and racist harassment (Jarman, 2004; Knox, 2011; Kowalski, 2018; Little, 2015), outrageous events are not the only way that these discourses are expressed.

It is through everyday social interactions that these prejudices are nurtured and reproduced. They are passed on between all sectors of society, permeating all of Northern Irish life to various degrees. Ballycross RFC is an organisation that is situated within this interplay of social discourses. As an all-male, all white, Protestant-majority rugby club it provides an interesting case study in which to explore how sectarianism, racism and masculinity are expressed and intersect. *Ballycross* showcases how a unique group of people understand, and are affected, either directly or indirectly, by the historical influences of the Troubles, and how young men deal with contemporary Northern Irish life.

As an all-male, all white, Protestant-majority rugby club, the members of Ballycross RFC live their lives largely within a homogenous environment. Discourses of sectarianism are common between members of ‘the two communities’ within the traditionally Protestant-dominated site of the rugby club. Performances of excessive masculinity that are almost synonymous with rugby

clubs (Light & Kirk, 2000; Pringle & Markula, 2005; Schacht, 1996) are fostered within a homosocial culture that promotes misogyny, homophobia, and distance from femininity. Understandings of race are caught within competing discourses of commonplace anti-immigration Brexit rhetoric and contemporary awareness of racist language. Yet, there is also evidence that the site provides a platform where meaningful Catholic-Protestant relationships are able to develop, and young men can transition towards more accepting and positive forms of masculinity as they mature.

Ballycross RFC sits within a complex mesh of social, cultural and historical influences and the symbols, meanings and interactions that take place within it are often highly complex and context-specific. Despite playing rugby nearly my entire life, having spent considerable time in Northern Ireland in the past, and being married to a Northern Irish woman, I was often forced to ask, “what does that mean?” or troll through both academic and popular literature in order to decipher or comprehend a symbol, language or practice. I was never definitively an insider or an outsider, but both, in a multitude of ways which were continuously performed (Blix, 2015). Faced with the difficulty of expressing this complexity (Hammersley, 2006), I wrote an autoethnographic novella that portrays my evidence of a season-long ethnography. Rich, descriptive and personal (Richardson, 2001), it is my attempt to draw the reader in to Ballycross RFC, to feel the tackles, laugh or cringe at the jokes, and understand individuals’ perspectives. I want the audience to play a role in constructing their own readings of Ballycross RFC (Sparkes & Smith, 2012). Therefore, I offer my interpretation rather than spoon-feeding ‘the way’ to understand Ballycross RFC. There are

signposts along the way that gently guide the reader, but there are also opportunities to wander, to make connections based on interpretations.

Why write of Northern Ireland? Of rugby players? Of men? Why am I, a New Zealander, interested? Why is my perspective meaningful? My particular social, cultural and historical perspective is intrinsically linked with this project. Who I am and where my interests lay drove the direction of my research, but as I investigated Ballycross RFC, I learned more about the influences that shaped this perspective.

*We head west. Tiny stone cottages line the streets of village after village, with barely a soul to be seen. Down the craggy rock mountains towards Dingle we drive, the Atlantic stretching out before us, a wild range of Kerry sandstone rising to our right. "Whoa, whoa, slow down, slow down, this is it," Dad calls out, tracing our directions on his phone. My parents are in Ireland for three weeks and we've decided to search our family ancestry. I'm slightly uneasy. It's like chasing the footsteps of a ghost, hunting the family we could have been. I brake hard and turn up a lane barely big enough for our Megane. Grass grows between the two sealed tyre ruts and we are flanked on either side by a deep, boggy ditch. Dad's directions keep me trekking up the mountain. We finally stop when we can drive no further.*

*"Hello?" Dad shouts sheepishly as he steps from the car onto the gravelled driveway of a strange house. A muffled reply emerges from behind a shed, so we follow the sound, dancing gingerly between the cow*

*manure in inappropriate footwear. Leaning up against a fence, we wait as a figure languidly makes its way towards us.*

*“G’day,” Dad yells, “are you Dermot, are you?”*

*“Aye, what can I do for ye?” His seasoned face scrumples suspiciously.*

*“My name’s Brendan, this is my wife Philippa and my son Tom and we’re over from New Zealand. But I think we might be related. We’re Kavanaghs too, you see?”*

*His face relaxes. “Oh aye, is that right?” I can see my Mum and Dad straining their ears closer and closer, trying to decipher his thick Kerry accent. But after a stilted five-minute conversation, Dermot says, “Well sure, why don’t you come into town this evening, and we can have a pint. If I don’t get back to these cows they’ll go mad, sure they will.”*

*At 8pm we find the quiet pub and sit down at a booth to have a pint of Guinness and wait. A seasoned fiddler plays in the corner, but the few patrons ignore him. 15 minutes later, Dermot walks in, raises his eyes in recognition and heads to the bar before joining us. He sits down in the slow manner of a man who has known a life of manual labour, his white hair sprouting from under his worn cap, his clothes changed, yet still worn and agrarian. His weathered face searches his dark pint as he cautiously addresses us. His voice is deep yet quick, words melting together in a rough country style. My father sits opposite him, also a farmer, but looking quite opposite with his clean-shaven face and his upmarket*

*clothing. Yet they are cut from the same cloth, these two men sharing the same great- great-grandfather.*

My father's great-grandparents John and Johanna left Dingle, Ireland for New Zealand in 1875. Having survived the Great Famine of 1845 -1849 but still suffering through the numerous blights that continued to pillage Ireland, and in the context of Anglo-Irish landlords, evictions and mass emigration (J. S. Donnelly, 2001), John and Johanna uprooted their five children, searching for a brighter future. Preparing to emigrate to the United States, they were bequeathed a block of land in Taranaki by Johanna's brother Michael and altered their travel plans.

Michael Begley had served as a Taranaki Military Settler. Recruited from Otago, where he was (probably) prospecting for gold, he was shipped north and involved in the Taranaki Wars. This conflict arose from the sale of Māori land and the Crown's eagerness to suppress the perceived threat of Kingitanga (Māori monarch) (M. King, 2003). Against heavy artillery and large troop numbers, Māori communities were driven from their land in a scorched earth policy which saw almost one million acres of land confiscated (New Zealand & Waitangi Tribunal, 1996). For his services, Michael was granted a block of land, and battling tuberculosis, he began to 'break' in the land, eventually dying in 1871, aged 38. In his will he left this block to his sister, Johanna Kavanagh (nee Begley), my great-great grandmother.

Leaving Plymouth, England in October, 1875, the Kavanagh family travelled aboard the 'Caroline' to New Plymouth, New Zealand. They were escorted to a block of land in Okato, where the woman and children slept in the blockhouse

while the men slept outside in tents, paranoid that the local Māori would attack. By 1882 they had increased their holding to 160 acres, and in 1902 their son Lawrence left to farm 58 kms away in Manaia, shifting nine years later to Hawera where Kavanaghs still farm today.

I grew up 175kms away, in a white, middle-class family on a farm in a small rural district called Raetihi. My grandparents were devout Catholics but my parents were less strict. Ours was a household that did not require any church attendance; there was no religious iconography on the walls of our house, and if there was a Bible, I had certainly never seen it. But through the influence of my grandparents, I was well aware of my heritage as Catholic. Church, priests, devotion, faith, sins, salvation and sacrifice were not overt themes in their household, but they were certainly covertly advocated. Tagging along to Mass would certainly earn a few brownie points.

I write “heritage as Catholic” because it was not simply a matter of religion. “Catholic,” in our extended family, was as much about being Irish as it was about rosary beads and communion. The ethnic dimension linking *Irish* with *Catholic* was handed down and reinforced generation after generation. Through family emblems, Irish folk music and romanticised tales, we were proud of our Irish roots in a modest sense even if it was not central to our identities. We were New Zealanders. Perhaps this was based on a conscious decision from Johanna and John to assimilate into a new culture, one teeming with immigrants from Britain. For years the British had painted unflattering stereotypes of Irish Catholics as lazy, wild, backward and untrustworthy (Kearney, 2002), so promoting their heritage may have been something they avoided. Or perhaps in a country where

‘white or brown’ mattered more than ‘what kind of white’, the prejudices of the Old Country faded from relevance in New Zealand.

Occasionally, we would visit my great-uncle who lived on a farm in Hawera and I would overhear adult conversations discussing our Irish heritage, but the topic was peripheral to my experiences as a young New Zealand boy. Instead, my interest lay in sport, and in rugby specifically. My three brothers and I would spend our free time playing rugby on the front lawn. We would drive into town on Tuesdays and Thursdays to train and on Saturday mornings to play. If we were lucky, we got to sit up at night to watch rugby on TV. For my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got tickets to my first All Blacks test. Rugby was my primary interest: it was central to how I identified myself, it was how I learned and reproduced acceptable masculine behaviour, it was how I assessed my self-worth, and it framed my relationships with family and friends. Despite the fact that I was only a moderately good player, and never a star, I became increasingly committed to the sport. I explore this avenue in detail in my autoethnographic master’s thesis (Kavanagh, 2014).

When I left secondary school, like many young New Zealanders, I embarked on an adventure, travelling overseas to explore the world. I stayed with my friend Ronan in Belfast, who walked me around the murals scattered on the walls of the city, and took me to several pubs to test the Guinness and listen to fiddles and flutes. He explained why the police vehicles looked like they could survive an apocalypse, why certain buildings had barbed-wire topped fences that stretched high into the air, and why everyone that lived in his community was of “his community”.

He laughed when I asked about the local rugby team. “It’s more of a Gaelic football area,” he smirked. And we rushed home in a taxi when a bomb threat cleared the city.

“You’d best get out here,” the driver said, pulling off to the side of the road.

Confused, Ronan corrected him. “No, no. We’re away up the hill.”

“No chance. I’m not driving in there.” Ronan argued but three minutes later we set off to walk the two-mile journey home. Ronan swore all the way back, but the words ‘prejudice’ and ‘sectarian’ echoed the loudest.

When Ronan moved to Ballycross, I followed him, and together we joined a rugby club called Ballycross RFC to meet the locals. Hailing from New Zealand, and possessing enough talent to be useful, I integrated into the club effortlessly. But although Ronan made pockets of friends, his access to group membership faced several impediments that weren’t rugby related. *Why?* I wondered.

The next year, I met a lovely young Northern Irish woman called Karen. After dating for a few months, she invited me to meet her parents. A barrage of red, white and blue adorned the street up to their house, but Christy Moore, an Irish Catholic folk musician, was playing on the stereo as we opened the door. After an hour or so of polite conversation, the topic turned to Northern Ireland.

“So, what did you think of our street? You must have thought you’d arrived in England,” Karen’s father mutters facetiously.

“Yeah, I was wondering about all the flags and the bunting,” I replied.

“Lovely reminder isn’t it? That’s what you get when you live right next to a Protestant estate,” he sighed. “You should see it around the 12<sup>th</sup>.”

“What’s that?”

“12<sup>th</sup> of July. Marching season. You would’ve seen the fellas in their orange sashes and bowler hats and the big drums, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah. So, are all the flags and stuff up for that?”

“Na,” Karen’s father shook his head, “they’re always up. You’ll see wee boys scaling the lampposts or some big brute forcing a wee woman to fly a paramilitary flag. Ach, but there haven’t been too many issues living here. You’ve just got to keep your music quiet and be careful you’re not seen in a Gaelic jersey.”

“Yeah? What about during the Troubles? Must have been a scary time to live through.”

Karen’s father paused. He looked down at his feet, then chuckled, as though they’d just told a joke. “Funnily enough, the only trouble I had was caused by a Catholic fella. This one night I was sitting down having a pint at the local, just chatting shit, when I felt something hard push into the back of my head. ‘Give me your keys,’ I heard, ‘and don’t call the cops.’ I ruffled through my pocket and held them out. Then he was gone. The next day the police come banging on the door, and I get shoved into a tiny cell with five other men. Three days I spent there without being told anything. Turns out the car had been used in a failed IRA<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The title ‘IRA,’ as it is used here, refers to the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), which was founded in 1969, as opposed to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) which formed in the wake of the Easter Rising in 1916, or other groups claiming the title, such as the Official IRA, the Continuity IRA or the Real IRA (English, 2003). Ballycross RFC members often referred to the

bombing. So, the coppers lift me out and throw me in a van. We drive and drive until we get to the middle of nowhere. ‘We know you did it,’ they yell, angry as hell, ‘If you tell us you did it, we’ll let you go.’ I’m just shitting myself, saying nothing. They keep getting angrier. ‘Run then,’ they scream, pushing me away from the van. But I wasn’t running anywhere. I clung to the van, to anything I could. Because I knew if I ran, I was a dead man.”

This was unlike anything I’d ever heard. Movies, songs, books and family tales had left me with romantic notions of green fields and wild coastlines scattered with good humoured country folk. I began to question everything I knew about the island of Ireland.

As I began to write my thesis proposal, and started researching Irish history, I started to see links with my family ancestry. My family had lived through many of the historical moments I was reading about. Questions of reflexivity (researcher’s awareness of how standpoint and power shape perception and representation), began to arise (T. E. Adams & Holman Jones, 2011; C. A. Davies, 2008; Leavy, 2014). I could better understand who I am and the opportunities I have been afforded by understanding the forces of colonialism in both Ireland and New Zealand. I was able to recognise how these factors played a significant role in how I viewed and understood Ballycross RFC and the choices I made in representing this research. As Richardson argues, “people who write are always writing about their lives” (2001, p. 34), and understanding the influences that shaped my family

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‘IRA’ but this was always in reference to the PIRA. To avoid confusion, I will also use the title ‘IRA.’

history, and therefore my position in the world, allows me to understand how I see Ballycross RFC.

My thesis, *Ballycross RFC*, is not supposed to be an exemplar of *all* Northern Irish life. It is a snapshot of a specific group within a particular social, cultural, spatial, temporal and historic context. But there are many aspects of social interaction that are widely applicable to other contexts. The banter, the displays of masculine behaviour, the desire for intimacy, the transition through stages of maturity, the subtle inferences of prejudice, and the overt performances of sectarianism, racism, misogyny and homophobia are themes that are prevalent in many spheres of Northern Irish, and wider human, interaction. I invite you, the reader, to investigate these elements with me. To gain an understanding of Ballycross RFC, first we must explore the context which shape its discourses.

## A tale of Northern Ireland

Unless we understand the historical context of the island of Ireland, we will not be able to understand the contemporary situation (Cronin, 2001). This history is rich and complex and it is beyond the scope of this research to provide a detailed, thorough examination. Instead, I will provide a summary of four important periods in the construction of the sectarian dynamics that have structured Northern Irish society: Plantation, Partition, the Troubles and the contemporary context. Irish history is contested, as nationalist and unionist versions of history continue to be used to legitimise political positions and provide support for contemporary arguments (Hutton & Stewart, 1991). To illustrate this, I weave my participants' quotes through this section to show how Ballycross RFC members currently understand Northern Irish history. These often-limited comprehensions are used to contrast strongly against the nuance of historical practices that led to the current sectarian climate. So here, I provide a very brief overview of Northern Irish history.

### Plantation

The Northern Irish conflict can be traced back to various origins over more than nine centuries. In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, King Henry II of England attempted to attach Ireland to his kingdom (Cronin, 2001). Over the next four hundred years, as various English rulers attempt to bring Ireland in line with British law, the Irish inhabitants attempted to rebel and reclaim the land (Muldoon, 2004). Conflict spiralled out of control, violence escalated – and execution, mass slaughter, even famine inducement – became widespread (D. Edwards, 2007).

However, most scholars of Irish history point to the Ulster Plantation as the origin of the Northern Irish conflict (Hassan & O’Kane, 2012). In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the vastly powerful Ulster chieftain, Hugh O’Neill, rebelled and was eventually subdued, nearly 500,000 acres of Ulster land was confiscated and repopulated with subjects loyal to the crown (Cronin, 2001). These settlers were English and Scottish, and predominantly Protestant by religion, in contrast to the native Irish, who were predominantly Catholic (E. Cairns & Darby, 1998). Catholicism was blamed by many Protestants as the primary motive for rebellion (Foster, 1988). Hassan and O’Kane (2012) argue that this created a segregated society, laying the basis for centuries of ethno-sectarian strife as Catholic resentment was never fully addressed.

In 1641, the Irish rebelled against the English and Scottish planters, brutally slaughtering the settlers, and instilling the Protestant culture with a siege mentality (A. T. Q. Stewart, 1977). Cromwell retaliated with slaughter and massacre (Bardon, 1992). In 1689, James II (who, as a Catholic, was overthrown from the English monarchy) marched on Derry, but could not overthrow the walled city as 30,000 Protestant residents held siege (Cronin, 2001). Reinforcements for the Irish were sent from France, but again the crown’s forces, under William of Orange, won a significant and symbolic victory at the Battle of the Boyne (Foster, 1988).

*Mmmm [long pause] I think it’s more just coz you’re told to rather than what you actually think now. It’s like, back in the day there probably was a reason and all for it, but then it all just sorta built up. Like ‘oh, my dad told me this and my dad said I shouldn’t be doing this’ and then you just*

*kinda do it and then the whole reason behind it just becomes skewed. So, it just kinda, you're just doing it for no reason in the end. (Chris)*

The Protestant population established superiority, occupying all positions of political and judicial power, and holding the best land (Cronin, 2001). Penal laws were introduced in 1695 that ensured the subservience of the Catholic population (and, to a lesser degree, the Presbyterian population) (McGrath, 1996; Wall, 2001). These reflected Protestant fears that lenient treatment of Catholics had left Protestants vulnerable to renewed attack (S. J. Connolly, 1998). Lecky (as cited in MacManus, 1944) detailed the extent of these restrictions:

- The Irish Catholic was forbidden the exercise of his religion.
- He was forbidden to receive education.
- He was forbidden to enter a profession.
- He was forbidden to hold public office.
- He was forbidden to engage in trade or commerce.
- He was forbidden to live in a corporate town or within five miles thereof.
- He was forbidden to own a horse of greater value than five pounds.
- He was forbidden to own land.
- He was forbidden to lease land.
- He was forbidden to accept a mortgage on land in security for a loan.
- He was forbidden to vote.
- He was forbidden to keep any arms for his protection.
- He was forbidden to hold a life annuity.
- He was forbidden to buy land from a Protestant.
- He was forbidden to receive a gift of land from a Protestant.
- He was forbidden to inherit land from a Protestant.
- He was forbidden to inherit anything from a Protestant.
- He was forbidden to rent any land that was worth more than 30 shillings a year.
- He was forbidden to reap from his land any profit exceeding a third of the rent.
- He could not be guardian to a child.
- He could not, when dying, leave his infant children under Catholic guardianship.
- He could not attend Catholic worship.
- He was compelled by law to attend Protestant worship.
- He could not himself educate his child.
- He could not send his child to a Catholic teacher.
- He could not employ a Catholic teacher to come to his child.
- He could not send his child abroad to receive education.

The priest was banned and hunted with bloodhounds.  
The school master was banned and hunted with bloodhounds. (p. 458)

These laws excluded the Catholic population from political and public life, and inhibited their rights to worship, and educate their children, as they chose (A. T. Q. Stewart, 1977). Though many of the penal laws were infrequently enforced as law, they still held great ideological importance for those who appealed them, and for anti-Catholics who supported them (Leighton, 2016). While Catholics were subject to economic dispossession and political exclusion, Protestant settlers prospered (Brewer, 1992). By 1778, only five per cent of land was owned by Catholics and many prominent Catholic landowners converted to the Anglican Church to retain their land and positions (Coohill, 2005).

## Partition

Industrial development in the nineteenth century favoured the north east corner of Ireland due to its proximity to other industrial centres in mainland Britain (Brewer, 1992). Linen, woollen goods and provisions were the main exports during this period, experiencing huge expansion (R. D. Edwards & Hourican, 2005). Consequently, industrial wealth was concentrated in Ulster and thus in the hands of Protestants, while Catholics remained in largely agricultural or labouring jobs (Brewer, 1992). But in the 1840s, famine dramatically changed Ireland. From 1845-1851, roughly 1 million people either died from starvation or its accompanying diseases, and a further 1 million emigrated (Ó Gráda, 1999).

William Bennet described the horrific sight of widespread deprivation:

My hand trembles while I write. The scenes of human misery and degradation we witnessed still haunt my imagination, with the vividness

and power of some horrid and tyrannous delusion, rather than the features of a sober reality. We entered a cabin. Stretched in one dark corner, scarcely visible, from the smoke and rags that covered them, were three children huddled together, lying there *because they were too weak to rise*, pale and ghastly, their little limbs - on removing a portion of the filthy covering - perfectly emaciated, eyes sunk, voice gone and evidently in the last stage of actual starvation. Crouched over the turf embers was another form, wild and all but naked, scarcely human in appearance. It stirred not, nor noticed us. On some straw, sodden upon the ground, moaning piteously, was a shrivelled old woman, imploring us to give her something - baring her limbs partly, to show how the skin hung loose from the bones, as soon as she attracted our attention. Above her, on something like a ledge, was a young woman, with sunken cheeks,- a mother I have no doubt, who scarcely raised her eyes in answer to our enquiries, but pressed her hand upon her forehead, with a look of unutterable anguish and despair. (Bennett, 1847, p. 26 emphasis in original)

The British government's *laissez-faire* doctrine regarding the famine was heavily criticised in Ireland and reignited ancient grievances and fuelled growing nationalist sentiment for rebellions past (Beckett, 1979). Nationalists promoted the famine as proof that the British presence was harmful to the people of Ireland (Cronin, 2001). In the late nineteenth century, despite several reforms made by British politicians, the idea of Home Rule (total self-government and separation from Britain) began to gain traction (Cronin, 2001). Rebellion in 1916, and specifically the execution of the leading insurgents, enflamed the Catholic public, and became a tipping point for nationalist opinion (A. Jackson, 2004; F. McGarry,

2016). Unionist (for the Union, against home Rule) reaction, however, was strong, and after demonstrating their willingness to use violence, Britain agreed to partition the island into two parts (Barnes, 2005). In 1921, Ireland was partitioned into a six-county Northern Ireland and a twenty-six county Irish Free State (which would later become the Republic of Ireland) (A. Jackson, 2004).

*For me I... [exhales. Long pause] I don't really see what the point of the conflict has been. I guess the main conflict has always sort of been between Protestants and Catholics and having a united Ireland. I don't really understand why it's been like that even though I studied A level history. I understand that the British Army came over and at the time they weren't really welcome in Northern Ireland by the Catholics or the IRA. And there was incidents happen [sic] for numerous reasons, but to be honest it's not something I've really looked into too much. I guess I was sort of born once the Troubles had happened. It's always sort of been just part of daily life but there's been ahh.... I guess since I've been born there's been no real major conflicts in Northern Ireland. There's always just been that tension or some things that have happened in the past that some people maybe just haven't moved on from. (Ryan)*

Protestants comprised two-thirds of the population of the new state of Northern Ireland, and a single political party, the Ulster Unionists, were to rule for well over half a century (Bew, Gibbon, & Patterson, 1979). Nationalists in the north felt betrayed by partition. The Catholic voice was lost as political gerrymandering ensured that the Protestant majority maintained control (Muldoon, 2004). Catholics were relegated to second-class citizenship, trapped in a hostile state, in

an unfair system of institutionalised inequality that favoured Protestants in politics, jobs, housing and policing (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). With the downturn of the heavy industries in the mid-twentieth century, Northern Ireland's prosperity diminished and unemployment rates increased (McCracken, 2001). The poor economic situation fuelled hostilities between the communities (Sullivan, 1998; Whyte, 1990), and as competition for jobs increased, discrimination against Catholics rose.

## Troubles

*Richard: The Troubles have been forever hanging over my family. You've heard about the Kingsmill massacre<sup>2</sup> ...?*

*Tom: Yeah*

*Richard: ...my two cousins, their father and their uncle, were killed, purely because they were Protestant. Whenever they asked, 'is anybody here a Catholic?', they thought it was loyalists gonna kill the Catholic driver. So, they were all going [motions with hands to run away], whenever really it was the IRA saying, 'right you can go.' And then they fucking shot 10 of them in cold blood. Fucking... Dave, he was great craic growing up, something hit him one day, doesn't speak, doesn't talk, doesn't... it's just, 'Well, what about ye?' And he's gone... Not just those two men were killed, like, part of their sons and nephews died too. I don't*

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<sup>2</sup> The Kingsmill Massacre of 1976, one of the most atrocious acts of the Troubles, involved the IRA hijacking of a factory bus, and shooting all but one of the employees aboard. The man released was Catholic as opposed to the others who were all Protestant (Kowalski, 2018).

*really remember Danny that well but I remember the tears of my grandmother and mother on the day of the funeral. You know?.....*

*Tom: Yeah*

*Richard: And ahh we had to move off for a couple of generations, you know, a lot of my people who were feeling, 'are we being squeezed here, like?' [Long pause] There was a lot of hurt and there was a lot of trauma involved. When we were little we were kept away from it, but as you get older, you can sense 'you don't like those people at all – I don't like them.' I'm clannish as the next one. Whatever side my people choose, I'll stay on their side, like. At the end of the day I will make a stand with those people, you know, coz they're my blood, like. There's no imagined community here<sup>3</sup>, I know these people by name, you know?*

The civil rights campaigns of the 1960s<sup>4</sup> galvanised the Catholic community politically, demanding reforms around voting rights and anti-discrimination legislation (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). Although introduced as a form of peaceful protest that would gain media attention, things quickly spiralled out of

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<sup>3</sup> Bell (1990) draws upon Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of the imagined community to understand Northern Irish Protestant ethnicity in relation to nationality. He states:

“The Protestant imagined community is not a nation. It remains what it always has been, a beleaguered garrison loyal to the Crown and Empire, defending an Imperial interest in a hostile and rebellious land. Loyal, that is, not to a British polity and nation, governed by democratic political conventions, but to a sovereign who can guarantee their liberties and ascendancy.” (1990, p. 16)

For some Protestants, such as Richard, the notion that their group - such a foundational element of their identity, and something they are willing to sacrifice their lives for – is a socio-cultural construct, and can be classified by a set of boundary-defining symbols, is perceived as depreciating and insulting.

<sup>4</sup> Groups such as Campaign for Social Justice (CSJ, 1964) and the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA, 1967) formed to protest the fairness of the Northern Irish political system and argue for greater Catholic participation in the state.

control in the face of open Protestant hostility. Clashes erupted between demonstrators and the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) (English, 2003). The relationship between Catholics and the RUC, who often used excessive force and were perceived as having sectarian motives, quickly deteriorated (Bardon, 1992). The nature of protest quickly unravelled and became a battle perceived as Catholicism/nationalism forces fighting against the Protestant/unionist population (Cronin, 2001). Paramilitary groups such as the IRA, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) began to form or re-emerge and conduct low-intensity urban guerrilla warfare (Muldoon, 2004). Attacks on houses of the 'other' religion became common, communities separated into their own denominations and sectarian killings multiplied (Cronin, 2001).

*My father was a clergyman. He was in a parish at the top of the Shankhill in the heart of a staunch Protestant area. A lot of normal working-class families, and all of a sudden, they were joining paramilitaries and people are being killed and murdered and blown up. And he was having to try and counsel and advise families and going visiting people in jail. People were coming knocking at his door in the middle of the night, "They're gonna shoot me, mister, hide me under your bed." He's putting guys in the boot of his car and covering them with blankets and driving them to the airport. Giving them money for a plane ticket or down to the docks to get them out of the country. And these were people that he'd baptised or married. They came from just normal families, but got sucked into this situation, you know?*

*A couple of wee pubs were blown up beside the church and it was almost destroyed and he had to rebuild it. It all took its toll. He had a breakdown of his physical and his mental health; he had a double hernia and then he had a lotta stress related illnesses. Me and my brothers and sisters were still at school. He still had a family to look after. So, the church made sure he had a wee part time parish, that was their way of looking after him. He did that for 5 or 6 years but his health deteriorated quite quickly and he spent his last 10 years in poor, poor health. It probably [long pause], it probably shortened my father's life by about 20 years. He died quite young. (John)*

British troops sent in to restore order were initially welcomed in Catholic areas, but the initial goodwill quickly turned to hostility (Whyte, 2001). Evidence has emerged that security forces colluded with loyalist paramilitaries and employed a sectarian *shoot-to-kill* policy (Tomlinson, 1998). Internment (imprisonment without trial or charge) was introduced, only increasing the violence (Whyte, 2001). Over six months, more than 2,400 people, almost exclusively Catholic, were arrested, with many subjected to sensory deprivation techniques, harassment and degrading treatment (Aretxaga, 1995; McKittrick & McVea, 2012).

Assassinations, sniper attacks, bombings, street riots, civilian searches, and vehicle checkpoints became an inherent part of life in Northern Ireland (Muldoon, 2004). Violence was predominantly waged between the IRA and the state, and between paramilitary groups, though many incidents were carried out by civilians (Balcells, Daniels, & Escribà-Folch, 2016). British policy was largely reactive and primarily concerned with conflict management, attempting to project an image of even-handedly managing an internal conflict (Tomlinson, 1998). Civilians

suffered the most casualties throughout the Troubles, with over 2,000 killed in comparison to roughly 1,000 security forces and 500 paramilitary forces (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). In total, more than 3,300 people were killed, and more than 38,000 people were injured as a result of the Troubles (Sullivan, 1998).

Northern Ireland has always been characterised by a high degree of segregation, but following the outbreak of conflict, minority communities in mixed areas fled to the perceived safety of segregated neighbourhoods (Joanne Hughes, Campbell, Hewstone, & Cairns, 2007). This functioned as both an organisation of space and a system of ethnic classification (Shirlow, 2001). Catholics and Protestants lived separately, utilised different symbols, and contested, rather than shared, territory (Brewer & Teeney, 2015). The state ordered the construction of security barriers, or “peacelines,” of which at least 41 were erected in Belfast from 1969 onwards (James Hughes, 2018). These interface areas were synonymous with violence during the Troubles and continue to experience high levels of tension, contributing to a general deterioration of community relations (Feldman, 1991; French, 2009; Jarman, 2004).

Though segregation is not understood to be the *cause* of conflict, it plays a major role in establishing and maintaining intergroup conflict (Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger, & Niens, 2006). Shirlow (2001) described the separation of the two communities as “the instrument through which animosity and the reproduction of mistrust and division best manifest themselves” (p.67). Rather than first-hand experience, knowledge of the ‘other’ became based on what people were told (Brewer & Higgins, 1999).

*What could have stopped it? People not believing the bullshit. You know, by demagogues spouting shit on both sides again. Paisley on one side, you know, great orator, get the people going like, you know? But they were forgetting about their own experiences with their neighbours. 'Ach wee Bessy down the road. I know her, she's a Catholic and she's grand.'* (Richard)

Between 1974 and 1994 there were seven unsuccessful attempts at reaching a political settlement (Barnes, 2005). However a meaningful cease-fire was established and by April 10, 1998, all parties were able to sign the Good Friday Agreement (Cronin, 2001). Negotiated between the traditionally opposed political parties, the agreement resulted in an elected Northern Irish Assembly for the first time in nearly 30 years, with a focus on coalition building and shared governance (Muldoon, 2004). The years that follow were littered with numerous setbacks, the process stalling over decommissioning of IRA weapons and the rebranding of the police force, and direct rule was reinstated (Coohill, 2005). But in 2005 the IRA ordered an end to their armed campaign, and despite unionist scepticism, by the following year an agreement was reached to make the power-sharing assembly work (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). In 2007, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, iconic Protestant and Catholic leaders, stood shoulder to shoulder to announce a new era of peace and reconciliation (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). The road to peace in Northern Ireland has never been smooth though, and the power sharing assembly experienced many more interruptions.

### Contemporary

In 2015, when I began my study of Ballycross RFC, Northern Ireland had experienced 17 years of tenuous peace. Despite a meaningful cease-fire, Northern

Ireland still suffers from sporadic outbursts of violence (Mac Ginty, Muldoon, & Ferguson, 2007; Roche, 2009). Violence has significantly reduced, but has not been eradicated, and is perpetuated by flashpoint events such as parades and through the activities of dissident paramilitaries (Balcells et al., 2016; Jarman, 2004; McAlister, Scraton, & Haydon, 2014). Such events are frequently decontextualized and downplayed by the media and politicians, and represented as mindless violence (McAlister et al., 2014). These acts of violence don't align with the narrative of peace and reconciliation, and are isolated from the historical and contemporary political context they derive from. Like many 'post-conflict' societies, Jarman (2004) argues, violence in Northern Ireland did not end with peace agreements, it merely emerges in new forms and erupts in other spheres.

The segregation of society did not dissolve with the advent of the peace process either. Approximately 35-40% of the Northern Irish population is divided into completely segregated communities (Joanne Hughes et al., 2007), while over 90% of social housing remain segregated into communities with over 80% of a single ethnic/religious group (Shuttleworth & Lloyd, 2009).

These communities are demarcated with sectarian boundaries: graffiti, flags, kerb paintings, murals and other symbols of cultural political identity and paramilitary association that intimidate and discourage 'others' (Joanne Hughes et al., 2007).

These symbols enable communities, groups, nations and states to "imagine" themselves (Bryan & McIntosh, 2005, p. 128). Symbols are used in Northern Ireland to mark territory, educate, elicit support, maintain publicity for the struggle, convey resistance and opposition, and "simultaneously express, create and contest ethnic and national identity" (Sluka, 1996, p. 382).

These symbols are reminders of the sectarian divide and members of outgroups may experience threat, intimidation or humiliation when they are openly flaunted (Dickson & Hargie, 2006; O’Leary & McGarry, 1996). They maintain the community separation by demarcating areas of belonging and “the boundaries of risk” (McAlister et al., 2014, p. 304). This has created a sense of fear of entering an area where the ‘other’ community lives, reducing opportunities to meet and socialise with the ‘other’ group (Roulston, Hansson, Cook, & McKenzie, 2017). This fear is not unfounded, as children and young people continue to experience sectarian abuse as part of their daily lives, and often consider themselves imprisoned within their own neighbourhoods (McAlister et al., 2014).

*I think it’s about in-groups and out-groups. People identify, they see the others as a threat. And once you get violence and confrontation, those sort of in-group, out-group feelings intensify and people close off to the other. And the less personal contact you have, the easier it is to see yourself as under threat, to see the other as suspect. Or as deviant or as devious.*

(Michael)

However, there are commentators who believe that segregation is not the problem. Stewart (2001) argues that cross-community contact will only resolve issues once there is agreement on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland<sup>5</sup>:

there is no misunderstanding between Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland, none whatsoever. Nor do they need to get to know each other better. They know each other only too well, having lived alongside each

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<sup>5</sup> There is debate as to the outcome of constitutional change, with Miller (1998) arguing that accommodating Protestants would be a significant problem in a 32-county Ireland, and that only addressing the material interests of Unionists would produce accommodation.

other for four centuries, part of the same society yet divided by politics and history. This is not just a clash of cultures; it is a culture in itself, a point overlooked by most observers (A. T. Q. Stewart, 2001, p. 185).

This view is shared by Cairns and Darby (1998), who propose that one of the defining features of the Northern Irish conflict is the high level of contact between members of the two communities in many areas. However, the segregation of society acts as a wedge that limits cross-community development on an individual level. Contact between the two communities has been shown to facilitate the development of trust and understanding (Joanne Hughes et al., 2007).

The advent of the peace process and the expansion of the European Union saw immigration to Northern Ireland dramatically increase in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century (Knox, 2011). However, a climate of sectarian harassment quickly mutated to include racist abuse for immigrants who sought housing in cheaper, working-class neighbourhoods (McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). Yet, as ethnic diversity is still low<sup>6</sup> in Northern Ireland, there are wide-held (incorrect) assumptions that racism is not an issue (Irwin, 1998).

Northern Irish education continues to operate with around 93% of pupils attending schools that consist predominantly of their ethnic/religious group (Joanne Hughes & Loader, 2015). Less than 6% of Catholics attend Protestant schools and less than 1% of Protestant children attend Catholic schools, while roughly 81% of 'other religion' children attend Protestant schools (Borooah & Knox, 2015). Overall, only 6% of the school population attend integrated schools (Joanne

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<sup>6</sup> According to the 2011 census, 1.8 per cent (32,400) of the Northern Irish population belonged to minority ethnic groups (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014).

Hughes & Loader, 2015). John explains the hesitancy of many parents to seek secondary education outside of 'their' ethnic/religious group:

*...while there is academic selection, there will always be a tendency for middle-class parents, even liberal parents, to send their children to grammar schools. So, if you have educational aspirations for your children, you have to be very, very strongly committed to the integrated concept. My kids all went to an integrated primary school. But at that age of 11, do your kids go on to grammar school or do they go to the integrated movement? One of those is about academic achievement, the other is about extracurricular activity. And it's not just rugby, it's choir, it's drama, it's a number of things. So, you're making decisions like that. I could argue that all three of them chose to go to [grammar school], but subconsciously, I'm sure there was some influence. (John)*

The move towards integrated education, which was so popular in the 1980s, has slowed in the face of opposition from the Catholic Church and divergence on threshold ratios between the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the state (McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). Other initiatives, such as the Shared Education Programme (SEP), which seeks to improve educational outcomes through sustained cross-community shared classes and activities, have been introduced (Borooah & Knox, 2013), but many young people never experience cross-community education until university level, if at all (Borooah & Knox, 2015). Accordingly, most children have minimal contact with the 'other' community, perpetuating suspicion, fear, stereotyping and prejudice (Joanne Hughes, 2011).

While there has been a slight increase in recent years, mixed marriages still represent a small proportion of all marriages in Northern Ireland (Joanne Hughes et al., 2007). Religion has played a large role in maintaining ethnic/religious boundaries, with Whyte arguing that the churches' strong stance inhibited social interaction and fostered prejudice, claiming that, "endogamy was the most powerful single factor in maintaining the community divide" (1990, p. 40). Had the Scottish and English settlers been Catholic, Elliot (2013) argues, colonial antagonism would have persisted, but the admonition from religious institutions against intermarriage would have subsided, eroding the strict adherence to maintaining ethnic boundaries.

*...I don't have enough knowledge in terms of historical background and political background, and I probably should because it's such a big thing in my own country. But also, one way, I try not to let any of it affect me so I don't want to be affected by any of the history in some ways... (Matthew)*

Being able to turn a blind eye to history may be a privilege that only the middle and upper-class are afforded in Northern Ireland. It is unlikely that Matthew's contemporaries in working-class Loyalist or Republican<sup>7</sup> neighbourhoods would be able, nor want, to divorce themselves from the situation. Yet perhaps this perspective is an example of the progress made in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the peace process has allowed many to imagine a Northern Ireland beyond a Catholic-Protestant dichotomy.

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<sup>7</sup> Loyalists and Republicans can be viewed as the more radical political position of unionists and nationalists respectively (Brewer & Teeney, 2015).

For some, Northern Ireland is about more than the legacy of the past, and hosting events such as the 2011 MTV music awards in Belfast (Devine, Boluk, & Devine, 2017) and the 2013 UK City of Culture in Derry-Londonderry (Boland, Murtagh, & Shirlow, 2016) have allowed them to view the country in a more cosmopolitan sense. A gradual shift away from arguments of nation-statehood as a 32 county Republic or a United Kingdom towards a local sense of identity within a wider European Union seemed a way to imagine a less divided society (Kearney, 1997).

However, Brexit appears to have halted that dream. Suddenly, despite a majority voting 'Remain', Northern Ireland is being dragged out of the European Union, regardless of fragile issues like the North-South border and an undermining of the Good Friday Agreement (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017; Guelke, 2017). Any progress that has been made regarding localised identities within a European Community look set to stall, while the Brexit conversation reignites conflicting notions of nationhood, threatening cross-border economic ties and potentially reigniting violence (Braniff & Whiting, 2017; Stevenson, 2017).

## A tale of Northern Irish sport

Sport is an important and pervasive aspect of Northern Irish life (Liston, 2006). More than half the adult population participated in sport in 2015/16 and nearly a quarter of the adult population are members of a sports club (Department for communities NI, 2017). Men are twice as likely as women to be members of a sporting club and, on average, spend twice as much time on moderate intensity sporting activities (Sport NI, 2010). Like many elements of Northern Irish society, sport is also heavily segregated along ethnic/religious lines. Sport in Northern Ireland identifies “who you are and what you are” (Cronin, 1999, p. 144). Sport preference follows the Catholic-Protestant division so closely that it is one of the most significant markers of communal identity (Hargie, Somerville, & Mitchell, 2015).

In communities where tension is high, sport has been promoted as a harbinger of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland (Hargie et al., 2015). The state has utilised the ideological myths of sport – such as improved community relations, opportunities to establish networks, and the ability to address social isolation – and has implemented a number of sporting initiatives and constructed numerous leisure centres (Bairner & Shirlow, 2003; Hassan & Telford, 2014). These projects are seen as a vehicle for encouraging individuals to understand the situation of others, to foster a sense of community, and to provide an opportunity to invest in their locales through volunteering and social engagement (Hassan & Telford, 2014).

However, despite the pervading optimistic belief in sport’s integrative capacity, in Northern Ireland, sport is typically a “force of division that underpins, rather than

counteracts the bitterness of a sectarian society” (Cronin, 2000, p. 26). Sport cannot be separated from the social, cultural and political landscape, and in Northern Ireland this has meant that the sectarian divide has been replicated on sports fields across the country (Hassan & O’Kane, 2012). The majority of sporting experiences in Northern Ireland take place within an individual’s local cultural settings, reflecting the same ideologies and prejudices (Sugden & Bairner, 1993). Separate codes, separate teams and separate identities mean the rehearsal of the same old divisions (Hassan & Telford, 2014). As such, sport plays a significant role in the manufacturing of nationalist and unionist identities in Northern Ireland, and in the definition, and exclusion, of the ‘other’ (Bairner & Shirlow, 1998; Sugden & Bairner, 1993). Within such a context, any activity will be infused with political meaning, and to “suggest that sport could, in such an environment, be a neutral pastime to unite the opposing communities, is to deny the experience of history” (Cronin, 1999, p. 144).

By providing a focus for both identification and confrontation, Sugden and Bairner (1993) argue, sport not only reflects the political and social conflict, but helps to sustain and sometimes widen sectarian divisions. Sporting competition, Tuck (2003) argues, provides the most ‘real’ expression of these imagined communities in everyday life, and supplies a platform where groups can be tested against each other. Taking part in competitive sport against such an ‘other,’ Sugden and Harvie (1995) suggest, may inflame militant feelings amongst both players and spectators. Irish sport offers something easily identifiable to cling to, a hero and a direct enemy in coloured shirts (Cronin, 1999).

Sport has been utilised (albeit in a limited way) by both republican and loyalists as a means of breaking the established influence of the state or the ‘other’ community (Hassan & O’Kane, 2012). Through direct attacks, bomb warnings, disruptions and threats, loyalists routinely launched attacks on Gaelic sporting organisations, and less frequently, republicans attacked teams representing Britain. The notion that the security forces were representative of only one community (see O’Leary & McGarry, 1996) was not helped by Gaelic clubs being confiscated by the British Army, and heavily-armed helicopters disrupting Gaelic football matches (Sugden & Bairner, 1992).

In their seminal work on the Irish sporting landscape, Sugden and Bairner (1993) identified three broad categories of sports: Gaelic sports (such as Gaelic football and hurling), universal sports (such as football, boxing, and cycling) and British sports (such as rugby, cricket, and hockey). Gaelic sports are played almost exclusively by Catholics, universal sports are played by members of both communities, and British sports are played mainly by Protestants (Bairner, 1999; Hargie et al., 2015). So, it is interesting that my study is looking at a rugby club that consists of members from both of the major communities. Next, I briefly summarise how these categories have contributed to shaping the current Northern Irish social and cultural context.

### **Gaelic sports**

After the great famine of the mid-nineteenth century, several groups formed with an aim towards promoting Irish nationalism and creating an Irish identity which was distinct from Britain (Cronin, 1999). Sport was identified as an important sector, and thus the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was formed, establishing

their own sports and rejecting British games (Tuck, 2003). As such, the GAA played a particularly influential role in linking the masses with constructed myths of Irish nationalism (White, 2004). As an organisation it claims more members than any body outside the Catholic Church, and counts among their former members such prominent figures as Michael Collins (Cronin, 1999). A proudly amateur sporting association, the GAA consists of over 2,000 clubs across the 32 counties on the island of Ireland and more than 400 clubs across the globe, promoting the Gaelic games of hurling, Gaelic football, handball, and rounders (GAA, 2018).

Yet for all its positive promotion within the nationalist community, it is seen as a problematic organisation for unionists. Not only are the games promoted as having national significance for consolidating Irish identity, but several GAA grounds, trophies and competitions are named in memory of individuals that unionists regarded as republican terrorists (Hargie et al., 2015). Additionally, several official GAA rules actively excluded the Protestant population: Rule 21 precluded members of the security forces from participating, Rule 27 banned members from attending ‘foreign’ games, and Rule 42 banned foreign games from GAA clubs (Cronin, 1999; Hargie et al., 2015; Hassan, 2005). While these rules have been overturned, for the majority of Protestants, Gaelic games continue to be seen as an exclusively-Catholic preserve (Bairner, 2003).

### **Universal sports**

These sports have become so popular worldwide that they are seldom seen in reference to their British origins. Boxing, golf and cycling have faced political issues, particularly surrounding national representation (Cronin, 1997), but it is

football, with its widespread appeal, that has faced the most significant sectarian issues. Following partition, football split into two associations on the island of Ireland. While still widely popular among Catholics, Northern Irish football is a predominantly Protestant affair, and for many Protestants, football grounds became an important site for underlining the continued existence of Northern Ireland and its inherent Britishness (Hassan, 2002). As such, Bairner (1999) explains, watching Northern Irish football is intimately bound up with consolidating supporters' identities as Ulster Protestants. The clubs of Northern Ireland align strongly with ethno-religious communities, and football "has brought members of the two groups together both on the field and the terraces" (Bairner, 1999, p. 288).

Rather than unifying the groups, soccer has acted to reinforce division, mutual suspicion and sectarian hatred (Cronin, 1999). Catholics have typically identified this loyalist symbolism inherent in the national team as problematic, and issues of sectarianism have led several of the predominantly Catholic clubs to join the Republic of Ireland's Football Association of Ireland (FAI) competition (Bairner & Shirlow, 1998). Sugden and Bairner, commenting on a violent interaction between Donegal Celtic and Linfield, noted that, "the character of the two clubs involved and the nature of the support they attract can only be explained with reference to the politics of division" (1993, p. 1). An anti-Catholic rhetoric is common in the songs and chants in many Irish league grounds, Bairner (1999) explains, and has at times led to violence in the terraces and in the streets. This situation was exacerbated by sporadic paramilitary involvement, including death threats to prominent players (Hassan & O'Kane, 2012). However, Hargie et al., (2015) note that many of the Northern Irish football organisations have made a

considerable impact in restricting sectarianism in recent years. Initiatives such as Football for All, World United and Belfast United have focused on eradicating sectarianism from the game, promoting women's football and ethnic minority participation, yet as Schulenkorf (2010) argues, these sporting initiatives can only have a significant impact on social relations as part of a wider agenda of socio-political support.

### British sports

Rugby, cricket, and hockey are reminders of the international influence exerted by Britain, with rugby the most prominent of these (Sugden & Bairner, 1993). Despite its status as a 'foreign' sport, rugby has always had considerable popularity amongst Catholics on the island of Ireland, and managed to withstand the efforts of the GAA to ban participation (O'Callaghan, 2013). Contributing to rugby's popularity was the common myth that the sport was above political, religious and social class divisions (Maguire & Tuck, 2005). The game is often presented as wholly apolitical, and Sugden and Bairner (1993) suggest there is an inference that the problems of Ireland would be solved if all Irishmen took up rugby. Unlike Gaelic games and Association football, the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU), which formed in 1879, spans the two countries of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and promotes rugby to the whole island of Ireland (Tuck, 2003). Rugby was held to have a 'de-nationalizing' effect (O'Callaghan, 2013), allowing members from all communities to take pride in the Irish team. That rugby in Northern Ireland was derived predominantly from the Protestant middle class, and as such, much less likely to have grown up in areas affected by

political violence and extreme ideologies, was often overlooked (Bairner, 2003).

My study of Ballycross RFC explores this particular circumstance.

However, promoting an All-Ireland game has typically created issues around national anthems and flags, illustrated most clearly through the players' strike of 1954, when players from the republic refused to sing the British national anthem or play under the Union Jack before an International match in Belfast (Tuck, 2003). Thereafter, all games have been played in Dublin, under a flag representing all four provinces. Amhrán na bhFiann (Soldier's Song, which is the Republic of Ireland's national anthem) also caused much angst amongst the unionist rugby fraternity as a national anthem (Fanning, 2016). So from 1995, Ireland's Call has been used in matches outside of Ireland, and in Dublin, it plays after Amhrán na bhFiann (Rouse, 2015).

The symbols of Irish rugby can be complicated for unionists in the North.

Wearing green, identifying with a 'United-Ireland', watching and playing in Dublin, and listening to the Irish national anthem can clash strongly with many unionist ideologies. However, their middle class social background has allowed the unionist rugby fraternity to show more flexibility in its sporting allegiance (Bairner, 2002b). For some, such as Michael, it provides a chance for Northern unionists to identify as Irish:

*I think Irish rugby is very important in my own identification. When I think back, I saw my first Ireland rugby match when I was 13. And going to Dublin and being a part of that, I think rugby was quite a strong influence in my sense of national, cultural identity. I think its great strength is as an All-Ireland game. I think it allows people to identify as being Irish,*

*whatever community they're from. There's a sense of Irishness generated through rugby. So, there is some sort of identity beyond whatever way you identify yourself. It allows you to be Irish, at least for the day.* (Michael)

Until relatively recently, in Northern Ireland there has been a reluctance by Catholics to play what they have traditionally seen as an English sport. The schools that promote rugby in Northern Ireland are predominantly Protestant grammar schools, resulting in the overwhelming majority of players being Protestant and middle-class (Bairner, 2003). The GAA's ban on 'foreign games' saw rugby dismissed as anti-nationalist, severely impacting on the participation levels of Catholics (Hassan, 2003).

*Na, rugby would have been seen as a Protestant sport, and my Dad's a Catholic so he wouldn't really have wanted me to play that sport, anyways but...* (Declan)

Along with meeting strong resistance from within their own communities for playing an Anglo-sport, Hassan (2003) states that many nationalists have been marginalised within rugby's predominantly Protestant sporting culture. He explains that acceptance for many nationalists has been contingent upon their willingness to assimilate and compromise their perceived political ambitions. Furthermore, there was a strong perception that the rugby community supported the Crown and the fight against republicanism. Protestant paramilitary forces were at times given permission to use rugby clubs as training grounds (Sugden & Harvie, 1995) and the British Army forces invited teams to play rugby inside their barracks:

*You had Welsh, Scottish, and English regiments and they would come out to Northern Ireland for 3-month tours of duty. Into a war zone, as far as they were concerned, so for their down time they would invite certain teams into their barracks to play. We got invited to different barracks several times. The bus would be searched, all your bags were searched and once you passed the tests, you were allowed to play rugby. Then they'd kick seven bells out of ya. After that, you're treated like family, taken into their social areas, and fed full of drink all night long. They wanted someone to party with, a release from the overwhelming tension they went through 24/7. And we were happy to oblige: it was always lots of fun. Pity they were always away games though. (John)*

Rather than participating in friendly matches and social drinking activities, the Catholic perspective was more likely to be hostile towards an invasive group that stood at odds with their nationalist ideology. GAA clubs often felt that they received little to no protection from loyalist paramilitary attacks (Bairner, 2002a) and the Crossmaglen Gaelic club even had to withstand the appropriation of their playing fields for an Army fortress (Maynes, 2016; Sugden & Bairner, 1992).

Despite these barriers, in recent years, Catholic participation in rugby has grown. Bairner (2016) states that many Catholics have become involved through school, work or social colleagues, or are actively recruited by clubs. This rise can also be attributed to their rise in social class (Hassan, 2003), which Sugden and Harvie (1995) suggest allows cultural and political loyalties to be more easily separated. Rather than a monolithic Irish/Catholic/republican bloc, these communities are more fractured, and their identities more flexible (Hargie et al., 2015). Playing

rugby, like many activities which challenge Northern Irish identities, can offer a grey area where individuals don't necessarily have to align along strict identity boundaries.

Sport and politics in Northern Ireland are intrinsically linked. Though popular discourses extol sporting activities as a sanctuary from conflict, in practice they provide a platform for the fundamental antagonisms of Northern Ireland to play out (Bairner, 2002b). Northern Irish sport's divisions have reflected the major community divide, and have been used to construct and reinforce both nationalist and unionist political and cultural identities (Maguire & Tuck, 2005). Though these are not rigid concepts, and continue to slowly shift, they still hold significant influence in sporting participation. In the pages that follow, I explore how Ballycross RFC sits within this context.

## A tale of Ballycross RFC

I arrived at Ballycross RFC ready to play in the amateur leagues and cups of Ulster rugby's 2015/16 season. A club with roughly 60 active members<sup>8</sup>, Ballycross RFC fielded two teams, and included a small management team and a club physiotherapist. Approximately 85% identified as Protestant, 10% Catholic (though these were markers of their ethnic identity rather than their religious affiliation) and 5% other (one French player, another New Zealander, and me, which reflects the nature of contemporary global sporting transience rather than wider Northern Irish demographics). Four men identified as Christian, though several others were fluid in their association with this group. The men who played for Ballycross ranged in age from 18-36, though the majority were under 25. All members of the club identified as male, they all self-identified as white, and the majority identified as middle class.

These demographics are important. First, they show how the ethno-religious make-up of the club is dominated by Protestants, which largely follows the trend of rugby union in Northern Ireland. While the sport is becoming more popular amongst an increasing Catholic middle-class in Northern Ireland (Hassan, 2016), it is still widely associated with the Protestant grammar school tradition (Hargie et al., 2015). With a small Catholic population, the Ballycross RFC group was mixed and individuals had to negotiate a non-homogenous culture. As such, Ballycross RFC is a relatively uncommon microcosm of Northern Irish society. Of their own

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<sup>8</sup> While the 1<sup>st</sup> XV was settled, from week to week the number of players available to the 2<sup>nd</sup> XV would change, sometimes drastically. They had a number of committed players, but through work and other commitments some individuals were only available on select occasions. The total number of individuals who played for the club probably exceeds 70.

volition, Protestants and Catholics engaged in an activity together. It is not completely unique in this fact, but sites around Northern Ireland where Protestants and Catholics laugh, trust, socialise and commit to a shared goal together are rare. Having grown up in de facto segregation with housing and education predominantly divided along ethno-religious lines (Borooah & Knox, 2015), for many, Ballycross RFC is their first real interaction with members of the ‘other’ community.

The vast majority of Protestant players were middle-class and had attended grammar schools where they were introduced to rugby. Higher social class afforded many an opportunity to sidestep many of the problems associated with the Northern Irish conflict (Hassan, 2016). The middle-class were more likely to grow up in areas less affected by political violence and avoid extreme ideologies that perpetuate conflict (Bairner, 2003). Only four Protestant club members identified themselves as working-class.

The Catholic players were evenly divided between middle and working class, though all had attended Catholic secondary schools and begun their rugby careers as a result of Ulster rugby initiatives. Accordingly, these players did not attend the primary nurseries for rugby – state schools – which do not prohibit Catholic attendance, but in practice, are almost exclusively Protestant (Bairner, 2003). This situation is changing in Northern Ireland as clubs and schools place an emphasis on encouraging Catholics to participate.

There was a small section of the club which identified as Christian. They considered themselves Protestant as an ethnic marker, but saw their religious faith as making them distinct from the rest of the group. In a country that has defined

itself through religious markers, there is an irony that those practicing religion needed to demarcate themselves.

*They say in Ireland that there are more churches and more pubs per head of population than anywhere else in the world. So, does religion drive you to drink or does drink drive you to religion? (John)*

Christian values were not always a natural fit at Ballycross RFC. A game of violence and aggression with associated post-match rituals of heavy alcohol consumption and lewd masculine behaviour clashed strongly with the message of morality these young men attempted to spread. There were also disgruntled murmurings from the rest of the club about feeling judged for their alcohol practices, their relationships with women, and how Christians separated themselves from the group to pray during the final stages before a match.

Two clubs that Ballycross RFC played against were predominantly Catholic, while the other 10 were predominantly Protestant. This meant that as a club with members from both ‘communities’, depending on the opposition, Ballycross RFC was at times perceived as a Protestant club, and at others, as a Catholic (or mixed) club. In tense matches, these differences were sometimes highlighted (though admittedly rarely), which inflamed hostilities and almost certainly resulted in heightened violence.

The majority of players were born within a few years of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Consequently, they have grown up in a social and cultural landscape that has (for most) been dedicated to maintaining peace between the two major communities. This means that their understandings of conflict and violence and difference has largely been learned in a post-Troubles context and

their understanding of the Troubles has been influenced by others rather than personally experienced. For the management team and the club's older players, experiences of violence and hostility towards the 'other' community continue to shape their perception of Northern Irish society and Ballycross RFC.

Conversely, there was no variation at the club regarding gender. All players and management staff were male. While there were women who played peripheral roles (such as mothers, girlfriends or wives who watch or tend to injuries), none of the Ballycross RFC club members were women. This homosocial setting reinforced a variety of masculine discourses associated with "lad culture", including a focus on the consumption of alcohol and heterosexual relations, and support for sexist and homophobic banter (Dempster, 2011; Phipps & Young, 2015). Typical of a rugby environment, Ballycross RFC also reproduced discourses encouraging stoicism, machismo and bravado in the face of pain and injury and attempts to provide distance from all forms of femininity (Muir & Seitz, 2004; Pringle, 2001; Schacht, 1996). But noticeably, within Ballycross RFC, there were several ways of interacting with these discourses. "What it meant to be a man" at Ballycross RFC differed according to age, maturity and experiences.

Notably, all Ballycross RFC members were 'white'. This was not uncommon among rugby teams in Northern Ireland, and throughout the season (24 regular season games) I rarely encountered non-white players. This meant that all understandings of race and ethnicity were framed within an all-white environment. All non-white bodies were perceived as different, and interactions within the safety of the all-white group were made to highlight this difference.

Ballycross RFC was, from a sporting performance perspective, in a state of recovery when I arrived. The previous two seasons had not been successful and several influential players had left for other clubs. What was left was a swathe of younger players and only remnants of an established team culture. Confidence was low and many members did not have high expectations for performance or victory. Despite this lack of optimism, there was a youthful enthusiasm about the club and an appreciation of the social elements of rugby culture.

Ballycross RFC is very dear to my heart. I have had many wonderful experiences over four seasons at the club, both sporting and social, and hold many members amongst my closest friends. This has made it very difficult to engage in a critical sociological analysis at times. Writing of behaviours that individuals uncritically engaged in is not easy when you realise that your relationship with them may be tarnished by your words. To those who feel that I have unfairly represented the club, I apologise. I have tried to show the good with the bad. Though discourses of sectarianism, masculinity and racism continue to perpetuate issues at Ballycross RFC, the club is also full of warmth and laughter and support. I count myself lucky to have been a member of Ballycross RFC.

## Structure of thesis

This is not a traditional thesis. In an attempt to portray Ballycross RFC effectively, I have experimented with structure, representation and methodology. So much of critical sport sociology is about disrupting the status quo and thinking about scenarios in alternative ways. I use this notion as a premise for this thesis, searching outside conventional methods of representation for presenting my interpretation of Ballycross RFC. To give the reader some idea of what to expect, and to avoid any nasty surprises, I gently walk through my chapters.

Here, in **Chapter One**, I provide a brief introduction to my study before explaining the context in which it takes place. I briefly summarise three significant periods in Northern Irish history that influenced the sectarian divide and describe the contemporary context in terms of violence, segregation and Brexit. My focus then shifts to explain how Northern Irish sport has functioned within this climate, how different sports were imbued with meaning based on their origins, and how sports have been used as a vehicle for promoting national and ethnic identities. Finally, I paint a picture of Ballycross RFC, describing the club demographics that are important to consider when reading this thesis.

In **Chapter Two** I explain the philosophical and methodological assumptions that underpin my research as well as the methods used to conduct my fieldwork.

Drawing upon an autoethnographic sensibility, I describe my role in the research process, the inductive approach I employed as well as the choices I made in representing my ethnography of Ballycross RFC. I discuss the use of ethnographic creative non-fiction to portray my evidence in a novella form, and explain how the various themes within this novella should not be viewed in isolation, but as

intertwined and intersecting. The “fiction” of my novella intersects with my writing throughout my thesis, as each text is a representation, a “fiction” which I have created (Denzin, 2014). The fieldwork methods I used were participant observation, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, and using the style of a confessional tale (Van Maanen, 2011), I describe the many hurdles that I overcame throughout the fieldwork process.

I portray my evidence through a novella. **Chapter Three**, *Of mauls and men* is my attempt to bring my experiences - and the experiences of my participants - of a season playing rugby for a Northern Irish club to life. Weaving a season’s worth of fieldnotes and transcripts into one story, I portray Ballycross RFC as I interpreted it: as a large group of mostly young men attempting to make sense of the complex array of sectarian, masculine and race-based discourses within their specific context. Attempting to write rich and evocative descriptions, I allow the reader to live these moments as a member of Ballycross RFC.

My thesis then shifts to three analysis chapters: *Be Protestant*, *Be a man*, and *Be white*. Of course, these declarations are not the official Ballycross RFC club rules. Rather, *Be Protestant*, *Be a man* and *Be white* are the three major discourses which are established through the language, practices and means by which subjects are marked as individuals at Ballycross RFC (Whitehead, 2002). If we consider power to be distributed through discourses (Foucault, 1977), in an investigation of Ballycross RFC it is wise to define what discourses hold significance. As such, the chapters can be read as how individuals interact with the discursive strategies of sectarianism, masculinity and racism within Ballycross RFC. These chapters should be used to inform *Of mauls and men*. They provide

context and analysis to place the experiences, behaviours, beliefs and actions of Ballycross RFC members within the cultural, social, political and historical context of contemporary Northern Ireland. This is an attempt to “connect lived experience with analysis” (Denison, 2016, p. 9). While *Of mauls and men* is certainly intended to be evocative, *Be Protestant*, *Be a man* and *Be white* are designed to extrapolate theoretical insights.

In **Chapter Four**, *Be Protestant*, I first provide a definition of sectarianism and an overview of how academics have conceptualised the conflict before explaining how sectarianism plays out within the Ballycross RFC context. The vast majority of interactions that draw on the relationship between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland are framed as humour. I examine how this can function as a coping mechanism when dealing with a sensitive, omnipresent topic, but also functions to silence any dissent. I also look at how the use of symbols can act to highlight and reinforce the ethno-religious divide and how occasionally these tensions spill over into physical conflict.

**Chapter Five**, *Be a man*, explores the dynamics of masculinity within Ballycross RFC’s all-male environment. Rugby clubs are notorious for creating a culture where performances of excessive masculinity are cultivated. Additionally, Northern Irish society has traditionally fostered an unhealthy culture of violence, stoicism and specific gender roles. Ballycross RFC certainly displayed examples of these discourses, with sexism, misogyny, homophobia and problematic drinking behaviours encouraged and reinforced. However, Ballycross RFC also featured signs of less problematic masculinities amongst more mature members, and a process of learning more productive relationships with ‘others.’

In **Chapter Six**, *Be white*, I investigate how Ballycross RFC members display and understand racism. With little ethnic diversity in Northern Ireland, Ballycross RFC members typically perceive society within a ‘two community’ framework. However, the peace process has created a more stable society that is much more appealing to immigrants. Slowly, Northern Ireland is moving towards multiculturalism, a daunting prospect for some. During this fascinating time of change I explore how the young men of Ballycross RFC use ethnic humour to disparage ‘others’ and strengthen in-group bonds, whilst rejecting all claims of racism.

Finally, I conclude my thesis with **Chapter Seven**, *The sense of an ending?* In this chapter, I offer interpretations, but continue to invite the audience to co-create this research alongside me and to draw their own conclusions. Ballycross RFC sits within a complex social, cultural and historical context, and its members are forced to contend with complicated, intersecting and changing discourses of sectarianism, masculinity and racism among many others. So rather than providing answers, I leave Ballycross RFC by asking my readers to think deeper about their own experiences, to draw their own interpretations and to produce their own meaning.

## Chapter Two:

A portrait of the artist as a young(ish) man

(Methodology)

## Introduction

It is inevitable that at a Northern Irish rugby club there would be tension and conflict. What is less obvious is how issues of sectarianism, masculinity and race play out in the contemporary context of Ballycross RFC. To observe this, I employed an inductive and eclectic approach, structuring my research around the phenomena as I observed them, and utilising a wide range of scholarly literature to inform my work. Drawing upon ethnographic methods that would illuminate these interactions, over the course of a year, I lived the life of a Ballycross rugby player. I observed as I trained, played and socialised alongside these young men, and once I had earned their trust, I conducted focus group discussions and interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their personal experiences and beliefs. I explore these interactions with my participants, placing my experiences collecting evidence within the often messy, ambiguous and problematic contexts within which research operates. Autoethnographically, I write myself into my research and attempt to reflexively understand the influence I exert on my study and the perspective I bring. Rather than focusing solely on the 'other', using my experiences I attempt to expose the cultural issues within Ballycross RFC (T. E. Adams & Holman Jones, 2011). In this chapter, I take the reader through the choices I made when conducting this research, explaining my methodological choices, the methods I used, and the creative form of representation I used to express the lives of Ballycross RFC members.

## Inductive approach

I addressed Ballycross RFC using an inductive approach, which essentially means that the researcher allows categories, themes and patterns to emerge from fieldwork rather than imposing them in advance (Janesick, 2003). It means entering the field with questions and an open mind about the answers. And most importantly, it means the participants' perspectives of the world are privileged ahead of a researcher's hypothesis. Using an inductive approach, an initial idea will inform what is studied, then the evidence collected will raise questions which will lead to more data collection, analysis, writing and more ideas (O'Reilly, 2008).

This is not to suggest that I was thrown into a site I had never heard of, with no knowledge of theories and arguments that have preceded me. Of course there will be preconceptions, but they can be reflexively acknowledged, and used as an advantage (O'Reilly, 2008). Rather, as a 'bricoleur', I viewed my research as an emergent construction that had the ability to change and adapt as new information arose and different techniques of representation and interpretation were added to the puzzle (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). This involved reading widely, considering, and sometimes moving between concepts and theories, as I stitched together several interpretive strategies. By considering and examining the evidence from different perspectives, I attempted to gain a more complex understanding of Ballycross RFC (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

I wanted to be involved in constructing new knowledge based on things of importance to my participants. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009) point out, "how one conceptualises things actually affects what comes into view" (p. xvi). So,

instead of a theory-driven approach, I entered the field with some broad research questions, and as few preconceptions as possible. Starting with a wide focus, I refined my research questions as themes emerged (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). What I observed and experienced drove the direction of my research and I was flexible to exploring new avenues of discovery.

In a similar fashion, I did not attempt to view my study of Ballycross RFC through the lens of a single theory. Instead, using an eclectic approach, I tried to use the work of many to provide different perspectives on the same phenomena. Just like utilising multiple methods can enhance understanding, using a variety of complementary concepts can broaden our knowledge by showing us how to think differently about the same data (Bruce, 2010). A study of Ballycross RFC could have been conducted using many different individual social theories, but by expanding my theoretical catchment, I attempted to utilise the most relevant concepts for each particular issue. By using this approach, the most pertinent parts of my participants lives stayed central, focusing my research, rather than tailoring the areas of study to particular concepts. The desire to be “methodologically inventive, theoretically alive, and empirically rigorous” (Silverman, 2007, p. 5) drives this approach. My eclectic approach should not be seen (I hope) as lacking in substance, but as methodologically and theoretically creative; an opportunity to tease out the lives of Ballycross RFC members in novel, compelling, and reasoned ways.

Drawing upon poststructuralism, interpretive and critical frameworks, and symbolic interactionism, I seek to understand my participants’ subjective experiences and place them within their social and historical context (Markula &

Silk, 2011). Crucial to my study are the interrelationships between individuals, the lived experiences, and the workings of power that shape their lives. Like Gubrium and Holstein (2009), I view concepts as tools to help us understand a phenomena, not to predetermine what we choose to look at or how we apprehend the empirical. To be mastered by method or theory is to be kept from finding out about something in the world (Harris, 2006). Instead, following C. Wright Mills' (2000) insistence, I avoid rigid sets of procedure and seek to develop my sociological imagination. I draw on the works of many in an attempt to provide a breadth of understanding of my participants' lived experiences. Most importantly, my study of Ballycross RFC is not defined by these theories; they simply provide a perspective to view my evidence. Ballycross RFC is the primary focus of this research, and method and theory are tools to unravel Ballycross RFC's constructions.

## Autoethnography

This thesis is an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club. Playing, training and socialising as a member of the group, I observed, wrote fieldnotes, asked questions, conducted focus group discussions and interviews and tried to understand Ballycross RFC. I participated alongside Ballycross RFC members as they conducted their lives and attempted to interpret the culture in terms of the meanings they ascribed to their interactions.

Classic ethnography is the study of the shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs and language of a cultural group through extended periods of observation (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). A strong emphasis is placed on exploring the nature of

a particular social phenomenon, as opposed to deductively testing hypotheses (P. Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998).

Central to ethnography is the emphasis on studying a culture first hand, that the researcher submit to “the fire of action *in situ*”(Wacquant, 2004, p. viii).

Ethnographic fieldwork typically involves some degree of participation and observation, over a sustained period of time (P. Atkinson, 2015; Hammersley, 2006). By living inside the situation, the researcher attempts to identify with the participants of their study and to learn the nuances and meanings of their lives from their perspective (Janesick, 1998).

Ethnographic research, with its focus on qualitative values and meanings, provides an opportunity to express ‘other’ cultures and marginalised ‘others’ within our own culture (Silk, 2005). As such, sports scholars have widely utilised various forms of ethnography as a means of understanding the meanings individuals ascribe to sport participation (Evers, 2006; Giulianotti, 1995; Thorpe, 2008; Wheaton, 2000). This allows researchers to become part of a sporting environment; to live as a participant, to feel and understand what it means to be a player, coach, referee, or spectator. I laced my boots and ran out onto the field to experience what it means to be a member of Ballycross RFC.

While traditional anthropology and sociology keep their focus solely on the ‘other’, like Behar, I recognise that “any ethnographic representation . . . inevitably includes a self-representation” (2003, p. 271). Writing about the ‘other’ must also include a consideration of how the self influences what we write. Van Maanen describes it well when he writes:

It rests on the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others. Ethnography is therefore highly particular and hauntingly personal. (2011, p. xiii)

My study is primarily about the culture of Ballycross RFC, but as a researcher, and a participant who contributed to the culture, I reflexively consider my position and foreground my voice. By minimising my role, I would be neglecting the messy, complex negotiations of ethnography (Coffey, 1999). Attempting to connect the personal to the cultural, I turn towards an autoethnographic sensibility.

Autoethnography attempts to disrupt dominant ideas about research (T. E. Adams & Holman Jones, 2011), and reflexively, uses the experiences of the author to expose broader cultural issues in society. With autoethnography we tell stories of the self through the lens of culture, using artistic and analytic demonstrations of our experience to engage ourselves, others, culture, politics and social research (T. E. Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2014). Told in the first person, these texts not only express the researcher's perspective, but "consider how and why we think, act and feel as we do" (Ellis, 2013, p. 11). Autoethnography asks the writer to peel away their assumptions, to uncover the influences that shape the way we understand the world, and to write this process into their research. It is about challenging the hegemonic practices of the world, about disrupting and deconstructing the methodological practices in pursuit of a more just society (Denzin, 2006). This thesis is designed to engage an audience and provide worth to the members of Ballycross RFC (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Autoethnography is always ethnography, an exploration of culture, whether someone else's or one's own (Roth, 2005), but the emphasis autoethnographers' place on culture and the self can vary widely (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My study focuses on the Ballycross RFC culture, the factors that maintain this culture, and how the individuals within the rugby club interact with the dominant discourses, but these stories are told through my experiential lens and I acknowledge how this influences my research. Immersed within the life of 'others', it is my perspective, and my voice that tells the story (Kraft Alsop, 2005). My thesis, *Ballycross RFC*, is a dialogue – a back and forth process linking the personal with the political (Spry, 2016). Through evocative, descriptive writing practices and critical reflexivity I tell my tale of Ballycross RFC.

### **Narrative**

The critical autoethnographer, Denzin (2014) argues, connects experiences with culture, history and social structure. I attempt to accomplish this through the use of narrative. I view the term *narrative* as expressing at least two methodological approaches: as a form of analysis and as a form of representation. First, it is a way of understanding the world through the stories people tell. Narrative as a form of analysis allows the researcher to engage with the meaning that people attach to their worlds. Individuals make sense of their lives through narrative (Bochner, 2000). It helps us to impose order on otherwise random and disconnected events (Tedlock, 2013). People understand their experiences by attaching meaning to them and express them in the form of stories.

When someone asks you *who* you are, you tell your story. That is, you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future

anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime.

(Kearney, 2002, p. 4 emphasis in original)

Narrative brings subjects and objects to life. It draws the reader into the experiences of others, and may allow us to reflect upon our decisions, and change our direction. It can help us to make sense of individuals, cultures, societies and history. People tell stories that are reflective of their context, that are meaningful within an specific culture, and that are performed in relation to a particular audience (Sparkes & Partington, 2003). The stories they tell reveal a part of them; who they are, where they've been, what they believe in, and what they feel is significant (Goodall, 2000).

These stories are not innocent – they are part of a continuing conflict of interpretations, told from a certain perspective and in light of specific prejudices (Kearney, 2002). Richardson (1995) explains how “participation in a culture includes participation in the narratives of that culture” (p. 211), that the cultural stories are embedded with discourses of home, community, society and humankind, as well as nation, social class, gender, race and occupation. They shape identity and aspirations, and have real consequences for individuals, communities and nations.

*Was a very traumatised country, a lot of people having to deal with a lot of loss. There's a freedom from that trauma that the younger generation have and I hope that they don't take it for granted, like, you know? Umm, I come from a different world, where Belfast was closed off at 6 o'clock, the*

*barriers came over, you know, the security forces were here and there - you go to Belfast now, and the centre of town is thriving with restaurants and pubs, you know? These kids haven't grown up with that, you know? They know nothing of it, and I think that's a good thing, there's enough of us carrying that baggage, you know? And eventually you've got to get to the stage where the younger generation comes along and you know what? You don't even tell them the stories. Don't corrupt them, you know?*

(Richard)

So, by engaging the participants at Ballycross RFC in conversation, they told their narratives, stories that demonstrated who they are and what is important in their lives. These stories reveal how cultural narratives about their community's history and entitlement are produced and reproduced, how they understand the dominant narratives within the rugby environment, and how they may conflict or align. Or as Gubrium and Holstein (2009) explain, "the contexts in which stories are told are as much a part of their reality as the texts themselves" (p. 2). Therefore, analysing the narratives of Ballycross RFC is about much more than transcribing interviews; it is about understanding the many influences that converge to shape an individual's perception of the world. As a storyteller, my analysis is the story (Smith, 2016).

Secondly, narrative is a way of representing the world through stories (Bochner, 2001). To explain storied lives, I tell stories. My aim is not to "compulsively cling to old patterns of apprehending and presenting the world" (Rinehart, 2010, p. 196), but to explore new ways of expressing the lives of my participants. By writing in nonconventional ways I hope to offer the possibilities for new insights

(Bruce, 1998), and to engage readers in an evolving conversation (Goodall, 2000).

I invite the reader to be an active participant in producing the text rather than a passive reader of my words (Sparkes, 1991). Van Maanen (2011) reminds us:

The intention is not to tell readers what to think of an experience but to show them the experience from beginning to end and thus draw them immediately into the story to work out its problems and puzzles as they unfold (p.103).

Setting out on the journey of my PhD I wanted to be bold, and inspired by Richardson, Denzin, Sparkes and Denison, I sought novel ways of representing Ballycross RFC. Therefore, I experimented with various forms of representation, and ultimately chose to write a novella that brings Ballycross RFC to life. To allow the audience a glimpse into the messiness of Ballycross RFC, like Wacquant's (2004) *Body and Soul*, I use a novella to weave sociological analysis with lived experience. This is, in essence, my 'evidence' chapter. Here, I show how sectarianism, masculinity and racism play out at Ballycross RFC. I use various examples from this chapter to illuminate my analysis with rich detail, but the real advantage of a novella form is being able to view these examples in their specific context. In this way, the audience can see how the interactions at Ballycross RFC develop, how tension, pressure and prejudice can build or dissipate, and understand how behaviours and beliefs are part of wider social, cultural, historical circumstances as well as personal relationships.

I write in this way to allow the reader an insider's experience into the complex, intersecting social issues the young men of this rugby club negotiate. I use fictionalised methods to venture into the immeasurable – the socially constructed,

the obscured, and the complex (Rinehart, 2003). I attempt to write evocative texts to highlight the messiness and complexity of human life (Denison, 2010; Douglas, 2009), inviting the reader to emotionally “relive” the experiences of the participants in my study (Sparkes, 1996).

Messy texts seek to break the binary between science and literature, represent the contradiction of truth of human experience, and show how real human beings cope with the vagaries of life (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Elements of our lives seldom fall into neatly definable categories; problems are not always obvious, hard ‘data’ not always revealing. We cannot always explain the “rush” of raw experience with neat, scientific compartments (Rinehart, 1998a).

I wrote my fieldnotes, my interviews and focus groups into existence (Richardson, 2001). I dove into my fieldwork, intimately engaged in the transcriptions, the notes and my memories, and gained a deeper understanding of my participants’ meaning (Markula & Silk, 2011). I began by writing vignettes that would bring the experiences of Ballycross RFC to life. I wrote of training sessions, matches, bus trips, social occasions, conversations in changing rooms, and hanging out in people’s houses. I took these experiences of broad settings and wove them together. I wrote and rewrote and structured and restructured. I selected, edited, and shaped to suit my presentation (Vickers, 2010).

While transcriptions are largely written as spoken, they are relieved of repetition and conversational fillers. This is exerting a certain interpretive authority over these voices (Rogers, 2007), but all research “involves a complex politics of representation” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 43). Nothing can be represented in its entirety without some form of selection and juxtaposition, and I do pick and

choose, switch and shunt my writing into the polished text I produce (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

### Power of representation

In the process of confining these lives to words, I am not searching to explain the 'truth.' The literature I drew on for my research at Ballycross RFC had moved beyond positivist and post-positivist claims to objective knowledge (Lincoln et al., 2011). A claim of truth is a claim of power, a privileging of certain knowledge and particular interests (Richardson, 2002). Exposing these truths allows us opportunities to write in different ways, about different things, and gives voice to different people.

Language and speech do not mirror experience; they create experience, transforming what we describe (Denzin, 2015). In the process of constructing my narrative I impose meaning on the phenomena I am exploring (Booth, 2005).

Writing is not stable and fixed, but a sociohistorical construction, and so it must be recognised that a text is a product of its time and place (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Paradigms shift and ways of writing are privileged. In a similar vein, language can be understood as historically and culturally specific, a reflection on the discourses available to the individual. Language creates a particular view of reality, and the devices and structures I choose bestow meaning and value on the things I write (Richardson, 1995).

There are always multiple possible interpretations of texts, dependent on the particular context (Derrida, 1982, 1998). Once they become a text, these narratives became my version of what happened (Denzin, 1990). Another

researcher may have understood events in very different ways, their perspectives “filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 25). Heidegger (1927/1967) argues that each person brings their own lived experiences, understandings and historical background to a phenomenon and will perceive it in a different way. Accordingly, my writing is shaped by the social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gendered world I have experienced, and will be read by an audience through their own personal experiential lens (Mantzoukas, 2004).

As I wrote, the hidden political and ideological agendas in my writing began to emerge (Richardson, 2000a). I wrote through the process of understanding, increasing my knowledge of my project as I pieced together relevant literature and ways of conceptualising the phenomena with my experiences. I constructed the social reality of Ballycross RFC, each language choice producing meaning, producing my subjectivity (Richardson, 2001). I defined the investigation, chose the voices that are heard, and decided what experiences to include and how to interpret them (M. Fine, 1994). I am the interpreter and creator of the reality that is presented, the one who tells the story (Mantzoukas, 2004). Nothing can be assumed to be neutral: all texts are embroiled in struggles of power (Richardson, 2001, 2002).

Reflexively, I acknowledge that I did not enter the field as a neutral collector of data or objectively represent an ‘other’ culture. Fieldwork takes place within a mesh of social relations and interpretations, and reflexivity is being aware of who we are and what we are doing (P. Atkinson, 2015). Guillem and Gillam (2004) argue that reflexivity is an active, ongoing process of critical reflection of what

questions we pose and discard, the choices of design, methodology and theoretical framework, who we include and exclude, our interpretations, analyses and representation. We are shaped by our socio-historical locations, and the values and interests these locations confer upon them (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The social interactions and the production of knowledges that occur during the research process are always framed by these particularities. While positivists attempt to show objectivity and negate contamination, I seek to reveal my influence on the research process. The researcher is always implicated in the problem being addressed (Pelias, 2013), and imposes their own analytical structures upon the social world (Wolcott, 1995). I have tried to be aware of these influences, to step back from my research and critically reflect on my role in the research process (Guillem & Gillam, 2004). I acknowledge my subjectivity, the power dynamics at play, my position in relation to my research and my participants, and my role in actively constructing knowledge (Finlay, 2002). My presence was part of what I studied, and how I represent it (Leavy, 2014).

My research also bears the etches of the historical, social and cultural factors that shaped my identity and my understanding of the world. I cannot claim to have entered my research as a New Zealander free of any biases, prejudices or predilection. Amidst discussions of Catholic and Protestant, there is no doubt that my genealogical connection still influences the way I understand Northern Ireland, and I view the sectarian relations at Ballycross RFC through this lens. My “whiteness”, the socio-economic status I was afforded by my family’s role in the colonisation of New Zealand, and the discourses of masculinity within rugby

culture that shaped my identity also affected my perception and understanding of the world and influenced the decisions I made.

### Ethnographic creative non-fiction

What I write, therefore, will to some extent, be a “fiction” made up of the experiences I have observed (Denzin, 1990). I draw upon techniques of literary fiction to convey lived experience more effectively than objective, scientific writing (Rinehart, 1998a). Fictionalised representations offer alternative points of view, and open multiple interpretations (Denison, 1996) Fiction can be engaging and accessible; it allows for nuance, interpretive gaps for the readers’ imagination, and a multiplicity of meanings (Leavy, 2014). I agree with Richardson’s (2000b) lament that much of academic writing is boring. I long for texts that capture the imagination with wit and creativity and hope my writing on Ballycross RFC can achieve this. I want my experiences to resonate with the audience (Ellis, 1993), so that readers can engage with it, enjoy it, and gain insights from it.

Nevertheless, verisimilitude is important to how I view my ethical integrity.

Verisimilitude is “the creation of a realistic, authentic, and lifelike portrayal” of experience (Leavy, 2014, p. 57). It is an attempt to apply a literary standard of truthfulness in storytelling (Ellingson, 2011).

Therefore, I draw upon ethnographic creative non-fiction as a means of representation. I use fictional methods to create a narrative made up of my ethnographic observations, interviews and focus groups (Sparkes, 2008). Creative non-fiction indicates a “proximity to the truth” (Barone, 2008, p. 110). Grounded in research findings and drawing upon literary techniques, I produce a story that is

fictional in form but factual in content (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). What I have committed to paper is largely how I viewed events. Nothing is pure fantasy: the sights and smells and sounds, the opinions and the memories: they are all things I jotted down in my little blue notebook or recorded in interviews and focus groups. But they required my mediation; a pattern inscribed on non-linear events (Rinehart, 1998b).

Autoethnography allows, demands even, that writing also achieves literary as well as academic value. Ellis (2000) asks for evocation, engagement and nuance, for showing rather than telling, for immersion and provocation. Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis ask for four characteristics when writing autoethnography:

*(1) purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices, (2) making contributions to existing research, (3) embracing vulnerability with purpose, and (4) creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response.* (2013, p. 22 italics in original)

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) produced a similar criteria, requiring standards of substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, and impact. Qualitative research is difficult to judge using universal criteria as the quality of this work always relies on social judgements (Sparkes, 2009). Bochner argues that applying criteria distracts from the real dilemmas of qualitative research, that it is merely an attempt at to legislate standards that “thwart subjectivity and ensure rationality” (2000, p. 269). Scientific paradigms still act to constrain such personal writing, and I write to challenge this dominance.

## Criticism

Autoethnography has been criticised as insufficiently rigorous, overly emotional and self-indulgent naval-gazing. It is either too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Atkinson (1997) questions autoethnography's claims of greater or different authenticity, insisting that autoethnographies are devoid of social context and do not achieve serious social analysis. Delamont (2009) insists that autoethnography is introspection that has "no analytic mileage" and tells the reader nothing of "social scientific, pedagogic or educational interest" (p. 58).

As a method that challenges traditional forms of academic writing, autoethnography has had to fight for acceptance in the academic world where it is constantly judged against scientific, quantitative, positivist research. I make no denial that some autoethnographic work can be self-indulgent. But like Sparkes (2002), I believe that these claims come from scholars steeped in the scientific paradigm, seeking to resist change and reinforce the status quo. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) state that these criticisms position art and science in conflict, something that autoethnography attempts to bind together. Autoethnography, when done well, can be rigorous research and simultaneously evocative and aesthetic. Yet, as my thesis, *Ballycross RFC*, has a clear focus on the other members of the club as well as my own 'self,' and as I have three explicit analysis chapters, I clearly address these criticisms of self-indulgence and lack of analytic rigor.

## Intersecting

The discourses of Ballycross RFC are complex and mutually constitutive.

Therefore, an investigative approach needs to recognise that there are multiple social influences that intertwine rather than a single axis upon which experiences rest. The term intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (1989) to highlight the multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender experienced by black women.

Rather than separate factors, intersectionality explores how they mutually construct each other (Collins, 1998).

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2)

Utilising this concept, I explore an alternative perspective – highlighting how the young men of Ballycross RFC act to maintain their position of dominance over those who fall outside their accepted categories of ethnicity/religion, gender and race. While most studies of intersectionality focus on those who fall between the cracks and lack representation (Davis, 2014), my study of Ballycross RFC highlights how dominant groups are also subject to intersecting classifications.

Not all Protestants are the same, not all Catholics are the same, not all men are the

same, and not all white people are the same. To essentialise these groups is to conflate narratives and reinforce hegemonic discourses of identity politics, constructing homogenised ways to be a group member (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, age, religion and nationality that people identify as, and are defined by, reflect and determine their experiences and opportunities.

For example, the Catholic players were often subject to sectarian discourses and interacted with these in differing ways, yet they were also complicit in discourses marginalising women and people of colour. Rather than experiencing multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1994), these young men are hindered by one aspect of prejudice, but benefit from, and contribute to, several other forms.

*Of mauls and men* is an attempt to broach this intersectionality. I attempt to write in-between the spaces of sectarianism, masculinity and race (Lykke et al., 2014). I write to highlight how these three practices play out together, mingling as fear of the ‘other.’ Sectarianism, masculinity and racism do not work independently of each other, but are intertwined and overlapping. Often, they build off the tension, the mistrust and the hatred that develop as circumstances change and the status quo is challenged. My intention has not been to highlight how ‘Protestants’ or ‘Catholics’ or ‘men’ or ‘whites’ at Ballycross RFC understand and behave in their social context, but to emphasise the heterogeneity of beliefs, actions and behaviours. I showcase how different members interact with discursive practices, highlighting a specific element of identity at a time. This strategy is what McCall (2005) terms the *intracategorical* approach to the complexity of intersectionality:

In personal narratives and single-group analyses, then, complexity derives from the analysis of a social location at the intersection of single dimensions of multiple categories, rather than at the intersection of the full range of dimensions of a full range of categories, and that is how complexity is managed. Personal narratives and single-group studies derive their strength from the partial crystallization of social relations in the identities of particular social groups. (2005, p. 1781)

Rather than dismissing categories altogether, I recognise the significance that prescribed categories play in structuring and restricting lives. It is important to understand my analysis chapters, then, not as categories that I analyse, but as the discursive practices which members of Ballycross RFC use to control, understand and differentiate themselves and others. The chapter *Be Protestant*, for example, can be understood as the language of sectarianism that is such a dominant feature at Ballycross RFC, rather than as a categorisation of ethnicity or religion.

Within this framework I utilised three methods to understand Ballycross RFC: Participant observation, focus group discussions and interviews. By becoming an active member of the club – playing, training and socialising as part of the group – I gained acceptance into the group, I built a rapport and was able to have meaningful conversations with individuals, and I was included in the casual ‘banter’ that was central to the majority of interactions. To build on the observations I made while participating as a Ballycross RFC member, I employed a series of focus group discussions and interviews to understand how my participants make sense of their experiences, their beliefs and their understanding of history, and to view how group dynamics shaped performances.



## Methods

### Immersion

Having played for Ballycross RFC in the past, knowing the social, cultural and historical context of the site, and having strong relationships with the management team, I was aware of the many research possibilities Ballycross RFC held. Rather than searching for a site that suited my research topic, the site structured the research questions I asked. Though a number of personnel had changed from my previous experiences at Ballycross RFC several years earlier, the majority of the management team, and several former teammates were still involved. The details of my role at Ballycross RFC were established with the club's management via emails, including consent to conduct my research with the club.

Engaging as a participant-as-observer (Bryman, 2008), I played an active part as a member of Ballycross RFC. Immersion was a key strategy to 'get inside' the field of inquiry (Woodward, 2008). I sought out membership within the group, becoming a player on the team and a member of the club, something relatively few people could have done. My prior experience at Ballycross RFC aided me significantly: the coaches were enthusiastic about my involvement, and my relationships with former teammates allowed me to integrate easily.

I was not interpreting interactions from the sideline; I was engaging in activities alongside Ballycross RFC members. Long practices on cold, wet nights were spent tackling, running, passing, kicking, rucking, mauling, dragging, trusting, and organising alongside these men. Every Saturday was spent preparing, travelling, playing and socialising with them, building a rapport with players that

(I hoped) would transcend the usual distance between researcher and participant. Rugby union is a sport that relies on cohesion; the 15 players on the field must trust each other to support them, to sacrifice their bodies for them, even to fight for them. So to become a complete participant, to assume a full membership role (Adler & Adler, 1991), requires a lot more than attending a few casual sessions. It demands that you buy in to the philosophy of the team, that you show yourself as trustworthy, and are willing to commit your body, time and effort to the cause. Participant observers in areas of research that study deviancy and danger are faced with numerous, continuous obstacles to entrée, and moral and ethical dilemmas surrounding the limitations to their involvement (Giulianotti, 1995). Proving myself as a player of talent, trust and work ethic, whilst also demonstrating that I was willing to socialise with the team, and engage in group behaviour were key facets for gaining acceptance, and access to players.

Goffman (1989) suggests that an ethnographer should “cut your life to the bone” (p. 127) as much as possible. No distractions, no obligations, no way out. But I went in with a world full of luggage. Every position casts a different shadow on a project, and reflexively acknowledging my perspective is more important to me than attempting to be a “lone, ungendered, unbiased researcher” (Billo & Hiemstra, 2013, p. 320). At the time of joining the club I was 30 years old. While hardly ancient, this was significantly older than the few players straight out of school, and the majority who were under 25. The first few weeks saw a minor divide emerge, where the six oldest players changed in a specific section and tended to socialise together. While the impact of this lessened as I got to know people, the initial relationships, especially with the youngest members of the team, were more hesitant than I would have liked. I also had a family – a wife and

a daughter (two daughters by the time we left) – which made engaging with other families considerably easier, and times of loneliness were non-existent, but it also meant that some of the “Indiana Jonesish” aspects of fieldwork had to be shelved at times (Starrs, Starrs, Starrs, & Huntsinger, 2001, p. 77). I had neither the time, interest, effort or money to be out drinking and “girl hunting” (Grazian, 2007) multiple times per week like some Ballycross RFC members. This altered the invitations I received, my inclusion in certain tales, and acceptance within particular friendship groups. These decisions impacted what came into view (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009), but I was aware that I was never going to be able to observe everything, and these choices reflect what I deemed most pertinent to the environment.

#### **Insider-outsider**

Accordingly, my own multiplicity of identity effected how I viewed my research and how my participants perceived me. Initially, interacting with my participants was aided by my similar socio-economic status, my white skin, my previous experience at Ballycross RFC and the rugby legacy of New Zealand. Yet the dynamic was never as simple as transitioning from outsider to insider. Several researchers have recently highlighted how this insider/outsider binary is overly simplistic (Blix, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). At any one time, I assumed multiple positions dependent on the different elements of my identity. These positions were fluid as well, suggesting that a simple dichotomy is insufficient for understanding group membership (Coombs & Osborne, 2018). For example, as a New Zealander, I was always different, unknowledgeable about the intricacies of

Northern Irish society and the experience of living there. This was something I was able, at times, to use to my advantage at times.

As an older player, I shared similarities with some, and was an outsider to many. As a white, heterosexual male, I shared experiences of race, sexuality and gender (though there could potentially have been “closeted” gay men that were unwilling to openly express their sexuality). As a rugby player, I assumed full membership relatively quickly. But these dynamics intersected, they changed over time, and they were dependent on individuals within each context (Sherif, 2001). My membership was never finalised but continuously performed (Blix, 2015), subject to “constant negotiation and re-negotiation” between me and my participants (Cui, 2015, p. 367).

#### Participant observation

At training, while the team huddled to conclude practice, I introduced my research and its implications to the players. I wanted them to understand that they were not ‘subjects’ of research, but active partners who would help formulate and accomplish my research plan (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2013). I tried to make it clear that participation in all aspects of my research was voluntary, and working hard to become a fellow club member, I tried to minimise these power differentials. But there will always be a discrepancy in power between individuals within a culture and those seeking to understand them. Additionally, as a senior player, I held a limited role of authority within the club. Rather than a tangible position of power, my role gave me authority to speak in training sessions, to suggest tactics to the captain and coach, and a slight advantage at selection time where experience was valued. While all players theoretically had the opportunity

to voice their opinions, in practice, new members of the club were socialised into being relatively voiceless contributors.

Participant observation is a method in which the researcher takes part in the activities, rituals and interactions of a group, learning about their lives and their culture (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Immersed within the setting for a prolonged period, the researcher seeks to understand the significance of the group behaviour through repeat observations (Bryman, 2008). This offers the opportunity to view the nuances of the culture, presenting a “rich, descriptive analysis” of the behaviours which occur (Muir & Seitz, 2004, p. 322). As new ideas and questions are posed, participant observation informs the project, encouraging the formulation of new research questions.

I felt it necessary to highlight the fact that my observations were not confined to formal rugby environments, but included “hanging out” (Evers, 2010; Woodward, 2008) in more social, unstructured settings with team members. These included the informal conversations that I had in cars, on bus trips, in changing rooms or at people’s homes which became foundational for my understanding of Ballycross RFC members. While these informal talks were not recorded, they often provided spontaneous insights into attitudes or beliefs and offered an understanding of the players’ justifications and motivations for engaging in certain behaviours (Muir & Seitz, 2004). Ibrahim (2008) stresses the importance of “hanging out” as an ethnographic method as it allows the researcher to view the multiplicity of identities and observe how they are performed in multiple ways and sites over an extended period. By developing a sense of intimacy and trust, not only do participants feel more comfortable being open and vulnerable, but that the

research is done *with* them, not *about* them (Evers, 2010). The relationships I formed with participants at Ballycross RFC are ongoing and important to me. Therefore, I feel obligated to represent them fairly and produce research which is meaningful to them.

I quickly realised that “hanging out” within the Ballycross RFC environment would not lend itself to taking fieldnotes. Writing in changing rooms, at practice, or as a guest in a house would be impractical and inhibit my research. I decided to live the moment, to take mental notes without garishly brandishing a notebook, and to produce a detailed account once detached from the moment. Therefore, my participants were not baulking at the sight of a researcher jotting notes, and I was not rushing away from an activity or conversation to write. With the rush of the moment gone I felt calmer, more circumspect and I was able to be reflexive about what had occurred. As such, my writing was always going to rely on memory, and my representation was always going to be a “fiction.” During my early fieldwork, in social scenarios I often used my phone. Pretending to text, I would jot bullet points that I could expand on later. While this was a useful strategy, it didn’t always work:

*I wait until there is a lull in conversation, then pretend to go upstairs to the bathroom. I head into the empty stairway, load the ‘To Do’ app on my phone, and jot down notes. I am face down in my phone when Chris rushes up to me. I quickly exit out of my notes and bring up my texts.*

*“What are you up to, you sly old dog, texting your wife are ya? Ooooooh, I love you, love you too baby,” he sings in a mocking tone, pursing his lips and swaying his hips. He grabs the front of the phone to see the screen.*

*“Oh my god, you actually are. Jeez, Tom, she’s got you on a leash. You asking if you can go out now I spouse?”*

*“Na, mate, just checking in.”*

*“Oh yeah, sure you are,” he laughs and lunges forward as though to punch my crotch. “Come on, we’re gonna race a few drinks.” I put my phone away, determined to return to it later.*

Using my phone, I was conscious of appearing anti-social, negating the social interaction I was trying to engage in. Additionally, it did not take long for certain participants to realise that the phone-obsessed researcher may be using it as a tool. At this point, even non-research phone use attracted unwanted attention, and diverted conversations towards my role. I quickly realised this was not going to be productive.

By committing to the Ballycross RFC cause, I attempted to disappear as a fieldworker, to let my position as a fellow teammate subsume my role as researcher (Ellis, 2007). This was not to deceive any participant with covert research; rather, it was an attempt to relax club members, so that they didn’t feel as though they were constantly being monitored.

*I place my jambalaya and rice stacked plate down upon the cheap wooden table and sit down opposite Jamie and Ian. Jamie’s brow is wet with sweat, his face red and his mouth gaping open as he gasps.*

*“This is what I imagine hell would be, just eating this constantly.” He gasps before gulping at the small glass of water in front of him.*

*“You could never marry an Indian,” Ian laughs.*

*“No, and nor would I want to.” Holding a finger to his forehead, he bobbles side to side. I cast my eyes low and pretend to be immersed in my spoon.*

*“Hear that Tom?” Ian asks, giggling.*

*“Oh, you’re just sitting there, listening to all of this aren’t you?” Jamie questions me. “I’m only having a laugh, you know.”*

Undoubtedly, my presence had an influence on the behaviour I observed at Ballycross RFC. But rather than worry about “threats to the validity of observational data” (Spano, 2005, p. 608), I reflexively write myself into my research. The “observer effect” (McKechnie, 2000), is unavoidable, but the influence of the researcher can often reveal profound truths and social/cultural phenomena (Monahan & Fisher, 2010). Accordingly, I examine my role in the construction of social life (O’Reilly, 2012), rather than disguising my influence behind scientific writing of objectivity.

#### *Fieldwork and alcohol*

At Ballycross RFC, alcohol consumption was a normalised element of all social activities, a “ritual of the game” (Mair, 2009, p. 453). The role that alcohol plays as a normative aspect of culture is often disguised in ethnography. Joseph and Donnelly (2012) stress the importance of discussing alcohol consumption and its role in the research process, and argue that hiding the methodological decisions, strategies and experiences of alcohol-related research does a disservice to future researchers. For many (though not all) at Ballycross RFC, the ability to consume

excessive amounts of alcohol was a key marker of masculinity and central to gaining acceptance within the group (C. Palmer & Thompson, 2007). Drinking alcohol was certainly promoted as a group activity that enhanced “togetherness”. Dietler (2006) argues that drinking serves to simultaneously construct a communal identity and reinforce difference and boundaries from others. Therefore, participating in alcohol related activities was central to building rapport and gaining access to the group.

Had I tried to abstain or attempted to limit my consumption, I would have severely limited my engagement in one of the central elements of Ballycross RFC life. Therefore, on the occasions that I engaged in drinking activities, I participated fully. This offset any perception that I was taking a moral high ground (C. Palmer & Thompson, 2010) and blurred some of the boundaries between researcher and participant (Sherif, 2001). Drinking alongside the men of Ballycross RFC, significantly aided my access, as this excerpt from my fieldnotes illustrates:

*I wake up the morning after and I feel a little weary. However, I manage to consume a lot of water over breakfast and by the time I get to the field for the mid-day training session I'm not feeling too poorly. The numbers are poor so while the coaches discuss changing the session I chat to a few of the players who were involved last night. The conversation is dominated by Shane and Pete, telling tales of women and excessive consumption. Shane lightly whacks my arm to get my attention.*

*“You know that girl I was talking to? She was fit, hey? Invites me back to hers, I’m thinking ‘Yesssss.’ Not even a blowy.” He shakes his head in despair.*

*This subject makes me uncomfortable. As a husband, and a father of a daughter, such crude objectification of women makes me uneasy. My education has also made me much more aware of gender issues and how problematic such language and behaviour is. I highly doubt that Chris has thought twice about his language. Within this environment, such rhetoric is common and seldom challenged. Chris probably expects that, like everyone else, I’ll engage with the conversation enthusiastically and uncritically.*

*Despite the topic, I am delighted that I am being involved in a casual conversation. For the first time, I am an active participant in a discussion that is not rugby related. I can almost feel a symbolic wreath of acceptance being placed over my shoulders.*

For several weeks, I had been engaging in rugby environments but gaining little traction in social elements. One night of drinking with a few Ballycross RFC members led to a dramatic rise in my social capital and inclusion within the informal stories of the club. Following this interaction, I was regularly involved in the casual conversations that I had previously been unable to participate in.

Giulianotti (1995) argues that engaging in these alcohol-related activities allows access to attitudes and beliefs that years of research may have missed. Alcohol’s role as a social lubricant certainly enabled me to get much closer much sooner to my participants.

Drinking also enabled me and my participants to “loosen up” and share stories after a few drinks (Joseph & Donnelly, 2012). There was no hesitancy about normal social interactions at Ballycross RFC, but there were still boundaries that restricted certain topics from being discussed. For example, while sectarian ‘banter’ was acceptable, publicly discussing the constitutional status of Northern Ireland was deemed too sensitive – while sober. Alcohol freed these constraints and gave an insight into perspectives many members would have kept private.

Yet fieldwork within alcoholic environments raises numerous ethical and practical issues. Joseph and Donnelly (2012) argue that when participants are inebriated, their ability to make informed decisions about participation is compromised. They explain that determining a participant’s ability to give consent is a dynamic process that changes over time and according to the participant’s condition, and that the researcher must balance the potential risks and benefits of inclusion and exclusion of material in their research.

This is assuming that the researcher themselves are not inebriated. Being affected by alcohol compromises a researcher’s ability to take fieldnotes (C. Palmer & Thompson, 2010) and their memory of events. On the occasions I over-indulged, like Rose (1990), I either wrote brief notes to expand upon later in a more sober, but also more distant, state (sometimes having to clarify these with other participants), or I chalked up the event as rapport-building. These occasions were spontaneous and enforced with group pressure. As such, to abstain could have severely damaged my social status and group membership.

*“Tom, would you like to stand up?” Finn asks, though it is not really a question.*

*“Ayyyyyeee,” Chris goads me, a wicked grin and a knowing look spread across his face. I eye him up as I slowly stand.*

*“Tom was this your first yellow card of the season?” Finn plays stupid. He is well aware of my history, and the consequences of such an act. From behind his back he produces a bottle of cheap sauvignon blanc and this time the whole bus goads me.*

*“Ayyyyyeee.”*

Despite alcohol related activities increasing the likelihood of accidents and danger, as a member of an all-male team who supported each other in public, I never felt in any danger while drinking. My alcohol consumption was at times excessive, and my ability to work productively was sometimes inhibited by the previous night’s excesses, but I never approached a dangerous state of health.

#### *Dangerous contexts*

Sluka (1990) explains that danger is inherent in all anthropological fieldwork, due to the perpetual possibility of cultural misunderstanding. Conducting fieldwork in Belfast in 1981-1982, his research in a Catholic ghetto was innately dangerous. I would not begin to suggest that my study approaches that level of danger, but the possibility of being misunderstood leaves everyone, most of all a researcher from a foreign land, vulnerable to violence.

*I head out of Karen’s parent’s house and down the road to do a little reconnaissance work and confirm the exact words on the phone box I saw yesterday. At a distance of around 30 metres I start to feel a little nervous, and I surveil the scene, conscious that my actions could be misinterpreted*

*and I could get into a lot of trouble. Did that curtain just move? Is that old lady watching me? What would someone do if they thought I was pulling it down? Could this have wider implications for Karen's family? 18 years after the Troubles and this still feels dangerous, I can't imagine what conducting my study would have been like during the worst of the violence. I look all around me, then, confident no one is watching, I take a quick photo on my phone. As nonchalantly as possible, I stroll back to Karen's house. Inside, I read the words once more.*

*100 years*

*of Irish republican murder*

*and ethnic cleansing*

*and we are still*

**BRITISH**

I was always aware of the potential of danger. Wearing the wrong colour in the wrong area, witnessing sectarian behaviour, or conducting detective work like the vignette above always contained the possibility of being misinterpreted. I was never threatened, never aggressively approached about my research or even spoken to in any of these scenarios, so in hindsight, conducting research in a relatively stable country, perhaps these fears were more perceived than tangible. Ironically, playing rugby was probably the most dangerous part of my study. Certainly, compared to research like that of Belousov et al. (2007), who conducted fieldwork of the shipping industry in a Russian port, and had their key informant murdered, or Gill's (2004) ethnography of Dominican migration to the

US which saw her take cover from gunfire and run from a knife-fight, my fieldwork was mundanely stable. Yet, it is the potential for misunderstanding in a country with a history of violence that meant danger was always a possibility.

### Focus groups

Focus groups discussions are set up to “explore specific topics, and individuals’ views and experiences, through group interaction” (Litosseliti, 2003, p. 1). Rather than merely an interview with several people, focus groups highlight the communication between people from similar or different backgrounds, providing insights into how and why people think and behave as they do (D. L. Morgan, 1996). These attitudes and beliefs are not formed in a vacuum; people are influenced by other’s opinions and understandings when forming their own (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As much as I wanted to understand the individual comprehension of Northern Ireland, rugby culture and Ballycross RFC, I wanted to witness how interactions with peers shaped these beliefs.

*Josh: Um I think we’ve all probably been told by people at some stage.*

*As a Christian playing sport, it’s important that you show yourself to be a good witness...*

*Tom: What do you mean by a good witness?*

*Josh: Being a good witness is being in the world but not of it. Showing yourself as a... [looks to Ian and Adam for guidance]*

*Ian: A representative...*

*Adam: A good example...*

*Ian: Representative...*

*Josh: Representing Jesus, and there's a cliché that you'll often hear and it's that you may be the only Bible someone ever gets to read. So, if this person doesn't know anything about Christianity but all they know is that you're a Christian and that you're different. Just make sure you're different in the right way. You're just being a constructive influence to people around you and just showing that compassion.*

*Adam: I would agree. [Nods at Josh, confirming his statement] I also say that, it talks about in the Bible: God puts desires in your heart. I believe that God has a purpose for us, and he has a plan and he wants us to do what we love.*

Here, three Christian men construct a group opinion. As a focus group, the social pressures to conform to the master text resulted in a constantly restricted message where any voice of dissent is silenced (Hollander, 2004). Josh regularly looks to the slightly older group members for reassurance, and with their approval, his speech, and his understanding of the topic are refined to fit the dominant discourse. While individually they may have produced similar narratives using individual interviews (given the fact they were largely reproducing their religious doctrine), the content of their dialogue would have diverged from this path as their personal experiences dictated. However, focus groups provided an example of how behaviours and attitudes may be socially produced, highlighting how the group enforced adherence to particular discourses. Here, I was primarily concerned with how Josh and the group constructed their talk rather than whether Josh 'really' believed what he said (Wilkinson, 2016).

Using an inductive approach to my research, focus groups were looked at, not as a way of reinforcing or providing evidence for themes, but as a way of influencing the direction of the research itself (Field, 2000). As participants introduced topics that were relevant to their lives, the focus groups and the entire focus of the research adapted to include them. My focus group schedule was fairly broad and loosely structured. Each discussion was allowed to follow the directions the participants wanted to explore, pursuing their own priorities (Kitzinger, 1995). Therefore, the focus group discussions varied widely, with each group placing different value on the various topics.

To delve deep into the experiences, beliefs and attitudes of my participants I wanted small groups to generate high participant involvement (D. L. Morgan, 1996). I invited my participants to my house for the discussions, keen to keep the atmosphere as comfortable and relaxing as possible (M. Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). I wanted my participants to feel comfortable to talk to each other, to ask questions, and to tell the stories, secrets, exaggerations and half-truths of everyday life (Hollander, 2004). I wanted to hear their language, their particular idioms and their vocabularies (Wilkinson, 2004).

I segmented the club into groups of either three or four, according to individuals I thought would give a good representation of the club and share enough in common to speak freely (Hollander, 2004). Specifically, I wanted both Catholics and Protestants to feel open expressing their experiences and opinions of Northern Ireland. The benefit of this segmentation is evident in the interaction below.

*I post a Facebook message<sup>9</sup> asking if Connor, Finn, and Declan are available on a few set dates. Connor quickly realises that there is something they all hold in common.*

*Connor: Are we the jimmy group? Our chats gonna be way better than those stinky prods*

*Declan: Just noticed we're all Catholics. How dare you segregate us like that*

*Tom: Every group is segregated. It's to ease the flow of conversation on certain topics.*

*Declan: Can we rise up against the other groups and take their land? Possibly sometime around Easter for no obvious reason*

*Finn: Is this some sort of freedom fighter group?*

*Connor: We'll stick a lock of Wolf tones<sup>10</sup> on and I'll bring my starry plough<sup>11</sup>*

*Declan: Under the leadership of Tom Kavanagh we shall take back the six counties*

*Connor: Naw just 5. Fuck Tyrone*

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<sup>9</sup> Punctuation was not a high priority for this group when communicating through Facebook Messenger.

<sup>10</sup> The Wolfe Tones are an Irish rebel music band who take their name from Theobald Wolfe Tone, one of the leaders of the 1798 Irish rebellion.

<sup>11</sup> The 'Starry Plough' a flag that was flown by the Irish Citizens Army during the 1916 Easter Rising (F. McGarry, 2016). It is a symbol of insurrection and is sometimes used alongside the tricolour by the IRA.

*Declan: Also, can we sell Monaghan to the Welsh or something?*

*Tom: Could everyone do Thursday?*

*Connor: Naw mate I'm doing 8-8 or something ridiculous. I blame Thatcher*

*Finn: I'm free..... From the oppression of the British government*

The use of humour is central to all Ballycross RFC interactions, but especially concerning the relationship between Catholics and Protestants. Segmenting the groups by ethnic/religious groups allowed for jokes, opinions and beliefs to be shared in a “safe” environment. While mixing the groups could have raised interesting conflicts, my experiences within the club led me to believe that participants would have been more likely to shirk from confrontation and provide generic, “acceptable” responses. Even within a common environment, this behaviour was evident at times. Despite my best efforts, in one discussion, I had considerable difficulty developing a rhythm and the entire session was stilted and awkward. Here, my fieldnotes illustrate my difficulties:

*My easy, initiatory questions fall flat, receiving one-word answers. I can see the responses being restricted, monitored and conformed. Eye contact is minimal and Luke and Pete have their heads lowered slightly as though hiding from me. When a sanctioned masculine comment is offered quiet sniggers ripple across the group. There is very little cumulative effect; an answer by one player does not trigger similar experiences; it is almost seen as a relief that the question is being directed elsewhere. The mood is*

*one of reluctance, and I try my hardest to prompt without appearing too authoritative.*

Around the changing rooms and training fields the men from this focus group were the individuals I could count on for a boisterous story of the alcohol they had drunk, the fights they'd got into and the women they'd slept with. Yet even in this most casual of environments, being asked to give explanations, stories and opinions is beyond them. Presenting a favourable image of themselves in front of the group restricts their expressions, and they appear reluctant to be vulnerable and open. They cannot control the scenario, and all the bluster and bravado has withered and disappeared. Though focus groups usually highlight subcultural values or group norms better than direct questions (Kitzinger, 1995), in this instance, no rhythm is allowed to develop.

All participants were informed about the nature of my research and provided with an information sheet and a consent form at the time of the discussion. However, all participants consented without looking at the information sheet or even reading the consent form. Even after urging them to read what they were getting involved in and signing, not one individual gave the information more than a cursory glance. Apathetic from a life of inundation with forms and letters and applications, these young men assumed I had their best interests at heart, that the information would be boring jargon, and that reading it would not benefit them anyway. Therefore, I felt it necessary to verbally brief them on what was involved, what their rights were and what was expected of them before I felt I could continue.

I was aware of the inability to guarantee confidentiality in focus groups before undertaking my discussions (Tolich, 2009). Despite assurances that everything would remain within the group, the opportunity to increase social status through the derision of another, was too tempting for some.

*“You know what we were talking about earlier? Come and have a look.”*

*Will pulls me around a corner to see Jamie in nothing but socks on top of a bench. Will laughs, flopping his lower arm about to signify Jamie’s carefree attitude towards his display of nudity.*

*“Wait, what?” Jamie asks when he realises he’s being judged. “What the hell did you guys talk about in your group?”*

Despite the fact that I conveyed to everyone that I could not fully control the information discussed (Hollander, 2004), I still felt responsible for allowing Jamie to be hurt. This situation raised an ethical dilemma: How far does my responsibility stretch towards the protection of others outside of each focus group? A member of the club, even an individual who chose not to participate in my research, could become the topic of discussion in a focus group, the focus of judgement and/or derision, then have that information transmitted in public (Hennink, 2014). While ‘do no harm’ is a mantra that the researcher can apply to their own procedures, the choices of participants concerning confidentiality are ungovernable, and may well harm those outside the group, consenting participant or not. Tolich’s (2009) suggestion of employing the principle of *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware) attempts to share the responsibility between researcher and participants, but this offers little support for an individual who is harmed by what is said in another group. I discussed this issue with both Will and Jamie

separately, and though no further issues arose, I questioned whether I had done enough to protect my participant.

Discussions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and two devices were used to record each focus group. All transcriptions were completed manually, and produced verbatim, detailing pauses, mutterings and interruptions. Deciphering the variety of Northern Irish accents within my groups provided plenty of difficulty at times, especially when multiple people excitedly chattered over each other, eager to express their perspective. I was generally able to pick out voices but on occasion, I ended up with sections of tape where I could not understand anything and, reluctantly, had to write [undecipherable] in my transcription.

## Interviews

“If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them?” Kvale (1996, p. 1) asks. For my research, interviews were an important part of the three-stage process for understanding Ballycross RFC. After gaining access and building rapport, observing individuals’ behaviour, then watching how individuals interacted in focus groups, interviews were the final method, aimed at eliciting personal stories and gaining a detailed view of my participants’ perspectives. Like my focus groups, I used a semi-structured interview schedule. Open-ended, these were designed to allow the participants to respond freely rather than imposing my framework of ideas (O’Reilly, 2012). This allowed a targeted yet flexible approach, where participants’ unique experiences were able to direct the flow of discussion. Seeking an emic (insider) perspective, the participant’s perspective unfolded as they viewed it, rather than how I dictated (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Rather than formal events, these interviews were

conversations, co-productions between the interviewer and the subject (Kvale, 1996).

I encouraged a casual environment and attempted to conduct all the interviews at my home, but for a variety of reasons, participants sometimes requested alternative sites. I was aware that this is common, that participants often select ‘their’ territory (N. King & Horrocks, 2010), but this limited my ability to control the environment. Even when I asked for assurances of privacy and quiet, sometimes interpretations of what this entailed differed.

*I drive around just before 6pm. As soon as John greets me at the door I am conscious of the dog barking in the background. John knows that the dog will be an issue with a stranger in the house, so he attempts to sneak me in. This fails and now the small schnauzer is losing its mind in the locked living room. I worry that I won't be able to conduct an interview at all, but John assures me he'll be able to calm the dog and after a few minutes of bribing it with food and toys, we get silence. To be safe, John suggests we head into his back garden where a picnic table waits. Birds tweet madly in the nearby trees, and as John organises a cup of tea I run a sound trial to ensure our voices will be audible over the din. It appears to be fine, so we get under way. 25 minutes in, a tractor starts working in the distance. I grumble in frustration, then slide my devices closer to John.*

I tried to treat my interviews as collaborations, where my participants and I constructed knowledge, as opposed to an excavation of information (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). After spending the majority of a year training, playing and socialising with these people, they were conversations among friends rather than

interviews of any formality. This rapport helped develop an easy flow to interviews and allowed topics of sensitivity to be broached in a relationship of trust. Yet, I now wonder whether this familiarity led me to shy from some questions or gloss over topics a more detached researcher may have investigated in more depth.

The nature of Northern Ireland's conflict meant that there was always a possibility of covering topics which were distressing for participants. Michael, a former police officer, was involved in some of the most notorious events of the later stages of the Troubles. He still had the security of his family to think about, and the psychological impact of the events still weighed heavily upon him, seriously affecting his mental health. Calmly, he told me that these were topics he was not willing to discuss. I was disappointed that I would miss such an insightful perspective, but respectfully retreated from this line of questioning.

Similarly, when John told the heartfelt story of the psychological toll the period took on his father, he became increasingly emotional as he described the years it robbed them. In my role as interviewer, I tried to empathise as much as possible, and continued to probe and demonstrate active listening. I looked to Guillemin and Gillam's suggestion of using reflexivity to respect the autonomy, dignity and privacy of participants during "ethically important moments" (2004, p. 276). But as he finished his tale, I found it strange and hard to try to transition the topic of conversation onto comparatively trivial topics. While not awkward, my change of direction was hardly fluid, and this was a process I reflected on and refined for later interviews.

In contrast, I felt other participants attempted to construct presentations in front of me. A participant who “gives off” is one who attempts to control the conduct of others, especially their treatment of him/her (Goffman, 1959). Presenting oneself in a favourable light, typically for maintenance of social status, participants often suppress their “immediate heartfelt feelings” to convey an image others will accept (Goffman, 1959, p. 9). The fear of being viewed as intolerant often led to an overcompensation, and often, a flustered participant.

*Tom: “So what is it about a man-only rugby environment that you like?”*

*Matthew: [smacks lips] “Um, I think... you can’t be totally black and white, and I don’t think that... that no man’s two-faced and no man is bitchy, or no man is any of those negative things that are sometimes, by some people, associated with women. In the same way, you can’t label all women as being bitchy or two-faced or sneaky or anything like that, because of course they’re not.”*

Matthew had recently endured a stressful time in a female-dominated work environment and within his female-dominated family. Trying to express his frustration and angst, whilst not appearing sexist, he stumbled over his words. This “presentational data” (Van Maanen, 1983) was a manufactured image, a performance for me, as the researcher, and for my recording device.

Relatedly, some participants’ answers directly contradicted what I had observed. From certain epistemological positions, this could be problematic. However, by recognising that society’s rules and individual actions do not always coincide, I viewed these discrepancies as chances to learn about society’s structures and how these rules and norms are interpreted in practice (O’Reilly, 2012).

In one particularly tight game, two players were injured and removed from the field of play by Phil, the team physiotherapist. Ryan, the coach, thought that Phil was being overly cautious, and proceeded to berate Phil, screaming and swearing that these actions would cost the team a victory. Phil hurled back abusive comments, and it was plain for everyone to see that the relationship between coach and physio was volatile and frail. So, when I interviewed both Ryan and Phil, I expected plenty of emotion. Instead, I received flippant comments like, “It’s all part of the game”, “We both knew it wasn’t serious”, and “We get on pretty well.”

Cooperation is not guaranteed in any situation, and Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that an interviewee may have good reason not to be truthful or open. As a researcher, I tried to distinguish these ‘untruths’ and understand them as performing certain functions. These interactions may not represent their beliefs or opinions as I viewed them, but they reveal the relationships of power and the performances of individuals in society (Goffman, 1959). As a researcher, was my position of power, and my ability to represent these experiences, influencing how they presented themselves? Or was my role as a player subordinate to the managerial positions they held, and did they feel they had the authority to control the information they provided?

In comparison to my focus groups, transcribing interviews was straightforward and quick. While accents and speaking patterns still made things awkward at times, the relaxed nature of one-to-one speaking relieved all the competition for attention of group discussions. Without having to rush or shout to get their opinion heard over others who wished to contribute, my interview subjects were

able to calmly ponder a question before giving a reasoned, more thoughtful response. Again, I transcribed all interviews manually, and verbatim, detailing pauses, mutterings and interruptions.

After 11 interviews, I felt I had covered most topics, and I had a wealth of tales to work with. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) study on data saturation corresponds, suggesting that after 12 interviews, themes emerge infrequently. After observing for a year, conducting six focus groups, 11 interviews and countless informal conversations, I had concluded my fieldwork.

### **Pseudonyms**

All the characters in my tale are pseudonyms, and they are composite characters of several individuals (Ellis, 2007). I have done this, not to create stereotypes, but to ensure a level of internal confidentiality, which is “the ability for research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication” (Tolich, 2004, p. 101). No character is a direct representation of any individual, so the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of a given character in my research may belong to any number of club members. There are times when identification is unavoidable; behaviour or language that was directly observed by another member will be identifiable. But the nature of composite characters means any other behaviour by the character could have been performed by another individual. Thus, the amalgamation disguises identification of others, though I acknowledge that nothing is ever fool-proof (Christians, 2013).

What follows is my novella of Ballycross RFC. I invite the reader to interact with the text and join me as I experience a day within the context of the club. Through

my writing, I hope to engage the reader in the major discourses of sectarianism, masculinity and racism, and offer a perspective which shows how complex, pervasive and intersecting these discourses are.

Chapter Three:  
Of mauls and men  
(A novella)

## The bus journey to the game

The radiator hums as it strains to warm the room. I am wearing four layers of clothing, including two of merino wool, a woollen Irish rugby hat, and two pairs of socks, yet I shiver. I sit in the kitchen and glance up at the window that overlooks our yard. Hail pelts against the steamy glass. Beside my Weetabix is my laptop, and I regularly check the club's Facebook page, hoping upon hope that a message will pop up declaring today's match abandoned. Online newspaper articles describe road closures and trees falling and children playing in unexpected snow. But no message comes.

"Daddy, can you wrap this?" My daughter, Isla, holds up a doll and a blanket for me.

Carefully swaddling the doll to Isla's preference, I reply, "I'm gonna go soon. Can I have a big hug?" She throws open her arms and squeezes them around my neck as I lean down. "You're gonna be good for Mum? What are you going to do today?"

"Ummm, go to the playground?" She says hopefully.

"Mmmm, might be a bit cold. Could be an indoor day. You might get to do a big painting."

"Yeah." Isla runs enthusiastically into the bedroom to tell her mother.

Thunk, thunk, thunk. The door.

"Come in."

“Hello, hello. You ready to go?” Matthew opens the door, letting in a horrendous breeze, undoing everything the radiator has achieved. I motion for him to come inside.

“Honestly? No. I think I might just stay in today.”

“Haha, I might join you. It’s pretty nasty out there. Probably be snow in Killoran too. I think every other game in our comp is cancelled. Karen here?” I nod. “Hi Karen,” he yells into the house.

“Hi Matthew, I’m just getting ready,” Karen shouts from down the hallway.

“Oh, hello,” Matthew says kindly as Isla leans around the kitchen door. Isla smiles bashfully and runs back to her Mum. “I might just grab a drink before we go,” Matthew says as he walks towards the cupboard. He turns slowly, and I startle a little as the left side of his face comes into view. His eye is a swollen mess of discolouration.

“Holy shit, that elbow really messed you up.”

He smiles at my reaction then winces as the movement acerbates his wound.

“Yeah, I’ve been better.”

“Your modelling career might have to go on hold,” I joke.

“Ohh, tell me about it. Emma just about killed me when she saw it. I’d promised her I wouldn’t get hurt with the baby coming and all.” He takes his pint glass to the sink and fills it with tap water.

I cringe. “You right to play today?”

“Yeah. Got the stitches out on Thursday. Should probably let them rest but you know.... big game. I’ll just throw a bit of tape over it.” He runs his hand over the injury delicately, then sculls the last of his water, placing the glass beside the sink.

“Any who, it’s got to be done. See you later Karen. Bye Isla.”

“Bye. I’ll give Emma a text and see what she’s doing,” Karen says as she enters the room. I pull on an extra coat, sling my bag across my shoulder, and walk over to her for a farewell kiss. “Don’t get to banged up today, I don’t wanna hear you complaining again.” She smiles as she opens for a hug.

“I’ll try.” I smile back.

“And don’t drink too much tonight either. You’re not one of the young boys anymore.” She commands me this time, poking a finger at my chest.

“Course not.” My smile takes on a sheepish tilt. I give Isla a hug and a kiss then pick up my box of beer in one hand. “Bye.”

Head down, I sprint out into the cold, and dive into Matthew’s car. The little Renault Clio is freezing but quickly warms as he blasts stale heated air into our faces. We zip along the flooded lanes towards the rugby club.

“So, what’s your prediction.....”

“Hold on, hold....” Matthew holds up one hand to silence me, then uses it to adjust the volume on his radio.

“Light showers in the east, settling later in the day. Snow falling in exposed places, a chilly high of just 1 degree.”

“Great,” Matthew drips sarcasm. “Well, you know we’ll....” This time he is interrupted by the radio.

“Police in Killoran have escaped with minor injuries after a petrol bomb incident earlier today. They were attending an accident.”

“Jeez,” I mutter.

“I know. Bastards.” Matthew shakes his head.

“Is that stuff still going on?” I ask.

“Not as much now. When I was little it woulda been happening all the time. Now it’s more just disruption stuff. Hoax calls, bomb threats....”

“Were you aware of that stuff growing up?”

“Na. I woulda known stuff was going on, but we were pretty sheltered from most of it. Only when I got to 16 or 17 that I matured and realised.....” He stares at his white-knuckled hands on the steering wheel. “My parents didn’t really mention it too much, but I would have spent a lot of time with my grandfather. He would have mentioned it more, being from a generation that it was more of a thing. He would have talked about Catholics and Protestants, and made jokes about Catholics. Just light-heartedly, like he had no die-hard hatred, but we would fix something up, and he would always say, ‘Oh, that’s a bit more Protestant looking now,’ or ‘Ohh the Catholics, aye, their eyes are closer together.’ Really stupid jokes that go around. But he wouldn’t have talked as if he believed it.”

“Right?”

“Yeah, my Granda wouldn’t have had friends as such that were Catholics. I don’t know if that’s a conscious thing or just from his upbringing. I don’t know if he had ever really mixed with Catholics, he would have thought of them as like an alien race. They had always lived around Belfast, in Protestant areas, so they had more traditional views, I think.”

“He have you out marching on the 12<sup>th</sup>?” I grin, picturing a young Matthew in a sash and bowler hat.

“Na, nothing like that. I’ve never even gone out to watch one. To be honest……” he grips the steering wheel hard, struggling to formulate his argument. “I think it’s great to celebrate, whatever you, you believe your culture and your background is, but I don’t think that should be at the expense of, you know, in something ending up in a riot or violence, or even, ‘we’re gonna do a march down here, just because we want to and it’s gonna annoy you.’ Or, ‘we’re gonna light a bonfire here because it really shows off that we are the Protestants and we are gonna burn an Irish flag at the top of our bonfire.’ I’ve got mates I went to school with, that you see on Facebook, and they’re posting stuff about the TUV and painting kerbs and flying flags, and I dunno. Maybe if I’d stayed there, and was part of that crowd, I’d be doing the same. Don’t think Emma would appreciate it much now though. Haha.” He chuckles, relaxing his grasp. Emma, his wife, was brought up Catholic.

“Haha, so you won’t be putting up any flags outside your house?”

“It’s ‘flegs’ over here. And no, probably not. I made tea for Emma once and said, ‘that’s a good Protestant brew,’ and I nearly had it thrown at me.”

“Haha.” A truck approaches, and Matthew shoulders the car as far as he can to the left. Silently, I brace for impact. The car just manages to squeeze past. I breathe. “Know where you’re playing today?” I ask. With wide shoulders and an athletic frame, Matthew has the ability to play several positions, and a team sheet hasn’t been announced yet.

Eyes focused on the road, Matthew replies out of the side of his mouth, “Na. If Connor’s fit then hopefully the back row.”

“Sick of the front row?”

“Oh, my body is just wrecked the next day. I told John and Ryan I was keen to stay out of it. The front row is like an STI though, once you’ve got it, you can’t get rid of it.” Matthew smirks, punching the gear stick down into fourth. We slingshot around the final corner, and park outside Ballycross RFC.

A large, white bus sits waiting. Faces stare out through the slightly tinted windows as we walk around to the baggage compartment. The storage door is open so we thump our bags into the left-hand side of the cavity, then gently place our beer on the floor, sliding it to the right. My box sits among a mass of Carlsberg, Strongbow, Fosters, Carling, Buckfast, Bier D’or, Lambrini, Kopparberg, Scrumpy Jack and Rekorderlig. 18 packs and 15 packs and 12 packs. Some half open with a variety of drinks tossed in. Some stuffed in bags, an inauspicious bottle neck poking out the zip.

Around the bus and up the stairs we trudge. Despite cigarettes being prohibited on buses for years, the smell of stale smoke still leeches out of the fabric. Alas, it is

not the worst fragrance; the body odour of 17 young men already clouding the small space.

The bus driver sits with a newspaper propped up on his steering wheel and doesn't bother to glance at me. His greying hair, two-day stubble, and jaded eyes speak of frustration and boredom. I watch him as I walk by, but he just ruffles his pages, and continues to wait.

"All set, Tom?" John, sitting in the second row, leans over the front seat. A tall, broad shouldered man, it is only the flecks of white beginning to appear in his trimmed beard that suggest he is no longer a player. He wears a smile of anticipation and a dark set of sunglasses despite the grey and miserable outlook. He runs his hands along the top of the seat in front of him. Large, worn hands, shaped by manual labour now, but that once held a rugby ball as easily as an apple. John shed sweat and blood and tears for many years as a player for Ballycross, then took up the mantle as coach, and now overlooks the management of the club. He has shaped and been shaped by Ballycross RFC.

"Yep, could have done with a few extra degrees though."

"Oh, it's not that bad, once you get running around you'll barely notice it." He gives a gentle smile.

"I'll report back to you on that." I begin moving past him towards the back of the bus where the players sit.

"Hey, I'll have a wee chat to you later on if that's ok?"

"Yeah, sounds good." I give a thumbs-up, then move down the aisle.

I pass Finn and Connor, two large men squished into their seats on my left.

“Right, Tom?”

“Finn, Connor. How are things?”

“Not too bad.”

I accidentally bump into Ronan, who stares at his phone. “Sorry.” I raise my hand in apology.

“Right Tom,” he says, oblivious. I continue walking.

“Lads.” Rather than individual greetings, I address the entire back seat.

“How’s it Tom? Looking forward to it today?” Chris asks. Tall and skinny, with a mop of blonde hair, Chris’s accent sounds like a tin can in a blender.

“Yeah, beautiful day for it.” Andy scooches towards the window so I slip into the gap between he and Chris.

“Got your sunscreen?” Chris asks facetiously.

“Aye, I could do with a tan though.” I swing my legs forward and lift the leg of my tracksuit pants. The Northern Irish winter has left them ghostly pale.

“You Kiwis are bloody soft,” Andy says, nudging me under the ribs with his elbow.

Up the front, Jamie climbs the stairs and the bus roars to life.

“Right boys?”

“Jamie.”

“What’s the craic, big fella?”

The bus begins to pull away from the clubhouse. “Oh, you know, not too much,” Jamie replies, plopping his rangy frame down beside Chris. “What have you boys been up to?”

Chris frowns. “Same old same old.” He’s quiet for a second before a smile lights up his face. “Know where Andy was yesterday? Getting his wang checked out for diseases.”

“Oi, fuck up, it’s not like they don’t know you on a first name basis,” Andy spits back. He scowls, but his ears prick, eager to hear Chris’s story.

“Like, it’s so funny, like, when you get to go but it’s not for you. Coz, like, we always get a mate to come along for a little moral support. And it’s awful when you have to go in and you might have something wrong with your dick. But when you’re just going in to help your mate you can laugh at all the other people who are all getting their junk checked.”

“And it’s always the same kinda people.” Andy interjects.

“Yeah, like the typical twenty-year olds, out every night.”

“And there’s always the gross old guys and the scungy old women. Like who is fucking you?”

“Hahaha. Yeah, and then, like the 15-year old girl all sour and shit, sitting in the corner there with her Mum.”

“Ahh Mum, piss off you’re so embarrassing.” Andy’s imitation is brutal in its high-pitched judgement.

“Well if you hadn’t been such a little slut we wouldn’t be here.” Chris completes the scene with the malevolent mother.

“Hahahaha,” Andy hearty laughter is joined by several onlookers from the near seats. “Oi, what happened with that chick the other night.”

“What chick?”

“You know, the one you were talking to at the bar.”

“Oh, yeah, the little Southern girl. She’s tidy, eh? Na, second night in a row she asked me back to hers and all I get is a finger bang.” Chris holds up two fingers like a gun.

“You gonna keep trying? I’ll give it a crack.”

“I dunno, eh? Like, she’s fit, but do I wanna waste like a month trying?”

“I know, you see that girl I pulled last night? Easily an eight, maybe an eight and a half. And we’re fooling around and she says, ‘I’m a virgin.’ And I’m like, ‘Oh fuck. Do you wanna not be?’”

“Hahaha.” A few laughs are genuine, a few faces slightly strained.

“But I get nowhere. So, do I put in the graft, and it’ll be a lotta hard graft, or do I get my dick sucked by a three tonight?” Andy leans back as he poses the question which is met with murmurs of contemplation. Apart from the vehicular grumblings, the bus goes silent for a moment. Several people sitting further up the

bus have chosen to use this time to rest and their heads are flopped against windows and covered with hoodies.

“Hey, Richard why don’t you tell us about your secret girlfriend?” Eager to rejoin the conversation, Will sacrifices his friend. He leans in, his eyes like saucers, his mouth slightly agape.

“Shut up, just coz you’re a massive virgin.” Richard shuffles his weight so he can face Will.

“Chastity is a virtue. A burny willy is a disease,” Will says proudly.

“Hold on, are you saying I have a girlfriend or I’m sleeping around?”

“Why don’t you tell us?”

He laughs awkwardly. “Neither. I went on a date. Just coz the only girls you talk to are on a computer screen.”

“Ooooooh, that hurts,” laughs Will.

“Speaking of,” Jamie interjects, “I was gonna go out with this girl I matched on Tinder the other day, but she has some weird Irish name, and I was like, I’m not going to look like a tool trying to pronounce ‘Aaaoooyyyfffy.’”

“What?” Finn scrunches his faces in agitated confusion. He cocks his head over his shoulder from several rows in front.

“Oh fuck, see? It started with an A and had like three vowels and an F.”

“Aoife<sup>12</sup>?”

“Aye. That’d be it. Imagine that on a date. Much easier just hooking up with an Emily.”

“Yeah, I think the important thing is that Catholics should curt Catholic girls and Protestants should curt Protestant girls,” Richard laughs, “Eh, Nathan?”

Nathan goes bright red and ducks his head. Ian takes the opportunity to forcibly ruffle his hair.

Thrashing his arm up to remove Ian, Nathan sits back up. “Well, that’s gone to shit anyway.”

“Why? Did you burst into flames when she took you to church?” Finn laughs.

“Na, did you have a fight when she wouldn’t let you wear a johnny?” Shane quips aggressively.

“Or did she want you to have 18 kids?”

“Did she try to get you to move into a thatched cottage?”

“I don’t think I could seriously bring a girl home, and be like, ‘Mum, this is Aoife, my Catholic girlfriend.’ It’s just more hassle than it’s worth.” Jamie says soberly.

“You couldn’t handle a Catholic girl,” Finn jibes.

“Haha, I don’t think my parents would care what religion a girl is, as long as she’s not black,” Andy says. Nathan nods his head.

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<sup>12</sup> Pronounced “ee-fa”

“Yeah, but like, what about if you landed home with some Muslim, that’d be worse. Like, ‘hey Mum, here’s my ISIS girlfriend.’ Muslims are way worse than blacks,” Jamie reasons.

“Yeah, I spose, I hadn’t thought about that,” Andy responds calmly.

“Look, Prods stick to Prods, Catholics stick to Catholics,” Richard adds once more to no one in particular.

“Na, na, I don’t care who you curt as long as it’s a girl, not a gay.” Andy raises his voice, fighting for the spotlight. Understanding nods of approval and murmurs of agreement rustle throughout the back of the bus. Several of the heads slowly turn back around and engage in quiet little conversations with their neighbours. A few more decide to sleep.

I look out the window. We are stopped at a set of traffic lights in a small town. Bunting of red, blue and white criss-crosses its way across the road, matching the colours of the curb-stones that line it. A side road is littered with Union Jacks and the Ulster banner. The large column of a church tower looms over a little shop with a plastic sign out the front advertising Glasgow Rangers football memorabilia. People scatter about doing important things, their jacket collars pulled high, their faces partially obscured with scarfs and woollen hats. The light turns green and we continue on, crossing a small stone bridge on our way out.

I shuffle out of my seat and down the aisle, taking care not to disturb those asleep. I sit down on the spare seat behind John. His thumbs dart all over his phone, so I wait until he has finished sending his text. Slipping his phone back into his pocket, he looks up and smiles.

“How’s it going?” I ask.

“Good, good, Tom. Now, I just wanted to have a chat to you about today. How are you feeling?”

“Not too bad. Few niggles but nothing major.”

He pauses for a second. “Good. And how do you think the backline’s going?”

“It’s getting there. Missing Sam will hurt us, but we should be alright.”

“Now, I just wanted to warn you, they have a bit of a reputation for being a bit dirty. They’ll have an experienced team, and they’ll try to get under your skin. You’ll probably cop plenty at 10. But you’ll be fine. It’s the young guys that you’ll need to look out for.” I nod in agreeance. “I just want you and a few of the older heads to make sure we stay calm. They’ll figure if they can get us thinking about fighting, we won’t be thinking about rugby.”

“Right.”

“Now it may not come to anything, but better to be prepared now than have it come as a surprise during the game.”

“Yeah.” I exhale deeply in anticipation. I glance back at our team. Some of the faces are very fresh. The bus starts to climb in altitude.

“But that’s all. I think if we don’t let them rattle us, and we play to our strengths, it should be a good battle.”

“I hope so.” I glance out the window. The trees seem to be getting colder. “What do you think of this year’s group?”

“It’s becoming a good team. I think the culture’s pretty good, everyone seems to socialise pretty well together, from ahh, all different walks of life; Protestants, Catholics, Christians, Heathens, whatever you want to call them, hahaha. Um, married guys playing with students and everything in between. How have you enjoyed it?”

I rest my elbow on the seat in front and rub the back of my head with my hand. I lower my voice. “It’s not bad. There’s potential. There are some good younger ones coming through. We just seem to lack a bit of experience in a few positions.”

“Yeah,” John frowns, the creases in his forehead deepening. “That’s just the nature of where we sit in the pecking order. We’ll always lose a few. But... that just adds another challenge.”

“Do you find it different from when you were playing?” I settle in to the seat as John turns right round.

“Well, of course, I played my rugby through a very different period. The rugby has changed a bit, it’s faster and more physical, but during the late eighties and early nineties there was a lot going on in Northern Ireland. So, the rugby experience was a bit different.”

“Yeah? What do you mean?”

“Well, one Saturday, I remember, we were travelling in a mini-bus, returning from a game in Belfast, with about 14 or 15 lads. Vans used to get stopped and searched for smuggled guns and bombs all the time and every now and then there would be an incident and someone would get killed. Looked at the wrong guy or

said the wrong thing. Didn't much matter what side of the community you were from.

“And we got stopped at a police checkpoint but this one was manned by an English Army regiment. It's always a bit tense because you never know how they'll react. They're nervous as hell, never knowing if the next vehicle is an ambush, and they've got a gun in your face. And then one of the lads makes a smart comment about one of the squaddies. Suddenly we're all outside, hands on the side of the bus, and they're frisking us. ‘What's your name? Where do you live? Where are you off to?’

“We're all shitting ourselves. And then a radio crackles. And the young man stops and stares into the surrounds. Suddenly he yells, ‘Right, we've gotta move.’ And then about a dozen guys emerge from nothing, just materialize from the grass. They've all been pointing guns straight at us the whole time. And then they're gone. Off to a bomb scare or a shooting or something.” John chuckles.

“Jeez,” I give a laugh of incredulity. “How often would stuff like that go on?”

“Oh, very rarely. I don't know if you just got conditioned to it, but it didn't really seem that different. You knew stuff was going on, but it didn't really affect your life that much.”

“Yeah?” I knit my eyebrows together.

“Yeah, it wasn't all doom and gloom. I can remember it was the 1991 World Cup. David Campese scored that try. Final was England and Australia. And we were in a minibus after we'd played a game that morning. And there was an Australian

student on the bus who was all boisterous after their World Cup win, and a few English lads who copped plenty of jokes.

“So, we were driving home, and we had to go through a controlled zone. This meant no cars were allowed up or down. There was a big wire fence at one end beside the courthouse, so it was like going into a prison. They’d open the gates, you’d drive in. They’d search your car, checking underneath with mirrors, making sure you weren’t carrying anything. Then they’d let you go but you weren’t allowed to stop, you’d have to drive right through to the other end. Stressful stuff. And we arrive, and it’s an English regiment on duty, so there’s a bit of banter about the rugby with this young Aussie guy giving them heaps. So just as the bus started to move off, the English boys grabbed the wee Australian fella and stripped him naked and threw him out the back door.” John gives a hearty laugh, his voice getting louder and quicker as he recounts his story.

“The poor fella had to run naked down the entire controlled zone, panic stamped all over his face, his bits flapping about for everyone to see. All the boys thought this was hilarious, and are yelling out the windows, ‘we can’t stop, we’re not allowed to stop until the end.’ All the squaddies were standing laughing and radioing ahead to their mates who made sure everyone came out to watch. 300 metres later he finally catches up to the bus and everyone is cheering and laughing and all the soldiers are smiling and giving him grief about being Australian. So even though times were tough, you could still have a good laugh sometimes.” Still laughing, John now sighs happily, and I can almost see the moment playing out in his glazed eyes.

“Hahaha, some things never change, eh?” I smile. Out the window I see glimpses of white. Snow covers the grassy verge beside the ditch. “Oh jeez, I hope their pitch is in good shape.”

John purses his lips. “Well, you never know. But it’s not normally the best pitch. We’re nearly there so you’ll see soon enough.”

The bus continues to climb, before reaching a crest, then twisting down a gentle slope and into a residential area. A large sign welcomes us into Killoran. A corridor of tall trees directs us towards an arrow with “Rugby Pitch” written in bold. Onto a gravel driveway, the bus finally stops at a building labelled “Killoran Rugby Football Club”. The door opens, and we step out.

## In the changing room

Inside the clubrooms, we walk down a long corridor of grey. A smell of mud and moisture lingers. “Ballycross RFC” is scrawled on a small whiteboard on a door to our left. Finn opens it and throws his bag down on the wooden bench. I follow him in and thump my bag down beside his. Chris does likewise. My eyes scan the cold concrete room as I place my dress shirt on the wall hook in front of me. A small window high on the wall rattles slightly in the wind, rhythmically tapping against its frame. The small amount of light that filters through on to the wall is occasionally interrupted by the dark clouds that race across the sky. Finn and Chris begin unzipping their large gear bags. Out come boots and socks and shorts and jackets and warm woollen hats. Finn leans down and begins to untie the laces to his running shoes.

“Right there, Tom?”

I look up. “Yeah...Well, to be honest, not really. I’m bloody freezing.” The concrete walls trap the cold like a giant freezer and the window seeps a hostile draft. I shiver violently. “How are you boys?”

“Aye, not too bad. Yourself?” Chris, asks, despite me answering that question seconds ago. He swishes his wild mop of blonde hair out of his eyes and begins to remove his shoes as well. Old and worn, his socks offer no insulation on the icy floor. “Fuck it’s cold.”

“You backs are soft.” Dressed in just a t-shirt and track-pants, Finn’s 18 stone frame is impervious to the temperature.

“We’re not all fat cunts. We don’t have 10 stone of seal blubber keeping us warm.”

“I prefer to call it muscle.” A wry grin spreads across Finn’s face.

“Well then you must have been working out for years.”

“Yeah, yeah.” With a smirk he throws up two fingers in Chris’s direction. “What you up to this weekend?”

Chris smiles as he pulls up his long rugby socks. “Ah, heard there might be a bit of craic back home with a few of the locals. Maybe throw a few stones, might get lucky and chuck a few petrol bombs. But you never know. That’s just if everything goes to plan.”

“Aye fuck, I heard about that. What’s that about? I might have to go down and get a few bricks ready.”

“Fuck knows. Is it ever about anything? Good chance for the scumbags to wreck the place and get in a fight.”

“You must be in your element then?”

“Oh, fuck yeah. I’ll get out my sash and my ATAT banner, get the lads round on the lash and get some chants on the go.”

“What’s ATAT?” I inquire. I’m still reluctant to expose any skin to the elements, but begin by removing my shoes.

“Haha. It’s ‘All Taigs are Targets.’ You know, just a friendly slogan my mates at the UDA use.”

“Aye fucking dead on, those cunts.”

“No Surrender.” Chris reaches forward and taps at Finn’s crotch.

“Arrrgh, ye wanker.” Finn blocks, then flicks his shorts back in Chris’ direction but misses.

Players who drove rather than taking the bus begin drifting into the room. Each one yelps at the temperature. It is freezing outside, but somehow this room manages to crank the thermometer down a few notches further. Thumping his bag on the far wall, Joel sits across from me and casually raises his eyebrows in greeting.

“Lads.”

“How you going, alright?”

“Aye not too bad.”

“Well?”

A heavy-set man, Joel eyes the tight spaces remaining on the bench with disdain.

“Shove up a bit, will ye?”

Scrunching his belongings to his left, Andy asks Joel, “Oi, what was that shit you put on Facebook?”

“What shit?”

“Don’t gimme ‘what shit?’ The fucking, ‘Oh my god baby I love you so much. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.’” Andy’s voice goes up several octaves.

“So what?”

“Whattaya mean, ‘so what?’ That is the gayest shit I’ve ever seen. I don’t wanna open up my phone and see that lovey dovey shit.”

“It was just to get a blow-job, chill out.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“You gotta do what you gotta do for a blowy.”

“Oh fuck, Joel.” Andy winces in disgust. Had this been Chris or Ian or any other of the other young, single men, I imagine Andy would have been digging for details. But Joel is old. His status within the club is relatively low. He is in a committed relationship. And he is overweight. “More shit I didn’t wanna hear.”

“Didn’t even get one anyway.” He throws his top into his bag in mock frustration, his bottom lip bent in a deep frown.

Those few who had waited as long as possible before changing now enter the room. The small space is loud and the smell of Deep Heat invigorates my nostrils.

“Who’s got the tape?”

“Someone fill up the water bottles.”

Some sit fully clothed, talking to those beside them, others stand, removing socks and pants and jackets, and a brave few stand proud with bare chests or legs. Jamie wears nothing but a pair of socks. Slowly everyone transitions from their everyday clothes into their warm-up gear. Ian unzips his large gear bag and looks inside.

“Oh shit.”

“What?”

“I forgot to wash my kit.”

Wet, heavy, rancid clothing is removed, and his soggy boots are clumped on the concrete floor. He picks up his compression shorts in two fingers and sniffs at them. His face curdles and his nose seems to be trying to escape towards his left ear. He weighs up what he can utilise from his current clothing, then begins the moist, sodden process of applying his neglected rugby gear.

Chris tries to squeeze past. “Oh fuck,” he says. His face contorts in disgust. “You trade clothes with a homeless guy?” Eyes fixed on Ian, he trips over Connor’s bag.

“Hahaha.”

Red with embarrassment, Chris picks himself up and dusts himself off. “We couldn’t have got an extra room? This is ridiculous.”

“There’s a closet you could change in,” Finn offers.

“Na actually....” Chris pauses before raising his voice to announce to the room.

“Catholics, you’re out in the hall.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Finn laughs as he swipes away the comment.

“Hey you’re lucky you’re not on the floor. You wanna sit on the floor?” His eyes are wide, scolding Finn. But he has to quickly jump away towards the doorway as Finn thrusts at him. I snort in laughter and Chris turns towards me. “Hey,

internationals aren't even supposed to be inside. Tom, get your stuff. If you behave yourself we'll let you change on the bus."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah...." I dismiss their teasing, but Finn squeezes at my waist from behind.

"Na, na, out you get." His fingers dig into my sides, making me squirm forward off my chair involuntarily. I turn and pretend to lunge at Finn. He covers his face, waiting for impact. Instead, I sit back down, muttering playful curses.

"Lads, lets hurry up. Get changed and out on the field, eh?" I look up to see Ryan, standing at the edge of the doorway. His words are sharp and tense. His coach's façade of composure is very much in its infancy.

I strip half my clothes and pull up my compression shorts and socks, followed by my team shorts and socks. I bend over to slip on my boots and begin lacing them. From above me I can hear Andy asking Jamie. "You heading out tonight?"

"Dunno, probably not. Got a lot to do tomorrow."

"Yeah, I think that's what my Mrs. said, but I wasn't really listening." Andy snickers.

"Is that how you treat all women?" Jamie asks. He mocks a serious question, playing devil's advocate to fluster Andy.

"I'd say it's like how you talk to small children. If they ask you for chocolate cake for breakfast, you pretend you're entertaining the idea, but you're not really." I smile as I sit back up and begin taking off my jacket.

“Ohh, Tom.” He sighs, stopping as he notices the researcher paying attention to his behaviour. “You know, I don’t really think like that. I’m just…….I don’t really know why I said it to be honest.” Flustered and red, Andy stammers his way through an excuse.

“Why do you think you said it, then?” I grin. “For Jamie?”

“……oh, na, I dunno. I don’t think I was trying to do anything. I think you’re thinking too deeply about not much,” he laughs, banging his finger softly against his head, intimating that he’s not the smartest.

Jamie jumps in. “My friend thought about things too deep when he was swimming…… got eaten by a big fish.”

“Good point.” I feign contemplation. “What’s the metaphorical fish in this scenario?”

“What’s a metaphor?” Jamie holds his face blank for three seconds before a smile faintly cracks the surface.

“You ready to head out?” Andy asks.

“One second,” I reply and pull my windbreaker over my compression top, merino t-shirt, shoulder pads and jersey. I unzip the end pocket to my bag, unsheathe my mouth guard and slip it in my sock. I finish by applying my woolly hat. “Ready,” I smile, walking through the door all bulked out like an astronaut.

I follow Finn and Andy through the doors and down a sodden path towards the field. The continuous rain over the last few weeks has saturated the area, and there are only sporadic clumps of grass in a sea of mud. Luckily, the only snow sits

high on the surrounding ranges, but a large puddle has formed by the entrance gate. Andy, sporting a brand-new pair of white boots, dances away to the left, climbing two fences to avoid it.

“Faggot.” Finn states casually, as he walks straight through the muck. As I carefully step over the worst of the mud pool, I glance at Andy who jogs back to us, but he completely ignores the insult. I pick up a ball from the team bag at the edge of the pitch, and the three of us jog down to the far end, passing the ball as we go.

## The warm up

A cold Northerly breeze blows as we run. Out to the far end, turn, jog back, turn, and jog to the far end again. I stop at the line, bend one knee to the ground, and stretch the other in front. Andy and Finn continue jogging, passing the ball between them. I stretch my right hamstring for 15 seconds, then swap legs. I look up to see Richard jogging towards me. He stops and joins my stretching routine.

“You right?” I ask.

“Aye, grand. Looking forward to today.” His speech is measured and fluent in rhythm, yet the end of his words curl back on themselves fiercely. No razor or pair of scissors has graced his body for a long time. His hair falls gently on his shoulders, framing his weathered face. His eyes look older than his 34 years, having seen too many bottles, too many cigarettes, and too many hard times. He bounces on his hamstring, but his wiry muscles appear to be impervious to his dangerous technique. “Lovely place, this, isn’t it?”

I look around. With the elevated surrounds sprinkled in white, and trees bordering the fields, it certainly is picturesque. However, cold, and now with wet knees, I struggle to fully appreciate it. “Cold though. Only going to get worse once we start making tackles.” I stand and begin stretching my quadriceps. “Hey, did you hear about that incident round here? With the petrol bomb?”

“Aye, scumbags.”

“Scary. You know what happened?”

“They faked a car crash I think. When the police turn up, they’re waiting for them.”

“Bugger that.” I swap legs.

“Aye, get blown up for doing your job. My Da was in the RUC. Or, PSNI they call it now.”

“Right.”

“Yeah, he was for a long time. He was in Eniskillen when the Eniskillen bomb happened. Ahh and his unit was involved in the Holy Cross protests. You hear of the Omagh bombing? Yeah, he was a first responder there.”

“Shit, is that right?”

“Yeah, yeah. Heavy shit. His unit was heavily involved in the Troubles, a lot of casualties...”

“Yeah?”

“Still has an impact on him, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah. It would.”

“There’ll be triggers that just hit him like a wave. So, you know, he’s had a lot of assistance with his mental side of things. He’s slowly working through that.....”

He pauses as he stands and begins rocking his hips side to side in an unconventional technique. “Some of the stuff never stops. Even nowadays, like if I’m at home, I’d have to get up and check all the cars and check around the house...”

“Right?”

“Just to make sure Dad’s car hasn’t been, like a bomb’s been put underneath or something. If you’re in the police it’s a lifestyle you have to get used to.”

“Yeah.”

“And in the house, like me and my sister are upstairs, Mum and Dad are downstairs and Dad would sleep with his gun with him, so that if anything happened to our house, he’ll protect Mum, and I have the key for the shotgun upstairs, I’ll protect my sister. I would’ve been about nine or ten when Dad would have brought me out at night for walks and shown me how to use his Glock.”

“Bloody hell...”

“So, that’s the reason I don’t want to be in the police. I would have always when I was younger.... But you’re always looking over your shoulder.” His voice trails off to little more than a whisper. “And it fucks you off when you hear scumbags are throwing petrol bombs at these guys. For what? They’re in Stormont. Na, some poor guy has to lose an eye or get burnt half to death.” His jaw twitches as the words spit out angrily. “Anyway,” he exhales deeply, “you don’t wanna hear about this shit, could talk for hours about bloody..... Protestant this, Catholic that.”

“Na, na, it’s interesting stuff.”

The heaviness in his forehead lifts and he chuckles. “Well, you should listen to my mate Will and I once we get on the lash. We sort out all the country’s problems.”

“Hahaha. I might take you up on that offer.”

The majority of the team are now either warming up or standing in a huddle talking, so Connor yells, “Touch.” People slowly split themselves into two roughly even teams, Connor taps the ball and runs. The ball zips around the field, thrown about incautiously. People jog about to get warm, chatting playfully as they get used to handling the ball.

After ten minutes, Ryan calls for Jamie to begin warming up. “Right, five up on the line.” People are chatting to each other as they walk towards the laid-out cones, while Jamie waits with hands on his hips.

“Hurry up. Lines of five. There’s only four here. One more. Come on.” People sluggishly move into position while Jamie sighs loudly.

“High knees, hold, hold, up.” The first five complete the task and I line up in the second group. “Hold, hold, up,” Chris calls. We jog around to the back of the crowd, ready for the next round. Chris leans over to me. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this Tom, but it’s always the Protestants that lead things. Catholics never lead.”

“Right? Why is that?” I ask.

“It’s coz they’re too used to being bummed by priests. They just do what they’re told.”

“Tshshshsh,” Ian and Harry snigger. Everyone else appears to be immersed in their dynamic stretches.

“Hold, hold, up.”

I take my place in the line, waiting for the next round, but Finn and Andy begin to misbehave. Laughing and cursing, they push and jump at each other.

Eventually, Finn lines up beside me to begin ‘high knees.’ Andy, standing directly behind him, pulls at the long black hairs on the top of Finn’s calf.

“Aaaahh, you dirty black bastard<sup>13</sup>,” Finn squeals, and runs after the fleeing Andy.

“Yehehehe,” Andy laughs as he skips and dodges.

“Come here ye jammy Hun prick.” Finn lumbers about like a bear trying to catch a squirrel, only exacerbating Andy’s high-pitched laughter. I dodge out of the line so I can get a better view, and notice the foul expression on Richard’s face. Eyes squinted and locked on Finn, he mutters aggressively to himself. When the warm-up finally recommences, Richard, eyes still on Finn, steps forward and bumps into Harry.

“Would ye fucking watch yourself,” Richard snaps. Harry, scared and confused, flinches and turns back quickly.

We run through two more rounds, targeting all the major muscle groups, before Jamie shouts, “Circle up.” The group spreads out to begin stretching. “On your backs.”

“Ohhhhh.”

“In the wet?”

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<sup>13</sup> In this context, Finn is using ‘black’ as a derogatory term for a Protestant. Though the term’s origins are unclear, it may refer to members of the Royal Black Institution, a Protestant fraternal institution.

“This is fucking stupid.”

But Jamie will have none of it. “Quit whining you pussies, it’s not even that cold.”

The majority of the team relents and takes their position lying supine on the wet, cold ground. I wince as my back submerges into the near freezing water. I curl my knees up to my chest and roll back and forward, apparently stretching my spine.

To my left I notice Connor has not submitted, and has chosen to perform a stretch of his own. Jamie’s stare is acidic.

“Connor, you think you’re better than the rest of us? Get the fuck down and stop being a bitch. What, are you scared you’ll get your tampon wet?” Sniggers.

Connor is shaped like a square. He is short, and easily as broad as he is tall.

Agriculturally muscular and agriculturally reserved with his speech, he was raised in an isolated rural community on a small piece of mountainous farmland. Connor was born into a Catholic family, and taught to be aware of how Catholics have been positioned within Northern Ireland. With a parched dry wit and an imperturbable nature, he seems to thrive on the reciprocally-insulting nature of the Ballycross RFC banter. He reacts with a hand gesture that suggests he is masturbating then throwing his semen at Jamie. More sniggers.

“Right, over to Ryan.” The group jogs over and huddles around the coach.

Everyone links arms. Connor grips me too tightly just under the ribs so I am pulled uncomfortably to my left. Jamie lurches an arm over my shoulder forcing my head forward. This huddle is more painful than some games of rugby I’ve played.

“Everyone in. Is that everyone? Right. Finn, where were you on Thursday?” Ryan demands. Everyone shuffles uncomfortably, staring at their feet.

“Um, I was just doing ahhh...”

“Do you know what mixed netball is?”

“Um... what? Ahh...”

“Mixed netball. Do you know what it is?” I’m getting images of Samuel L. Jackson’s character in Pulp Fiction.

“Ahhh....”

“Nathan, I suppose you were busy too, were you?”

Head down, Nathan mumbles, “No sir, I was at mixed netball.”

“Well..... if we want to go places this year, we need everyone out at training, not at mixed netball.” He sneers derisively. Ryan is a good technical coach. He has taken a rabble of uncertain players and provided a foundation of structure and skill enhancement. He has got results and allowed individuals to advance towards their potential. But he is young for a senior coach, and sometimes his weaknesses in player management become glaringly obvious. He runs his hand through his short hair in frustration.

He looks around the group.

The team looks firmly at the ground.

Connor coughs.

Harry gulps.

“Right, grab a drink, then we’ll split, then run the pattern.” Ryan finally breaks the trance. He coughs, then composes himself. “Backs go with Tom, forwards with me.”

As players begin to place the water bottles back in the holder, I yell, “Backs on halfway.”

The forwards trudge off to practice their lineouts. “We’ll leave you backs to comb your hair and talk about your emotions,” Finn jibes as he walks away.

“Sorry, I don’t speak Neanderthal. Can you say that again? ‘Urgh, Urgh, Urgh?’

No, no idea,” Chris retorts. They exchange rude hand gestures as they separate. I head towards the middle of the field where the backs form a small huddle.

“Where were you on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>?” Andy yells, pointing his finger at Richard.

“Haha.”

“Mixed netball, what are you, a bunch of gays?” Chris deepens his voice.

“Hahaha.”

Smiling, I throw Harry the ball. “We’ll start with ‘hands’ boys. Start a bit closer and a bit deeper than usual. It’s bloody wet.” The huddle splits and forms a jaggedy line stretching most of the pitch’s width.

“3, 2, 1.” Harry fires me the ball and in six passes the left winger places it on the ground.

“Japan,” I shout, and the jaggedy line is altered, three players suddenly within touching distance.

“3, 2, 1,” Harry calls as he passes. Two players run wide. One charges in close, the ball skips out the back, then is tipped softly on the inside. “Slick.” Harry claps his hands in approval. Chris puts the ball down just over the 22. “Turning around? Are we turning around?” Harry asks, suggesting that running in the opposite direction, with more space, would be wise.

“Turn it around, turn it around, turn it around. Turn it around, turn it around, turn it around.” Chris begins mocking Harry, using the *Pitch Perfect*<sup>14</sup> version of *Turn the beat around* as his medium. Hands up, his arms close to his chest, he wobbles as he rotates in circles.

Andy perpetuates Harry’s embarrassment, melodramatically clutching at the air, singing Bonnie Tyler’s *Total eclipse of the heart*<sup>15</sup>, “Turn around. Every now and then I get a little bit lonely and you’re never coming round.”

“Come on Harry, you started it. Join in,” Chris urges facetiously. “Every now and then I fall apart.” He stops singing to be serious for a second. “We won’t be able to get that song out of our heads now.”

“Haha. The forwards will be packing down a scrum and look back and see us like, ‘I fucking need you tonight.’” Andy pumps his fist wildly as he imitates the wedding singer from *Old School*<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> (Brooks, Handelman, Banks, & Moore, 2012)

<sup>15</sup> (Steinman, 1983)

<sup>16</sup> (Goldberg, Medjuck, Reitman, & Phillips, 2003)

I can see the forwards making their way towards us, so I speed things up. “Going back up, let’s run Japan once more, then All Blacks.”

Harry kicks the ball into position. “Ready?”

“Yeah.”

“3, 2, 1.” The ball flashes about quickly. It’s placed firmly into the soil. “3, 2, 1.”

Decoys crash close as the ball flies to the opposite winger who jigs in and out, imitating a swerve around an imaginary defender.

The horde of large men arrive. Ryan looks irritable. “Backs in.” Everyone jogs over and grabs at the water bottles. “Quick drink then straight into it. Kick-off to you. Let’s go.” He claps his hands. People slowly spread out over the field, taking their positions. I watch from my spot, far behind the forward pack as Ryan kicks high. There is confusion surrounding who should catch it and Matthew snatches at it late. Ryan shouts before the ball has hit the ground. “That’s crap. Sort it out.”

The wet conditions and sub-standard ball result in multiple mistakes. In the distance, I can see Ryan throwing up his hands in despair. We can’t seem to avoid errors for any longer than three phases at a time. “Everyone in,” Ryan yells. “Right, I don’t know what’s going on, but this isn’t good enough.” Pained expressions appear on the panting faces. “If we go out there playing like this, they’ll put 50 points on us. Get it together.”

People stand too flat.

They run hesitantly.

They stand in completely the wrong place.

The team sets a lineout and swings the play to the far side. Harry gets pulled into a ruck.

“Half, go half,” I yell from 10, instructing a forward to play Harry’s role and pass me the ball. But the ball sits stagnant at the bottom of the ruck with no one confident on playing that part. Adam stands on his own on the blindside and runs a piercing line, screaming for the ball, eager to provide some impetus. Connor reaches in and pops him the ball. Adam runs unopposed into what would be the ruck defence.

“Stop, stop, stop,” Ryan screams. “Adam, what are you doing? Why are you here? You’re the smallest player on the field and you’re running a crash line into the forwards? You’re not even supposed to be there. What position are you playing?”

“Fullback,” Adam mumbles into his shirt.

“Fullback? You’re meant to be way over the other side.” His rage is barely contained, the words exploding from his mouth with more and more fury.

“You don’t have to yell. I was just trying to get things going.”

“What? You think you should be crashing that ball in? You think that’s smart rugby? You think that’s the pattern?”

“Yeah but you don’t have to yell. I can hear you if you talk normally,” Adam grumbles, walking away from Ryan back into his position.

“Why don’t you worry about being in the right place rather than worrying about how people are talking to you? Why the hell would we get a guy that’s 10 stone to crash one off the ruck?” Spit hurtles out of Ryan’s mouth with great force.

Suddenly the field seems very small.

Everyone resumes their positions, and we run through our pattern once more. It's not perfect, but we're able to hold the ball for several phases, stretching a defence of our substitutes.

"Yes boys. Looking good." Jamie claps his hands together.

"Can I have the captain please?" A soft toned request comes from behind us. A female ref with blonde pig-tails stands, firm faced, eyes searching for our leader.

Jamie stands beside me at the back of our group. "Ooh, I don't mind having a wee conversation with her." He winks. "Maybe we can have a few demonstrations on ruck technique. By the end of this chat she'll blow every call our way."

"Oh jeez, maybe you're not the right person to represent our team," I say light-heartedly.

"Hey, I haven't had sex in a very long time," he points his finger at me and manages to keep a straight face. "I need every opportunity I can get. Don't take this away from me." He wanders over, and I can see him engaged in a detailed discussion, his face animated and his hands moving to demonstrate scrums and rucks. He swaggers back. "Boots" he shouts.

Everyone kneels on the 22 while the ref checks the studs on our boots to make sure they aren't too sharp. Beside me with a huge grin, Jamie whispers, "she was saying it won't be me on my knees later on, if you know what I mean."

"Why's that?" I feign.

“Oh, she probably needs some help with some gardening at her place. I’ll probably help out for a bit. Or... you don’t think it was a sexual thing, do you?”

I laugh despite myself. As people are checked off and begin to stand, Ryan calls out, “Right, over to John.” Ryan has had time to relax and the colour in his face has begun to pale to a less dramatic pink.

John stands on the sideline chatting to Michael, a former Ballycross RFC player from several generations ago. We line up beside the three tackle pads in front of them. “Three on the pads,” John yells, “and three on the line.” Chris, Richard and Andy rush forward, snatching at the cushion shields, eager to avoid any tackling.

“Quick boys, we don’t have much time. Up and hit.” Ryan looks at his watch.

Jamie, Ronan and I line up opposite the pads. “Hold, hold, up.”

Forward we charge, lowering our body height just before contact, punching our shoulders hard into the waist level pad.

Oomph. The air escaping from the pad makes a satisfying noise. I drive my legs forcefully into the ground, propelling Andy backwards.

“Nice hit.” Andy remarks.

I peel off to the back of my line and the next player steps up.

“Fuck’s sake,” I hear and look forward to see Richard glaring at Ian. He raises his hand to his lip and feels for a wound.

Muttering to himself, he takes his place once more. Elbow extended slightly, body height low, legs wide and braced.

“Hold, hold, up.”

Finn charges and ploughs into Richard’s puny protective shield. Like a train obstructed by a plastic bag, Finn clears a path where Richard once stood. Cludth. A discarded pile of Richard lays in his trail.

“What the fuck are you doing?” The pile rises, becoming a swinging, shouting ball of fury. “Ye stupid fucking Fenian cunt. Trying to be a big fucking man, are ye?”

Finn turns, and his face drops all cheer. “The fuck?”

Richard picks up his tackle pad and muttering obscenities, resumes his role. Finn turns, and grinning ever so slightly, takes his place at the back of the line.

Ronan runs forward and bends into contact. Richard drops his shoulder and crunches into the tackle with all the resistance he can muster. A limp Ronan falls feebly to the turf. Though he has played rugby for a few years now, the sport is still foreign to him. Slight and barely reaching the shoulders of most Ballycross players, he looks like a ruck or a strong tackle could snap him in two. He stands and takes a breath to compose himself.

Ryan looks at his watch nervously again. “Right, seven minutes to kick off, everyone in.” Players swarm and link arms. Ronan grabs a drink bottle, then slowly joins us. The hot, sweaty bodies combine to create an insulated ring of body odour.

“Right, everyone knows that rugby is a tough game and things get heated. But that doesn’t change this bond.” He shakes at the arms of the two young men beside

him. “I always say, ‘what is said on the pitch, stays on the pitch.’ I like it when people can voice their opinion, I won’t hold any grudges. We can kick seven bells out of each other, but at the end of the day, we’re all mates. Now head back inside, get your stuff on quickly. Jamie, anything to add?”

“No. That last run through was good. Let’s keep the intensity. Cross on three. 1, 2, 3.”

“Cross.”

“Everyone in tight.” To create an appearance of unity and cohesion, the team jogs in to the changing shed in a cluster. A cloud of steam rises. The sound of heavy breathing is only broken by messages of motivation.

“Come on lads.”

“Let’s go boys.”

“We got this.”

Clack, clack, clack, clack. Onto the concrete path the team runs, boots clattering like a herd of wild horses. Into the freezing box.

“Whooooo.”

“Come on boys.”

“Let’s fucking do this.”

Inside the concrete walls, people start whooping and clapping, charging the room with an excited, but slightly nervous energy. I grab a quick drink, then peel off my windbreaker and hat, and replace my training top with the team jersey.

“Everyone in tight.” A huddle forms. Players grip each other firmly and the swaying of several players means the shape swells and shifts like a swarm of bees.

“This is going to be a tough game, but if we make our tackles and play our pattern, we can win this.” Jamie says firmly.

“Let’s fucking go out there, and hit em’ hard, right from the first kick off. Look at each other’s eyes, look at the fucking fire. Go out there and do it for your brothers. Let’s play for that fucking badge on your chest,” Richard spits as he screams. He is all fury and madness and the dramatic increase in intensity catches me by surprise.

“Come on lads,” Connor says firmly. “We’ve gotta hit these fuckers. The last few weeks we’ve been waving our arms about, tackling like faggots. I want to see you hit them with your shoulders and smash them back.”

Red faced and blowing, Richard continues, “We could go out here and fuck about, and get fucked. But I know I don’t want to be fucked. So, let’s do the fucking instead of getting fucked.”

I try to focus on the intended sentiment, to use Richard’s passion as motivation. But a smile teases at my lips. Chris catches my eye from across the huddle and grins back. John pokes his head around the corner, “Two minutes.”

We immediately reach our hands high in the centre. “Cross on 3. 1, 2, 3...Cross.” Single file, we make our way out of the shed.

“Let’s go boys.”

“Whoooo.”

“Come on Cross.”

I wait as the most hyped up players jostle in the queue, eager to begin. Chris sidles up beside me, “Fucking hit em’, fucking rape them, fucking arrrrrrghhh.” He flails his head about madly while he imitates Richard. I grin at him, then shelve the feeling, trying to re-enter my ‘game mindset.’

## The game

Outside, maintaining our line, we make our way towards the field. Steely-eyed, we are impervious to the small crowd watching us and the cheerful clacking of our boots on the path.

We huddle once more on our 40-metre line. Jamie disappears to do the coin toss with the ref. This time Connor delivers a calm and measured speech, “It’s simple boys. Line speed, make your tackles. When we have the ball, be patient, trust the pattern, support your mates.”

Jamie comes running back, lifts the arms of Finn and Shane, and wedges himself in. “Our kick, boys. Going this way.”

The ref blows a short blast on her whistle, and both teams break from their huddles and prepare to begin.

We step up to the half-way line. I roll the ball over and over in my fingers, waiting for the whistle. I look to my left, and wave my players back a step. Shuffling back, they gape at me like well trained dogs waiting for a command.

“Ppppeee.”

I kick long, the wind blowing the ball in an awkward dipping, floating trajectory. Ballycross men charge into the melee. There is confusion amongst the Killoran players and the ball is dropped as someone lunges at it late.

“Pppee, scrum red,” the ref says matter-of-factly, her arm outstretched towards us. A good start; possession in good position.

“Japan, Japan,” I say to Andy with a hand disguising my lips. He passes the message to the other backs, and they realign. “Mayday,” I tell Harry. Backs ball. Ball in hand, he walks to where the ref waits. The two forward packs stare at each other as they prepare to pack the scrum.

“Crouch, bind..... set.”

“Hooooooooooooargh.”

Our players hit hard, but Killoran weather the hit.

“And weight.” They bellow as they shunt.

“And weight.” Jamie pops, but the pressure keeps coming.

“And weight.” Our scrum folds like a piece of bread. Going backwards, the Ballycross pack collapses. Demolished, it is left discarded in a heap.

“Whooooo.”

“Yes lads.”

There is backslapping and clapping and aggressive stares of contempt from Killoran. The referee’s arm points skywards, penalising our inability to maintain shape. Our embarrassed forwards plod backwards. Their 10 kicks to touch, but despite the wind behind him, only gains 15 metres.

Back we go, and as the forwards line up just inside the Killoran half, our backline spreads the width of the field just inside ours.

“24, 31, blue,” the Killoran hooker shouts their code. Arms primed above his head, he waits while the 14 men in front of him jostle and shuffle, mislead and imitate. He launches the ball and a Killoran jumper leaps at the front.

“Up, up, up,” Nathan shouts. He jumps, and gripping his thighs, Finn and Jamie lift him towards the sky. Tight to his chest as he ascends, his arms suddenly burst into extension. Inches in front of his opposite, he swats at the ball and it falls to the Ballycross side.

“Great work Nathan,” come shouts from the sideline.

Harry has to reach to his left, and under pressure from the Killoran forwards, just manages to hurl a pass wide to where I stand. I am flat-footed and our backline stands level with me, so I run hard to the line, then offload to Andy who rams into the Killoran defensive wall.

Cludth.

Shoulder meets shoulder. Andy pumps his legs and gains another metre. “Down,” Richard screams, then leaps over the tackler to smash into the ball thief. Chris and Richard pile in, clearing bodies. When barging straight through won’t work, they lift arms and legs and tip the Killoran players off their feet.

“Harry, Harry,” I call, and the little man enters the ruck, digs for the ball, then, falling backwards, slings a pass to me.

I have to reach for it, but this extra forward momentum puts me outside my marker, and I’m able to commit the next defender. Finn reads my movements and steps off his right foot, charging into the hole I’ve created.

“Now, Tom.”

I slip a delicate little pass to Finn who marauds off downfield, pushing and shoving the defenders who yap at his ankles. Just 15 metres from the tryline, he is finally hauled down from behind. Ballycross men frantically pile into the ruck to secure quick ball, and when Harry passes to me, I see an outrageous overlap to my left.

“Tom, yes, yes, yes,” Connor screams as he charges just two metres outside me. I pretend to feed him, but instead throw a wide ball out behind to Adam who streaks into acres of space. Ronan and Matthew are free outside him. Adam winds up, preparing to throw a huge skip pass.

Snatch.

The Killoran winger plucks the ball out of the air and races 90 metres untouched. He swan-dives dramatically under the posts. Adam reaches his arms high, then covers his face in despair. The Killoran player jogs back with a Cheshire grin, high-fiving his mates and slipping their 10 the ball to convert.

We walk all the way back and stand beneath our posts. Holding umbrellas and wearing thick jackets, the crowd freeze in their inertia. But despite wearing much less, and facing a biting wind, the intensity of exercise has warmed my veins. I grab a bottle of water from the holder that John runs out, while Jamie pleads with us not to lose hope. “They were lucky boys. We were all over them. We know now that if we hold the ball, we can tear them apart.” 14 sets of eyes look back, convinced he is right. The ball sails over our heads.

7-0

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Back to halfway. “Make sure they’re behind you,” the ref orders as I prepare to kick. I bounce the ball on the white line, and motion for my team to stay back. I drop the ball so that the point hits the ground, and popping straight up, my foot collects it, and sends it rotating high into the air for my team to chase.

Arrgh. Too deep.

A Killoran giant rushes forward, plucks the ball from the air and obliterates the feeble tackle attempts in front of him. Running laterally, he moves towards my path. *Bloody hell. Low, low, low.* My coaches of years past ringing in my ears, I commit my body to felling this monster. Thud. I plough my shoulder in to the soft flesh just above his knee. Thump. Despite throwing everything at him, my momentum is dwarfed by this man and we both travel backwards and crash to the floor.

I struggle to my knees, and look up. Their flanker thunders towards me, intent on wiping me from existence. He dives at me like a kamikaze plane, his elbow raised and aimed at my face. I manage to duck my head behind my shoulder but he still makes heavy contact and crumples my body once more. The ball is cleared and I am finally able to stand. It is agony. As each joint flexes and contracts, I feel a hundred aches.

I throw up my arms, looking for sympathy. “Ref?”

“Play on,” she yells.

*What?* I think to myself, hardening to the standards that have now been set. Phil the physio runs up to me. “Just take a knee, take a second.” I oblige. “Are you ok? What happened?” He passes me a water bottle.

“I’ll be right. Their bloody flanker just took me out.”

“Well just take a moment. Did he get you in the head? How.....”

Phil is interrupted by shouts of, “scramble, scramble, drift.” I turn, knowing our defence is in serious trouble. Ronan just scrags his opposite before the line. I stand.

“Wait, wait....”

“Na, na, I’m fine.” I sprint off to join my team, leaving an exasperated Phil to jog back off the field.

“Hold, hold, up.”

Connor smashes into a Killoran attacker, then is bunted backwards as he tries to steal the ball.

“Matthew, in, in. Finn, shuffle in.” Back in the defensive line, I try to organise our team. Big players close to the ruck, smaller players wider.

“Hold, hold, up.”

Nathan dives at the feet of an attacker, unseating him, then rejigs back into the defensive line.

“Here, here, inside me,” I yell, trying to align our wall. He moves towards me, then stops. His face turns towards the turf, and a trickle of water spills off his lip. Fluid then explodes from his mouth. Then again. Then again.

He lines up to defend.

“No, no, get out of it, get out of the line.” I shout and move in closer to the ruck to cover his position.

“Hold, hold, up.”

A stodgy, dark-haired Killoran prop carries the ball into contact too high. Finn bends at the knees and crunches into his over-sized belly, forcing the ball free. It squirts loosely forward and Harry fumbles it as he tries to scoot away.

“Ppee. Scrum red.”

I look over at Nathan. “You alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m ok now,” he says, trying to ignore me.

Phil is treating Jamie. I hesitate.

“Did you take a knock?” I ask, making my own assessment.

“Na, na, it’s just fitness.” Again, Nathan turns his shoulder and moves away, eager to ignore my questioning. Nathan has a history of vomiting in games and trainings, but I can’t believe it would be such a coincidence.

“Phil.” I wave at our physio and point to Nathan.

“Oh fuck, Tom.” His eyes scream at me. Betrayal. I shrug back helplessly.

Phil arrives with his little bag. “What’s up?”

“He was vomiting there, could have taken a head knock,” I say. I daren’t look at Nathan.

“What? No. I had too much to eat earlier and when I had to run for ages, I chucked. I didn’t even take a proper whack. Ask Ian, I throw up all the time when I have to do fitness.”

“OK, just chill out. Let’s take a look at you.” Phil reaches out his arm and keeps Nathan seated. He begins a series of checks so I walk away.

“What was that about?” Andy asks when I join the mull of players waiting for the game to recommence.

“Oh, Nathan’s just getting a head check,” I answer.

“Oh yeah, I saw that. Copped a knee right on the temple. Looked like Niagara Falls coming back up again,” Chris adds, using his hands to demonstrate.

We all look over and see Phil walking Nathan off the pitch. Will, tall and gangly, lopes on in his place.

“Are ya kidding me? We can’t afford to be losing players,” Ryan yells at Phil from the sideline.

“I’m doing this for the player,” Phil snaps back angrily.

“Arrgh.” I watch our coach storm off up the touchline.

“Right, scrum red,” the ref reminds everyone.

“Get low this time boys,” Connor demands of his pack.

“Crouch, bind.... set.”

“Hoooooooooooooargh.”

This time the contest is more even, our forwards edged ever so slightly, but able to recycle the ball. The ball whips from Harry to me, then behind Richard to Andy who clears for touch with a raking left foot punt.

“Good exit, boys.” The sideline claps.

Killoran form quickly for the lineout.

“18, 92, John Deere.”

“Up.” But this time, we cannot steal the ball.

“Drive, drive, drive.” Their scrumhalf chants, slapping at rear ends. They quickly form a phalanx and thrust forward. We are slow to react and gift them momentum.

“Get in there, Matthew,” Harry tugs on the shirts of bystanders, throwing them into the fray. Reorganising, we slowly stop their push for our line.

“Use it now,” the ref demands.

Out the ball flies.

“Up,” I scream, sprinting forward. Their 10 runs to the line, then turns his shoulder, popping the ball to their inside centre on a scissoring angle. Ribs exposed, I slam my shoulder into the 10 with everything I have. Bang. He spills over backwards, and I stand above him.

“What the fuck are you doing?” He spits at me as I run on. I look back to see him staggering slowly, holding his side, but after near decapitation from their flanker, I feel no remorse. Jogging backwards, I join our defensive line, repelling the waves of crashing attack.

“Yes, yes.”

Crunch.

“Hold, and up.”

“Fill in, fill in.”

“Arrrgh.”

Thud.

Finally, after 14 phases, they find a chink in our armour. A squat little hooker drives from the base of quick ruck ball and squeezes low between Jamie and Matthew. He looks up at the ref, and she raises her arm and blows her whistle.

“Ppppeee, try there.”

“Yes, Killoran.”

“That’s the way lads.” Fists pump the air. Backs are slapped. Ballycross heads slump. Reconvening beneath the posts, the breathing is heavy as Ryan and John fill the air with instructions.

“You’re doing well lads.”

“It’s only two tries, that’s nothing.”

Jamie clears his throat. “Straight back down there, lads. I wanna see a proper fucking hit on whoever catches that ball. Let’s play down there.” He pauses for a deep breath or two. “And let’s hold onto the fucking ball.” He looks up as the conversion is kicked.

14-0.

As we walk back towards halfway, Andy whispers in my ear, “Just have a wee look to the right this time. There was no one covering a switch kick last time.”

I nod. “I’ll keep an eye on it.”

I approach the ref, trying to appear glum and disinterested as I scan the field for space. I glance right. Andy winks. “Take a step, lads,” I call to the forwards on my left, then swiftly pivot, and deftly kick the ball to the right. Andy flies onto it, and scoops up the ball on the bounce. A Killoran man is able to unbalance Andy, and throws himself at the ball, but Ronan and Adam are there in time to crunch him to the turf. Harry lifts the ball and scoots down the blindside in one movement. Like a hare evading hounds, he sprints for his life.

“Harry, Harry,” Matthew calls, and as Harry passes the 22-metre line he steps off his right foot and finds Matthew with a firm, flat pass.

Boomph.

Matthew takes ball and heavy contact. He crashes to the ground, but holds on to the ball. Harry, Jamie and Chris recycle for all they are worth. Adam rushes to distribute.

“Adam, Adam,” I cry, as I sprint to position.

“Nonu.” From my left, I hear our code for a chip kick.

The ball hits my hand and I pop it onto my foot. I watch as it sails just over the head of the defender confronting me and into a nice little Killoran-free oasis.

Andy storms forward and the ball hops perfectly up into his arms.

“Go on,” Jamie screams. Running with great purpose Andy evades one defender and bursts through the tackle of another. He powers forward and slides on his belly to score under the posts. “Fucking yes,” Jamie says with fiery conviction and lifts Andy in a bear hug.

Wrestling free, Andy jogs back towards his teammates with a huge smile and ‘dabs.’

“You beautiful man,” Finn smiles and throws his arm around his neck, pulling him close.

“Awesome mate.” I low-five him and he winks as he throws me the ball.

Ryan runs the kicking tee out and I place it on the ground. “Great stuff, Tom. Keep them going forward.” I settle the ball on top, take one step back, and hoof it between the posts.

14-7.

“Pee pee peeeoo. Half time.”

Hooohaaaahoooohaaaaaa

“Grab a drink guys, just catch your breath.” Ryan and John walk over with the water bottles, and place them in the centre of our group.

“You’re doing well guys, you’re making your tackles, and putting them under pressure. Look what you can do when we hold on to the ball. A bit of bad luck is the only reason it’s not 14-7 to us.” John grips on to Finn’s jersey, his hands white with pressure, his jaw clenched with intensity.

“We just can’t allow them to keep us pinned down in our 22. Their big men will crash at us all day. That’s the only way they’ve constructed points. With a bit of a breeze behind us, let’s try and play down their end this half.” Ryan slams one hand into the other as he animatedly makes his points.

“Ach, lads, we just need to stay calm. Put some phases together down their end and we’ll score,” Connor states, his country accent bobbing and jiving. “We kicking?”

“Na, their kick,” I reply.

“Well let’s make sure it gets caught, then we know how to exit.” Connor nods his head, and his speech is over.

“Ppee.” The light peep of the referee’s whistle informs us the break is over.

“Hands in,” Jamie calls. “Cross on three. 1, 2, 3.”

“Cross.”

Scattering into position, we wait for the Killoran kick off.

“Ppeee.”

High, high into the air the ball floats, descending into a ruckus.

“Mine,” Matthew yells. Knees braced and wide, arms aloft, he is ready for the ball and the stampede.

“Yours, Burnsy, your ball.” A large, athletic Killoran player races forward, impelled by his teammates encouragement.

Matthew waits. The opposition gets closer.

Matthew waits. Snorting, the Killoran creature bears down, almost within touching distance.

Matthew waits.

The Killoran player leaps into the air, climbing up over Matthew. Arms raised, he clasps the ball. Concerned only with protecting possession, his elbow crashes down into the eye socket of a wincing Matthew. The impact jolts the ball free, and the Killoran player kicks out at it in frustration. Matthew feels at his face at the point of impact, takes a moment to compose himself, and runs on.

“No advantage, scrum red.”

The two packs settle into their positions, ready for impact, when Matthew lifts his hand to his cheek. He stares at the redness that colours his fingertips. He reaches once more, and this time removes a hand covered in dripping blood.

“Oh fuck.”

Phil spots him and rushes to his side. Unleashing his water bottle, he squirts water all over Matthew’s face. Matthew looks up, and a line of red from his nose to his

ear emerges. I watch in horror as it gets bigger and bigger, covering his left cheek in blood within seconds.

“Right, we’ll have to take him off and see if we can stop the bleeding,” Phil says to the ref, and the pair walk side by side to where the coaches stand.

Ian runs up and down on the sideline, swivels his hips, completes a lunge on his right leg and decides he is ready. He runs in, and packs down on the side of the scrum. I turn to my left, about to instruct the backs which move we will attempt. Andy stands there, hands at his waist, thrusting.

“I fucking need you tonight.” His expression is primal and disturbing. The four players behind him are bent over with laughter.

“Fuck’s sake,” I say, laughing. “Get in position. We’ll run All Blacks.”

Andy gnashes his teeth at me, and slowly walks backwards to his place. Shaking my head, I turn back to Harry. “Red ball (wide), Mayday (straight to backs).” He nods, giggling to himself.

The two packs crash together, and Harry slips the ball in. He dashes to the back of the scrum, prepares his stance, and rockets the ball into my hands.

“Yes, yes, yes.” Andy and Richard scream in decoy. I track Ronan drifting deep and pass wide and long, giving him enough lead so he doesn’t have to check his stride.

Zoom.

Adam cuts across on a piercing line. The Killoran winger drifts in, committing his body to tackling Adam. Adam's face twists in anguish as he prepares for contact. But Ronan throws a miss pass out the back. Chris, unmarked gallops down the touchline, but doesn't have the pace to outrun the cover defence. He steps off his left foot but is wrapped up by the Killoran fullback.

Ronan and Andy manage to clear the ruck, and quick ball hits me firmly in my palms. Jamie charges off my shoulder, "Tom, Tom, Tom." But I spot a hole, and fire a flat pass across Jamie into Connor's hands. Like a miniature bulldozer, he rumbles through their defensive line. Another desperate tackle, crunching into Connor's knee, halts him momentarily. But as he falls to the ground, his right arm wrenches free, and he floats the ball up into space.

"Connor," Jamie roars. He snags the ball and fights through the limp arm that reaches for his shorts. Stumbling over the line, he slams the ball down.

"Fuck yeah," Chris shouts.

Jamie firmly, but reservedly clenches his fist in celebration as he stands. He holds a stern look of determination as Connor and Chris rush up and embrace him. No words pass his lips as he hands me the ball.

"Yes. Great work lads," Ryan yells to the team as he hands me the kicking tee.

"Cheers," I say, glancing at the posts. I am about 15 metres to the left of the uprights, so I wander back about 20 metres and drop the tee.

"Great run Chris. Brilliant, Ronan."

I place the ball, take three steps back, and two to the left. “Hoooooooooooo.” I look up, visualising the ball travelling between the posts.

Step, step, whack.

The ball flies off to the right and falls well clear of the target.

“Arrrgh.” I pick up the tee.

“Don’t worry about it, Tom. Get us back down here.” Ryan catches the tee as I frisbee it towards him and jogs off.

14-12.

Matthew jogs back on, a turban of tape covering half his face. His left eye is almost completely obscured. Ian begrudgingly wanders back off.

Killoran kick deep this time, and Harry catches it on our 22. He has time to kick, and punts the ball over the touchline. The assistant referee raises his flag 40 metres from our line.

“Five man,” Killoran call, and two forwards from either team drop back in line with the backs.

“Here, Finn you go inside, and Matthew go outside,” I say, organising them to counter the big runners Killoran have stacked by their 10.

Backwards, then forwards, then back a little, then forward a step, and up goes the Killoran jumper. Step for step, Will mirrors his opposite, then springs skywards.

Two tall young men clash high in the air like lifted gladiators. Infinitesimally faster, Will plunders the Killoran possession. He taps the ball back towards Harry,

but it is loose, and under pressure, Harry fires the ball in my general direction. It lands squarely in the giant mitts of Finn. Unprepared and surprised, Finn panics.

“Carry,” I yell from in front of him.

Instead, drawing on his background in Gaelic football, he spots space on the far side, and punts the ball cross-field. Ronan, equally surprised, makes a late dash for the ball. It swirls above him, dipping randomly as it travels quickly across the dark sky. His arm reaches in hope, but the ball glances off his fingertips.

“Bollocks,” he shouts as he runs after the dribbling ball into the open space.

“No advantage, black ball.”

Both forward packs wander to the spot where Ronan dropped the ball.

“Maybe just stick to running the ball.” Connor gives Finn a friendly push in the shoulder.

“Ohh, fuck, used to do it all the time back in the MacRory Cup<sup>17</sup>. Was on the money, too. Perfect distance, into space.” Finn rehearses his kicking technique with an imaginary ball as the two packs prepare for another scrum.

“Fucking Catholics.” Words curl off a sour lip. Barely five-foot six, and weighing about 19 stone, the Killoran tighthead prop wrinkles his face in animosity. He waits for a response.

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<sup>17</sup> The Ulster inter-school Gaelic football championship.

The conversation between Finn and Connor falls from the air. The skin on Connor's face seems to tighten as he squints his eyes. His teeth slowly grate against each other. He grips his props and readies himself for contact.

"Aye," Finn says in a half whisper. He chews at the inside of his mouth, then exhales and turns away. Matthew and Jamie stare in distaste.

"Come on lad, let's go. Crouch." The ref breaks the moment of tension, and the players take their places.

"Crouch, bind.....set."

"Hoooooooooooooargh."

Both teams seem to have found reserves of energy for this scrum. The tension is so great that the Killoran hooker can only watch the ball sitting motionless between the two straining packs.

"Come on lads. Heave," Harry screams into the ears of his tighthead, Joel.

Millimetre by millimetre, Killoran gain an advantage and finally clear their ball.

Their scrumhalf flings the ball out to their 10.

"Up," I scream, and run forward. I feel Andy to my right, following. The Killoran 10 throws a skip pass wide to 13.

"Drift," I scream, and angle my run to cover the next player. Andy moves with me, but Richard stays glued to his spot, preparing for a collision with his opposite.

“Drift,” Andy yells furiously, but it is too late. Their 13 pops a short pass to their incoming fullback who pierces the gap between Richard and the hapless Ronan. They drift through our resistance with skilful ease.

With a stutter-step, the Killoran fullback tries to accelerate around Adam, but the young Ballycross fullback is able to shadow him towards the touchline. Moments before contact, the Killoran player straightens and looks inside to where their scrumhalf streams through. He draws Adam and throws a perfect nine metre pass to his support.

Crackkkkkkkkkk.

From nowhere, Chris obliterates the tryline bound scrumhalf. The Killoran player’s head slaps back as Chris’ shoulder drives into his ribcage, lifting him off the ground. Completely blindsided, the small fair-haired player has been turned inside out. The ball springs free dramatically.

“Woooooooooooooh. Yes, Chris.” Connor’s aggressive celebration is paraded in front of the concerned Killoran players. The scrumhalf slowly regains his feet. The Killoran physio is waved away.

As the forwards prepare themselves for another scrum, I turn to Andy. “What do you feel like?”

“Japan?”

I mull it over for a second. “Yeah.” I cup my hands around my mouth and yell, “Japan.” Nods and thumbs up. Andy and Chris join me in close. “Harry, blue ball,

mayday.” Another knowing nod. Another scrum is packed down, and with a quick hook, Harry is ripping a pass off the back.

The pass is a little high, so I have to check my run. To my right, Richard storms forward, all beard and hair, screaming, “Yes, yes, yes.” The Killoran 12 stops, his feet square and heavy.

Andy arcs around behind Richard, forcing the Killoran 13 to follow him wide. I pass flat and wide, hitting Andy on the move. Just as his large opposite is about to barrel into him, Andy softly flicks his wrists and transfers the ball inside to Chris who has run a mirroring arc.

Through the initial line he surges, legs pumping, ball tucked under his right arm. Swerving madly to the right, he heads away from his intersecting support. He is cut down in a textbook tackle, a tangle of legs and elbows rotating over the soft, muddy surface. Under duress, Chris thrusts the ball backwards, and watches as the synthetic ovoid bobbles illogically away. Ronan appears first and collects ball and man. His small frame is manhandled backwards, but he is able to drop his weight, and now a tackle scenario, Finn flattens Ronan’s assailant. Left the ball travels, scorching from Harry to me to Jamie, out the back to Richard and on to Will. Like a young giraffe cantering down the field, he is curtailed on the 22. Back the ball comes, this time crashing through a tackle with Connor, hitting stiff resistance with Matthew and being driven back with Joel. Killoran players raid our breakdown with fervour, but lose their balance and feel the wrath of the whistle.

“Ppeeeeeee,” blows a tiring referee.

Harry snatches the ball from the Killoran pilferers and taps the ball at the ref's feet. In and out he darts, weaving amongst the backtracking defenders. He twists his way to within a whisker of the line. One wide of the ruck, Matthew barges in. Force meets force and he gains nothing. Connor tests the edges, then Jamie, but still for no impression. Eight Ballycross forwards and Harry are within a metre of the ball. I stand seven metres wide of the ruck with three men outside me, while to the left, Ronan and Chris stand uninvolved.

“Andy, Richard, we’ll sweep round and outflank them,” I say hands waving as Will picks and makes an inch. “Harry, Harry.....Harry. Bloody hell. Harry,” I scream. He glances up. “Stringer.” He screws his face in confusion. “Arrgh, Stringer. You know....” I cross my hands in the shape of an X. A wide smile rises, the message dawning on him, observably, in slow motion. He nods.

“Connor, wider, wider,” Harry orders. In position, Connor receives a pass, then powers his legs forward, Matthew and Will clinging on and forcing him through contact. “Clean, clean.” All available forwards power into the ruck to present tidy ball.

“Now,” I shout, and Richard, Andy and I swing round to the left-hand side.

Killoran defenders scramble madly to follow us.

“Harry.” I call just as I’ve stepped back to the right. He hits me with a wide, deep pass. Two ruck defenders stand in front of me, but the right winger has crept infield. Adam stands unmarked. I throw a long, loopy ball. Adam waits for it. He catches it. He tears over the tryline.

“Put it down, put it down,” Ryan screams from the sideline, but Adam edges closer to the posts for an easier conversion. He slams the ball down emphatically and I can almost feel the pressure inside Ryan’s head releasing.

“Ye-he-Yesssss,” Jamie chortles, gripping Adam in a tight hug. Chris jumps on top of the small huddle that forms around the try scorer.

“Stuff, Adam,” I say as I walk past and collect the ball from the in-goal.

“Just make sure you’re in line,” the ref recommends. I raise my eyebrows and my hand in question and receive a nod of affirmation.

“Take a deep breath, clear your head, and keep your head down this time,” John offers as he hands me the tee. I can feel the excitement bubbling from within his large red winter jacket.

“How much time is left?” I ask.

“Oh, it couldn’t be more than a few minutes.” I kneel to place the tee and John drifts off to the side.

Innnnnnnn and outtttttttttttttttt. Innnnnnnn and outtttttttttttttttt. Head down. Kick through the ball. Innnnnnnn and outtttttttttttttttt.

A tiny step to the left, then three large steps towards the ball and .....thudth. Head down. Follow through.

“Yes, Cross.”

“Come on, lads.” I hear the cheers of excitement and support before I look up. Two raised flags.

19-14.

Rushing now, Killoran hustle to halfway and dink a kick to their left. They storm through, but the ball travels slightly too far and Jamie consolidates possession just outside our 22.

“Clean, clean,” Harry screams. Killoran players ram at the ruck with no thought for their health. Ryan runs up the sideline, waving his arm, pointing downfield.

“Exit,” I shout at the backs outside me. I turn back. “Harry, Harry, Harry.” Everything seems to have spiralled into hectic chaos. Harry spins the ball back, but it is a slow, dead dog of a pass. I have to wait, then crouch to catch it just above the ground. Killoran players charge through.

“Tom, Tom, Tom,” Richard yells as he tears through on a collision line. But Killoran aren’t completely fooled by the dummy this time, and when I pass back to Andy, he has company. He scrambles the ball onto his foot, and makes frumpy, ugly contact. It sails over the touchline.

Jamie claps. “Better safe than sorry.” He runs forward to mark the lineout.

The ref heads in the opposite direction. “Ppee. Taken back in. Out on the full.”

I look down. I look at the last ruck. I collapse my head into my hands as I realise our mistake.

“Come on Killoran.”

“Here we go.”

The tide of momentum swings Killoran's way. The exhausted men who stood under their posts moments ago appear to have been replaced by energetic, determined, stronger versions.

"31, Alpine, Blue, Paisley."

We know what is coming. The storm is on its way, so we batten down the hatches.

I watch helplessly from the backline as our forwards defend a lineout maul. We throw up no jumper, preferring to commit all numbers to a counter maul.

Unopposed, the Killoran man rises high, and hauls in the floated throw. Down he comes, into a protective blanket of his teammates.

"Drive, drive, drive."

"Come on Ballycross."

"That's the way Killoran."

The noise from the crowd rises with the tension. Both packs strain in deadlock.

"That's once, Black." The ref tells Killoran that if the maul stops again, they'll either use it or lose it. Then they start moving. Rolling like a huge boulder, Killoran edges forward microscopically, then progressively, until they are a relentless, irrepressible force that bears down on our line imminently.

Suddenly, the mass collapses in a giant heap.

"Arghhhh."

"Fuck."

The body pieces begin to untangle. Joel lies at the bottom.

“Ppppppeeeeeee.” The ref begins to step back, raising her arm in punishment.

Mostly standing, a push and a shove and a raised voice arise from the huddled forwards. Joel waits as the Killoran player on top of him twists free. I look down at his face, which is partially obscured by a leg, but placid and patient.

Thudth.

I cannot see Joel for the Killoran shorts that suddenly block my view.

“You dirty cunt.” Jamie shoves the Killoran tighthead prop in the chest. Jamie’s shirt front is twisted, a fist at his throat, fat knuckles digging into his chin. He smiles dirtily. The pack has closed to breathing distance. White steam rises, clouding everything. Joel lies prone in the mud.

“You fucking knee him in the head?” Connor strides in. Jamie forces his forearm down on the arm at his throat, but he can’t break free.

Still staring into Jamie’s eyes, the Killoran troll spits, “Who’s the cunt with the dirty Southern accent?”

“Ye fucking.....” Connor’s sentence dissolves in the explosion of violence.

Suddenly the pitch is a swarm of bees, swirling and twisting, bodies grappling and thrusting, fists and elbows flying through the air.

“Ppppppeeeeeeee, Ppppppeeeeeeee, Ppppppeeeeeeee.” The ref blows frantically as men fly into the fracas.

The centre of the brawl rotates around Finn, Connor and Jamie and four Killoran men. At the same time, five smaller conflicts orbit around the nucleus. Punches

and elbows thrash ubiquitously, though seldom land with force. Joel teeters, but manages to stand and find space. I grab a Killoran collar from behind and rip a man off Harry, then turn to see Will being bullied by three much larger men. One drives an overhead right into Will's nose, which erupts with blood. But he is still held, and though he struggles, two further punches rain down on his skull.

“Ppppppppeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.” Desperately trying to halt this all-in brawl, the referee blows for all she is worth, pulling the less engaged participants off the edges.

Matthew manages to make his way to Will, barrelling one attacker to the ground. Though Matthew receives several clouts to the back of his head, and has his tape turban ripped, he buys enough time for Will to escape to the sidelines. Phil rushes over and grabs him, shrouding him in his jacket protectively. John, Ryan and the Killoran management are all on the field, attempting to separate their men. Finally, enough players disengage to allow the fire to wither.

“Ppee, Pppee, Ppee. Captains, captains over here.” Despite the blonde pigtails, the referee looks as furious as anyone I can recall. Jamie walks over, ready for a 1950's public school style dressing down.

The rest of our team huddles, anxiously looking over at the stern looking commands Jamie and the Killoran captain are weathering.

“Fuck those cunts.”

“Typical Killoran, pack of dirty bastards.”

“Anyone get any good hits in? I smacked their winger a nice one, clean on the chin.”

“I fucking hope this doesn’t get called off. We’ll get nothing.”

“Oh, hadn’t even thought of that. Shit.”

Checking on Will, I watch as he staggers to the side, then falls to his knees.

“Gaauuaaaaaa, gaaaaaa,” he retches.

A small brown stream bubbles out onto the grass. He holds out his arm to Phil, then vomits again.

“Right, come with me,” Phil says.

“What’s happening with Will?” Ryan asks in a rather demanding tone.

“He’s concussed, he’s out.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” His red face balloons, then deflates as he exhales in frustration.

Jamie wanders back to us, his face pale and distressed. “Lads, no more of any carry-on or the game’s going to be called off and we’ll both lose points. There’s only two minutes to play. Joel, you’re in the bin.”

“Are any of them binned?” Joel asks, dismayed.

“Na, reckons it was all handbags. If we hadn’t sacked it, wouldn’t have been a fight.”

“Bullshit.” Joel’s face glazes over.

“Red 3?” The ref goes through the formality of showing Joel his yellow card, and he trudges off. “Two minutes remaining.”

Killoran kick the ball in the corner.

“31, Alpine, Blue, Paisley.” The same call.

No one bothers with any deception, Killoran throw up their lock at the front.

“Sack, sack, sack.” This time, instead of allowing Killoran to maul, the jumper is pulled down before they can form anything. Three metres from our line, Killoran lay siege to our line.

Thhhhhuuummmppp.

One pass from the ruck, Killoran’s biggest players launch their bodies into contact. One after another, they crash, and time and time again our team hurtle their bodies back desperate to withstand any advance. Like bulls fighting in a field. Collision after collision after collision.

Thhhhhuuump.

“Hold. Hold. Hold. Up.”

Thhhhhuuump.

“Arrrrggghh.”

Thhhhhuuump.

“Hold. Hold. Up.”

Despite the glacial temperature outside, from the field resembles a sauna. Steam veils everything. Still Killoran batter away.

“Get low,” Connor screams. One knee on the ground, he launches himself as Killoran ram-raid towards him. Connor kneecaps him and Matthew finishes him off over the top. They set again.

“Get in closer,” I yell, “hold....up.”

The Killoran flanker’s head rocks back as Finn crushes his chest with a huge shot. But he hits the ground and Killoran recycle.

“Up and hit ‘em,” Jamie roars. But as the Killoran lock thrusts from the ruck, Jamie is too high. He hits with his shoulder, but rises up and over. Killoran’s giant lock lunges forward, reaching his arms out and over our line. Descending into glory, a broad toothy grin shines through the muddy picture. He is but a few inches from the white chalked line when Harry slides in underneath the ball. He latches on like a possum to its mother, clinging for dear life.

Twisting and turning, the giant cannot break the ball free.

Huudth. Harry and the ball are lifted and crashed to ground, but still they remain inseparable. Jamie leaps on top, then Finn, then Connor. A horde of Killoran men smash at the bodies, but they cannot move them.

“Ppppeee.” 30 sets of eyes flash towards the referee. “Held up. Pppe, Pppe, Ppppppppeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.” She waves her arm from east to west. The game is over.

“Yesssss.” Jamie raises his fists in triumph. Connor and Finn bearhug. Ryan and John run on to the field. Several players collapse on the ground, exhausted. I walk over to Harry and thrust out my hand. He reaches up, and I pull him to his feet.

“Great stuff, young fella,” I say, stretching my arms wide and gripping him in a tight hug. He beams, then turns to Richard who also wants to congratulate him.

“Well done, Tom. That was a great win.” John shakes my hand firmly, tapping my arm with his left hand. Pride glistens in his eye. Dejected Killoran players pick themselves off the ground and make their way to their coach.

“Ballycross, over here,” Ryan calls. He places the water bottle carrier on the ground and players circle around it. “Lads, you should be very happy with your efforts here today. To come down here and win is not easy, especially when the rub of the green goes against you early and you have to fight your way back. But I thought you played brilliantly. Especially young Harry, what a save at the end.” Harry’s stylish, flowing hair is firmly rubbed fondly by Finn. “Right, Jamie, you can take over.” He looks at John. “Let’s get out of this cold.”

“Well done lads. That defence at the end is about as tough as we’ll get this season. If we show up like we did today, we can beat anyone.” Jamie passionately points his finger, his voice creaking with emotion. “Hands in.” Fingertips perch lightly in the centre. “Cross on three, 1, 2, 3.”

“Cross.”

Killoran have formed a tunnel at the edge of the field, and as we walk through the corridor they clap begrudging congratulations.

“Well done lads.”

“Good game.”

At the end, we form the same evenly split lines and offer insincere commiserations as we clap them through.

“Hard luck.”

“Well played.”

“Yeheeee,” Chris whoops as the teams separate and he sprints towards the changing rooms. I wryly smile as I haul my aching body behind him.

“Right Tom, I’ll catch you later,” Matthew says, offering a handshake.

“You not coming back on the bus?”

“Na, Phil reckons I’ll need a few stitches so I’m best to hurry off to the hospital with him now before the Saturday evening crowd starts clogging it up.”

“Alright, mate. Well if you get out of there early enough, flick me a text and we might catch up for a beer later on.”

“Sounds good. Talk later.” He waves and walks off, joining Will in the backseat of Phil’s small red Corsa.

## **In the shower**

Inside the changing rooms, the concrete environment is alive with the cheering and laughter of young men. I spot my seat and slowly lower myself.

“Arrrgh,” I groan.

“Jesus, you really are an old man. I think there’s a Zimmer frame in the hall if you want it.” Chris jibes.

“Yeah, that might come in handy. I’ve actually got a present for you. It’s a razor. You can start practising your shaving for when you hit puberty.” I pretend to rustle through my bag for it.

Finn reaches out and grabs Chris’ smooth chin. “Ooooooh, he’s such a wee baby.”

“Piss off,” Chris laughs, yanking his face away. “This was supposed to be about Tom.”

I lean against the blockwork behind me, revelling for a moment in the satisfaction of our performance. No longer active, I am quickly starting to cool though, so I straighten up off the icy wall. Ian and Adam stand, quickly replace their boots with running shoes, grab their bags, and shuffle to the doorway in a cloud of cheap deodorant.

“Bye.”

“You not having a shower?” Jamie asks, his sentence curling up in surprise.

“Na, I’m not that dirty, I’ll grab one at home.” Adam replies apathetically.

“You off too?” Jamie asks Ian.

“Yeah, I’ve gotta work, I’ll catch a lift with Adam.” The pair wave and disappear from view.

“What is it with those guys? Have they ever had a shower?” Jamie asks quizzically.

Finn stretches his arms. “I saw Adam getting changed in his car once. I was walking past and he was hunching down in his seat, trying to hoick up his pants.”

“I think they might be scared of getting their willies out. Not like you.....” Chris teases.

“Why would you be scared? I enjoy having a shower after a game,” Jamie says proudly.

“Well I’d say you’ve got plenty of reason to be scared.” Chris holds up his little finger, a coy look on his face.

“Hey that’s unfair. It’s not that small.”

“I dunno....” Chris smirks.

“Hey we’re not all made for porn. I’m a grow-er, not a show-er.”

“What do you enjoy about showering with a bunch of dudes?” Finn’s scrunches his face in distaste.

“No, I don’t enjoy it, that’s just a joke, I mean, you go and get clean and it makes everyone feel more comfortable with each other...” Defensive now, Jamie’s speech quickens and begins to squeak.

“I’m not sure I’ve experienced any bonding in the showers...”

“No, but...”

“If I see someone’s ding-a-ling, like, I’m not feeling any closer to them.”

“I’m not saying, like, in a gay way. Just, you know, it’s like a team thing...”

“Is this your first step in coming out?”

“Maybe it is.” Jamie switches to counter-attack, sensing an opportunity to shine the light in someone else’s eyes. “Is that a problem?”

“What? No...”

“Would you not like me in the showers with you if I was gay?”

“As long as you didn’t come on to me. Na, actually...”

“It would be a little weird. Turn around and there’s Jamie with a boner.”

“Hahaha.”

“Na, because he’s gay wouldn’t matter. It would be different if he was like a gay rapist, that’d be different...”

“Haha.”

“If he was a rapist it’d be different.”

“Aye well...”

“Never mind a gay one.”

“Aye well that’s true.”

“Hahahaha.”

“Do we know he’s a rapist?”

“Who?”

“Jamie. I think if you knew he was a rapist, you probably wouldn’t bend over in front of him.”

“Might have to start putting the soap on a string.”

“Hahaha.”

I rip off my mud laden shirt and lay it number up on the pile in the centre of the room. My laces are thick with mud as I undo them and slip off my boots. I smack them down on the concrete floor to clear the studs of muck.

Clack. Clack. Clack. One piece holds firmly to the base so I have to dig it out with my fingernails. I unzip the side section of my rugby bag and place them inside.

Peeling the electrical tape garters off and throwing them in the large drum bin in the corner, I turn to Chris, “Chuck us one of those drink bottles.”

Chris, bare-chested and bootless, stretches forward. Connor reaches around behind Chris and slips his hand down his shorts.

“Ahh, what the fuck?”

“Aye, it would be different if there was a rapist on the team.” Connor nods slightly, raising his bottom lip and tilting his head as he ponders the thought.

“Hahaha.”

“Ye fucker,” Chris mutters. “Right, I think I’ve had enough of this bant.” He picks up his towel, works his way into some space, and drops his shorts. He wraps his towel around his waist, and wanders off to the shower.

“Aye, good idea.” Jamie follows him.

“Ooooooh, he’s selected his victim.” Finn tries an impression of David Attenborough. “Watch out Chris, he’s right behind you.”

“Would you stop it? This is how rumours start,” Jamie says as he rounds the corner.

“Oh bollocks.” Connor grumbles, shifting items in his bag. “Forgot my towel again.” He continues searching in vain for a moment before pleading to the group, “Anyone got a spare towel?”

“Na.”

“Sorry.”

“You can borrow my towel after me if you want.”

“Urrgh, I might just use my warm up top.” Connor strips completely naked and makes his way out into the cold corridor completely exposed.

“That’s a fine-looking ass, Connor,” Finn whistles.

“Play your cards right and you never know...” Connor winks as he leaves.

I pull off my socks, my compression top and my shorts. Heavy with moisture and mud, I drop them into a plastic bag, then tuck them in with the boots. As I remove

my compression shorts, I quickly wrap myself in my towel, grab my body wash, and gingerly make my way out the door.

My toes grip on the coarse cement floor. It is hard and biting cold, so I tentatively dance towards the noise. Sssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. I can feel the moisture long before I see the open doorframe. A naked Killoran player grabs his towel from the hooks on the wall, and shuddering, hops away towards the Killoran room.

“Ohhhhh my god.”

“Aaaah, aaaaah, aaaaah.”

The noises that emanate from within leave no illusion of a comfortable experience. I hang my towel and walk in through a series of plastic flaps that remind me of a meat-works factory. Inside, shower fittings hang from metal pipes that criss-cross the ceiling. A large industrial drain sits in the centre of the concrete floor. Large, burly men, with chests full of dark, black curly hair whimper beneath the dribbling nozzles.

“Ah fuck ye,” yells one man as he thrashes his dirt covered arm into the water.

I squash into the small space and move towards a free shower between two Killoran players. A spray of icy moisture from the neighbouring showers splashes at my legs as I pass.

“Right?” Says the man to my left. I look up and notice the squashed features of the tighthead prop.

“Mmmm,” I reply, nodding, turning to my right.

“How are you lads doing this year?” The other man asks. He is tall, dark and skinny with lots of small curly black hair covering his chest and a large tribal tattoo on his upper arm.

“Yeah, we’re doing OK.” I say, grimacing as I place my leg under the tap. “Just lost a few games we should have won through injuries. You guys?”

He nods, putting his head into the water. He appears impervious to the temperature until I notice the goose-bumps dotting his arms. “Aye, not bad. Same thing; too many injuries, although we’ve got a couple of easier games coming up so we’ll see.”

I’m not too keen to engage in a lengthy conversation. I’m freezing, naked and just inches from three other naked men. Standing outside the stream of icy water, I bend towards my shower gel which I’ve placed on the ground then squirt a healthy dollop into my hand. Targeting the dirtiest patches, I scrub hard at my knees and elbows with my hand before quickly rinsing them. Every time the water jolts me, clenching my muscles, adrenaline rushing through my body. I soap my head, then dip it beneath the nozzle.

“Aaaah. Jesus,” I scream as the water runs down my back. “Right.” I exhale deeply. One, two, three. I plunge into the water. “Hooooo, hoooooo.” Noises escape as my lungs contract. My arms flash here, there and everywhere, like a pair of mad eels squirming, cleaning. “Aaaahh.” I jump out of the water, raise my eyebrows to the men beside me, and move out of the battery cleaning. Through the plastic flaps, I grab at my towel, holding it close as I pat myself down. Never have I appreciated cotton so much.

Back down the corridor I jog. I can hear muffled voices from several metres away, but all I can concentrate on is clothing myself. I shuffle passed Finn to my spot and grab my boxers out of my bag.

“It must be cold in there,” Finn grins.

“I was scared I was gonna lose the wee fella.” I say through clenched teeth. I am shivering so badly that I can’t balance for long enough to hook my leg through the hole in my boxers. I hop haphazardly on one leg.

Dripping, Connor rubs his sweaty warm-up t-shirt over his body. He is dry now, but the smell of wet grass and mild body odour lingers. “Oi, got any spray?” he asks.

“Catch,” I reply as I reach into my bag and throw him a can of Lynx Black. He clouds the room with vigorous spraying, then sniffs at himself. “Ahh, that’s better.” He leans over and hands it back, his naked body hovering over Finn.

“Bloody...” Finn gasps say turning away. “You could at least buy me dinner before waving your wee fella in my face.”

“You wouldn’t like a wee windmill?”

“A what?” I ask.

“It’s, hahahahahaha, its hahahahaha,” he tries, and fails to explain over the top of his infectious laughter. He stops to breathe, and compose himself. “It’s when somebody, they ahh, they spin um around their penis as if it were um the blades of a windmill.”

“Oh, right.”

“You know, in a circular fashion.”

“Hahaha. Like what Chris did to you.” Finn joins the conversation.

“What?” I ask again.

“Aye, last year. Well Chris wind-milled me till I had to...”

“Bite his dick.” Finn interjects

“...self-defence, I had to bite his penis.”

“Hahahahahahaha.”

“It happened, it happened, I was there.”

“We were having a few beers, and then Joel just held me down and I was like ‘Grrrrrarara.’ Connor’s mouth slumps to the right, his tongue lolls about on his bottom lip, and his eyes are nearly closed. If he wasn’t mid-story, I would be worried he was having a seizure. “He was wind-milling me, I was like, ‘get it out of my face...’ And I warned him. I said, ‘If you don’t stop doing that, I’m gonna bite your willy.’”

“Hahahaha.” Finn’s laugh is a deep and hearty guffaw.

“Well, actually he’s named his penis, and it’s Francis.”

“That’s right.”

“So, I said, ‘If you don’t stop that, I’m gonna bite Francis.’ And he didn’t stop it, and I just went ‘Haaaahum.’” Connor opens his mouth wide and snaps it shut as he makes this biting noise.

“Tshshshsh.” My laugh comes out in a snigger.

Laughing, Connor continues. “Bit down for a while, he was going, ‘Oooooooooohhh.’ You should’ve seen his face. I did draw blood as well. I warned him though.”

“Well, you did like, in fairness,” Finn says.

“He was so chuffed whenever the new pope was named Francis.”

“Hahaha.” I shake my head as I laugh at Connor, but he just tucks his lips in, in his customary smile, and bobs his head, ever so pleased with his story. Still dripping, he finally covers himself with his underwear.

“Ooh, that’s a good wee dig you got there,” Finn exclaims, pointing to the series of red lines that drive down his thigh like railway lines. A faint smattering of burst blood vessels and early bruising colour the edges in yellow, purple and black.

“Aye, saw the fucker too. Just lined me up and...” Connor finishes his sentence with a rucking motion of his feet.

“Always like that, Killoran. Hate playing them down here. But, it is what it is.”

Joel leans over and kills the conversation with his expectation of toughness and stoicism. With jeans, socks and dress shoes on, I pull my shirt and tie off the hanger.

Chris walks into the room, his towel loosely hanging around his waist, and traverses the fine path between the gear bags and muddy clothing back to his spot. As he passes Jamie, his mouth curdles in repulsion. “Have you heard of manscaping Jamie? Come on bro, it’s the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you’ve gotta get that jungle under control.”

I look over and see Jamie standing proudly atop a bench wearing nothing but a pair of red socks. A towel waves loosely in his left hand and his penis flicks from side to side as he vividly recounts a story. Andy looks up at him with displeasure, an unkempt pubic bush too close for comfort.

Jamie turns. “What? What are you saying?”

“You need to get out a strimmer or a chainsaw or something, and start hacking away down here.” He waves his hand in the general groin area.

“Oh, gee....” Jamie stutters, embarrassed and unprepared for such attention. He shuffles along the bench to grab his shirt and bumps into Ronan who walks past.

“Ohhh, do you realise that you just brushed my arm with your dick?”

“It’s just a body part, chill out.”

“So, you’d happily touch his dick?” Chris asks, all grin.

“I’m not really happy with where this is heading. Ronan, what’s new with you?”

“Well, the most interesting new thing in my life is probably those two speed lines in your eyebrow,” Ronan smiles. Despite his intentions, all eyes are now focused on Jamie.

“I lost a bet.”

“A bet you always seem to take. Didn’t you have them a few weeks ago?” Chris asks.

“We could make it an initiation task for the newbies,” Jamie counters.

“What? Give them the butch lesbian look?”

“Hahahahaha.” Finn, Connor, Joel and Ronan laugh loudly but without malice.

Jamie raises his eyebrows and throws up his arms, conceding defeat with a symbolic doffing of an imaginary cap. “Anyone ready to head through?”

“Yeah, I’m coming now.” I say, tightening my tie. I pick up my bag and weave my way out towards the clubrooms.

## The after-match function

Jamie holds the door open for me, and I follow him into the Killoran clubrooms.

There is a small pile of rugby bags near the door, so I dump mine beside them.

Despite the three large windows that frame the left-hand wall, the room is dark and heavy with wood and low ceilings. Smoking was banned in public places years ago, but the smell and taste of cigarettes still lingers in the corners.

However, the chattering of old men creates a loud, amiable milieu, and we head towards its focal point at the bar. Adorned with plaques and framed rugby jerseys of famous former players, the old wooden bench is topped with a rubber mat, and three taps displaying its wares. A cheery middle-aged woman with shoulder length hair and dark eyebrows looks inquiringly at us.

“What can I get ye?”

“I’ll have a pint of Guinness, thanks,” Jamie says.

“Make that two,” I add, holding up two fingers to clarify.

She pulls on the black tap with the golden harp, and a creamy brown cascade flows into one pint glass then the next. Turbulent and wild, the swell crashes and tears at itself, then settles in a fragile peace. Setting them aside, four fifths full, to rest and mature, the barkeep turns back to us.

“That’ll be six pounds seventy. You paying together?”

“Yeah, I’ll grab this one,” I say and dig out a five-pound note and a handful of change.

“Good man, I’ll get the next one,” Jamie says, leaning onto the bar to scan the room. “Hope there’s some decent food today, I’m starving.”

“I reckon.” Looking over towards the kitchen in the corner, the smells that faintly waft over don’t fill me with hope of fine dining. At this stage, I’ll settle for filling my growling stomach.

“Here you go.” Two black stouts are placed aboard the rubber mat, a hint of creamy froth dribbling down the side of each.

“Beautiful, thank you,” I say, and we carefully turn and look for a seat at one of the four rectangular tables. Two Killoran players sit amongst a handful of their supporters on a near table and another is nearly completely full with grey-haired men. One of the far tables is empty though, so we walk over and sit down on the bar stools that surround it.

“Ahhhh,” I groan, aching as my stiff muscles bend. We both sit quietly for a second. I sink my lip deeply into my pint, gulping, and emerging with a moustache of white froth. Using the side of my hand, I wipe it clear. “You’re from around here, aren’t you? Do you know a few of their players?”

“Yeah, I went to school with a couple of them. Ronan is a Killoran boy originally too.”

“Oh yeah. You know him before Ballycross?”

“Na, see Killoran’s pretty much split in half. And I live in the Protestant side and he’s from the other side of town. And I would never..... not because I didn’t want to, but you just would not have associated with anybody from that part of town.”

“Right? So, you wouldn’t go to the other side of town?” Confused, my voice curls upwards. Chris, Connor and Ronan walk into the room, spot us and head over. Chris and Connor drop their things and head to the bar, but Ronan pulls up a seat alongside Jamie.

“Well..... if I had to, yes, but if I was going to choose between like Spar here, or Tesco here,” he uses the coasters on the table as geographical markers, “I’d go to Tesco’s, just because, for one its nearer and two it’s just, I dunno, like it’s sorta programmed in your head, that’s where to go. Everything that I needed, was there, in that half of the town. There’s no real reason to go into the other side of town. And if you did, you’d just probably be seen as ‘you’re looking for trouble.’”

“Right? And do you think you’d find trouble?”

“Ahhh, if you’re going to the shop, no, but if you’re wearing, if you’re wearing a GAA top or something like that or something to show your ethnicity or religion then, yeah, you are gonna start trouble or you’ll get abuse.”

Ronan nods and says quietly, “I remember going to get a kebab once, and I didn’t even think, I was wearing a GAA top, and I was walking down and there was a parade going on at the same time, and I just, I just, people shouting abuse out of their cars, like, and I had a hoody and just zipped it up, like that...” He zips an imaginary hoody, solemn and vexed.

“Yeah?”

“And just carried on. It’s an uncomfortable feeling, like, when you’re on your own as well.”

“Where was that?” Jamie asks.

“Down by the railway tracks, you know, by Wilson Street?”

“Oh yeah, I definitely wouldn’t wear a GAA top there.” Jamie pronounces it ‘Gar’. He chuckles to himself, then moves his pint as Chris and Connor return.

“Where are the rest of the lads? Still changing?” Chris asks.

Nods.

“Surprised you’re out here then, Jamie,” Chris adds, “Don’t you normally have twenty minutes of wang flapping to do first?”

Jamie purses his lips tight and nods his head assertively at Chris. “Hey, Chris.” He holds a rusty old bronze penny in his palm. Placing it carefully on his thumb, he flicks it. Forward it flies, arcing perfectly into Chris’ near full pint of lager.

“Yehooo. Save the Queen, save the Queen,” he yells.

“Oh, what? Oh, feck ye.” Chris lifts his glass, scowls, then tips the golden liquid down his throat.

“All the way, all the way, that’s it. Nice. Is she OK?” Jamie asks as the penny tinkles down the glass and hits Chris in the mouth. Chris pulls it out, scowls again, then looks around at the other glasses. I watch closely to make sure he can’t hit mine. Joel, Andy and Nathan walk over, drinks in hand, and perch themselves on the remaining stools. I feel someone moving behind me, and pull my seat in to let them past. The Killoran tighthead prop, dressed in formal wear, but still crude and unrefined, shuffles past our table. All eight of us glare at him.

“I fucking hate Killoran,” Connor mumbles out the edge of his mouth.

“You’re not the only one,” Nathan agrees. He takes a sip of his cider, the ice jangling noisily in his glass.

“Hey Joel, what’s that in your pint?” Chris asks.

“Oh, for shit’s sake,” Joel grimaces. “I’ve gotta drive and all.” He raises his pint glass and in four large gulps, all that is left is a white foam in the bottom and a wet coin. He rolls it out onto his hand, flicking it dry, and scanning for an opportunity to repay the obligation.

Nathan warns, “Don’t bother putting it in Connor’s, he can’t play.”

“Why not?” Joel and Connor ask in unison.

“Coz he’ll let her drown on purpose,” Nathan replies.

“Hahahaha.”

“Too right I would,” Connor mumbles in return. Despite this, Joel flicks the penny into his glass anyway.

“Down it.” Joel leans forward, his weight on the table, his breath stale and his tone aggressive.

“You save your Queen Connor.” Nathan chips in.

Connor motions towards his pint, then baulks. The table erupts in outrage.

“Oiiiiiii.”

“Typical Fenian.”

“For God’s sake, an old woman is drowning, save her man.”

Connor smiles, then ever so slowly, raises his glass. He tips it slightly and sips as the beer splashes into his mouth.

“HMMMM, well that’s probably enough for me,” he says with a laugh. Ronan beams from the opposite side of the table, his eyes aglow.

“Oiiiiiiii.”

“You can never trust a Southerner, Joel. Look at what you’ve done.”

“Give the bloody pint here, I’ll save her.”

Connor wrestles his drink away from Nathan who lunges for it. He holds up his right hand to signal everyone to stop, and with his left he pours his beer down his throat. When the coin falls, he holds it for a second, then throws it on the ground in dismissal.

“Arrrgh.” Chris, Nathan and Andy scramble from their seats to find the penny. Joel sits, torn between wanting to show his denomination, and his reluctance to lift his large frame off his comfortable spot. Connor leans back and smiles at Ronan and me.

“Hahaha,” I laugh. As the three men begin to stand up, Nathan looks at me with an austere expression. I am a little taken aback, surprised that he is still holding a grudge for my act of ‘betrayal.’ Andy arises with the penny and slams the coin down beside Connor’s pint.

“Just flick it in a good Prod lad’s pint next time, will ya?”

“We’ll see,” he smirks as he eyes Finn lumbering towards him.

“Any spare seats?” The big man asks. He pushes in between Nathan and Andy and sets his pint glass on the table roughly, causing a minor spillage.

“Just grab one of those poofs over there,” Andy suggests, pointing to the knee-height, cushioned stools beneath the bench that overlooks the field.

“He prefers to be called Ronan,” Chris quips.

“Haha.”

“Hahahaha.”

“Only joking,” Chris smiles at Ronan, jostling him with his elbow.

“Oi, grab us one, will ye?” Finn requests of Ronan. Bright red and silent, Ronan moves towards the small piece of furniture and slides it over to Finn. The merriment of moments ago is gone, replaced with a look of insecurity. Finn sits down, but his face barely registers above the table.

“Oh, fuck this.” He discards the small seat, wanders over to another table and asks if he can borrow a regular stool. He waddles back with one between his legs.

“Drink up, big man,” Connor says, pointing to the coin at the bottom of his glass.

“Fuck the Queen,” he grunts, but picks up his pint glass and finishes it. The coin stays latched to the base of the glass, so Finn wriggles it out, catches it, and shoves it straight into Nathan’s cider.

“Oh, bollocks.” Nathan digs out the ice at the top of his drink, and throws it out. The small blocks slide around, creating little wet trails on the wooden table. He throws back his head, but just seconds in, he has to relinquish his task.

“Oh, that’s fecking cold.”

“Come on princess,” Finn offers helpfully. Nathan has another attempt but again pulls out, baring his teeth.

“Ohhh, it’s like drinking from the tits of a polar bear.”

“Hahaha.”

“Well, you’re doing a better job of knocking off the Queen than I did. Wait – are you a Fenian in disguise?” Connor says, leaning his hand on to the table, then pulling it off, disgusted, as his sleeve gets soaked with melted ice.

“Here, are you an informant for the RA, Nathan?” Finn asks, pulling him close.

Nathan gasps as he pulls the cider from his lips. “Shhhhhhh. You’ll get me bloody shot saying that shit around here.”

“Haha, anyone want another one,” Connor asks, standing and heading towards the bar.

“Yeah, I’ll go another one,” I say, raising my glass.

“Na, I’ll get it,” Jamie says firmly, joining Connor.

To the remaining people at the table, Chris whispers, “Oi, oi.” He points to the table. Connor’s phone sits there, unlocked. “Oi, what should I write?”

“Pass it here,” Finn demands, yanking the phone out of Chris’ hands. His thumbs dart across the screen for a few seconds, before he turns it around, and shows everyone. Connor’s Facebook app is open, and a message has just been posted.

*Finn beat me in a fight, he is the better man*

“Haha, yeah. But give it here, I’ll put in a proper one,” Chris says, squirming in his seat. Finn hands Chris back the phone, who looks over towards the bar, then begins to type. Connor leans on the bar waiting to be served.

*Fuck the Pope and the IRA*

“Oh yes, here, here.” Finn smiles, calling for it back.

*Love Ian Paisley*

*I’ll be voting SDLP because I am a castle Catholic*

*I was never in the IRA but I was once gay*

“Hahaha.”

“He’ll be ragin”

“Oi, give me a turn,” Joel asks.

*Any wee blades looking fingered?*

*Accidentally sat on my thumb, went up my anus, enjoying it* 

*Brazilian fart porn, everyone welcome*

“Fuck Joel, I think you need to go and see a counsellor or something.” Finn screws up his face. “You venting your fucking fetishes?”

“Piss off, Finn.” Joel, disgruntled, throws the phone down on the table.

“Tom, do you want to take him for a few sessions?” Chris asks.

“Yeaaaah, I’m not a psychiatrist,” I smile. “Dunno if I’d want to enter that Pandora’s box anyway.”

“It’s not Pandora’s box I’m worried about, it’s Joel’s girlfriend’s.” Chris laughs.

“Hahaha,” Finn and Andy laugh heartily.

“Oi, quick, a few more before he comes back,” Chris says in a lowered tone.

*Love playing against Killoran, nothing like the thrill of playing rugby and getting broken in*

“Here, here,” Andy whispers, motioning with his hand. He turns it to face the group who all lean in intently.

*Look at me I’m Stevie Wonder fdsbfjkwefHwufhdffuebvjkabkhhkjhfkjef*

“Bloody hell,” I whisper, leaning back.

“That’s a bit on the nose, isn’t it?” Finn screws his face. “Here, I’ll do one more. I know what’ll get to him the most.” He stares into the screen, his face lit up as he weaves his evil.

*Up Tyrone*

“What?” I ask.

“Just wait till he sees it,” Finn grins to himself, placing the phone back where Connor had left it.

A loud roar of laughter erupts from the table of Killoran players beside us.

“Cunts,” Connor states soberly, setting his armful of alcohol down on the table. He sees his phone backing light on and his eyes squirrel from side to side, eyeing up those who sit around it. “You bastards, what have you done?” While a suppressed laugh circulates, Connor picks up his phone, and checks his Facebook account.

“Some interesting comments you’ve made recently there Connor,” Chris says, staring into his own screen. “Can’t say I totally agree with you.”

Connor’s eyes scroll left to right. “Yeah..... well..... you know.....” His face still immersed in the writing, he laughs, “Hahaha. You lads are shit at this.”

Completely unflapped, he puts his phone down and lifts his pint to his lips.

“You into Brazilian fart porn? That’s a bit weird,” Joel says with an aloof manner.

“I take it that was you, was it? I shoulda guessed. You’re a bloody odd biscuit, aren’t you?” Connor shakes his head and Andy and Chris laugh as Joel goes red. He takes another long drag of Guinness, then picks up his phone again. “Hahaha, my Ma has ‘liked’ one of them.”

“Hahaha.”

“The Castle Catholic one, she’s always calling me that. When I started playing rugby she called me Billy for a month.”

“Hahaha.”

“Fuck Tyrone though, they can piss off.” He pauses, then looks up at Finn. “That must have been you, was it?”

Finn grins at me. “Told you.”

“Ye fucker. I’ll get some shit for that tomorrow from the oul’ man.”

An older man wearing a Killoran blazer, shirt and tie drifts over to our table with two huge pitchers of beer. With a strained smile he looks at Finn, “Where can I put these?” Finn leans to allow access to the table. “Oh, and foods ready, lads.”

“Cheers.”

Without hesitation, Jamie, Finn and Andy stand, and walk towards the metallic bench in the corner of the room. The smell of frying teases at my stomach, so with authorization, I make my way between the tables and chairs to the queue that has formed. Slowly, the line shuffles forward.

“Hurry up Finn, they’re not all for you,” Chris says from in front of me. Two fingers are raised in reply. Killoran players wait patiently until the last Ballycross man lines up, then fall in behind. Paper plates filled with overcooked sausages, baked beans, mashed potatoes and buttered slices of bread await. I grab a knife and fork out of a metallic goblet, a red folded napkin, then a medium sized plate of food.

“Thank you,” I call out into the kitchen where a balding, portly man and a wiry, fretful looking woman furiously slop food from huge tubs onto a production line

of plates. They continue on, unaware, engrossed in their task, as the number of filled plates quickly dwindles.

Back at the table, there is no conversation, only the chomping and gobbling of food in mouths, and the occasional ting, ting of cutlery clashing.

“You reckon we can go up for seconds?” Finn asks, his last forkful of sausage entering his mouth. I look down at my plate. I’ve eaten half my mash and one fork of baked beans. “I might go up and check.” He comes back with a full plate, one slice of bread already disappearing into his mouth. I plug away, eager to fill my belly with as much as possible to slow the effect of the impending torrent of alcohol. I am mopping up the last of my beans with my bread several minutes after Finn has cleaned his plate. A pile of scattered dirty plates and cutlery is finally tidied when Jamie decides to conduct a few formalities.

“Oi, Harry, Richard.” Jamie yells towards the two players who have just finished talking to John and Ryan near the bar. “Come over here.” He grabs one of the pitchers which sits in the middle of the table and begins to pour into two empty glasses. “Right, that’s everyone, eh? ..... Ok, today, our ‘Man of the Match’ is.....Harry.” Jamie hands him his pint amidst a round of applause.

“Well done Harry,” Richard says, offering a thumbs up.

“Great game, lad.” Finn slaps him on the back. Harry ducks his head shyly, unable to hide his big smile.

“And our shit-head of the week goes to Andy, for pulling a Nazi salute after scoring a try.”

The table erupts in laughter. A perplexed and embarrassed Andy stands up.

“What, what are you talking about?”

“Everyone saw you, you scored the try, then you went like this.” Jamie holds his left arm high and outstretched, and two fingers of his right at his moustache.

“What? No, no, no. It was a dab. It was this.” He ducks his head into his right elbow, stretching his left in the dance move du jour. The laughter that continues doesn’t seem to be convinced.

“Just put on the hat, Adolf,” Jamie smiles, pulling out a brown hat shaped like a pile of excrement. Begrudgingly, Andy reaches out and places on his head. “Strap it up.” Andy looks pleadingly at him, searching for compassion, but finds nothing. He pulls the strap under his chin, and with a humorous frown, slumps back on his stool. Jamie slides the second pint glass across the table.

“Cheers,” Andy says as he wraps his hand around the cool glass, and charges it towards Harry.

“Oh, shit,” Harry exclaims. Tentatively, he clinks his glass against Andy’s. Back their heads slam, and the amber ale glugs down the two throats.

“Go on, go on.”

“Come on Harry.”

“Ohhhhh,” Jamie sighs as Andy finishes first and raises his empty glass, upside down, above his head. Four seconds later, Harry follows.

“Haaaaaa,” he gasps, and resigned to second place, lethargically tips his glass over his hair to show he is done.

“Good effort, lads.” Jamie raises his toast to the two drinkers and they receive another a round of applause for their efforts. “Right, drink up, I think we’re heading off soon.”

The last of the beer is tipped into the emptiest glasses, and quickly disposed of. People begin filing for the door.

“Cheers, lads.” Jamie raises a wave to the Killoran players and supporters. Finn, Andy and I also throw an arm up in farewell.

“Cheers, guys, safe trip,” we receive in return. We pick up our bags at the door, and make our way out to the bus.

## The bus journey home

“Oh, fuck me, I’d forgotten how cold it is,” Connor says through gritted teeth as the wintery breeze infiltrates his thin cotton shirt. “My nipples are going to need some sort of safety cap. They’re a bloody hazard sticking out like this.” He rubs softly at his chest.

“Don’t lie. That’s got nothing to do with the cold, does it?” Finn jokes gruffly.

“You’re right. There’s nothing that arouses me more than a load of young lads on a bus.” Connor purses his lips, and squints his eyes craftily. “Oooooooooohhh.” He runs up behind Chris who is waiting to board the bus. Grabbing him by the belt, he thrusts his pelvis into Chris’ backside. “Urrgh, urrrrrgh,” he grunts.

“What the fuck?” Chris squeaks in horror, spinning around to lash out.

“What?” Connor says as nonchalantly as he can, walking back to the baggage area. Chris is left with his arms raised in bemusement.

“Right lads, I’ll catch ya later,” Joel yells, waving as he beeps his car open.

“Oh, you driving back? You coming out later?” Richard asks.

“Aaaahh, maybe.”

“If the Mrs. lets you?”

“Na, na, just got shit to do....”

“Yeah, yeah. Ask her to loosen your leash a little. I’ll give you a text later.”

“Yeah mate.”

I follow Richard towards the luggage area, where we throw our bags and collect our beer. The bottles rattle inside their cardboard box as I haul my selection up the stairs of the bus. I pass the driver, who flaps the pages of his newspaper, sighs, and continues to read.

I settle in to my spot between Chris and Andy, my feet cramped by boxes of Carlsberg and Budweiser. In contrast to our earlier trip, now the bus is dark, so the spotlights above each occupied seat are switched on. I reach down and pull out a 440ml can of Carlsberg, and tease it open with a satisfying, “tttssshhhkkkkkk.” Froth bubbles at the lip so I sip long and hard, suctioning the attempted escapees. It's warm, but drinkable.

The bus grumbles to life loudly and impatiently waits to leave. John stands by the door. “Is that everyone? Ok,” he tips his head to the driver, “We’re good to go.” He makes his way up the steps and on to his seat. He chats away with Ryan who sits opposite him. Cheerful with a hard-fought victory secured, Ryan and John seem animated, yet still segregate themselves from the team.

Chris jostles beside me, trying to rearrange his bottles of alcohol so he can get comfortable. “Oi, what was with the lady ref?” Chris asks.

“Oh, she was alright. Wanted me to tell her which way I was kicking off though, which I thought was weird,” I reply, squirming uncomfortably as Chris knocks my elbow, spilling a small amount of my beer onto my trousers.

Jamie leans over. “Better than that Nazi we had last week. Oh sorry, Andy. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“Hahaha,” Andy laughs sarcastically, bobbling his head cartoonishly.

“Lesbian, lesbian?” Chris whispers, laughing.

I close my eyes and shake my head.

“Oh, it’s just a bit o’ banter,” he laughs at me. He rubs his hand forcefully on my head in a sign of intimacy. I have to catch at my beer as it nearly spills again.

“Aye, aye,” I reply, nodding, smiling.

“Hahaha.” Chris laughs, happy the scenario has balanced and remains jocular.

Connor leans over the back of his chair. “She was tidy though, wasn’t she? I hope she wasn’t a lesbian. Although I’d prefer the last woman ref we had. Remember her? Oooooooooooh. I’d destroy her. After I was done with her, you wouldn’t even be able to identify her by her dental records.”

“Hahaha.” Hearty laughter fills the bus. I notice Harry, fresh faced, listening, watching and learning.

“You know what you need to get into?” Chris tells Connor. “Coaching. You know how I’ve started as the coach of that women’s team? I can tell you, it’s not about teaching others to play.” He winks with a twisted smile. “I’ve had the 10 and the fullback so far. I reckon I’ll be able to get one of the flankers and the 13 soon. I’d try for the whole team but who wants to fuck a front rower?”

“Are they keen?” Connor asks. “I could go heavy. A wee clash of hookers.” His eyebrows dance as he tries to look suave.

Chris is revolted. “Urgh, sounds like the worst kind of porn. Thanks Connor, for that image.”

“Hey, don’t shout at the doctor just because the needles are sharp.” Connor swirls back into his seat, leaving Chris staring quizzically.

“Oi, get everyone down the back,” Jamie calls to Connor. “Come on, we’ll have a few games and things.”

Connor raises his head to acknowledge him, then rustles through the plastic bag he had placed on his seat and pulls out a half-eaten sandwich. Taking a bite, he makes his way to an empty seat two rows from the back.

“Everyone down the back,” Jamie shouts again. Ronan quietly tries to slouch, but Jamie spots him. “Ronan, come on mate, down the back. We’ll play a few games.” Begrudgingly, with a pensive look and a four pack of mixed fruit Koppaberg cider, he makes his way down to the seat in front of Connor.

Down the back of the bus, Jamie continues to organise. “Everyone got a drink?” Rustling and crinkling and murmuring. “Hurry up. Come on.” Heads pop up when prepared.

Finn takes over. “Right, right, right, so we’ll do ‘Fat fuck’. Everyone know it?” A few nods. Lots of anxious faces. “Well, you’ll pick it up quick. You’d better or you’ll be drinking loads. Ready?” He looks at Chris, and the pair of them begin the opening chant.

“Oooooooooohh, fuck you, you motherfucking whore.”

Finn begins, “Fat fuck, fat fuck, can I get a silly fuck?” He points to Chris.

Chris immediately replies with, “Silly fuck, silly fuck, can I get a dirty fuck?” He looks towards Nathan.

“Dirty fuck, dirty fuck, can I get a.....”

Finn roars. “Aaaaaaaahhhh, drink you dirty fuck.”

Nathan takes a two second sip.

“Naaa, naaaa, a proper drink. Three fingers.” Finn holds the middle three fingers of his right hand against Nathan’s bottle of Scrumpy Jack. As thick as sausages, they cover nearly a quarter of his bottle. “Drink to here,” he says gruffly.

Reluctantly, Nathan throws back his bottle and drinks and drinks and drinks.

When the bottle falls and the level is inspected, it is just below where Finn had marked. “Urrgh, that’ll do, but make it a good one next time. Right you start the next round.”

“Aaaah...Dirty fuck, dir....”

“Hold on, we’ve got the chant first.” Finn grunts.

“You wanna drink more?” Chris asks. His chest puffs as he inhales deeply.

“Oooooooooohh, fuck you, you motherfucking whore.”

“Dirty fuck, dirty fuck, can I get an ugly fuck.” Nathan stares at Andy.

“Ugly fuck, ugly fuck, can I get a silly fuck?”

“Silly fuck, silly fuck, can I get a dirty fuck?”

Nathan stares blankly across the aisle. “Oh....dirty fuck.....”

“Drrrrrrriiiiiink.”

This time he consumes with gusto, and the liquid in his bottle falls below the packaging sticker when he surfaces for air.

“Good lad,” Jamie winks.

“Let’s do a different game, this one’s shit.” Connor complains.

“What do you wanna do?” Finn asks.

“Dunno.....”

“‘Never have I ever?’ Yeah, yeah, we’ll do ‘Never have I ever.’ Everyone knows this one, don’t they? Drink if you’ve done it, basically.” Finn takes a swig from his can of Tennent’s. “I’ll start. Never have I ever fucked a chick bigger than me.”

“Where the fuck would we find one that big?” Connor asks. “Easter Island?”

“Hahaha.”

“Just play the game, eh?” Finn says with a wry smile. Connor’s eyes shift westward and his mouth peels back sheepishly. He lifts his can of Foster’s to his mouth.

“Hahahahaha, hahaha, hahahaha.” Finn slaps the chair in front of him, almost hyperventilating with laughter. “Who was that?”

“Hahaha, remember that time at Doogie’s...?”

“Oh, that’s right, and you....”

“Bucked a manatee.”

“Hahahaha.”

“What?” Chris asks.

“You know what a sea, a manatee is?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“She looked like one of them.”

“Ahh she was disgusting looking, like, she was horrible.” Finn eyes and mouth curdle in disgust.

“Doogie was sitting beside me on his bed and he was like, ‘Right, I’m gonna go,’ and he lifted this massive plant....”

“Fern Cotton?”

“Aye, Fern Cotton. And he got up and went and she slapped herself down and I was like, ‘Oh, no.’ Hahaha.”

“Hahahahaha.” The entire rear section of the bus is fully engaged in the story, laughing sporadically, and encouraging more laughter.

“I was begging him not to leave coz I knew what was gonna happen if he did, and she was like, ‘Is he going with that plant?’” Connor imitates her voice in a cruel, high-pitched tone. “And I was like, ‘Yes, you should run after him,’ and she was like, ‘No, I’ll stay here.’ Ohhhh.” He hangs his head in his hands.

“Hahahahaha.”

“Horrible, like.”

“Andy, you’re next.” Finn says with a less than gentle nudge with his elbow.

“Ahhhh.....Never have I ever fucked a girl less than two weeks after my mate did.” He grins knowingly at Chris. Both Chris and Nathan drink.

“Dirty fuckers,” Jamie says, shaking his head.

“Sometimes it just kinda happens,” Chris shrugs.

“Tom?”

“Ahhhh....” I scramble to fulfil the expected level of conversation. “Never have I ever had a threesome.”

“Mmmmm, does getting a handy count?” Chris asks.

“Were there two other people?” Jamie asks.

“Yeah, this chick jerked off me and my mate.”

“Ohhhhh...”

“Gross, but yeah I think it counts. Drink.”

Chris chugs away at his swollen bottle of Crofter’s cider. He brings his lips away with a gasp and states, “Never have I ever got caught fucking a girl in a public place.”

“Got caught?” Harry clarifies.

“Sly little dog, eh?” Richard ruffles his hair.

Connor and Jamie all drink.

“Go on then. Where, what happened?” Finn demands.

“On a beach in America,” Jamie says. He pauses and grips onto his beverage while the bus goes around a roundabout. “We just ran into the sea, nothing happened.” He turns to face Connor.

“Ahh, I bucked a manatee.” He has to stop as the back seat erupts in laughter. “Wasn’t supposed to be public, but half the rugby team walked in, so…….”

“Hahaha.”

“Haha, Jamie?” Finn sighs.

“Never have I ever been fucking a girl, had her parents walk in, and bolt out the door butt naked.”

“That sounds very specific,” Connor says with a brooding look. Jamie grins at Chris.

“I’m gonna be fucking hammered by the time we get off this bus,” Chris says as he ploughs into his cider again. “What else would you do? Seriously, I question what the hell she was thinking. She knew they were coming home.”

“Hahaha.”

“Never have I ever let a girl kiss me after she’s just sucked me off.”

“Oh, for god’s sake, they can’t all just be tailored towards me,” Chris whines, throwing more cheap apple flavoured alcohol down his gullet.

“Don’t be such a dirty bastard then,” Jamie replies.

“Ok, haha, hahaha,” Chris trips over his laughter, “would you rather drink your Dad’s semen or your Mum’s period?”

Ronan's face contorts and for several moments he makes an almost inaudible grunt that is pure revulsion.

"Um.....that's a hard one," Jamie replies, considering it in a reasoned manner.

"Na, it's not. First instinct. Go."

"I spose you're a period man?"

"Na, I'd take my Dad's juice every day of the week."

"Urrrrrgh."

"In a little cup?" Andy jokes.

"Little cup? Have you seen my Dad? You need about a pint of spunk to create something like this." Chris gestures with a sweep of his hand across his body.

"You are a filthy man," Jamie tuts, but a smile creeps at the edges of his lip.

"What's next, Finn?"

"Ahhh, I think we need to welcome the new boy into the team," Finn says to Jamie. Harry looks worried.

"Ohhh yeah, good idea. Andy, can you grab those bottles out from behind you?" Jamie asks. Andy turns around, and stuffed into the fabric corner is a plastic bag with four large bottles of alcohol. "Right, lads, so Buffalo rules: No pointing, no first names, no right-hand drinking." Jamie pours cider into three large red plastic cups. When all are near full, he drizzles Sambuca in from a height. "Harry, you wanna make your way down here?" Harry stands, and negotiating the wobble of

the moving bus, walks to the back seat. “You’ve got 10 minutes, make sure they’re finished.”

Harry immediately starts sculling. Nine adult men stare intently. He gets midway through the first cup before he stops.

“Ah, jeez,” he says, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“Stop wasting time, get it down,” Connor says dryly. Harry fights against his stomach, and with eight minutes thirty on the clock, he finishes the third vessel.

“Good effort,” Jamie says proudly.

“Well done lad,” Richard reaches out his hand and shakes Harry’s. Harry grasps at his stomach, his face off-white and uneasy.

“Wooah ho ho.” Richard scrambles to exit the splash zone. But the moment passes, colour returns to Harry’s face, and he slots his cups inside each other and starts returning to his seat. “No, no, you’re not done yet, Harry. Come back. We want to get to know you. I want you to tell everybody a story. Something that people don’t know about you.”

Harry looks at his feet. He gulps.

“Something the fellas want to hear.” Jamie nods suggestively.

Shyly, but with ever increasing confidence, he regales the crowd. “Well this one night, I got wrote off and I was with this chick and I felt a fart coming on. I just kept going. I figured I could hold it in. But it wouldn’t go away.....” He begins to chuckle to himself. “So, I was on top, and I thought I’d just let it out gently. But

straight away it felt wrong, and I put my hand back and it was all wet and mucky. I'd followed through."

"Ohhhhhhhhh," the crowd groans in equal measures of disgust and delight.

"You finish?"

"Ahh, na. She felt it run down her leg and freaked out. I just grabbed all my stuff and ran off with shit dripping down my pants."

"Hahaha."

"You're a bloody dark horse aren't ya?" Jamie laughs. "Just one more thing before you sit down." He hands Harry another plastic red cup, filled just an inch with a thick black substance. "Jager. Enjoy." A small grimace, then determination flashes across Harry's face. With great rapidity, he slurps down the spirit.

"Urrgh, oh Jeeesus, urgh." As his eyes water, he holds up a finger to quiet the space and compose himself. It works, and he manages to stave off the violence in his gut. He makes his way past Nathan and Richard to his seat, both of whom lean away from the aisle.

"Hey Ronan, can you pass down that red bag up the front?" Jamie asks. Ronan walks up the aisle and collects it. "Cheers, mate," Jamie whispers as he reaches forward for it.

"What are you up to?" Nathan asks suspiciously.

"Hold these," Jamie says to Chris and me, ignoring Nathan completely. He passes us each four red cups. He dribbles three fingers of Jägermeister into Chris', then

three fingers of Apple Sourz into mine. “Pass them out..... We’ll go old fellas first.” We obey, handing Richard, Connor, and Finn two cups each. I hold onto two.

Connor sniffs at his, wrenching away as the alcohol pangs at his nostrils.

“Jeepers.”

“Oi, don’t drink it yet,” Jamie instructs clearly. He unzips the red bag and digs inside for a second. Out comes a plastic milk container. “Oh, no,” he cries theatrically, “I appear to have left my milk in my bag for too long.”

“Buuueugh.” I gag immediately. Thick off-white clumps float like icebergs at the top and as Jamie opens the lid a smell of rancidity clogs the enclosed area. His nose peels away, as though trying to escape from his face.

“Uuuuooooerrrgghh.” I am not the only one offended by the sight and smell. Chris and Nathan retch sharply.

“When I say go.....” Jamie announces, “down your drinks. The last one to finish both drinks, and have the cup on their head has to drink a cup of my friend here.” He lifts up the milk container for everyone to see.

“Do you like milk, Tom?” Connor asks.

“I normally do, Connor. But I don’t feel like any just now. You can take it if you’d like.” I reply.

“Oh, I think you’ll like this,” Finn smirks. “Kiwis can’t drink.” I raise one of my cups to take the challenge.

“Drinks on the seat.....” Jamie makes sure no one has an advantage. “Ready..... Go!”

Finn and I throw back the cups with fury, leaving our taste-buds to catch up. “Haaaaaa.” A noise escapes from my mouth as the alcohol scalds my throat. The artificial apple taste is sour, but the relief is sweet. Connor bangs his cup on his head, and we all watch as Richard struggles through both shots. Jamie begins pouring the ‘milk,’ a large clot slurping over the rim of the bottle and sloshing into the cup.

“Na, na, na....” Richard begins complaining as he ceremoniously doffs his cup upon his head.

“Ahhh, yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jamie replies, smiling, and hands him the cup. The smell taunts at Richard, and his face twitches and contorts, fighting the urge to flee. He quells these fears, and faces the challenge, sculling the liquid. An off-white gluggy mess sits at the bottom.

“Eat them, you haven’t finished, eat it,” Jamie yells in his ear. Richard hesitates, baulks, then pinching his nose, consumes the clots of rotten milk. I watch through parted fingers.

“Buuuueugh.” My beans and mashed potato make a desperate attempt to break free.

“Well done,” Jamie congratulates Richard. Harry, Nathan and Andy clap as Richard tries to control his gag reflex. Jamie has readied the next round of drinks and begins to pass them out. “Ok, well, we’ll do the next oldest now. Andy, Nathan and..... Chris.”

“Whoah, whoah, you’re older than me,” Nathan complains.

“But I’m.....”

“Na, na, get in there. You’re doing it, too.” Finn grabs the cups from Nathan and thrusts them in front of Jamie.

“Fine,” Jamie snatches at them.

“Go on boys, make sure he has to do the pint as well.” Finn winks at Chris and Andy. “Ready....Go!” Finn shouts. Chris, Andy and Jamie all sup at their drinks, struggling to overcome their apathy for the taste and potency. Chris finishes first, and crushes his second cup over his skull. A trickle of green drips through his long blonde hair. Andy sculls the last sip of liquor, and with a lofted cup, seals Jamie’s fate.

“Hahaha, yes lads.” Finn takes great pleasure in schlupping several curds into Jamie’s punishment drink. “Get it down ya, big fella.”

“Anyone got a spoon, or.....?” Jamie asks the group. Several shoulders are shrugged and heads shaken, but Harry emerges with a plastic fork from his lunch.

“Will this do?”

“That’ll do nicely, thank you.” Jamie takes the fork, and with great speed, stirs the mixture into a more even consistency. While no longer clods, it is still a rather unappealing watery creaminess. In his best English bourgeois accent, James offers his glass to the crowd, “Chin chin.” And down his throat it slides. “Mmmmm, was better than the Jager.”

“Uurgh,” I can’t contain my displeasure.

“So finally, we have the young boys,” Jamie announces, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “This’ll be good. Get em’ lined up Chris.” Six more cups are unleashed and filled slightly higher than the previous two rounds. “Haaaaaaaarrryyy……. Naaaaaaaathan……. and Roooooooooonan.” The cups are handed out slowly.

“No, no, I’m out,” Ronan baulks.

“No, no, no, this is like the UDA. Either do it or you leave in a body-bag,” Richard yells.

“Oh, the fucking UDA?” Finn groans, “I might be getting too old for this craic.”

Reluctantly, Ronan lifts his cups.

“On the seat,” Jamie barks. “On your marks……. Go!”

Ronan and Nathan fluently slide the liquid down their throats, but Harry, already in a state of impair, gasps at every sip.

“Errrrrgh, oh my God.”

“Guess who’s waiting for you,” Jamie taunts as he pours another penalty drink. It is wafted under Harry’s nose, the curdled milk floating like a rotten dough-ball.

“Boooeeuuughhh.” Harry clutches at his mouth as his cheeks bulge. He rushes for the plastic bag at his feet, but is only half successful. A huge gush of yellow water surges forward, some into the plastic bag in Harry’s arms, some onto the bag and all over his hands, some into the aisle, where it rolls up and down as the bus navigates changes in slope. Harry’s breathing is deep and rattly, his mouth open,

his face drained of colour. Richard squirts his water bottle onto the traveling vomit in the centre of the bus, then onto Harry's arms to clean them. The smell of bile is inescapable though.

"Wanna drink?" He offers.

Harry's eyebrows lift fractionally in affirmation.

"Chuck that up the front," Connor yells, referring to the soggy bag Harry still holds. He swings it back and unleashes it forward, but it falls just a metre away.

"Urrgh, not by me," Ronan squeals as it squishes into the corridor of sick. Harry prods at it with his foot but it barely moves.

"Piss stop," Chris shouts to no one in particular. "Piss stop."

"Hey John," Jamie yells towards the front, "John.... can you ask the driver if we can take a piss stop?"

Leaning forward, John converses with the bus driver. He leans back, and yells back, "He'll stop just up here."

"Cheers," Jamie and Chris shout back. The bus rounds a series of corners, then pulls off onto a nice wide shoulder on a straight.

"Right, quickly guys," John requests as players stream out the door. With cars hurtling by in the background, I stare out into the field in front of me, and relieve my bladder. Connor stands less than two feet away to my left, and Chris, Finn, Jamie and Richard line up to my right, all shooting streams of urine out into the

darkness. Harry leans heavily against the door of the bus, sucking in the ‘fresh’ air of a motorway. I pull up my pants and head back to my seat.

“Look at Connor, fucking head the ball,” Finn laughs as he sits back down. I look across Andy, and see Connor’s pants around his ankles, his bare behind glowing like a full moon. Three violent shakes, a quick bend down which reveals everything, a tightening of his belt, and he’s back on the bus.

“Want some?” Chris turns to me with a bottle of Buckfast.

“Maybe a sip,” I reply uncertainly, taking a small mouthful. It coats my throat like a sweet cough medicine.

“Have a decent chug, I’ve got plenty.”

“I’m ok, thanks. Maybe if I run out of beer.” There is no chance I will run out of beer.

“Oi, we’re all gonna do a song,” Finn hollers. “OK? So get thinking. We’ll start on this side. Harry?”

“Ahhh.....Ahhhhhhhhhh.”

“Anything, just get us started.”

“Ummmmmm.....”

“Bloody hell. Right, I’ll go.” He takes a breath to compose himself.

“On a warm summer’s evening, on a train bound for nowhere...”

The bus is raucous with supporting vocals. “The Gambler<sup>18</sup>” was always going to be popular.

“You got to know when to hold em’. Know when to fold em’.”

The volume goes up a level as the chorus as we reach the chorus. Ronan looks distant, forlorn. The song peters out after the second verse and Finn turns to Andy.

“You’re up, big lad.”

“Just a small town girl, livin' in a lonely world

She took the midnight train goin' anywhere...<sup>19</sup>”

I join in, but I notice Nathan slump in his seat, his head rested against the window, his face glued to his phone. I decide to clear the air, and wander over, Carlsberg in hand.

“Scooch, scooch,” I say flicking my wrist. He slings his legs to the right, straightening his body, giving me space. I sit down.

“The smell of wine and cheap perfume.”

“Oi, about earlier.” I’m uncomfortable, but I want to deal with this issue early. “I know you don’t think there was anything wrong, but I’ve had a history with concussion and it’s not something to mess about with.” I hold out my hand.

He shakes it limply. “Yeah, I know. But I wasn’t knocked out or anything. It was just fitness.”

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<sup>18</sup> (Schiltz, 1978)

<sup>19</sup> (Elson & Stone, 1981)

“Mate, you’d be one of the fittest players in the team. There’s no way you’re chucking after ten minutes. Didn’t you get a knee to the temple?”

“I dunno, I don’t think so.”

“Chris....Chris, you saw Nathan get kneed in the head eh?”

Chris turns towards us. “Yeah,” he smiles. “Then you boked more than a 14-year-old girl on the Falls Road.”

“Shit.” Nathan stops, doubting himself.

“Look, I know what it’s like. I played on after a knock last year, had headaches for two months. In the moment, you think you’re fine.” I pause for a moment.

“Anyway, we good?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He shakes my hand again.

“It goes on and on and on and onnnnn...”

“Hey, what were you talking about this morning? You break up with your Mrs.?”

“Yeah, last week.”

“You alright?”

“Yeah. It’s complicated. You’ve probably already heard what it is.”

“Na.....” I shake my head, urging him to continue.

“Well, like there’s a lot of families, especially my family, that like, they believe if you’re a Protestant, you stick with a Protestant, so um this girl, she was a

Catholic. From the start like I started to really like her and all, and ahh, I made that wrong decision but we're obviously just friends now, so..."

"You made that wrong decision, what do you mean?"

"I mean, I sorta, like I got too, too in-depth with her, you know, without even... Like, coz sometimes I'm just too laid back and never think about things, but then all these feelings built up, and ahh I sorta drift back, haha, unfortunately, so..."

"When I wake up, well I know I'm gonna be,  
I'm gonna be the man who wakes up next you<sup>20</sup>."

"So was that your decision, or was that based on..."

"Parents. Parents, yeah..."

"Did they actually say anything to you or....?"

"Yeah."

"Right?"

"Just over Christmas there, just like..."

"And do you think that you could have pushed on? Would you've....?"

"I could have like but..." He pauses, clearly struggling to articulate his position to an outsider. He takes a deep breath. "Well ahhh, it's a hard one like. I really do like her and all, she lives far away like from my home place so it would be quite

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<sup>20</sup> (Wingfield, 1988)

hard you know, but like um, I just, I think more the fact was that I didn't want to disrespect my family..."

"Yeah?"

"You know and fall out with them. Over, not, not something small, but... that sort of thing, even though she's a really nice girl. Um, that's why, another reason why, um, my mum and dad would be unfavourable if I married, or had a Catholic girlfriend, because it's OK until you have a child. Then you might have arguments about where the child's going to go, might go to a Catholic school or will it go to an integrated school or will it go to a Protestant school? Um that's when really things, coz I know like a few of my friends that's happened to and it's been massive arguments where, say, the father hasn't chatted to their family, or yeah."

"Would that matter? If they went to a different school? Or would it matter more to your parents than to you or...?"

"Yeah parents, more to my parents. It would matter to me as well I think, because, just, I'd like, you know the way you're brought up that way, just keep your own to your own. Not, not because you don't like them, just because, you'd like, you know..."

"Nathan, Nathan, your turn," Finn shouts, interrupting our conversation.

"Umm.....ok.....ummm," he stammers.

“Would you dance if I asked you to dance?

Or would you run and never look back<sup>21</sup>?”

I look at him in shock. “Is this Enrique Iglesias?” He nods back confidently. Andy and Richard strive to help him with the verses, but Nathan is basically a lone voice, and the song crawls along on the back of his flat, toneless drawl. But then the chorus kicks in, and the back of the bus booms with gusto.

“I can be your hero baby

I can kiss away the pain

I will stand by you forever

You can take my breath away.”

“Hahaha, fair enough, that was good,” I chuckle.

“You’re up now, Tom.”

Prepared for this moment, I wind up, and belt out,

“Why do you build me up, Buttercup, baby

Just to let me down, and mess me around...<sup>22</sup>”

It’s a safe bet, and the group sing loud and clear through two choruses. I settle back in to my seat as the song fizzles to its conclusion, but Finn has other ideas.

“Na, na don’t sit down yet. You’ve got to do your national anthem now,” Finn jokes.

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<sup>21</sup> (Taylor, 2001)

<sup>22</sup> (d’Abo & Macaulay, 1968)

“Maybe later, after a few more of these,” I reply, raising my can.

“Na, na. It’s either that or the haka.”

“Haka, haka,” Chris cheers.

“Na, alright, I’ll do the national anthem.”

“E Ihowā Atua,  
O ngā iwi mātou rā  
Āta whakarangona;  
Me aroha noa...”

It is lonely standing up singing solo after having such support for my last effort.

Alcohol is starting to play tricks with my memory too, and I mumble through

“From the shafts of strife and war...” There are a few claps as I finish, but they feel more dutiful, than impressed. I make my way back to my seat at the back.

“You can do yours now.”

Without skipping a beat, Finn starts,

“Sinne Fianna Fáil, atá faoi gheall ag Éirinn.....”

“Oooooooooiiiiiiiiiii.”

“Fuck off.”

“What? It’s the national anthem,” Finn smiles coyly.

“It’s no fucking national anthem of mine. I’m no soldier of Ireland.” Richard sits up on the back of his chair, wild and fierce. Chris jumps at the lull. He is quickly joined by Richard and Andy.

“God save our gracious Queen!

Long live our noble Queen!

God save the Queen!

Send her victorious,

Happy and glorious,

Long to reign over us:

God save the Queen!”

“Aaaayyyyyy.” Hands above his head, Chris claps his thanks.

“Fuck the pope,” comes a muffled shout from Richard.

“Your turn with another song,” Jamie tells Richard. He flicks his hair from his face and yells in the fashion of the Ulster rugby supporters.

“Stand up for the Ulstermen,

Stand up for the Ulstermen,

Stand up for the Ulstermen,

Stand up for the Ulstermen...”

I turn to Chris and quietly ask, “Not a fan of the Irish anthem?”

Chris looks strained as he musters up the right words. “Like, I wouldn’t sing the Soldier’s song, that’s what Finn was singing, coz it’s all about, like, ‘Go Ireland.’”

But at the rugby they have Ireland's Call which is fine. You know, 'Shoulder to shoulder...'" his head bobs inanely as he sings in a monotone. I nod. "But like in Dublin, they play the Soldier's song at the rugby, which is stupid. And like, the Ulster players won't sing it."

"Right?"

"It's a wee bit... And like Ronan O'Gara shaking the Queen's hand and stuff."

"What happened there?"

"Oh, they went to this big fancy thing and he wouldn't shake her hand."

Andy leans over. "I'd say if you're gonna meet the Queen... like, if you're gonna agree to be there, he coulda..."

"Kinda, kinda rude. He put himself in that situation," Chris says.

"If he wasn't gonna do it he just shouldn't have gone really." Andy shakes his head, then leans back into his seat.

"Who knows 'I used to work in Chicago?'" Finn asks loudly. Chris puts up his hand but most either mutter 'no' or ignore him.

"Come on,

'I used to work in Chicago at an old apartment store,

I used to work in Chicago but I don't work anymore.

A woman came into the shop one day looking for a rooster..."

"I don't think anyone's that keen, Finn," Jamie offers.

“You say: A rooster from the store?”

“Yeah, I think you might be flogging a dead horse there,” Chris agrees.

“A rooster she wanted, my cock she got, and I don’t work anymore.

Oh, I used to work in.....”

“Jesus, Finn,” Jamie shakes his head.

“Chicago at an old apartment store,

I used.....”

Chris bites at his lip nervously, excitedly, then grabs centre stage with a resounding call.

“You put your left arm in,

Your left arm out,

In, out, in, out, you beat the Taig about,

You knee cap the bastard when he's on the ground,

And that's what it's all about.

Ohhhhhh, grab yourself a Fenian

Ohhhhhh, beat him till he's screamin’

Ohhhhhh, kick his fucking head in

In, out, in, out, Fuck the RA.”

“Hahahahaha,” Jamie and Andy laugh loudly from the backseat. Richard, leaning heavily on the back of his chair, his eyes alive.

“Ehhhhh?” Finn yells, “Na, na, na...”

“Haha, that’s what I got in Chicago,” Chris laughs.

“Na, na, you don’t wanna...”

Chris inhales deeply, and this time he quickly gets vocal support from Richard and Andy.

“I knew a Fenian,

His name was McFinn,

Some people were throwing tomatoes at him,

Tomatoes are soft, they are good for your skin,

Not these ones, they are still in the tin.

Ah na na na aye.”

Finn is visibly agitated. He tries to come up with a quick and witty riposte but he is a lone figure fighting an Orange tide. Connor and Ronan, Finn’s only hope of support, sit further forward, engaged in conversation. Finn taps at Connor’s arm, but he receives an irritable, “Wait.”

He decides to plough on alone.

“Come out ye Black and Tans, come out and fight me like a man,  
Show your wife how you won...<sup>23</sup>”

“Booooooooooooo.”

“No, no. None of that shite.”

“Should we do the Sash?” Chris asks.

“Go on then, you start it.” Richard pulls out his phone and does a quick Google search for the lyrics.

“So sure I'm an Ulster Orangeman, from Erin's Isle I came,  
To see my British brethren all of honour and of fame,  
And to tell them of my forefathers who fought in days of yore,  
That I might have the right to wear, the sash my father wore!

It is old but it is beautiful, and its colours they are fine  
It was worn at Derry, Aughrim, Enniskillen and the Boyne.  
My father wore it as a youth in bygone days of yore,  
And on the Twelfth I love to wear the sash my father wore<sup>24</sup>.”

“Hahaha.”

“Yeeeehooooo.”

Finn looks flustered, but gathers himself for one last siege.

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<sup>23</sup> (Behan, 1972)

<sup>24</sup> (Unknown, 19th century)

“Oh, I’d rather be a Paki than a Hun

Oh, I’d rather be a Paki than a Hun

Oh, I’d rather be a Paki

Rather be a Paki

Rather be a Paki than a Hun.”

The bus erupts in laughter. Chris and Jamie smirk and shake their heads, but have run out of replies. Glowing from this moral ‘victory’, Finn, who is starting to slur his words, resumes singing pop songs.

“Hey there Delilah

What's it like in New York City?

I'm a thousand miles away

But girl, tonight you look so pretty...<sup>25</sup>”

As we enter the outskirts of Ballycross, enthusiasm for the singalong dips and Finn lacks vocal backing.

“Maybe just leave it now,” Chris offers, looking disgruntled.

“Chill out, what you yellin' for?

Lay back, it's all been done before

And if you could only let it be

You will see

I like you the way you are

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<sup>25</sup> (Rechtshaid & O’Keefe, 2003)

When we're drivin' in your car  
And you're talking to me one on one  
But you've become...<sup>26</sup>”

“Oh my god, I’ve never known someone to have a child and still be a virgin,”  
Chris moans loudly.

“Hahaha.”

Finn holds up his middle finger, but continues to warble with all the gusto he can muster.

“Why do you have to go and make things so complicated?  
I see the way you're acting like you're somebody else  
Gets me frustrated  
Life's like this, you  
You fall, and you crawl, and you break  
And you take what you get, and you turn it into honesty  
Promise me I'm never gonna find you fake it  
No, no, no.”

“Backs you can have him. That man can never play in the tight five again,”  
Connor says as he shakes his head.

“Where are we off to now?” Andy asks as we round the bend towards the  
Ballycross RFC clubrooms.

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<sup>26</sup> (The Matrix, 2001)

“My house for a couple, then into town,” Chris answers. I look at the clock on my phone. 8:06. *Jeez, I think, I thought it was much later.*

“Everyone heading out?” Andy asks. “Richard?” Nod. “Nathan?” Eyebrows jump. “Ronan?”

“Na, na.” He looks pained.

“What? Come on. I’ll shout you a drink, introduce you to a few lovely ladies.” Andy’s cheerful grin and warm demeanour are hard to refuse.

But Ronan does. “Na, sorry. I’m just.....” His voice trails off into nothing.

“Ach, leave the poor lad. He doesn’t wanna come out.” Connor says. “Maybe next time?” He looks to Ronan, who gratefully nods.

The bus pulls up in the empty car park, and people begin to stand, collecting their things and exiting. I gingerly hop over the strewn puddle of vomit with my box of beer safely tucked under my arm.

“How’s everyone getting back?” I ask, realising that my ride, Matthew, is in hospital.

“My flatmates picking me up, jump in,” Chris offers.

“Sweet.” I walk down the stairs and out into the night.

## In Town

Booof. The fresh air hits me like a ton of bricks. *Oooh jeez*, I think, suddenly feeling a little woozy.

“Right there, big fella?” Chris laughs at me.

“Yeah, yeah.” I exhale to acclimatise, smile, and join Chris who is walking towards a blue VW Golf.

“Howdy,” I say, giving a salute to the driver. I throw my bag and beer into the boot.

“How’s it going?” he replies, and flicks the lever on the passenger seat. It lunges forward, allowing me to climb in the back.

“This is Tom, he’s a psychic from New Zealand,” Chris introduces me to his flatmate. “Tom, this is Stu. He likes to wank a lot in his room.”

“It’s true,” the young man answers in a Belfast accent. He runs his hand through his sizeable beard, then holds them up for all to see. “I have the hands of an angel.”

“Just move those bags,” Chris tells me as I struggle to fit in among the wide array of clothing and baggage.

“You guys win?” Stu asks as he starts the car. We hoon off at express pace.

“Yeah, pretty close game. What was the score?” Chris asks me, turning over his right shoulder. Before I answer, he continues, “Big Killoran bastards, fuck I’m sore. Had a big fight at the end.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, everyone was throwing punches, but Tom ran off and hid behind the coach.”

“I did,” I falsely confess. “It was scary.”

“Haha,” laughs Stu. He glances over at Chris. “Thought you must have got a good whack to the face, it’s not looking good.”

“Na, what? I didn’t get hit.” Chris looks confused.

“Oh, sorry. Did you always look like that?” Stu shirks away from the playful punch he knows is coming.

“Right, this is us,” Chris says as we pull into a gravel driveway beside a two-storey house. He opens the door to let me out, and I wander to the back of the car to collect my belongings. I follow the two flatmates through a red doorway with a large metallic 3 and a small peephole.

“Just flick on the telly and make yourself at home,” Chris calls as he makes his way upstairs.

I walk into Chris’ sparsely furnished flat. The cheap, mock wood, linoleum floor squeaks with every movement of my shoes, the sound echoing off the walls. I take a seat on one of the old leather couches and it collapses inwards, supporting nothing, swallowing me whole. I struggle forward, and sit on the edge, feeling the hard wooden frame beneath my buttocks as I fumble with the television remote.

“Heyyyyyyy.” Connor and Finn enter. “Just you? Where the fuck’s everyone else?”

“Still coming I spose,” I reply. “Chris and his flatmate are upstairs.”

The words are barely out of my mouth before Andy, Jamie and Nathan pile through the door.

“Lads,” Andy says garishly. They set their alcohol on the floor in the centre of the room and jump onto the remaining spare seats. Jamie grabs the remote, and changes the channel from Mock the Week to TMF. Justin Bieber now fills the screen, so Jamie pushes the volume button up until I can’t hear anything else.

I lift a can of Carlsberg to my lips as Connor says something, “Woolloogaala birla furnaput?”

“What?” I yell.

“Wolo gabala funa put?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I nod my head and smile, completely oblivious. Looking about the room, I seem to be the only one struggling with auditory processing; conversations rattle around me, but I sit on the worn couch, isolated in my inability to hear. *Maybe I am getting old*, I think to myself.

I head into the kitchen, where Finn and Chris are discussing rugby. Chris notices me, “Tom, if we could have any player in the world to come and join our club, who would it be?”

“I’d say Richie McCaw would be useful.”

“I knew you’d pick a Kiwi. Oi, grab those plastic cups from that cupboard behind you.”

“Who would you pick then?” I ask as I yank at the stuck wooden door. A stack of cups sits inside a tube of plastic wrapping.

“Well, we could really do with a decent 10. So probably Carter or Sexton.” He laughs at his joke, watching my reaction, hoping I’ll take his bait.

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” I reply in a deep voice. I hold up the cups. “What are you doing with these?”

“Bit of the old flippity-cuppity before we head out. Chuck em’ in a line will ye?”

I begin making two lines of cups on either side of Chris’ kitchen table. “How many people are there?”

Finn jabs his head around the corner, “One, two, three...four, five, six, plus us makes nine.”

“You’ll just have to go twice,” Chris tells Finn.

“Oh, no, will I have to drink more beer?” Finn says, all dainty and high pitched.

“Call them in, will you?” Chris asks as he tips a can of beer into the ten aligned cups. He moves around them, crouching and squinting to check they are all equal.

“Oi, flip cup,” Finn shouts into the living room. I notice Harry and Richard are among the six people that walk through. People mill around the table, unsure of where to stand.

“Backs versus forwards?” Chris proffers.

“Sounds good to me,” Finn leers. He turns to Connor, “I’ll go first and last.” He heads to the top of the table. Nathan and Jamie join them on the far side, while Andy and Harry shuffle past to join Chris, Richard and me.

Chris begins to organise. “Right, Richard, you go last, I’ll go first.” The rest of us take a spot in the middle.

Chris and Finn stand poised, with hands behind their backs. Jamie stands at the far end, two hands gripping the table as he leans forward for effect. “On your marks, go!” Out flash hands, and the cups of Finn and Chris go up as they are drained, and down onto the table’s edge. Balancing it gently so that half sits cantilevered out over the floor, both players flick the cup up and over.

“Yes,” shout both Finn and Connor, as Finn’s cup teeters, but steadies, and sits face down on the table.

“Arrrgh, come on,” Chris screams at his cup as it falls sideways, he picks it up, and flicks it again. No luck; it rolls on its rim for a second, then tumbles.

“Down it, down it,” the forwards yell at Connor as his drink descends.

“Yes,” Chris’ cup flips on its head, and Harry swills his lager. One flip, and he is done. He high-fives Chris as beer glogs down my throat.

“Ahh.” Slowly, clumsily, I drag the cup to the edge, then lightly tip it upwards.

“Arrgh.” Again. “Come onnnnn.” The noise of the competition grows louder as first Connor, then Nathan complete the task. Flick. Up, over, sit. “Go,” I shout to Andy. Andy and Jamie finish split seconds apart, and Richard and Finn pound back their drinks within a cacophony of noise. On to the table go the cups,

Richard's falling momentarily. Finn flicks, but his cup falls. Richard flicks poorly, and it lands sideways. Finn takes a breath, and flips. It lands cleanly.

"Yes," screams Connor, his arms raised. The four forwards embrace in wild hugs, dancing and leaping amongst the kitchen appliances.

"Fuck's sake Richard," Chris says as he pushes his friend lightly.

"Oh, fuck off," Richard replies, shrugging away from the attention.

"Oooooooooooooooooooooo," Chris laughs, "settle down mate, we're only havin' a laugh." Richard nods angrily and walks away.

The group disperses, but I stay chatting to Jamie for a while. "What you up to tomorrow," he asks, placing his beer upon the bench behind him.

"Think I might go with Karen's old man and watch the Tyrone match. You watch any Gaelic?" I ask, though I'm fairly sure of the answer.

"Na.... na.... I wouldn't," he says, his voice drifting.

"Right?"

He seems strained to adequately answer the question. "It's just not.... when we talk at home, the oul' lad and I.... and we talk about of sport..... and our knowledge of Northern Ireland sport, which is pretty deep..... both of us would struggle to name three top Gaelic players."

"Yeah?"

"So, it's, even when you don't deliberately set out to block it out, it's not in your vision."

“Right? I would have thought it had a fairly high profile.”

He picks up his beer can and has a long hard drink. He fingers the beads of moisture that run down the side as he ponders his answer. “Well, yeah, but not..... if you asked me the top 50 sportsmen in the last 50 years in Northern Ireland, I might be able to name two or three Gaelic..... whereas it’s a game played by 30% of the population. And yet in my own consciousness it’s very, very low. I certainly don’t watch Gaelic very often. Flicking through the channels, I’m not gonna rest and watch....”

“Right? And, and is that just because...?”

“Ahh, I have limited time to watch sport on television, so I tend to be pretty selective... And it’s not gonna be a Gaelic match. Sadly. I might watch a little bit if it was, if it was an Ulster team playing in the All-Ireland final.” He pauses to take a sip. “I might watch a bit of it. Haha, I mightn’t watch it all.” He chortles away to himself. “You know it’s just, it’s, it’s, it’s, it’s a time thing but it’s much more than that, obviously it’s much more than that. It’s where my own interests lie....”

“Yeah.” I rummage into my box for another beverage. “Do you, would any of your mates watch any?”

“Hahaha.” He looks down at his drink, shaking it slightly to gauge the volume.

“Right, so yeah, that’s an interesting question, Tom, because if you looked at my friendship pattern over the years, sport would be pretty big.”

“Yeah.”

“But almost invariably, those friends are from the Protestant community... because I don’t, I haven’t been involved in soccer and I’m not involved in GAA. The three main games I’ve played, I suppose, are cricket, rugby and golf. But I’m not a great socialiser in the golf club, so the people I play golf with are the people who I used to play rugby or cricket with.” Jamie laughs wryly.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Hahaha, so that pattern. So, it has a huge... if I were honest, I mean, it’s a huge, it sets the pattern for friendship patterns right through and the Catholic friends that I would have are much more likely to have come from my professional life. And particularly, almost directly because of cross-community work and cross-community contact, so it’s much more professional than social.”

“Oh yeah? What do you do again?”

“I work in education. Teaching, but also a few programs. Obviously social friendships have developed out of that and some of them I really value. But the much more organic friendship patterns have been through sport, and because sport’s segregated, much more likely to be friends from the Protestant community.”

“What are you gays talking about?” Richard walks in, throwing his arm over my shoulder. His face is too close for comfort and the smell of stale beer is overwhelming. Despite feeling a little tipsy myself, Richard stands out as being well and truly inebriated.

“Just sport and how, like, Catholics and Protestants engage with them,” I reply, patting Richard on his back, then trying to subtly disengage from his grasp.

Jamie smiles; this is not the first time Richard has over-indulged.

“Have you got a spare can there?” Richard asks me. I nod towards the box. “Good lad. Well, I’ll tell you what... rugby is the sport. Rugby has helped, ahh, helped this country enormously, because, you know, ah Prods don’t go to the GAA, ah soccer is very tribal, and, and divided, rugby’s not.”

“Yeah, nobody I’ve ever met has any problems putting on an Irish rugby jersey or showing their colours, you know?” Jamie adds.

“So, you reckon rugby is a good place for inter-community stuff?”

“Yeah, without a shadow of a doubt. It was the first place that I had, met Catholic friends...” Richard takes a long swig of Carlsberg and stumbles slightly as he attempts to shift his weight. Yet the fire in his eyes only gets brighter. “Brothers, you know. When you bleed together, you know? When you trust each other. When you back each other up. You know, for those 80 minutes ah... religion, politics and all the rest of it mean nothing, you know? We’re at our purest during those 80 minutes, you know? We’re ahh, yeah. We’re teammates, you know? And like we used to have fun and mess about and, you know, at the AGM we would be saying like, ‘any chance of getting separate changing rooms for the Paddy’s’, you know? It was all good craic, you know? Ahhh... big Doogie used to call me his favourite wee bigot, like, you know? Coz I was always raking them and a few others, you know, the ones that would react, but they knew I was their brother. They knew that I stood by them, you know? Never back down. The wee man, you know? And so, I’d get away with messing about. That’s how it was, humour, how

we broke down any barriers that were there. And..... ahhhh, fuck's sake, there wasn't, you know? But ahh yeah, I, I, I had no Catholic friends up until rugby. I have plenty of Catholic friends now..."

"Yeah?"

"You know, um and not just through rugby but rugby was a gateway of, of seeing, 'oh right they're not all mad republican Gerry Adams types,' you know? 'Oh right, they just want to play the game too.'" He laughs heartily, then pauses and looks about, like a deer sensing danger. "What the fuck's going on in there?"

Richard leaves our conversation abruptly to investigate the commotion.

I follow him into the living room where a crowd has gathered. Finn and Connor hold the top corners of an Irish flag above their heads, the fabric draping down their spines, creating a backdrop of green, white and orange. Finn holds his phone outstretched, taking photos of them in front of it.

"Tiocfaidh ar la." Connor yells.

"Haha," Finn laughs. "Free the six counties."

"An Ireland unfree shall never be at peace."

Richard joins Chris who stands close by, and cups his hands to his mouth. "Go back home."

"Dirty Free Staters."

"Ulster says no."

Connor, and Finn barely raise an eyebrow. They continue on seemingly unaware of the presence of the two Protestant agitators.

“Oh, you can’t hear me? Well, see if you notice this.” Chris, walks over and yanks the flag from Finn’s grasp. Hastily, he starts shoving the tricolour down the front of his pants.

“Oi, what the fuck?” Get it out of there,” Finn protests and attempts to pull it back.

Chris manically stuffs for all he is worth. “How do you like this, eh? This is what I think of your Republic. Woooooooooooooh!”

Connor aids Finn, and between them they wrestle the material from Chris. They fluff the edges, but aren’t as keen to have it close to their faces anymore.

“Hahaha,” Chris walks away, looking over his shoulder in case of retribution before he starts talking to Richard. I watch closely, but Finn and Connor turn from the incident and continue talking unperturbed.

Beep beep.

“Oi, taxi.”

“Taxi’s here.”

We tumble out the front door and into the white van with ‘Joe’s’ plastered down the side.

“There’s another one coming, eh?” Jamie asks the driver. He receives a disinterested nod.

“Right, two have to wait.” I’m already in the back seat. Harry and Nathan grimly step away from the sliding door and back to the doorstep.

Da-ding. I reach into my pocket for my phone.

Matthew: Hey man, I won’t make it out tonight. Seven stitches and a pounding headache. Have a good one though.

A picture comes through of Matthew’s cheek, patched up like the laces of rugby balls of yore.

Tom: Ahh mate, we’ll miss you. Sure there’s no chance?

Matthew: Na mate, Emma is not happy. Prob be lucky to play again this season, let alone head out tonight. Sure, I’ll catch up 2moro if you’re about.

Tom: 

The taxi pulls up outside McGuire’s, and the seven of us bundle out into the cool night air. Fluorescent lights cast long shadows and unnatural colours. Jamie throws some money at the driver.

“Pay you back,” Connor says as he walks towards the nightclub queue.

“I’ll grab you a drink inside,” I offer, tapping his arm in thanks.

We line up for five minutes before our I.D. is checked and we walk upstairs into the packed nightclub. Despite appearing tidy in my rugby shirt and tie, I feel thoroughly underdressed walking amongst the sparkly, glittering flock.

“Doof, doof, doof.” The bass bangs as several pop songs are mixed with an electronic beat.

“Gonnabafanapear.” Chris shouts at me.

“What?”

He leans right in, grabbing my shoulder and speaking directly into my ear.

“Wanna drink?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I scream back, nodding. When Chris turns towards the bar, I clean the spit from my ear with my little finger.

Chris squashes in between the patrons and finds space at the far end of the bar

“You ever have a Moo-bomb?”

“Na.”

“It’s my personal creation, Jäger and Milk.” He yells. I scrunch my face. “It’s good, I’ll get us a couple.” He winks at the girl who is crammed up beside him, but she turns away sharply. Chris throws a look of embitterment in return. After getting the barman’s attention, four glasses and a bottle of milk are placed upon the bar.

The barman looks at Chris queerly, “So a shot of Jäger...”

“Yeah, then I’ll top it up with milk. It’s good.” The glasses turn a creamy grey as Chris adds the blue-top milk. He hands me one, then clinks my glass. “Chug it.”

Down goes the Moo-bomb. I can’t decide whether I like it or not, the strange

combination confusing my taste buds. “Good eh?” Chris yells into my cochlea, clearly proud.

“Not bad,” I smile. I turn for the dance floor with the other in my hand.

“Na, na, do both of them here.”

I grimace, but clink Chris’ glass again, and slam back the dense liquid.

“Uuuuaargh,” I roar as I set the glass on the bar.

I spot a cluster of red shirts in the middle of the dance floor. I look at Chris and motion with my head that we should join them. He nods so I venture into the jungle of dancers, beating a twisting path through the less congested areas.

“Heyyyyy,” Finn yells when he spots us. He grabs me, forcing my head into his breast. I wrestle my head free, then wrap an arm around Finn in a more conventional side hug.

“What are you lads drinking?” Andy screams. He looks patently ridiculous with the brown poo hat still strapped to his head.

“Just had a Moo-bomb with Chris,” I scream back.

“What?”

“A Moo-bomb.” I’m not a loud person, and my throat hurts from the strain.

“A what?” Andy stares at me strangely, his eyes intense and blue. “Wanna grab another one?”

“Oh na, I’m...”

“Come on.” He turns and leaves, confident I will follow. I remove myself from Finn and make my way back to the bar.

“What’ll you have?” Andy asks from the bar. He has pushed himself past a much smaller man who looks thoroughly irked.

“Ahhh, a pint?”

“Fuck you’re an old man. Na, we’ll do some shots.” He waves to the barman who arrives after pouring three shots of tequila for three young women. “You want tequila too?” he shouts at me, but turns back to the barman before I can reply. Clear fluid spills over the neat line of small glasses. A yellow slice of lemon sits on top like an ill-fitting cap. A slightly rusted salt shaker guards them. “Get up here,” he yells at me, seizing my arm, and hauling past the small man. Words mutter behind me. Andy slides two shots along the wet bar. “Here you go.” He drips lemon on the top of his hand, then sprinkles salt into his little pool. I disregard this tradition and suck lightly on the lemon. Andy lifts a glass and I read his lips mouth “cheers.” I reciprocate, and tip the spirit back quickly. I suck forcefully at the lemon as the fire swells in my throat.

“Haaaa,” I gasp.

“Haha, good stuff, eh?” Andy sculls his second shot. He spins quickly, slamming the glass on the bar. “Arrrgh, fuck.” He clutches his side, and winces horribly.

“You right?” I ask as we move away.

“Yeah, got smashed in the ribs,” he adjusts his hat which had slipped over his eyes, then untucks the bottom of his shirt and lifts it, exposing his body. The faintest colouring is just starting to form in an imperfect nine-inch circle.

“Jeepers, that’s gonna hurt tomorrow,” I say, exhaling quickly. “You should probably get that checked out. You could have a cracked rib or something.”

“Ahh, I’ll be right. People are too precious about these things. I’ll be grand.” His words tumble together, his tongue slow, sloppy and drunken.

“Reckon? I’d say you’ll be out for a while.”

“Na, pop a couple of Ibuprofen and I’ll be right as rain. It annoys me when people don’t train or go off for a minor injury, it really does. I broke that thumb, one game,” he holds out his hand as though I need reminding what a thumb is. “I broke that in the first two minutes of the game, no subs, was a real tight game, and so I went on to the wing. You know? And I made, I.... last tackle of the game, I saved it, and stopped them from scoring to win the game, looked down and my thumb was pointing that direction, so it was,” he holds his index finger from his other hand at 90 degrees from his second knuckle.

“Yeah?” I look around at the people close by, conscious of how we must appear. Andy is a big guy, shouting at me, spitting on me, telling everyone close by how tough he is. He’s also wearing the shit-head hat, the gesturing with his hand flamboyantly and sporadically exposing his skin.

“Yeah, and that’s when John thought, ‘there might be something wrong with that, son.’ Hehehehe ‘Get you to hospital.’ Hehehehehe.” He shakes his head as he cackles to himself. “Coz it was a really weird colour as well. And I’ve had me

nose broke, played on. In fact, I got a slap on it just before the end of the game and got it straightened again. So...hehehe and it was painful.” He looks through me with his fierce blue eyes, willing me to understand. Abruptly, they change, softening. “Haha, look over there. Go for it, young fella.” My gaze follows his pointing hand to where Nathan is locked in a passionate embrace with a young woman, their tongues lashing garishly.

“Jeepers, get a room, mate,” I mutter to Andy.

“Hahaha,” he laughs, before continuing his harangue. “But na, someone who goes off with a niggly injury, you know, it really does, it bothers me, it bothers me a lot actually. Coz I’ve been severely injured, and played on, you know. You’ve had serious injuries and you’ve played on, you know, it’s that feeling of not letting anybody down, you know. Get it seen to afterwards, you know, but don’t let, don’t let your mates down.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Firm believer in that. Coz the 15 guys standing with me at that moment in time, on that pitch, you know. You lie your body down for them and you stand, you stand up for them, no matter what, no matter what the cost is, you know.” He looks about the teeming room. “I dunno. That’s what I think, anyway.”

I nod my head. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I’ve been in teams where you have to make a tackle on a massive guy, crunches you, then you see Bobby next to you limply letting the next guy through. Hard to see the point.”

“Hehehehe,” he laughs. “If I’d a lived the rest of my life with, you know, in such a selfless manner as I played rugby, God knows where I’d be today. But I would have put my body on the line to stop it going from 55 to 62-nil, like, you know?”

“Hahaha, yeah.” I smile at this exaggerated performance, but I’m also aware of my own conformity to these discourses.

“Just a small town girl...”

“Heyoooooooo, it’s that fucking song.” Andy thrusts his hands in the air and is drawn, magnet-like towards the rest of the team. I follow him as he cuts a straight line, people banging off, drinks spilling to either side.

“livin' in a lonely world,

She took the midnight train goin' anywhere...”

A rotating, jumping, hugging circle of men empty their lungs to the sound of Journey. The group opens as Andy and I approach, swallowing us, mutating, yet never slowing. The surrounding patrons dance furiously, but glare angrily as the mass invades their space.

“Strangers waiting, up and down the boulevard

Their shadows searching in the niiiiiaaiiiight...”

Arms pointing to the sky in time with the words, overcome with emotions of shared trauma and pleasure, I feel at one with the men who sing, laugh and dance with me.

“Streetlights people, living just to find emotion

Hiding, somewhere in the niiiiiiiiiiight.”

Finn jumps into the centre of our circle and strums away at an imaginary guitar.

“Yesss, big fella,” Connor yells and joins him, plucking away at an imaginary bass guitar. The rest of us jump and shimmy around the pair, delighting in each other’s company. Chanting, hugging, jumping, wrestling, and spilling drink, the group is concerned only with itself. A few irritable expressions make me aware that we may be consuming a little too much area, and bumping a few too many elbows for some of the other patrons.

“Oi, fucking chill out, love,” Chris says bemusedly as an infuriated dancer pushes at him, spilling his drink. She jibes back at him angrily, but her voice is lost in the music.

Suddenly, the music stops and the lights flicker on. Our group stays whole as other patrons exit through the two large doors above the stairs. I eye the bouncers nervously waiting at the edges of the room, wanting to clear the floor. Big, barrel-chested men in black suits, they whisper to each other through devices on their ears.

“Don’t stop believing...”

Finn goes acapella, and is joined by Jamie, Andy and Richard. Chris and Connor break off, and head towards the door.

“Let’s go lads,” a square jawed man with jet black hair says, grabbing me roughly by the elbow.

“Alright, alright, we’re going,” I reply petulantly, wrenching my arm away. I turn to Finn. “Come on, let’s go.”

Finn stares at the bouncer in defiance, but slowly drifts away. We head back down the stairs and out onto the street where people swarm the area, converging on the footpath, sprinting across the street in front of disbelieving traffic, and queuing in front of takeaway vans. We organise ourselves at the base of the stairs.

“Nathan coming?”

“Na, he was knee deep in some bird,” Andy replies. “He’s probably taken off.”

“Where’s Harry?”

“Over there. Someone grab him will ye?” Jamie says with a frown. Harry is stumbling between groups of women, frightening them with his level of intoxication and his aggressive advances.

“Come on, little fella,” Andy says patronizingly, slipping an arm under his shoulder and steering him back towards our group.

“Na, na.... I was just....” Harry replies sloppily, twisting away to return. Andy holds him firmly, though, and Harry soon gives up.

“Right, back to mine?” Chris asks.

“Sounds good,” Finn says gruffly. We begin a long chain, making our way through the throngs.

“Gee, she looks like she’s seen a bit of sun,” Chris calls out. Andy and Finn chuckle as I look up to see three girls walking towards us. One of them is black.

“Oh, jeez,” I mutter.

“Oh, sorry Tom. Mr. PC. Is that too much?” Chris scoffs indignantly. “Actually, it’s OK. I can say that, coz I bucked her. Two weeks ago. Her name’s Friday.”

“Aye, Black Friday,” Andy quips from behind us.

“Ach, that was my joke.” Chris slumps his shoulders, disgruntled. He looks at me sideways. “You know, we’re not racists....”

I begin to reply, but Andy interjects. “He won’t care, he’s from like the most racist country anyway.”

“What?” I respond quizzically.

“With all those fucking dingoes stealing your babies, it no wonder.” Andy’s imitation Australian accent drips thickly. He jabs at me with his right hand then skips ahead, winking as he passes the three girls.

Jamie and I smile awkwardly as they stroll by.

As we clear free of the crowds, we stroll round the back of several closed shops and onto a pathway flanked by tall trees that sway dangerously in the wind. The noise and light of the club and the crowded streets has disappeared, leaving only an eerie silence and dark shapes. Overhead, a Union Jack flaps in the breeze and the shadows seem to flicker and jump. We pass a large concrete wall with the letters U.V.F scrawled in red spray paint. I’m glad I’m not alone.

“Oi, remember when I tackled that bin, and I nearly wrecked my shoulder?” Chris yaps, his drunken tongue flickering fast and unrestrained. He points to a metallic rubbish bin on the edge of the path, where the enclosed alley way broadens out into an open park lit with sporadic yellow lamps.

“Yeah,” I reply, “you’re a bloody idiot.”

“Na. It was just coz they concreted it in.”

“Yeeeah,” I say slowly, explaining the patently obvious. “And for tackling a bin in the first place.”

“What, you don’t think I can do it? Are you daring me to do it again?”

“No. I’m clearly not. But that’s not going to stop you, is it?” I watch as he sprints and launches himself at the rubbish bin. The lid flies off and little blue plastic bags filled with dog poo explode into the air, scattering all over the ground like snow.

“Eeeeeewwwwwww.” Chris swipes at the bags that land on his body, but none have opened. He jumps to his feet, leaving a terrible clutter of litter behind.

“Hahaha,” Richard laughs.

“Ohhh yuck. You’re going to have to clean that up,” I say, unimpressed.

He ignores me. Instead, he yells, “Reckon I can hit them with the top?” He picks up the plastic bin frame and hurls it at Finn and Connor who trail us by 20 metres. It flies through the air like a dead dog, crashing into the grass beside the two oblivious pedestrians. Connor pulls a two-fingered salute, then wanders over to the large black hunk of plastic. He considers it for a moment, then picks it up, places it over his head, and totters around like a small, black robot.

Arms and legs swinging stiffly, he calls out in a nasally, rigid voice, “Come... back... here... you... piece... of... shit.” Connor chases after Chris for several minutes, then settles, uncomfortable and tired inside his black cocoon.

“You gonna leave that somewhere?” Jamie asks.

“What, this?” Connor sounds astonished, though there is such a dull echo coming from the plastic tub that I could be very wrong. “No, no lad, this is coming with me. This will be with me for a very long time.”

We head along the footpath and into Chris’ house once more. Connor heaves the bin off himself and onto the floor. He crashes down on the sofa.

“Chuck us one of those tins there. Good lad.” Finn passes Connor a beer, and sits down beside him.

Andy, meanwhile hauls Harry upstairs. He walks back down heaving with effort.

“Get lucky?” Connor asks.

“Na, he was out before he hit the pillow. Shoes on though, so now he’s got a nice cock on his face.” Andy pulls out his phone and passes it around. On it, I see a photo of Andy grinning and pulling a thumbs-up next to Harry who has passed out on the bed with permanent marker all over his face.

“Haha, he was fucked, weren’t he?” Finn bellows as the phone reaches him.

“He’s just such a wee tinker,” Chris screeches in his best ‘old granny’ voice.

“Played well though, the wee fella. He’s a handy wee player,” Richard adds.

“Aye.”

“Yeah.” I nod my head.

“Can’t handle his drink though,” Connor says, rolling his R thickly.

“Drink, feck, arse,” Finn yells like Father Jack from the show *Father Ted*<sup>27</sup>.

“Girls.” Connor completes the line.

“Right, drink up,” Finn tells Connor.

“Would you catch yourself on? Sit down and have a beer.”

“I’ve got work in the morning. I’m going. You coming?”

“Ahh fer Christ’s sake. Well I’ll have to take a few for the road.” Connor picks up the remnants of his box of beer and tucks it away under his arm.

“Right then, lads, we’re away down the road,” Finn says as he and Connor stand.

“Oh, what?” Richard says in a slur, swinging his beer can in a wide circle. He doesn’t notice the small puddle on the carpet beneath him.

“Give us a yell if you wanna meet up for breakfast or summit,” Connor says to the crowd in general. He turns through the front door. “Catch you lads later.” His beloved rubbish bin lays abandoned in the corner.

“Ahhh, bloody Micks,” Richard mumbles as he falls back into his seat.

“What?” I ask, gently laughing at him.

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<sup>27</sup> (Lowney, Linehan, & De Emmony, 1995)

“Ach, they’re no fun.” Richard, all hair and attitude, resembles a petulant child with his bottom lip protruding and his arms crossed.

“Ach, they’re dead on. Sectarian Dick is just starting to rear his head now you’ve had a few too many.” Jamie points his finger, but remains calm. “Just chill out.”

“You chill out,” Richard retorts angrily. “I’m not saying they’re all wankers. I’m just saying it’s not surprising.”

“What’s not surprising?” I ask.

“Oh.....fuck. They’re just different.” Richard gets all prickly and defensive.

“They’re just a lot more comfortable by themselves, you know? They just get on with them coz their banter and stuff is different from what it would be. That’s the way they are brought up which is different from the way we’re brought up.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying,” Chris adds, leaning forward. “And the other thing is, too, just in saying that there, say if you’re working, or whatever, and say you have a, like a division of both Catholics and Protestants around you: aye it’s different. Because like, just the behaviour and all is different, you know, people chatting about. You would never mention say in the tea room ‘Oh I’m going to the 12<sup>th</sup>’ with the young boys because there’s Catholics in the room as well. So, like, if you’re working with the one group of people, like Protestants, you feel more at home, you can just, you can express your feelings more, and you can say whatever you want without holding back.”

“Aye, in fairness, they are different,” Andy adds, gazing at Jamie, trying to convince him.

“What’s different?” I ask incitingly. There is now a tight circle of young Protestant men all leaning in, engaging with the debate, alcohol relaxing their usually suppressed opinions.

“Their eyes are too far apart,” Chris quips quickly, laughing.

“Well if you want to look at it like Protestant and Catholic beliefs...” Jamie starts.

“You can’t trust em’,” Andy interrupts.

Undeterred, Jamie keeps explaining. “In terms of Christianity, I don’t know what Catholics teach nowadays but Protestants believe that we are saved by grace. So not by earning it or doing any work. Whereas Catholics would have, ahh.... that God forgave them by them doing something good to earn it. Ahh so I mean, I, that’s probably the main difference.”

Chris puts his can down beside his chair. “Yeah, people saying that they’re Protestant and on Facebook they’re putting up statuses saying for God and Ulster, do you believe in God? No, I don’t. So, it’s, it is absurd. These people, it’s not Protestant/Catholic, it’s, it’s Unionist/Republican.”

“Aye, nowadays people aren’t arguing over Calvinist doctrines or pre-destination,” Jamie adds. He turns to me. “It’s about politics, about Dublin or London, you know?”

“And you gotta think realistically, these people out on the streets are fighting because ahh their Mum’s told them “you’re a Catholic” and then this others boy’s Mum’s said to him “you’re a Protestant” and so they’re fighting for that reason.”

Chris picks up his can and takes another sip. "I'd say nowadays they're just fighting. They don't know what they're fighting about."

I'm surprised at the indifference. "So, it's all for nothing?"

"Like fuck, it is." Richard stands and more frothy amber ale is splashed upon the carpet. "Good men have fought and died. Fucking centuries of fighting for your beliefs. For nothing," he spits the words out like a horrible taste. "There'll be a united Ireland over my dead body. Hahahaha."

"Hahaha," Chris and Andy laugh. Jamie just shuts his eyes and sighs.

"I'm telling ya," Richard continues, working himself into a wild, turbulent rant.

"Um and again ahh just as my father, my grandfather, my great grandad fought them, I'll do my bit too, like. I have no interest in being ruled by Germans. Why, why on earth would I want to be ruled by a German elite who see the Irish ahh budget? Why would I want to join a country that has a parliament that is no greater than a county council? You know? This is not an independent country.

Why on earth would I want to join Dublin stroke Berlin like, or stroke Brussels, you know? I don't identify myself with that flag. It's like green, white and orange but some of them have green, white and yellow, like, they won't even have the orange in there for us, like, you know? You know, it comes from the French tricolour, you know, the Catholic piece and orange for the Protestant, like.

They've got nothing to offer us. We've got the NHS; you know? That's a major, major thing in this, you know? It's the instrument versus the sentiment, you know? And the instrument always wins, you know? People do their maths. Work it out. Where are we gonna be better off here, you know? Rory McIlroy's not the only Catholic Unionist, like, you know? There's a lot of them when it comes

down to things like the instrumental over the sentimental, the sentimental being ‘I identify as Irish,’ the instrumental being, job, pension, NHS, you know, against, a country with roads that go nowhere, you know? Ahh, there’s just no competition, like. And so yeah, some day we’re all gonna have that conversation, um and see what wins. Is it the instrument or is it the sentiment? And some people will vote, when the border poll comes in for sentimental reasons and others not, you know?”

“Do you think that’ll happen sometime in your lifetime?” I chip in.

“It’ll happen after I’m dead.” He sips at his beer fiercely, but is surprised to find it nearly empty.

Hahaha,” Andy and Chris continue to encourage Richard with hearty laughter.

Hahaha,” Richard laughs fanatically, then plays to the supporting laughter, “Mown down in a blaze of glory, like, holding south Armagh. Hahahaha.” He fires an imaginary machine gun at the four of us.

“Na, but it will,” Jamie adds in a reasoned manner. “Identities are altering and shifting. We’re not so polarised. Young Protestants can identify a lot more with Ireland than we probably can. We were polarised, you know, them against us, but you get out of the bubble, you go to university or join a rugby club or find out ‘alright, there’s 40 shades of green here,’ like, you know?”

Richard interjects. “Yeah, we were being killed and told we weren’t Irish, you know? So, after 30 years of that, you go, ‘do you know what? Bugger that, then.’ You know?”

“But we’re not all gonna throw petrol bombs at a Catholic Church.....” Jamie tempers the argument.

“Aye, but we’ll...” Richard begins.

“Look,” Andy states loudly, raising his can into the centre of our circle. “I’m happy to stay a part of Britain coz I’ve been brought up, I’m British, that’s just where I was born, like, that’s just the way I’ve been brought up. You know, I’m Northern Irish as well, and yes, there is Irish in me, you know, and you can see that when you go down to rugby games and that, you know? I don’t mind that, you know? I’m Northern Irish,” he bangs on the coffee table in front of him.

“Protestant.” Bang. “British.” Bang. “A person that’s just proud and brought up and it’s what I believe and, you know? Some people will argue its backward, its whatever, you know....”

“Tshshshsh,” Chris snorts in laughter.

“But like that’s, that’s who I am. Now I have no problem with, you know, people from the other side or anything like that, like I’ll chat away to them, I’ll share culture with them, let them have their events, but I draw the line when people try to embody, on both sides, paramilitary stuff, and trying to keep bringing that up. Until we as a country can get past bringing up the Troubles in everything we do, you know? I’m not saying sweep it under the carpet. Obviously, coz a lot of people were hurt by it and that there, but as our generation comes through, we’re not directly linked to it...”

“No...” Richard agrees.

“You know, but people feel they’re linked to it because all these commemorations and stuff like that there, you know, they have to carry that on, that tradition. Ahh, it’ll never, it’ll never be fixed, like, Huuha,” he stops to give a short breathy laugh. “But at the same time, it’s still home, like, I couldn’t leave. Haha.”

“Oh, fuck, I could leave,” Chris replies.

“See, I just feel no ties with England,” Jamie argues. “I feel closer to Dublin than I do with London. I mean, looking back, the English are the, the.... wrong party in this scenario. If ahh, I mean, if Ireland had won, you know, full independence in 1916, it would have been, history would have been written completely different. You look at America, they won their war of independence and they’re all seen as patriots. You look at the IRA, back when it was fighting the British Army as an Army, not what they are as today. If they had won, it could be seen as a completely different story, as a patriotic freedom group. But they’re seen as terrorist thugs.”

“What a load of shite.” Richard says angrily. He shuffles about on his wooden chair and almost falls over.

“Well...” Jamie begins to explain but Andy cuts him off.

Pointing his hand to make his point, he argues, “I don’t see them as a freedom fighter group. They’re a minority group, they didn’t have mass support at the start, you know, they gained it obviously through the British ahh killing people. I’m not gonna deny, they shouldn’t a did it, you know, the way they did it. Ahh, it wasn’t handled very well. But to say.... if they got independence they’d be seen as a freedom fighter group.” He scoffs. “It’s the same with any war, you know, if your

side wins, you're the good guys. But, I never saw them as an army, it was always a terrorist group, you know? They may call themselves the Irish Republican Army but they're not an army."

"Yeah but..."

"You know, and on our side as well, paramilitaries on our side, they did things just as bad, if not worse for some things and I never have supported them. You know, it's just an extremist group who are living off the past. The past is important for any group, but they don't see any future that benefits everyone."

"Would just like to say I'm not supporting the IRA..."

"No, I'm not saying you're supporting them..."

"It's just when you're talking about 'I don't support this, I don't support that' I just felt like you were having..."

"No, no, no..."

"...having a go at me there..."

"No, no, no..."

"I just wanted to clarify that."

"Hahaha," the room fills with laughter.

"Ryan's in the IRA, he's an informer," Richard says out the side of his mouth.

"Hahaha."

"Never expect me coz I'm a Protestant."

“Hahahaha.”

“Right, lads. I might be off,” Jamie sighs as he stands.

I check the clock on my phone. “I might join you,” I add, and pick my gear bag off the floor.

“Ahhh, spose I should go too,” Andy pouts. “Any plans for tomorrow?”

“Probably grab a fry somewhere. I’ll text ya,” Chris replies.

“Sounds good.”

“I’ll just grab the couch?” Richard asks tentatively. Living several miles out of town, I had wondered how he was planning on getting home.

“Aye, dead on,” Chris says. He turns to us, “Alright lads. Catch ya tomorrow.”

“Bye, bye, bye,” Jamie replies.

I give a thumbs-up, then a wave as we head out the door.

“Holy fuck it’s cold out here,” Andy screams, hugging his arms close to his thin cotton shirt. He doesn’t even turn to face us as he yells, “Right, I’ll catch you lads tomorrow.” Then he is off; a hulking beast tearing into the darkness.

“Ok.....” Jamie says, surprised by the sudden movement.

We walk up the path and around the old oak tree that signals my street. “See you tomorrow,” Jamie calls out as he walks across the road.

“Maybe. Might be going to that Gaelic match remember? I’ll flick you a text.”

Jamie gives a big thumbs-up and disappears. I turn down our street and walk briskly down the hundred yards to our door. I try to ignore the flickering lamppost and the dark shapes and shadows as I feel for the right key in my pocket. Inside, I thump my bag down on the linoleum and pour myself a large pint of water. Glug, glug, glug. One more. As silently as a drunk man can, I peel off my clothes and pile them by the door of our bedroom. Karen stirs slightly.

“Mmmmm.”

“It’s just me. Ni night.”

I open the sheets and ease into the bed. Head on pillow, I know sleep is close, but my mind still races. *I wonder if the conversation at Chris’ would have been the same if I’d been Northern Irish? Catholic? Probably not. If Finn and Connor had hung around? I’d doubt it. I wonder how I would understand Northern Ireland if I’d grown up here? If my daughters grew up here. How would they be interpreted? Jeez, that was a good game of rugby. Bloody Killoran though. I’ll feel it in the morning. How much did I drink? Bloody Moo-bombs. Hahaha. Great night though. I’ll probably.....*

Chapter Four:  
Be Protestant  
(Be Catholic)

## Introduction

*Chris leans over to me. "I don't know if you've noticed this Tom, but it's always the Protestants that lead things. Catholics never lead."*

*"Right? Why is that?" I ask.*

*"It's coz they're too used to being bummed by priests. They just do what they're told."*

*"Tshshshsh," Ian and Harry snigger.*

The most significant feature of the Ballycross RFC environment is the relationship between Catholics and Protestants. The historical context of colonialism on the island of Ireland, and most notably the thirty years of conflict known as the Troubles, continues to structure this relationship. The club includes members of the two major communities of Northern Ireland, but like many rugby clubs in the country, it has traditionally been a Protestant-dominant site. Sectarian 'banter' has been a major characteristic of this culture, despite increasing Catholic participation. For many of these young men, playing for Ballycross RFC is the first period of sustained contact with members of the 'other' group. Relationships within the club develop over time, but sectarianism remains the dominant theme. Chris' joke above is illustrative of typical Ballycross RFC sectarian 'banter.'

Performing for the Protestant majority, he light-heartedly disparaged the Catholic culture, attempting to provoke a reaction from the Catholic minority. At the same time, he established his heterosexuality, perpetuating the prevalent story of paedophilia in the priesthood, and by extension, Catholicism itself. The other chapters in this thesis must be read with this context of sectarianism firmly in

mind. Every aspect of Northern Irish social life is structured in some way by sectarianism (McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). Politics, education, housing, employment, leisure, and sport all function within a sectarian context.

## Sectarianism

*It's labelled as a religious division but it's not because most people that are involved in this division don't practice their religion. And also, if they were religious, they'd value life a bit more. I think it's more... it's now ingrained as a cultural difference, you know? These cultural differences that people then ascribe to and its simply labelled as either Catholic or Protestant. But if you look at the actual religious side of it, there's very, very little difference really. And if you look at other countries, Catholics and Protestants exist side by side, no issue at all. (Ronan)*

There are at least two meanings for the term sectarianism. First, developed by sociologists of religion, it can be used to describe a tool used to analyse church types, where the sect is a particular form of church institution, a small group separate from the dominant church organisation of the area (Ford, 2005).

Intensely committed, divergent from the dominant group, and exclusivistic, the sect maintains a degree of tension with the world, expressed through indifference, if not hostility (Wilson, 1990). However, the much more common application of the term, especially in the Northern Irish context, has described divisions grounded in religious difference (Sugden & Bairner, 1993). Definitions of the term vary as division remains over the significance of religion to the conflict, some viewing it as the primary motivating force, others as part of a symbolic labelling process (Ford, 2005).

Northern Ireland is a religious country in a formal sense with over 83% identifying with a particular religion (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014) and as recently as 2005, more than half of the population stated that they regularly attended church (Mitchell, 2005). However, formal religious membership and participation is usually higher in conflict situations because religion is used as a symbolic identity marker – when conflict is resolved, formal religious allegiance declines (Barnes, 2005).

Brewer and Higgins (1999) observe that as far back as the Plantation in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, religious beliefs were used to justify and reinforce the divisions between the communities. Religion became the dominant boundary-marker, and helped constitute the meanings of group identity and politics for some Protestants (Mitchell, 2007). Protestants had the ‘true religion’, and the plight of Catholics was seen to be a consequence of their illegitimate beliefs. The dispossession of land, subordination of Irish administration, and laws preventing economic development were justified by sectarian discourses that proclaimed the indigenous Irish morally and intellectually lacking (McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). The belief that there are immutable scriptural differences continues to this day amongst certain Protestants, perpetuating anti-Catholicism and inhibiting reconciliation between the two communities (Brewer & Higgins, 1999).

Brewer and Higgins define anti-Catholic sectarianism as “the determination of actions, attitudes and practices by negative beliefs about individual Catholics, the Catholic Church as an institution, or Catholic doctrine” (1999, p. 236). This occurs at three levels – through social structure; ideas, beliefs and attitudes; and individual behaviour (Brewer, 1992). At a structural level, sectarianism is evident

in the historical inequality Catholics experienced in terms of housing and employment. Secondly, sectarianism is manifest through ideas and beliefs, often perpetuated by myths and stereotypes that paint Catholics as lazy and/or unintelligent (Reid, 2015). And thirdly, through the actions enacted by individuals, most evidently displayed through violence, but also perpetuated through everyday sectarian practices such as derogatory language or displaying symbols.

While anti-Protestant sectarianism is also manifest through ideas and individual behaviour – as acts of harassment, intimidation, violence and hostility – Protestants in Northern Ireland have not experienced disadvantage as a group in terms of access to social structural resources (Higgins & Brewer, 2003). While the Protestant working class shared a similar economic position to the Catholic working class, they were granted cultural and political resources which engendered a loyalty to the state which Catholics lacked (Higgins & Brewer, 2003). However, as Connolly (1999) notes, in certain contexts and situations, Protestants can be disadvantaged and discriminated against, so each expression of sectarianism, and its effects, must be studied within its specific context.

*I don't take the view that ahh that Catholics were horribly discriminated against, you know? There's a wee old saying, 'there were no fat faces on the Shankhill Road,' you know? You know, the poor Protestants were just as skinny as the poor Catholics, the poor Protestants were living in gippy [sic] houses just like the poor Catholics were. (Richard)*

Religious institutions have also held considerable influence in Northern Ireland, endeavouring to place themselves within the political mainstream of their

respective communities, influencing as many people as possible, and protecting their own power and authority (Mitchell, 2005). Churches played a large part in furthering the peace process, with members of the church often central in initiating talks with paramilitary groups and politicians (Brewer & Teeney, 2015). Yet despite generally mediating tensions, churches bear a certain responsibility for reinforcing the sectarian social climate by intensifying the identity boundaries that prevented social interaction, including encouraging the maintenance of endogamy (marriage within a cultural group) (Elliott, 2013; Whyte, 1990). Furthermore, Cairns (2000) argues, religion functioned to mask sectarian exercises of power. By providing a respectable front, religion served sectarianism and the sectarian actor, 'justifying' their sectarian actions. By only selectively condemning sectarian acts of violence by their communities, church leaders, who held considerable influence, essentially gave their tacit approval (Elliott, 2013). However, the conflict has never been exclusively about religion, as politics have been at least as influential throughout Irish history (Barnes, 2005). While some observers (Mac Ginty et al., 2007; J. McGarry & O'Leary, 1995) suggest that the religious labels just serve to confuse the matter, others acknowledge the significance religion has played, arguing:

it is both political *and* religious, for religion maps onto and represents both real material and political differences. The conflict is over the legitimacy of the state and access to its political, economic and cultural resources, but religious affiliation defines the boundaries of the groups who are in competition. Religion provides some of the cultural resources for drawing moral boundaries between the ethnic groups in political competition,

religious symbols become associated with political contestation and the churches also took sides in the war. The religious affiliations of protagonists once had strong theological meaning for most people involved in the conflict. (Brewer & Teeney, 2015, p. 3655 emphasis in original)

McVeigh (1995) argues that from the late seventeenth century, sectarian labels approximate more to notions of ethnicity – of nationality, politics, culture, ‘race’ and importantly, religion – but that religion remained the main signifier of difference in Ireland. Connolly (1999) draws on this research to develop his definition:

Sectarianism in Ireland refers to all of those changing sets of ideas and practices which, whether intentionally or unintentionally, tend to construct and reproduce divisions and inequalities between ethnically-defined Catholics and Protestants (1999, p. 7).

Importantly, this identifies sectarianism in Ireland as not simply theological, but as specific to the Irish context; that it changes over time; that it is reproduced in different ways; that it should be gauged by how it is experienced, not how it was intended; and that Catholics and Protestants share an “asymmetrical power relationship” (McVeigh, 1995, p. 644). This power imbalance is often overlooked, with sectarianism widely used to describe a mutual dislike between Catholics and Protestants (P. Clayton, 1998). Conceiving of the Northern Irish troubles as a conflict about religion allowed the British public and external observers to dismiss the violence as “an irrational anachronism”, and the Northern Irish people as “ignorant peasants” (Jenkins, 1997, p. 108). Miller (1998) explains that the most

common explanation for the Northern Irish conflict is to view it as an internal conflict. Those who promote ethnic conflict models often describe the conflict as a struggle between two communities who, for various political and historical reasons, cannot coexist peacefully:

conflict is indeed waged between two communities whose members are religiously differentiated, but they are also divided by broader cultural differences, national allegiances, histories of antagonistic encounters, and marked differences in economic and political power. (J. McGarry & O'Leary, 1995, p. 172)

Sectarianism continues to be treated within an individual model as a structure of personal prejudice, rather than at an institutional level (Bell, 1990). This neatly avoids politics and considerations of the ways in which contemporary sectarianism derives from the colonial and post-colonial history of Ireland (Rolston, 1998).

This approach also tends to ignore the British state's involvement as an active participant in the Troubles (McGrattan, 2010). Miller (1998) explains that to view the conflict in Ireland as an internal battle is to ignore the central roles of the British state, the Irish Republic and international influences. Reducing the Northern Irish conflict to 'Catholics' against 'Protestants' neglects to mention that British forces inflicted, and suffered, large numbers of casualties and that the IRA claimed to target security forces rather than merely 'Protestants' (Miller, 1998). Additionally, reducing the past to a single variable facilitates the recycling of dominant narratives and fails to consider alternative experiences such as those based on age, gender, class or locale (McGrattan, 2010). Importantly, neither

community is a monolithic bloc, as identities, political priorities, religious affiliation, and class alliance are divided into multiple factions (J. Coakley, 2007; Miller, 1998).

Therefore, sectarianism in Ballycross RFC is understood as specific to the historical, social and cultural context and expressed through everyday discursive practices (D. Cairns, 2000). Thus, while the members of Ballycross RFC may see their ‘banter’ as harmless, they are located within structures that tend to discriminate and reproduce sectarian division, and by being part of such contexts, contribute to this division, however unintentionally (P. Connolly, 1999).

## Sectarianism at Ballycross

Sectarianism doesn't grow wild as a flower in a field. It's in the window box. It's in the potting shed and it's nurtured and it's handed on generation to generation. (Ervine, 2008)

As the late-former-Loyalist-paramilitary-turned-politician David Ervine alludes to in this quote, sectarianism in Northern Ireland is not an inherent element of human behaviour but is produced through a process of socialisation. Individuals form a relationship with their particular world (Van de Walle, 2011). Socialisation is not a uni-directional process where the individual is shaped by their social environment, but an interactive process involving decision-making and interpretation of the social world (J. J. Coakley, 2017). Using this approach, sectarian beliefs and attitudes are not simply transferred from the socialiser to the individual, but it is acknowledged that individuals have a degree of autonomy, and that socialisers are influenced by the socialisation process as well (Miklikowska,

2016). Through immersion within a social world, subjection to the authority of this world, and involvement in the structures and activities of this world, a social being emerges (Van de Walle, 2011). In the case of Ballycross RFC, individuals have grown up immersed within social worlds where fear and mistrust (and sometimes hatred) of the 'other' are normalised, where material symbols define social boundaries, and where practices exclude the 'other.'

The bifurcation of Catholic versus Protestant has framed their past experiences, and continues to frame their present and future interactions. The Troubles exposed a high proportion of the Northern Irish population to political violence. Hayes and McAllister (2001) state that approximately one in seven adults experienced direct violence, one in five had a family member injured or killed, and more than half knew someone injured or killed, while more were exposed to intimidation, injury or experienced riots or explosions. Hewstone, Cairns, Voci, Hamberger and Niens (2006) found that forgiveness and trust was lowest among those who had suffered most during the Troubles and those living in areas that had experienced high levels of sectarian violence.

In Northern Ireland, the social divisions of its colonial past continue to be perpetuated (Brewer & Teeney, 2015). Experiences of prejudice, violence, and death in the past fuel understandings of the present, or as Marx (1852/2000) wrote, "the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (p.7). For many, a history of colonialism, violence and 'othering' continues to form a salient aspect of their identity and their knowledge of their social worlds. As new grievances associated with the conflict arise,

ideologies are reinforced and passions reignited, contributing to the enduring nature of the conflict (Mac Ginty et al., 2007).

Family and community members often play a significant role in shaping political views and aspirations for young people in Northern Ireland (McGrellis, 2005).

Through intergenerational messages, young people learn about their own and the ‘other community’ (McAlister et al., 2014). Matthew’s discussion in *The bus journey to the game*<sup>28</sup> illustrates how these messages about the community divide pass down through generations.

This pattern leads to succeeding generations ‘remembering’ the past, structuring understanding of ancient quarrels, and holding broadly-similar worldviews (McAuley & Tonge, 2007; McBride, 2001). Through narratives which paint particular versions of history and the ‘other,’ messages are passed down through families and community members, continuing patterns of prejudice. My discussion with Nathan in *The bus journey home*<sup>29</sup> illustrates how powerful and

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<sup>28</sup> “My parents didn’t really mention it too much, but I would have spent a lot of time with my grandfather. He would have mentioned it more, being from a generation that it was more of a thing. He would have talked about Catholics and Protestants, and made jokes about Catholics. Just light-heartedly, like he had no die-hard hatred, but we would fix something up, and he would always say, ‘Oh, that’s a bit more Protestant looking now,’ or ‘Ohh the Catholics, aye, their eyes are closer together.’ Really stupid jokes that go around. But he wouldn’t have talked as if he believed it. My Granda wouldn’t have had friends as such that were Catholics and I don’t know if that’s a conscious thing or just from his upbringing. I don’t know if he had ever really mixed with Catholics, he would have thought of them as like an alien race. They had always lived around Belfast, in Protestant areas, so they had more traditional views, I think.”

<sup>29</sup> “Well ahhh, it’s a hard one like. I really do like her and all, she lives far away like from my home place so it would be quite hard you know, but like um, I just, I think more the fact was that I didn’t want to disrespect my family...”

“Yeah?”

“You know and fall out with them. Over, not, not something small, but.....that sort of thing, even though she’s a really nice girl. Um, that’s why, another reason why, um, my mum and dad would be unfavourable if I married, or had a Catholic girlfriend, because it’s OK until you have a child. Then you might have arguments about where the child’s going to go, might go to a Catholic school or will it go to an integrated school or will it go to a Protestant school? Um that’s when really things, coz I know like a few of my friends that’s happened to and it’s been massive arguments where, say, the father hasn’t chatted to their family, or yeah.”

prevalent these discourses of separation still are in contemporary Northern Ireland. Nathan is a young adult who is living away from home for the first time. Contrary to the discourses he grew up with, he became romantically involved with a young Catholic woman. While he would have been happy to continue the casual relationship, his parents' enforcement of endogamy intervened before things developed further. Elliot (2013) suggests that this insistence on boundary maintenance ensured the protraction and intensity of the conflict. He argues that these boundaries serve to "prevent social interaction and promote a kind of communal solidarity that is largely based on mutual ignorance and prejudice" (2013, p. 97). Approximately, 6% of marriages in Northern Ireland are mixed Catholic and Protestant relationships (Muldoon, Trew, Todd, Rougier, & McLaughlin, 2007).

De facto segregation through housing, education and sport continues to perpetuate this divide. The conversation between Jamie, Ronan and me in *The after-match function*<sup>30</sup> shows how this segregation plays out in contemporary Northern Irish

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<sup>30</sup> "Na, see Killoran's pretty much split in half. And I live in the Protestant side and he's from the other side of town. And I would never..... not because I didn't want to, but you just would not have associated with anybody from that part of town."

"Right? So, you wouldn't go to the other side of town?" Confused, my voice goes embarrassingly high. Chris, Connor and Ronan, walk into the room, spot us and head over. Chris and Connor drop their things and head to the bar, but Ronan pulls up a seat alongside Jamie.

"Well..... if I had to, yes, but if I was going to choose between like Spar here, or Tesco here," he uses the coasters on the table as geographical markers, "I'd go to Tesco's, just because, for one its nearer and two it's just, I dunno, like it's sorta programmed in your head, that's where to go. Everything that I needed, was there, in that half of the town. There's no real reason to go into the other side of town. And if you did, you'd just probably be seen as 'you're looking for trouble.'"

"Right? And do you think you'd find trouble?"

"Ahhh, if you're going to the shop, no, but if you're wearing, if you're wearing a GAA top or something like that or something to show your ethnicity or religion then, yeah, you are gonna start trouble or you'll get abuse."

Ronan nods and says quietly, "I remember going to get a kebab once, and I didn't even think, I was wearing a GAA top, and I was walking down and there was a parade going on at the same time, and I just, I just, people shouting abuse out of their cars, like, and I had a hoody and just zipped it up, like that..." He zips an imaginary hoody, solemn and vexed.

"Yeah?"

"And just carried on. It's an uncomfortable feeling, like, when you're on your own as well."

society. These two young men have grown up separately, constrained by cultural barriers within their town. Narratives created within each community function to maintain these boundaries. These narratives tell of the collective suffering at the hands of the other, they infer that the other is deviant, violent and irrational, and the other is reduced to the perpetrator as opposed to victim (Shirlow, 2001). The lack of contact with the 'other community' consolidates 'difference' and leads to a lack of understanding, mistrust and hostility, yet it is an understanding of this 'difference' that McAlister et al., (2014) suggest is necessary to safely negotiate the divided society.

*If you wanted to go to a certain place family members or friends would be like, 'oh, you can't go there. That's a Protestant place, you wouldn't go there.' And so, you became aware of these areas that you couldn't go to. That there were 'no go zones.' And that was absolute, like you just didn't go there. That was it. (Ronan)*

Roulston et al., (2017) used GPS tracking devices to show young people's use of space in the town of Coleraine, which highlights how several areas become effectively 'no go areas' for members of the 'other' community. Coleraine is not an isolated example, but is reflective of many areas within Northern Ireland, with over 70% of respondents in Shirlow's (2001) survey stating they will not venture into areas dominated by the other religion, with fear of being attacked the major factor in determining mobility. Had Jamie and Ronan not left Killoran for Ballycross, in all likelihood they would have remained within their communities, and never had meaningful social contact with one another.

This segregation is further reinforced through sports activities. For Jamie, despite his strong interest in sport, he feels that Gaelic games simply do not represent him or his community, and explains his complete lack of engagement with Gaelic sports in the chapter *In Town*<sup>31</sup>. As the majority of his lasting friendships have been formed through sports, and continued to be reinforced through participating in and watching sports, Northern Ireland's segregated sporting landscape acts to confine Jamie's relationships to Protestant-dominated spheres of society.

### Joking at BC

At Ballycross RFC, humour is at the centre of all social interactions. Laughter can be heard in the corridors of the clubhouse at nearly all times. A quick wit and a playful tongue are among the most valued assets in the club. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the most dominant element in Northern Irish society, the inter-community relations between Catholics and Protestants, is a frequent topic of humour. This sectarian/ethnic humour is about laughing at people who are not like

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<sup>31</sup> He picks up his beer can and has a long hard drink. He fingers the beads of moisture that run down the side as he ponders his answer. "Well, yeah, but not..... if you asked me the top 50 sportsmen in the last 50 years in Northern Ireland, I might be able to name two or three Gaelic..... whereas it's a game played by 30% of the population. And yet in my own consciousness it's very, very low. I certainly don't watch Gaelic very often. Flicking through the channels, I'm not gonna rest and watch...."

"Right? And, and is that just because...?"

"Ahh, I have limited time to watch sport on television, so I tend to be pretty selective... And it's not gonna be a Gaelic match. Sadly. I might watch a little bit if it was, if it was a Ulster team playing in the All-Ireland final." He pauses to take a sip. "I might watch a bit of it. Haha, I mightn't watch it all." He chortles away to himself. "You know it's just, it's, it's, it's, it's a time thing but it's much more than that, obviously it's much more than that. It's where my own interests lie...."

"Yeah." I rummage into my box for another beverage. "Do you, would any of your mates watch any?"

"Hahaha." He looks down at his drink, shaking it slightly to gauge the volume. "Right, so yeah, that's an interesting question, Tom, because if you looked at my friendship pattern over the years, sport would be pretty big."

"Yeah."

"But almost invariably, those friends are from the Protestant community..... Because I don't, I haven't been involved in soccer and I'm not involved in GAA. The three main games I've played, I suppose, are cricket, rugby and golf. But I'm not a great socialiser in the golf club, so the people I play golf with are the people who I used to play rugby or cricket with." Jamie laughs wryly.

us (Critchley, 2002). Ethnic jokes are bounded by social, geographical and moral boundaries, and ethnic jokes attempt to police these boundaries by mocking those peripheral to the dominant group (C. Davies, 1982).

Power is central to ethnic humour (Jenkins, 1997). Critchley (2002) argues that rather than criticising the established order, ethnic humour seeks to reinforce the status quo. He suggests that “such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless” (Critchley, 2002, p. 12). This cultural dominance is exploited within Ballycross RFC where Protestants hold a sizeable majority. As these interactions occur, members of the group learn and reproduce behaviour deemed acceptable. A culture develops where certain sectarian behaviour is sanctioned. For young Protestant men at Ballycross RFC, having come predominantly from exclusively Protestant environments, interactions with Catholics are relatively novel. They learn that taking advantage of their majority position in the club at the expense of others will not be punished. On the contrary, in many situations it will gain them social capital.

*...like in our team we have a bit of banter with them [Catholics] and like nobody takes it thick. Like you can say anything to them, and they just laugh it off. (Chris)*

While they (mostly) have rather innocuous intentions, the Protestant men utilise the power differentials in Northern Irish society for their own benefit. Protestants have certainly suffered sectarian abuse throughout Northern Ireland’s history, but there has been no enduring withdrawal of privilege for Protestants (Hill, 2009). It is the maintenance and reproduction of power differentials that makes this ‘humour’ sectarian in nature.

### *Cultural dominance*

Protestant dominance was pervasive in Northern Ireland, and generations of Protestants grew up with discourses that reinforced the legitimacy of their ascendancy. Narratives of superior work ethic and religious divine right formed as long ago as the Plantation justified their dominant position in society (Kearney, 2002). When constitutional changes were made in the wake of the peace process, this ascendancy began to falter. The cultural dominance of Protestants in Northern Ireland has always been contested, but arguably, it has never been under more threat than in contemporary society. Post-ceasefires, the status, and significantly, the population of Catholics in Northern Ireland has risen considerably in comparison to their Protestant counterparts (45.14% identified as Catholic in the 2011 Census compared to 48.36% Protestant) (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014). As the Catholic middle-class continues to swell, traditional discrepancies in housing and socio-economic status have begun to dissipate (McKittrick & McVea, 2012). Many Protestants feel they have been sold out in elite level peace agreements that have a focus on reducing violence without considering the influences that maintain conflict and separatist identities (Mac Ginty et al., 2007). The re-branding of the police force, from the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the introduction of a Parades Commission and flag protocols are all perceived as the relinquishing of Unionist control and the subsiding of Unionist identity and culture (McAlister et al., 2014). Hughes, Campbell, Hewstone and Cairns (2007) suggest that many Protestants view these shifts within a zero-sum framework, where Protestant concessions have negatively impacted Protestant communities whilst positively impacting Catholic communities. Any British state cultural

policy that addresses the unequal situation is perceived as supporting nationalism, leaving Unionists feeling isolated and betrayed (Rolston, 1998).

With Britain opting to leave the European Union despite Northern Ireland voting to remain, campaigns amongst the nationalist community for a United Ireland have been as loud as ever (G. Adams, 2016; Murray, 2017; Stevenson, 2017).

Hardly a relaxed majority, many Protestants in Northern Ireland feel vulnerable to the advancing Irish and even their unreliable friends, the British (Whyte, 1990).

Therefore, these performances can be understood as the actions of a cultural group trying to reassert the dominance that they have seen slowly slip through their fingers. This Protestant backlash is strikingly similar to the ‘angry White males’ of the USA and affirmative action policies (Kusz, 2001). In general Northern Irish society, it would be (mostly) unacceptable to openly express sectarian beliefs, but with the likelihood of a challenge extremely low, the Protestant men of Ballycross RFC feel they can push the boundaries without consequences.

#### *Just a joke*

There were three devices employed to explain or excuse sectarian ‘banter’. First, expressions were ‘just a joke.’ Because there was no intention on causing offence, there was an expectation that no offence should be taken. Humour is a way of saving face when challenged; any confrontation can be averted by admitting that everything was in jest (Foot, 1997).

*I think it's just a joke. I would joke around myself and I wouldn't like to think people take it the wrong way. (Jamie)*

The rhetorical device ‘only joking’ neutralises any challenge, passing the responsibility to the recipient for not having a sense of humour (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 2005). To challenge the sectarian joking in a serious manner would have quickly seen the unenviable label of ‘no craic’ applied. This essentially labels the individual as an outsider, as conforming to the group’s expectations of humour is a crucial element of group membership.

While jokes operate differently from other forms of discourse, and should not be reduced to the conventions of other forms, they don’t operate in a completely separate realm (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). Arguing that something is ‘just a joke’ does not render the words value-free. Humour is part of everyday life and intersects with other forms of discourse frequently. Drawing the line on what is ‘just a joke’ is not necessarily up to the joke teller, but a negotiation with the audience. And in the public spaces of Ballycross RFC, the audience is often large, varied, and not always voluntarily participating.

### *Satire*

Secondly, to justify their language, some members of Ballycross RFC claimed that expressions were satirical disruptions of Northern Ireland’s social structures. According to incongruity theory, we build assumptions around the reality we know, and jokes shatter them, hopefully causing us to laugh (Carroll, 2014). Some members of Ballycross RFC often explained that by placing the tensions between Catholics and Protestants within the context of humour, they allowed everyone to feel a temporary relief, if not a disruption of social order. By laughing at the situation, they argued, it does not control them. By turning it on its head, they

explained, they were actually overcoming the barriers that inhibit general Northern Irish society.

*I think it's hilarious, man [laughing]. Ahh, I think like if older people were looking in, it would be a disgrace, but because it's such a disgrace that we do it, it's hilarious. Um, it's like satire, man. (Connor)*

Laughing at power structures exposes their contingency, Critchley (2002) argues, showing them not to be fixed, but as constructions that should be ridiculed.

Humour can illuminate the absurdity of society. Used cleverly, humour has the potential to take you down the pathway of your own assumptions, disturb your expectations, and highlight society's issues. Or as Critchley (2002) explains, "Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world" (p.1). The problem with this explanation is that so little of the sectarian 'humour' actually fitted this category.

On very few occasions, a member of Ballycross RFC would successfully employ satire. A witty perception that played with the existing power structures or ridiculed a political figure was highly valued, but equally as rare. This is not to suggest that the Ballycross humour was without wit – far from it – but rather to point out that merely broaching the topic of the Northern Irish conflict does not in itself constitute the constructive social criticism associated with satire. Typically, humour was used disparagingly to reinforce the status quo rather than to point out its inadequacies.

*Not as bad as it could be*

Third, expressions are dismissed in comparison to sectarian violence. As Cairns (2000) noted, sectarianism in Northern Ireland is often considered only in terms of violence and discrimination, which can distract from the more subtle manifestations of everyday sectarianism. Framed against bombings, knee-capping, and murder, a light-hearted quip seems perfectly innocent in comparison. Because sectarianism in its most brutal form was highly visible in the Northern Irish media, a gentle comment here and there felt trivial in comparison.

*You wouldn't be like, 'haha did you hear about that fella that died? What a... I'm glad.' You know? That sort of thing. Just be banter. (Ian)*

Sectarianism in Northern Ireland is often considered in terms of violence, terror and widespread discrimination, but seldomly as part of the “mundane everyday reality of sectarianism” (D. Cairns, 2000, p. 437). This everyday sectarianism, Cairns argues, can be found in the ‘materialization’ of sectarianism in the cultural practices of Catholics and Protestants. In this way we can see that behaviour such as wearing symbolic signifiers or singing songs is sectarian, albeit in a socially accepted manner, despite many perceiving their actions differently (D. Cairns, 2000). The symbolic markers of Northern Irish society identify areas or social situations of safety, belonging and risk (McAlister et al., 2014), but within Ballycross RFC, they are used primarily as tongue-in-cheek statements of provocation.

On occasions, typically near the conclusion of a long, alcohol-fuelled bus journey, sectarianism would be displayed through the use of loyalist/republican songs.

Sound is a key symbol in the construction of identity in Northern Ireland (Moore,

2003). Whether that be the thumping of the lambeg, the whistling of the tin flute, or the sectarian songs of the republicans and loyalists, music especially defines the borders of the two cultures. Used in a sectarian manner, music can be used as a weapon, as witnessed at association football games, to offend the opposing group (Millar, 2016).

Chris, Richard and Finn sang sectarian songs in the chapter *The bus journey home*<sup>32</sup> with gusto and the Protestant men gained a healthy reception from sections of the audience. Millar (2016) illustrates how Glasgow Rangers fans are aware of the power of such songs to offend, that they relish it, and are calculating with the use of such music. Certain songs have such symbolic potency, Cooper (2010) explains, and that merely whistling a handful of notes can be enough to

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<sup>32</sup>“You put your left arm in,  
Your left arm out,  
In, out, in, out, you beat the Taig about,  
You knee cap the bastard when he's on the ground,  
And that's what it's all about.  
Ohhhhhh, grab yourself a Fenian  
Ohhhhhh, beat him till he's screamin'  
Ohhhhhh, kick his fucking head in  
In, out, in, out, Fuck the RA.”

“I knew a Fenian,  
His name was McFinn,  
Some people were throwing tomatoes at him,  
Tomatoes are soft, they are good for your skin,  
Not these ones, they are still in the tin.  
Ah na na na aye.”

“Come out ye Black and Tans, come out and fight me like a man,  
Show your wife how you won...”

“So sure I'm an Ulster Orangeman, from Erin's Isle I came,  
To see my British brethren all of honour and of fame,  
And to tell them of my forefathers who fought in days of yore,  
That I might have the right to wear, the sash my father wore!

It is old but it is beautiful, and its colours they are fine  
It was worn at Derry, Aughrim, Enniskillen and the Boyne.  
My father wore it as a youth in bygone days of yore,  
And on the Twelfth I love to wear the sash my father wore.”

incite violence in particular circumstances. He labels ‘The Sash My Father Wore’ and ‘Amhrán na bhFiann’ among the most inflammatory.

Chris did not necessarily believe in the message behind these lyrics but he used the songs to goad his Catholic teammates, and as a symbolic weapon to subvert the authority of Finn. Finn laughed this off as more banter with his friend, but for a young Catholic man who was new to the club, this would have been a shocking symbol of Ballycross sectarianism. This could be perceived as highly hostile without knowledge of the specific joking context of the club or if they had experienced sectarian harassment in the past (Pogrebin & Poole, 1988).

Interestingly, sporting signifiers were virtually never present at Ballycross RFC. Rugby clothing was common, but predominantly in the form of Ballycross RFC apparel or random French or English club jerseys that had been picked up in a sports store’s bargain bin. As such they harboured little symbolic significance within this context. Ulster jerseys were a rare sight and Irish jerseys rarer still, the two most pertinent symbols of these young men’s sporting choice significant in their absence. Despite being comfortable stating their allegiance to Ulster and Irish rugby, displaying that allegiance was a low-level political statement they were not comfortable making. Most players supported English Premier League football teams and the Northern Irish football team, and a handful supported Gaelic football county teams. But replica jerseys and official merchandise were very rarely sighted. On the one occasion Finn wore a Gaelic county jersey out to a training session he was given so much grief that the jersey was never sighted again. No members were overt supporters of either Glasgow Rangers or Glasgow Celtic. More than any other sporting symbol, wearing these jerseys would have

signified a firm sectarian loyalist/republican stance and would have been strongly disapproved of by the majority of players and especially the management group. Ballycross RFC could accept subtle sectarian behaviour but would denounce such overt displays.

Flags are obviously a significant symbol in Northern Ireland, but they were not a part of the everyday Ballycross RFC context. However, as the incident between Chris, Finn and Connor<sup>33</sup> in the chapter *In Town* illustrates, the players are all very aware of the symbolic power of flags. The symbolic significance of this incident is a remarkable metaphor for contemporary Catholic-Protestant relations at Ballycross. The two Catholics, with the courage of a dozen beers, become confident enough in their social standing to proclaim their Irish-ness. The two Protestants who oversee this become increasingly agitated and use force to subdue this insurrection and tarnish the symbol of Ireland. While this all plays out within an environment of light-hearted jesting, it follows the distribution of power within the club, and to a degree, Northern Ireland as a whole. Had the scenario played

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<sup>33</sup> Finn and Connor hold the top corners of an Irish flag above their heads, the fabric draping down their spines, creating a backdrop of green, white and orange. Finn holds his phone outstretched, taking photos of them in front of it.

“Tiocfaidh ar la.” Connor yells.

“Haha,” Finn laughs. “Free the six counties.”

“An Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.”

Richard joins Chris who stands close by, itching to engage the Catholics. “Go back home.”

“Dirty Free Staters.”

“Ulster says no.”

However, Connor, and Finn barely raise an eyebrow. They continue on seemingly unaware of the presence of the two Protestant agitators.

“Oh, you can’t hear me? Well, see if you notice this.” Chris, walks over and yanks the flag from Finn’s grasp. Hastily, he starts shoving the tricolour down the front of his pants.

“Oi, what the fuck?” Get it out of there,” Finn protests and attempts to pull it back.

Chris manically stuffs for all he is worth. “How do you like this, eh? This is what I think of your Republic. Woooooooooooh!”

Connor aids Finn, and between them they wrestle the material from Chris. They fluff the edges, but aren’t as keen to have it close to their faces anymore.

“Hahaha,” Chris walks away, looking over his shoulder in case of retribution before he starts talking to Richard. I watch closely, but Finn and Connor turn from the incident and continue talking unperturbed.

out in reverse, with individuals taking photos and shouting slogans in front of a British or Northern Irish flag, it is hard to imagine the Catholics within the group making a challenge to that performance.

Jokers tended to consider their expressions as fun, not as 'real' sectarianism. It is as though 'actual' sectarianism would not use or appreciate humour (Billig, 2001). And for many people in Northern Ireland, Connolly (1999) argues, once they have convinced themselves that they do not hate or harbour grudges against the 'other,' they absolve themselves of responsibility for sectarianism. For many Ballycross members, by training and playing and socialising with members of the 'other' community, they believe that sectarianism is not an issue for them. Like the common denial of racism: "some of my best friends are black" (Bonilla-Silva, 2002), sectarianism is denied with the rationalisation that they have Catholic/Protestant friends.

Being an 'outside' researcher offered some perspective to these situations (Coombs & Osborne, 2018). For a New Zealander, these sectarian jokes and jibes were not a 'normalised' part of life, sporting or otherwise. I was not viewing them from within the dominant group, where attempts to downplay the significance of sectarian language were rooted in cultural dominance. Nor was I viewing them from the minority group, who had largely become so accustomed to this language in rugby environments that they accepted that it was part of the culture. My position as an outsider meant I was sensitive to these everyday happenings that could have easily slipped into the background for someone within the Catholic/Protestant communities (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002).

Comparisons with the past – eras when overt sectarianism was commonplace – were also used to justify sectarian jokes. Ballycross RFC, like nearly all rugby clubs throughout Northern Ireland, was a Protestant domain during the Troubles and the years that followed. Catholics were not excluded, but rugby clubs were not welcoming environments during a time of such tension. Therefore, it was a time when sectarianism could safely go unchallenged.

*John: ...in my time you'd have got sectarian songs on the bus...*

*Tom: Right*

*John: People have had a few cans on the way home or... More on the presumption that there would be nobody on the bus that would be offended by it, or, who is there to offend?*

When Catholics started to integrate into Ballycross RFC, this sectarian behaviour did not change dramatically. It was generally accepted that a Catholic joining the club would have to accept frequent sectarian humour at their expense. The dominant discourse within this established Ballycross RFC culture suggested that anyone who found this problematic would be unlikely to return. As such, the ‘good Catholics’, those who were willing to overlook or engage in sectarian humour, would be filtered from the crowd.

*I think I was probably one of the first ones [Catholics]. I remember Christmas dinner said in one of the speeches. Hahaha. ‘We now have Catholics.’ It was a bit of a toast. Hahaha. (Ronan)*

Faced with a choice, they either accepted this sectarian dialogue and tried to establish themselves as ‘good bant’; or removed themselves from the club. The

residue of these discourses can still be seen in the sectarian humour of the 2015/16 members. Ballycross RFC has always been a Protestant domain, and while Catholics are now accommodated, they are made to understand this history. Catholics who possess sufficient rugby talent are shown greater leniency, but they are still faced with this examination of their resolve. As the minority group in Ballycross RFC, they are forced to play a subservient role to ‘get along.’ This notion was reinforced by Michael, who had been witness to this process multiple times in the club over his time:

*I think that Catholics who have played, have probably over the years bitten their tongue or, just, you know, been aware that they were in away territory and have either decided they want to play rugby or not play rugby and probably tolerated remarks or whatever. Not directed at them, I don't think at an individual level, I can never think of anybody who would have been discriminated against, but I think the cultural thing might have played out. (Michael)*

While certain Catholic players uncritically accepted this reality, the scenario was rather more problematic for others. For many young Catholic men, just getting to the stage of joining a rugby club meant overcoming several cultural barriers. Pressure, and at times, verbal abuse, was often applied from family, friends, and the wider Catholic community to engage in the traditional nationalist sports of the GAA. To play rugby meant committing to a British sport, a leisure activity of the coloniser. Connor and Finn discussed the reaction of their friends when they explained that they were choosing to play rugby instead of Gaelic football:

*Connor: you got digs and all. People sorta, they sorta half-heartedly but sorta half-seriously woulda give ya a bit o' abuse about it but...*

*Finn: Bit of sectarian abuse back then. But it wasn't, like, it was good humoured.*

*Connor: Aye. We would've got a bit of, I know the way people try to make it seem sorta...*

*Finn: Jokish, aye.*

*Connor: And they might a been a bit serious, or whether they were just making a joke about it, but. They would've, and also about rugby being gay as well.*

*Finn: Aye*

*Connor: Gay and Protestant*

*Finn: Gay and Protestant*

Arriving at a new club, entering an environment where you were a minority in a traditionally Protestant domain was a daunting prospect. In order to divert attention, some Catholic players concealed their ethno-religious affiliation. Most players would assume that a given player was Protestant, and until something clearly identified them as Catholic, for many, it was easier to avoid publicising their status. With sectarian behaviour frequently displayed, many sought safety in anonymity.

*Because there's more Catholics than you think, but they're quiet about it as well [laughing]. It's funny. (Finn)*

But in most scenarios, there was no opportunity to go unnoticed. One of the many ethno-religious signifiers would be revealed, and the young man would be instantly ‘outed.’ This often-public process could be quite daunting, as Declan illustrated:

*Declan: I can actually, I can remember, one time I actually did feel a bit uncomfortable. We had to stand up in the group and say your name, your school and what rugby club you played for. So, I said my name, I said I went to St. Pats, it’s obviously a Catholic school, and then, I said I didn’t play rugby, I played Gaelic before. And Finn said, ‘Oh, he’s a Catholic, lads.’ And I was a bit like ‘Oh. Oh dear.’ It was only later on I found out Finn was a Catholic.*

*Tom: So, in that moment, how did you feel?*

*Declan: I did feel uncomfortable. Everyone was laughing. It’s like a room full of strangers, do you know what I mean? And you don’t know what people’s backgrounds are and stuff, and it was worrying.*

Overcoming the unfulfilled expectation and disparagement of members of your own community must have been extremely difficult for impressionable young men. To face sectarian hostility once there, was often placing too many hurdles in the way of a leisure activity, especially for Ronan, who was new to the sport. For Finn and Connor, by the time they arrived at Ballycross they had already built up an array of skills to complement their naturally large frames. But when Ronan first arrived at Ballycross RFC he was unaccustomed to the nuances of the sport, he was not particularly fast or athletic, and he was small. Here, he describes how unwelcome he was made to feel in his first few weeks:

*Ronan: Initially there was a few comments and a few looks. One guy, I dunno, maybe I was trying too hard, but we were having a beer after the game, and one of our props, told me to shut up. Hahaha. He was like, 'Shut up.' I was like, 'The hell do you think you're talking to? But you're 20 odd stone so I'll not force this issue.' Hahahaha.*

*Tom: Why did he tell you to shut up?*

*Ronan: Well I didn't know him at the time, he didn't know me, and he didn't want to know me. That was my understanding of it, you know? He comes from a particular background that's different from mine, you know? But I think eventually people got to know ya, it was less of an issue. I wouldn't say it was not an issue. It was less of an issue. There was always [sic] jokey comments, but they're still comments. It was difficult learning to play rugby in the first instance, and then whenever you kind of think 'well, they don't really want me there anyway,' it's kind of a, you think well, what's the point?*

Here, Ronan was confronted with a naked sectarianism he was unaccustomed to. He had grown up within 'his' community, was made aware of 'others', was taught a particular version of history, and had limited, neutral interactions with Protestants at tertiary education. The "20-stone prop" grew up in a very similar context within the Protestant tradition. His fiercely religious background was heavily prejudiced against the Catholic community and he had no hesitation in asserting his views. After this incident, it was only the encouragement of other friends that motivated Ronan to return and this scenario would have been replicated many times at Ballycross RFC and at other clubs across Northern

Ireland. This example occurred when Ronan first joined the club and most club members would say that this blatant sectarianism is a characteristic of a past that no longer represents Catholic-Protestant relations at Ballycross RFC. This was not a distant past though, and the residue of these attitudes is still discernible in contemporary interactions.

#### *Relationships of trust and humour*

There is an important provision to add to sectarian humour at Ballycross RFC.

The context in which sectarian humour is expressed is hugely significant.

Ballycross RFC is awash with Catholic-Protestant jibing, and within that specific context, much of it is understood within the realms of playful banter. As Pogrebin and Poole (1988) noted, to a casual observer, much of this would not appear humorous, but offensive. However, within the contextual rules of joking within Ballycross, these interactions represent functions of group process, and are judged by the standards the group had constructed. We must understand humour as localised and highly context-specific (Critchley, 2002).

The ability to ‘perform’ banter was a highly valued attribute and a marker of group acceptance. Nichols (2018), in her research on lad culture at an English rugby club, identified banter as a significant element for the men to convey their identity and belonging to the group. Pogrebin and Poole (1988) explain that humour can function, in scenarios such as this, to promote social solidarity. As group members recognise that they can share a laugh at each other’s expense with no ill will, Pogrebin and Poole contend, they may generate feelings of implicit understanding and camaraderie.

The differentiating factor between disparaging sectarian humour and unifying group banter was the relationship between the individuals involved. For banter to be understood as inoffensive a foundation of trust had to be built over a significant period of time. Individuals had to prove themselves, sometimes over multiple years. Knowing your audience is important in such situations, as this banter cannot be shared with everyone (Dickson & Hargie, 2006). Humour is based on the social relationship between the participants and particular to the specific context (J. Palmer, 1994). As Critchley (2002) states, “a joke that does not get a laugh is not a joke – end of story” (p. 79). Only after members of Ballycross RFC had trained, played, sweated, bled, argued and laughed together, and shared relaxed conversations about politics, culture, history and society, were they able to use the tense social climate as material for comedy.

*...I think when a club gets to the stage where people are able to mock offend, then you've really got a much more healthy culture than, 'don't mention the war.' That people can actually say, 'Protestant git, ye,' you know? Really, I think it's a sign that people acknowledge cultural difference and can mock it themselves. (John)*

When two or more individuals are friendly enough to engage on such a topic despite coming from different backgrounds, there is plenty of room to explore the topic from a comedic perspective. For example, Chris and Finn jested constantly. At times they were as abusive about each other's community as possible. In a significant proportion of these jokes the teller may not necessarily have believed the stereotypes they were reproducing (Billig, 2001).

In fact, in many of the interactions, the purpose was to ‘get one over’ on their fellow teammates, and sectarianism was simply the most available tool at their disposal. Both individuals were comfortable with this: their depth of relationship, and knowledge of their feelings and intentions allowed them to brush aside even the gravest of insults. In fact, conceding a particularly witty or unexpected jibe was often savoured most. As Critchley (2002) explained, the game of joking is only successful when players understand and follow the rules. Both Chris and Finn took great joy from playing their particular form of ‘sectarian banter’ game. This is evident in their playful conversation regarding some rather heavy sectarian issues in the chapter *In the changing room*<sup>34</sup>.

Broaching the topic of riots and ethnic cleansing would be a sensitive topic for most members of the ‘other’ group, but as friends with a long, amiable relationship, these ‘jibes’ were understood, not as face-threatening or offensive, but as part of their repartee. There is an element of self-deprecation that allows the other member to engage without being defensive but it is the history of this particular joking relationship, their comfort with each other, and with the content

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<sup>34</sup> Chris smiles as he pulls up his long rugby socks. “Ah, heard there might be a bit of craic back home with a few of the locals. Maybe throw a few stones, might get lucky and chuck a few petrol bombs. But you never know. That’s just if everything goes to plan.”  
“Aye fuck, I heard about that. What’s that about? I might have to go down and get a few bricks ready.”  
“Fuck knows. Is it ever about anything? Good chance for the scumbags to wreck the place and get in a fight.”  
“You must be in your element then?”  
“Oh, fuck yeah. I’ll get out my sash and my ATAT banner, get the lads round on the lash and get some chants on the go.”  
“What’s ATAT?” I inquire. I’m still reluctant to expose any skin to the elements but begin by removing my shoes.  
“Haha. It’s ‘All Taigs are Targets.’ You know, just a friendly slogan my mates at the UDA use.”  
“Aye fucking dead on, those cunts.”  
“No Surrender.” Chris reaches forward and taps at Finn’s crotch.  
“Arrrgh, ye wanker.” Finn blocks, then flicks his shorts back in Chris’ direction but misses.

of their regular sectarian banter, that allowed them both to take amusement from their jocularity.

Chris and Finn were the most visible, but hardly the only ‘cross-community’ relationship which used the sectarian divide as a basis for humorous exchanges. A number of players had built friendships over several years at the club and had built enough trust to accept to-and-fro ribbing without taking offense. These friendships allowed rapport and understanding to develop much more significantly than in the past, in the majority of contemporary society, and are much more sustainable than friendships developed in many of the cross-community initiatives. The thought of Protestants and Catholics living together and mocking each other’s cultural traditions without ill will or offense would have been nearly unthinkable 30 years ago. At Ballycross RFC, it is now reasonably common.

The complication to this optimism is that trustworthy friends were not the only Ballycross members privy to most of these interactions. Most conversations within Ballycross RFC environments were very public. Though Chris and Finn were comfortable with the verbal jibing about ‘their’ communities, other members of the club could have interpreted this disparagement in a radically different way. Humour is a volatile substance, dependent on the setting, context, the teller and the recipient, that “rides a cliff-edge of ambiguous meaning and interpretation” (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, p. 9). In the public domain, they had no control over how their words would be received by others. Dickson and Hargie’s (2006) study of sectarianism in the workplace highlights this, as several reports of harassment in their study were due to banter that had gone wrong.

Additionally, a number of peripheral individuals would often engage and participate in this dialogue, through gasps, cheers, laughter or their own comments. A chance to ‘stick the boot in’ was rarely missed when one group (nearly exclusively Catholics) was under attack. Therefore, the friendly ‘banter’ between friends always contained the potential to mutate into a more aggressive interaction in the larger public group. A ‘jovial’ conversation could quickly become sectarian humour reinforcing Protestant dominance.

## Violence

Violence is always an outgrowth of milder states of mind. Although most barking (antilocution) does not lead to biting, yet there is never a bite without previous barking. (Allport, 1954, p. 57)

Northern Ireland’s “culture of violence” saw an entire generation emerge within a society that glorified physical force and was “polarized by the competing understandings of history” (Jarman, 2004, p. 435). Unpacking violence in Northern Ireland is complex; language is codified and laden with meaning, definitions are designed to either condemn or support its use, violence by the state is often framed distinctly from violence against the state, and fundamental to all discourses are questions of legitimacy (Cavanaugh, 1997). Paramilitary groups proclaim themselves as protectors of their communities, but as Knox (2002) explains, the reality of paramilitary violence is often grotesque, brutal and vicious. He describes this in detail:

Beatings are carried out using weapons such as baseball bats, golf clubs, pickaxe handles, drills, iron bars, hammers and hurley sticks spiked with

nails to inflict puncture wounds on victims. Assaults are aimed directly at bones to cause multiple fractures. In so-called 'crucifixions' the victim is tied, spread-eagled, upside down to railings and beaten mercilessly.

(Knox, 2002, p. 173)

Joel described such an interaction between a schoolyard friend and the local paramilitaries as he grew up:

*I know a guy that was in the estate and I knew him well. He knew he was gonna get shot by the UDA and they took him down and shot him in both legs. And then for a joke they shot him in the backside but hit the main artery. So, he was bleeding to death. They thought it was funny. Just happened to be a guy out walking his dog seen him lying face down in a pool of blood and called an ambulance. Huh [resigned laugh]. Or he wouldn't be here today. You know, so... (Joel)*

Despite common misconceptions that segregation promotes collective safety and prevents intergroup violence, Balcells et al., (2016) suggest that violence reaches higher levels across segregated communities as ingroup bias and outgroup fear is strengthened. To justify reactive violence, Shirlow (2001) explains, communities had to create a rationale that supported conflict and utilised fear as an instrument for survival. War and conflict are characterised by unpredictability and a loss of security and structure (Betancourt & Khan, 2008), and adults attempt to recreate a sense of normalcy in these settings to protect their young, and themselves, from the harsh realities of their world (Eisen, 1988).

*I dunno, growing up through the Troubles you get used to hearing about it all the time on the news so, you get very relaxed about it [laughing]. You know, 'there was somebody shot.' 'Oh ok.'* (Joel)

As a means of coping, many young people habituated to the circumstances, making the abnormal normal, yet this desensitisation to stress and anxiety carries the risk of dissociation, holding long term consequences for personal and social relations (Muldoon, 2013). Tomlinson (2007) identified significantly higher rates of depression among those who experienced violence, while Muldoon (2013) documented a range of short term and long term consequences including anxiety, insomnia, enuresis, delinquency and post-traumatic stress.

*I was going to school on the bus one day when a bomb went off in the back window of the bus. And you just went on to school. The school windows were done with Sellotape, so if a bomb went off in the area the glass didn't come into the classroom. Thinking back, it was like something out of a 1940's war movie, but you were used to it. Sadly, it was the norm.* (John)

Though violence has significantly reduced since the worst of the Troubles (Balcells et al., 2016), it is still a common factor of Northern Irish society. Though it affects all sectors of Northern Irish society, sectarian violence is disproportionately linked to the working class (Dickson & Hargie, 2006).

Violence, death and injury are concentrated in the poorest communities (Hillyard, Kelly, McLaughlin, Patsios, & Tomlinson, 2003).

*But it isn't a working-class issue. Yeah, the working class are often the ones that pull the trigger and suffer the most but it has been pervasive right through society. I mean, arguably the middle classes are just as*

*culpable because they have held particular views, and when they might have done more to challenge, they tended to withdraw to the suburbs, pull out of politics, send their kids to universities in England, and keep their heads down. And I'm sure I'm guilty of some of that myself.* (John)

Accordingly, direct violence is not an element of most Ballycross RFC members' lives. The middle-class are less likely to be exposed to extreme ideologies, and more likely to have opportunities to withdraw (Bairner, 2003; McAlister et al., 2014). However, Brexit threatens to disrupt the relative peace of Northern Ireland. Despite Northern Irish concerns over the fragile peace, economic trade and the status of the border, little attention was paid to the implications of Brexit for Northern Ireland by politicians and voters in the rest of Britain (Burke, 2016). Although 54% of voters in Northern Irish voted to 'Remain', Britain as a whole voted to 'Leave' (Gormley-Heenan & Aughey, 2017).

*I would be very worried if we were to exit from the European Union. I think that could be a really backward step in terms of North-South relations. The danger of the border being re-established... And if the border's re-established it becomes a target and so the whole cycle of violence... yeah...* (Michael)

Brexit undermines the Good Friday Agreement by disrupting the freedom of movement allowed by common European Union membership and ignoring the constitutional arrangement between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (Holder, 2017). For the young men of Ballycross RFC, a 'hard' border would not just mean an inconvenience when travelling south, but the threat of violence that accompanied militarised borders during the Troubles would return. Despite his

relaxed storytelling nature, John's tale<sup>35</sup> in *The bus journey to the game* highlights how tense border crossings were in the past. It is possible that republican factions could mobilise support based on the costs of Brexit to the nationalist cause – and military checkpoints would constitute prime targets for violence (Stevenson, 2017). This would inevitably elicit retaliation from loyalist paramilitaries.

Violence could return to Northern Ireland in a way that most Ballycross RFC members have only heard about.

On the field, the members of Ballycross RFC would occasionally scuffle (with sectarian insults adding a particular edge), and certain individuals were frequently involved in physical confrontations in nightclubs and bars on Saturday nights. But the most overt display of sectarian violence occurred on the rugby field against Killoran<sup>36</sup>. Killoran is an exclusively Protestant club, drawing its catchment from

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<sup>35</sup> “Well, one Saturday, I remember, we were travelling in a mini-bus, returning from a game in Belfast, with about 14 or 15 lads. Vans used to get stopped and searched for smuggled guns and bombs all the time and every now and then there would be an incident and someone would get killed. Looked at the wrong guy or said the wrong thing. Didn't much matter what side of the community you were from.

“And we got stopped at a police checkpoint but this one was manned by an English Army regiment. It's always a bit tense because you never know how they'll react. They're nervous as hell, never knowing if the next vehicle is an ambush, and they've got a gun in your face. And then one of the lads makes a smart comment about one of the squaddies. Suddenly we're all outside, hands on the side of the bus, and they're frisking us. ‘What's your name? Where do you live? Where are you off to?’

“We're all shitting ourselves. And then a radio crackles. And the young man stops and stares into the surrounds. Suddenly he yells, ‘Right, we've gotta move.’ And then about a dozen guys emerge from nothing, just materialize from the grass. They've all been pointing guns straight at us the whole time. And then they're gone. Off to a bomb scare or a shooting or something.” John chuckles.

<sup>36</sup> Joel waits as the Killoran player on top of him twists free. I look down at his face, which is partially obscured by a leg, but placid and patient.

Thudth.

I cannot see Joel for the Killoran shorts that suddenly block my view.

“You dirty cunt.” Jamie shoves the Killoran tighthead prop in the chest. Jamie's shirt front is twisted, a fist at his throat, fat knuckles digging into his chin. He smiles dirtily. The pack has closed to breathing distance. White steam rises, clouding everything. Joel lies prone in the mud. “You fucking knee him in the head?” Connor strides in. Jamie forces his forearm down on the arm at his throat, but he can't break free.

Still staring into Jamie's eyes, the Killoran troll spits, “Who's the cunt with the dirty Southern accent?”

the Protestant side of a strongly residentially segregated town. The competition, therefore, is between a Protestant team and a team with Catholics. This incident should not be understood as merely a rugby fight, nor should it be viewed as an isolated verbal attack. This must be understood within the context of the sectarian climate of Northern Ireland, and the pursuit of self-interested goals within wider political structures (Jackman, 2005). Offensive stereotypes, Lockyer and Pickering (2005) explain, do not simply derive their ideological currency from a contemporary context, but are linked to a legacy of meanings and associations that extend back into the past. Both Killoran and Ballycross players have grown up within this context, and are fully aware of the inter-community tension between Catholics and Protestants. For the few Catholic players, the verbal disparagement that led to physical confrontation was not a synchronic slur, but language that linked to the prejudice and discrimination suffered by Catholics throughout Northern Irish history.

Contrary to the belief that sport provides a site for peace and reconciliation, this fight provides an example of how sport may also provide a platform for inter-

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“Ye fucking.....” Connor’s sentence dissolves in the explosion of violence. Suddenly the pitch is a swarm of bees, swirling and twisting, bodies grappling and thrusting, fists and elbows flying through the air.

“Ppppppeeeeeeee, Ppppppeeeeeeee, Ppppppeeeeeeee.” The ref blows frantically as men fly into the fracas.

The centre of the brawl rotates around Finn, Connor and Jamie and four Killoran men. At the same time, five smaller conflicts orbit around the nucleus. Punches and elbows thrash ubiquitously, though seldom land with force. Joel teeters, but manages to stand and find space. I grab a Killoran collar from behind and rip a man off Harry, then turn to see Will being bullied by three much larger men. One drives an overhead right into Will’s nose, which erupts with blood. But he is still held, and though he struggles, two further punches rain down on his skull.

“Ppppppeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.” Desperately trying to halt this all-in brawl, the referee blows for all she is worth, pulling the less engaged participants off the edges.

Matthew manages to make his way to Will, barrelling one attacker to the ground. Though Matthew receives several clouts to the back of his head, and has his tape turban ripped, he buys enough time for Will to escape to the sidelines. Phil rushes over and grabs him, shrouding him in his jacket protectively. John, Ryan and the Killoran management are all on the field, attempting to separate their men. Finally, enough players disengage to allow the fire to wither.

group tensions to ignite (Sugden & Bairner, 1993). Allport (1954) explains that for verbal aggression to escalate into overt violence normally requires that the opposing groups are thrown into close contact. There are few sites of closer contact than competitive rugby. The physical nature of the contact sport means that opponents are regularly releasing frustration in (legal and illegal) physical attacks on each other. In amateur rugby matches throughout Northern Ireland, it is not uncommon to see contact flare into hostilities. When you add the dynamics of historical sectarianism, it is unsurprising that rugby provides a flashpoint for conflict.

Similar to the denial of malice in disparaging sectarian humour, physical expressions of sectarianism are denied as sportspeople justify their actions in the context of gaining a competitive advantage. Despite Ballycross and Killoran playing in an amateur competition, the emphasis on performance and victory is disproportionately high. Every opportunity to gain ascendancy over an opposite is taken, and for many, crossing the border of legality is not prohibitive. In this way, the Killoran prop may have viewed his sectarian slurs as just an opportunity to rile his opposition. Richard explained this mentality as he described a match from his youth:

*Now this is the semi-final of the Floodlit cup. We give them nothing but shit about being Catholics the whole match, like ahh 'Fenian this and Fenian that.' In their ears, away from the ref, like, getting them really, you know? And the wee scrumhalf says, 'I'm a Protestant' [in a soft voice]. I don't give a fuck, like, you know? Fucking... Now, were we doing that because we were sectarian? No. We were doing that to get under their*

*skin. It didn't matter if they were Catholic or Protestant. Just calling them names, just niggling at them the whole game, like, you know? And we beat them, went on to win that tournament, like, you know? We, we were winners, like, you know? We would do anything. When he puts the ball in, I would stand on the loop of his lace, if the ref wasn't looking. You know? We would use anything, it's nothing personal against those guys. We wouldn't see them again, we hadn't seen them before, like, you know?*

For Richard, and potentially the Killoran prop as well, he justifies the words as performing the same function as standing on the lace of your opposite: gaining a competitive advantage. This acts as an example that dispels the myth of rugby as a unifying force. In this case, every element that distinguishes one group from another is used to 'other' them, as leverage to disturb them from their performance. Richard is aware of the gravity of his actions, he knows it is likely to offend and aggravate his opponent, but he is apathetic towards the Catholic cause and utilises the most inflammatory tool at his disposal.

However, the Killoran fight also places Ballycross RFC sectarianism in some context. For the young Protestant men, despite identifying as the same ethno-religious group as the Killoran players, in this context, being part of Ballycross RFC is a more important in-group. Having spent months jibing at Connor with sectarian jokes, they now defend him ferociously from an out-group.

In Ballycross RFC, as in most rugby teams, there is an unwritten code of protecting your teammates in conflict. If anyone is involved in a scuffle, then there is an expectation that their teammate will come to their aid, regardless of the danger. Players overconform to the sport ethic (R. Hughes & Coakley, 1991),

engaging in confrontation without thought to the consequences of their actions or even the cause of the conflict. Will explains:

*...I despised Darren. Hated him with a passion off the pitch. But when he was on the pitch he was my mate. In that City game I stopped a guy from knocking seven bells out of him, you know? Coz the 15 guys standing with me at that moment in time, on that pitch, you know? You lie your body down for them and you stand up for them, no matter what the cost is, you know? (Will)*

In the Killoran fight, Ballycross RFC membership is more salient to their identity than their ethno-religious group. Many analyses of Northern Ireland paint identity as a complex but fixed component (Miller, 1998). This shows how identity can be increasingly fluid in contemporary Northern Ireland, changing in relation to circumstances and interests. Despite the constant references defining in-groups and out-groups, the derogatory comments, and the occasional confrontations, for these individuals, within the “heat of battle”, being Catholic or Protestant matters less than belonging to Ballycross RFC.

Chapter Five:

Be a man

(Be feminine)

## Introduction

*Andy, sporting a brand-new pair of white boots, dances away to the left, climbing two fences to avoid it.*

*“Faggot.” Finn states casually, as he walks straight through the muck. As I carefully step over the worst of the mud pool, I glance at Andy who jogs back to us, but he completely ignores the insult. I pick up a ball from the team bag at the edge of the pitch, and the three of us jog down to the far end, passing the ball as we go.*

“Be a man.” At Ballycross RFC this means more than designating the space as male-only, although that is a significant element of the environment. “Be a specific type of man” would be more accurate: a man who is heterosexual, tough, and can drink. Finn and Andy have normalised these discourses, and the example above shows how casually and uncritically problematic masculine behaviour can become part of everyday social interactions. Yet while it is ‘normalised’ it is also not taken as a serious insult. Andy recognises that this is an attempt to goad him rather than an attack on his heterosexuality, and doesn’t feel the need to defend his masculinity in this instance. These masculine identities are constantly performed according to the specific discourses and power relations within Ballycross RFC. Yet not all individuals ascribe to such narrow notions of masculinity, and there are multiple influences that shape identities within the context. As such, Ballycross RFC is a complex, dynamic site for producing both harmful and constructive masculine identities. I provide some conceptual context by outlining some of the dominant theories that have been used in recent sport studies of gender, and I draw upon Foucault’s notion of discourse as a tool for

understanding masculinity at Ballycross RFC. This is a tool that I have applied for its explanatory value for my fieldwork evidence rather than a concept I had chosen in advance.

## Masculinities

To speak of masculinities is to speak of gender (Connell, 2005). And to critically engage with masculinities is to recognise that the relationship between men and women is not, nor has ever been, an equitable one (Whitehead, 2002).

Understanding gender is therefore linked to relations of power, benefitting some and disadvantaging others (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994). Despite accounting for roughly half the world's population, and controlling, directly or indirectly, most of the world's resources, capital, media, political parties and corporations, men have largely escaped a critical gaze, and this is where studies of masculinities come in (Whitehead, 2002).

Yet masculinity is a difficult concept to define. The different ideas, images and behaviours of what constitutes masculinity can be competing or contradictory, they depend on the speaker and the context, and they are often ambiguous (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994). There is not one universal masculinity, but many masculinities that change over time, being affected by society and at the same time, affecting society itself (Morrell, 1998).

*In more rural parts, I would say the man would still be the one to go out and earn a keep so to say. And the lady, woman, is a stay-at-home-Mum and looks after the house. I know in my house; my Mum earns more than my Dad does and it's not an issue or a source of conflict within the house.*

*Ahh so yeah, I would say the culture is changing a lot. So, just what even being a man, being a manly man means, it's probably a lot different, depends which area of Northern Ireland you're living in. (Jamie)*

Within sociology, masculinity is typically defined as the socially-constructed gender ascribed to male bodies (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). As such, masculinity is understood, not as a fixed natural attribute found in men's biology, but as a collective gender identity that is socially constructed, fluid and under constant revision, negotiation and movement (Morrell, 1998; Whitehead, 2002). As constructions, there are always different ways of looking at these identities (D. H. J. Morgan, 1992). These are understood not as neutral concepts, but located within a contested political arena (Whitehead, 2002).

Consequently, many authors have drawn upon Foucauldian analysis to understand masculinities as discursively constructed. This 'third wave' of masculinity studies (see T. Edwards, 2006; Whitehead, 2002) adopts a poststructural perspective, and is particularly concerned with questions of normativity, performativity and sexuality (T. Edwards, 2006). Foucault argued that power was not a possession that could be held, but that power relations exist within all human relations, and that people arrive in positions of authority through the use of discourses which shape and constrain perceptions of reality (Pringle, 2005), or "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972/2002, p. 54). Whitehead (2002) describes Foucault's concept of discourse as concerned with language, practice, and how the body is marked as an individual. He explains:

Discourses are the means by which we come to ‘know ourselves’; perform our identity work; exercise power (in contrast to holding power); exercise resistance; pronounce or deny the validity of knowledges and ‘truths’; communicate with others and ‘our selves’ through the reflexive process; and subjectively engage with the world around us. Discourses are not restricted to any one society or culture but permeate all social environs. It is through discourse that beliefs, rituals and truths surrounding, for example, gender, sexuality and race, become manifest and dominant. (2002, p. 103)

Discourses should not, Markula and Pringle (2006) explain, “be considered as a simple translation between reality and language but as *practices* that shape perceptions of reality” (p. 31 emphasis in original). As such, masculinity is not conceived as fixed to the male body, but as constructed, performed and read in relation to discourses and power relations (Butler, 1990; Pringle & Hickey, 2010). The power of discursive regimes of gender truth is within the language that separates woman and man, straight and gay, and makes these notions seem ‘true’ (Butler, 1990; Petersen, 2003; Whitehead, 2002). These discourses can contribute to very real sets of lived differences and inequitable power relations within and between the sexes (Pringle & Markula, 2005). The sustained performance of these discourses, such as adolescent boys displaying athleticism, toughness, domination, bullying, hyper-heterosexuality and violence, can be understood as the reproduction of a masculine norm in a social context that recognises that as normal (Phillips, 2006). Within sporting environments, these embodied performances are enacted so that others within the context read them as masculine (Pringle & Hickey, 2010).

I highlight and draw upon these normalised concepts to understand the young men of Ballycross RFC as discursively-informed masculine beings. Performances of masculinity at Ballycross RFC are often complex and fluid, and a Foucauldian analysis of discourse and power enables an understanding of sport “as a contradictory and complex medium for masculinity making” (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001, p. 118). According to Foucault (1978), discourses are “neither uniform nor stable” (p.100). This allows us to understand the more ambiguous and seemingly-conflicting moments at Ballycross RFC. For example, Andy’s homophobic comment at the start of this chapter was a normalised way Ballycross RFC members distanced themselves from femininity, yet conversely, discourses of homophobia were often criticised and mocked, such as Chris’ imitation of his coach<sup>37</sup>. A Foucauldian analysis of Ballycross RFC allows for this ambiguity, and enables an understanding of power relations that goes beyond a repressive hierarchy.

## Masculinity in Northern Ireland

*Nathan: It depends where you’ve been brought up. But you know, a man’s man, for me, in Northern Ireland was always [a] big strong man, you know? If he gets in a fight, he gets in a fight, you know? If someone has a go at you, you don’t back down. Ahh he’ll go out and have a pint and that there, you know? Goes out and not afraid to get his hands dirty. It’s a man who works, who goes out and makes a living and provides you know? He’s*

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<sup>37</sup> “Where were you on the night of the 15th?” Andy yells, pointing his finger at Richard.

“Haha.”

“Mixed netball, what are you, a bunch of gays?” Chris deepens his voice.

“Hahaha.”

*the rock of his family that sorta idea. For me that's what a man's man is... But you know, that'll differ from people in wealthier areas compared to people who have that working man background, you know.*

*Ian: I mean, [people have] tough backgrounds in Northern Ireland, no matter where you're from. I don't agree with the whole thing if you're from a rich area you haven't, ya know? Everyone lived through the Troubles, everyone's been connected somehow, everyone's had to go through it, everyone's had to push through. So, you take it on the chin, you move on, you don't feel, there's not a lot of sharing goes on, you don't share your emotions, like...*

*Harry: Well, yeah, same, my Dad [is a] fireman and he sees some of the worst stuff he'll ever see in his life. Horrible, horrific stuff and he'll always just come home, smile on his face, handy man, he'll do what needs done around the house. And then at the end of the day he'll sit down beside the fire and have a pint.*

Critical studies of masculinities have been marginalised when discussing the issues of Northern Ireland in favour of understanding topics like sectarianism (Ashe, 2012). However, as Bairner (1999) notes, over the course of the Troubles, men did the vast bulk of the killing and dying (91% of all deaths were male (Smyth, 1998)), the security forces were predominantly male, and the politicians involved in seeking resolutions were nearly exclusively male. The Troubles also reinforced traditional ideas of masculinity, acting to preserve men's power and marginalise feminism at a time when critical gender studies were gaining traction across Western Europe and North America (Ashe & Harland, 2014). Thus, the

role of men and masculine identities is central to Northern Irish discourse, yet the theme remains relatively underexplored (Ashe, 2012).

There is a strong sense of responsibility for Northern Irish men to provide for their families. Work and employment are seen as major sources for reinforcing masculine identities (D. H. J. Morgan, 1992). Harland and McCready (2014) note how young men trapped in, and aspiring to, traditional male roles that accept patriarchy and male dominance as normal are a defining feature of male identity formation in Northern Ireland. Whitehead (2002) explains how employment functions to provide the discursive subject with a sense of identity and an opportunity to exercise power. This is especially pertinent among the Protestant working class, whose perceptions of the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1905/2002), and their own relationship to work and employment have strong implications for their masculine identities (Bairner, 1999). So while both Catholic men and women are greatly affected by unemployment, it is arguably Protestant working class men who suffer greater threat to their masculinity from potential unemployment (Bairner, 1999).

As a result, many young males turn to alternative means for asserting their masculinity (Bell, 1990). During the Troubles, men were afforded a sense of status and significance by their peers and wider community as defenders and protectors of their communities (Harland, 2010). Many men joined paramilitary organisations which promoted discourses which helped sustain sectarianism, racism and sexism, and sanctioned certain forms of violent and criminal activity (Jarman, 2004). This violent behaviour became a means of validating masculinity in this context, especially amongst working-class and unemployed men (Dickson

& Hargie, 2006; Reilly, Muldoon, & Byrne, 2004). As Lebow (1976) grimly notes, “the gunman casts a long shadow in Ireland” (p.234).

Coakley describes *violence* as “*the use of excessive physical force, which causes or has the potential to cause harm or destruction*” (2004, p. 202 italics in original). He explains that while violence that occurs in connection with underconformity it is heavily sanctioned, when violence is used to enforce the norms of a group it can be legitimised, approved and even celebrated. For many young men in Northern Ireland, the use of violence was imbued with a sense of moral righteousness and it was justified by their communities as a necessary means of maintaining control. However, within these discourses, the men of Ballycross considered it inappropriate to search for violence. That was something that ‘other’ people did, the people who continued to perpetuate the culture of violence in Northern Ireland.

*There’s [sic] certain places, like literally, a good fight’s part of the night as well, do you know what I mean? Like some guys kinda need that for a night out... they’re more masculine, but.* (Ian)

*But like going to school, you have, quote unquote, rougher backgrounds, and these are the boys who just wanna fight people. And I guess how that’s how they sorta identify themselves as being manlier than someone else because they’re just gonna hit them.* (Nathan)

For Nathan, a young middle-class male, this version of masculinity was clearly problematic. But he was able to ‘other’ these working-class males, which allowed him to identify them as part of Northern Ireland’s cultural issue with violence.

These dramaturgical performances of masculinity are expressions of value in the

specific context (Goffman, 1959). Expressing toughness through physicality, especially fighting, gains recognition amongst working-class men who have less access to other sources such as educational or sporting achievement (Jewkes, 2005). While Andy and Nathan still glorify these behaviours to a certain extent, they are less reliant on performances of toughness to gain the respect of their peers.

The presence of paramilitaries plays a large role in the construction of masculine identities for young men from working class neighbourhoods (McAlister et al., 2014). With an emphasis on 'rough justice' and an accepted legitimacy of patriarchy, young men are socialised into normalising violence (Harland & McCready, 2014). Consequently, young men in Northern Ireland experience greater exposure to violence, participate in violence to a greater extent, and are the primary victims of most sectarian violence (Jarman, 2004; Muldoon & Trew, 2000). Community settings which are tolerant of inter-community conflict, lack of parental supervision and aggressive male role models all combine to create an environment which fosters and encourages violence amongst young males (Reilly et al., 2004). This violent, dysfunctional and oppressive behaviour is often dismissed as a 'natural' part of masculinity (Whitehead, 2002). Routes to alternative, less violent forms of masculinity are often not available and/or acceptable to the young men of Northern Ireland (Reilly et al., 2004). And Harland and McCready (2014) found that young men often find little help from their schools and community to cope with the threat of violence or conflict.

The role of the male as protector is a common theme at Ballycross RFC and if the threat of violence became apparent, it was seen as imperative that a strong display

of violence was shown in return. Otherwise there is fear of appearing weak and being exploited. Jamie explains:

*If anything happened, like say if there was any threat to your family, or threats to your loved ones, you'll take it into your own hands to sort it out. You just have to stick up for yourself really coz you can't be walked over. If you show you're gonna be walked over, then you're gonna be walked over again and again and again. But if you show that first time and step up, they're gonna have doubts about doing it again. (Jamie)*

Northern Ireland's violent history means there is more than simply the presentation of a traditional working-class masculinity to consider in Jamie's statement. Community-wide notions of 'threat' are traditionally linked to the 'other' community, and sectarian and masculine discourses intersect to promote the protection of the family and community through violence. Northern Ireland's history of violent retaliation is a most graphic display of Jamie's sentiments. In situations of confrontation it is important to these young men to present a front that will distinguish them as indomitable (see Goffman, 1959). By *appearing* 'tough', they attempt to avoid any need to *be* tough. However, this position leaves little room for error. If a confrontation does arise, there is no option for negotiation. Consequently, Chris and Andy admit that they feel they don't have a choice if they are faced with violence:

*Chris: Na, I would say a fight would be a last resort kind of thing, like, if someone's in your face and they're gonna punch you, you sorta have to, there's nothing much else you can do really.*

*Andy: Yeah, I don't think any of us would go out looking for a fight but if someone was going to swing for us, we're not gonna just run away I don't think.*

*Chris: If you were out, and someone was trying to start a fight with you and you backed down, that would be seen as being like a real feminine thing to do.*

This was a common theme amongst both Catholics and Protestants. Messner (1990) points out that the term “male violence” tends to suggest that violence is biologically feature of maleness rather than a socially-learned behaviour. The violence that these individuals experience in Northern Irish society and on the rugby-fields is not a ‘normal’ element of being male, but part of a set of discourses which normalise it. Ballycross RFC members who had less direct experience of violence, such as Matthew or Ian, were less likely to strictly conform to these discourses, and subsequently, utilise violence as a means of asserting their masculinity.

## **Masculinity at Ballycross RFC**

*...another time we beat a team, fair and square man, roughest team around man. In a really bad time, a murder recently or something around there and they threatened the referee man. “That was a draw, that was a draw, that was a draw.” One of them was saying he was gonna stab the referee, and ahh, they got the draw, which is weird, but um that's violence, man. (Declan)*

The relationship between sport, sectarianism and national identity in Northern Ireland is a complex and interesting dynamic. However, as Bairner (1999) notes,

by focusing on these issues, researches have neglected the dominant role of men and masculinities within Northern Irish sport. Sport is a hugely significant aspect of Northern Irish life and the overwhelming majority of sport participants are male (Hargie et al., 2015; Sport NI, 2010).

The game of rugby was made popular by English public schools during the nineteenth century (Chandler & Nauright, 1996). A series of ideologies deemed important for young Englishmen were developed which linked rugby with the concepts of manliness and gentlemanliness, instilling discourses of gender and class differences (Chandler, 1996; P. Donnelly & Young, 1985). A proudly amateur game for the upper and middle classes, rugby grew in popularity due to the competitive rough and tumble or “mock battle” which allowed young men to measure up to traditional levels of masculinity better than their everyday jobs (Sheard & Dunning, 1973). The sport has traditionally been, and largely continues to be “controlled by males, played by males, written about by males and utilized by male politicians” (Chandler & Nauright, 1996, p. 2).

Academic literature on rugby highlight a culture that promotes violence, toughness, strength and stoicism. The body is actively promoted as a weapon for use against other bodies (Messner, 1990). From an early age, young rugby players are urged to construct an aggressive, physically dominating style of conduct (Fitzclarence & Hickey, 2001) and young men are provided with an opportunity to learn “how to get back up after being knocked down, how to express themselves physically, how to impose themselves forcefully, how to mask pain and how to follow team rules” (Hickey, 2008, p. 148). Physical force and domination are often emphasised over skill and tactical knowledge (Light, 2007),

and stoicism, loyalty and hardness are promoted over compassion and ingenuity. Young males perform these demonstrations of physical prowess or sexism to gain acceptance or prestige from other males (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). As such, rugby functions as a figurative proving ground for bravado and audacity at the expense of women, homosexuals and less-virile teammates (Muir & Seitz, 2004). These discourses of masculinity are “lived into existence” and, over time, help construct understandings of gender differences (Pringle & Markula, 2005, p. 482).

Thus, the men of Ballycross RFC are forced to negotiate a complex myriad of discourses surrounding male violence. They grew up within a society where conflict was normalised. And within their chosen sport they are asked to be physically brutal with their bodies whilst remaining within a strict set of written and unwritten rules that are constantly changing.

*Tom: Um, did you find the sport violent?*

*Ronan: No, I wouldn't have called it violent. Um, aggressive in places, but to me violence is something different to aggression. Aaaah you know, aggression within a sporting context, competitiveness and it's being aggressive about getting to the ball or getting down on the ball or making a run or something like that. I think it's highly physical and there is aggression involved but a lot of things would be left on the pitch. That's the good thing about rugby.*

*Tom: You never encountered anything that you would term violence?*

*Ronan: Well I suppose, my first game I got a punch in the back of the head. Hahahaha. I suppose that was a violent act, wasn't it? Had wee knocks I suppose, I got punched in the kidney one time, two guys, yeah, tackled me, one*

*punched me. Spose you do get it, but by and large that wasn't the case, you know?*

Discussions about violence are often confused by the way terms such as *physical*, *violent*, *aggressive*, *competitive* and *assertive* are used interchangeably (J. J. Coakley, 2004). Here, Ronan attempts to distinguish violence from competitive behaviour. However, his use of the term *aggression* is inaccurate. Coakley defines aggression as “*verbal or physical actions grounded in an intent to dominate, control, or do harm to another person*” (2004, p. 203 italics in original), and distinguishes aggression from violence by explaining that some violence occurs without aggressive intent. Young, acknowledging how intertwined these concepts are, and, attempting to combine notions of both violence and aggression, defines ‘sport related violence’ as:

“direct acts of physical violence contained within or outside the rules of the game that result in injury to persons, animals or property; and harmful or potentially harmful acts conducted in the context of sport that threaten or produce injury or that violate human justices and civil liberties”  
(Young, 2012, p. 15)

Rather than aggression, Ronan’s initial statements about “getting to the ball or getting down on the ball or making a run” refer more closely with *assertive* behaviour. Tenenbaum, Stewart, Singer and Duda (1997) explain that if an athlete uses legitimate means, and has no intent to harm their opponent, their behaviour is assertive rather than aggressive. Yet, using a Foucauldian perspective, we can understand Ronan’s comments as a process of constructing legitimate/illegitimate violence.

Dunning (1999) argues that rugby has been subject to a “civilizing process” that has sought to eliminate various forms of physical violence, demanded stricter self-control and introduce notions of ‘fair play.’ Yet while there are far more rules governing acceptable play, and individuals are expected to control aggression and violence, rugby provides a platform for expressions of violence as long as it “stays on the pitch”. Sports deviance is broadly tolerated within the sporting environment, with punishment from officials providing the moral boundary (M. Atkinson & Young, 2008). The use of the body to hurt an opponent outside of the rules is not uncommon in amateur rugby in Northern Ireland, and it is generally accepted that during a game, players will encounter unsanctioned violence of some description.

*On a rugby pitch, you always get a guy who would be the sneaky guy, dropping knees into somebody's back or you know, standing on somebody's hand. That would be acceptable, to punch him in the mouth and let him know that you're the one that did it and tell him to behave himself or the next one he maybe won't recover from. (Will)*

Ronan initially overlooks his experiences of violence before realising his role in perpetuating discourses that minimise violent behaviour in rugby. On the rugby pitch, while aggression is promoted there are still a number of sporting norms that must be adhered to. This proves a fine line to tread for many. Intense physical contact and a desire to dominate the opposition coupled with emotions of frustration or anxiety can sometimes lead to the fine line being overstepped. However, many Ballycross players found that there were players who had no intention of playing within the rules:

*Yeah, there is [sic] boys I've played with in the past who played it just coz there's a chance to get in a fight, like. Which is, I think that's stupid. If you want to do that go boxing or cage fighting or something. But there are definitely boys, they just play it coz, chance to get violent and stuff like that, and that's what they're like. (Jamie)*

Despite falling outside of rugby's discourses of fair play, these players were seldom shunned by their teammates. Instead, their actions are justified; language is shaped to fit so that deviance can be excused. While professional teams play under the spotlight of multiple cameras, amateur rugby teams often play with one referee as the sole adjudicator with team-provided touch judges<sup>38</sup>. Consequently, there is much that goes unseen, and the 'dark arts' of the sport continue to play a significant, and often glorified, role. For Ballycross RFC – a young, physically small, yet athletic team – these were elements to be negotiated as infrequently as possible.

### **Pain and injury**

The threat of pain and injury is ever present in rugby environments as several players are often side-lined through injury at any given time (Howe, 2001; Pringle & Markula, 2005). Rugby players are routinely asked to put their bodies "on the line," to ignore pain and to play through injury. This is especially true when players are placed under increasing pressure to win (Howe, 2001). Athletes are socialised into disregarding the risk of pain and injury, they normalise pain and injury as part of sport, and they conceal and ignore the pain and injuries of

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<sup>38</sup> The official term has been changed to 'assistant referee.' However, as the role at Ballycross RFC level is solely to indicate the ball crossing the boundaries of the field, 'touch judge' is more appropriate.

themselves and others (Roderick, Waddington, & Parker, 2000; Young, White, & McTeer, 1994). Injuries can be a symbol of masculinity to be proudly displayed (such as a large abrasion or blood smeared over a jersey) (Muir & Seitz, 2004), differentiating the player from initiates, non-players, and femininity, reinforcing male superiority (Schacht, 1996).

*Well it's the old thing, you know, when you were young and you cut yourself in the knee and your Mum would come over and say, 'so big boys don't cry,' you know? You just soak it in, you just toughen up, if you get hurt, you just pick yourself up, and get a wee plaster and you just go on. I mean, you get that at a young age and it just passes on as you get older.*

(Adam)

Coaches, other players and supporters encourage players to continue even though they may be severely hurt, and those who conceal pain and who do not complain are held in high regard and respected (Schacht, 1996). This over-conformity is highly valued by Ryan, the coach, and admired by sections of the playing community, but is relevant only within rugby circles. Wacquant (2004), explaining the “culture” of the boxer, captures the value of this capital outside of the specific sporting context:

This explains the tragedy of the impossible reconversion of the prizefighter at the end of his career: the specific capital he possesses is entirely embodied and, once it has been used, devoid of value in any other domain. (2004, p. 59)

While the knowledge gained throughout a career in rugby can be applied to coaching if one has the temperament and the time, or commentary if one has the

expertise, there is nothing to be gained from the body of a former rugby player. Normally twisted, broken and forever impaired, the sacrifices that seem so worthy on the field have value only in memories shared with former teammates. Yet these voices promoting toughness are often the loudest and have been shown to be highly influential, and in many contexts, players who do not conform to these discourses can feel marginalised or suffer abuse (Light & Kirk, 2000; Pringle, 2007).

There are numerous examples of playing through injury in *The game*, but perhaps most revealing is Matthew's persistence<sup>39</sup>. Despite having suffered a serious injury to the same area of his face the week before, and despite having a pregnant wife that is concerned with his well-being waiting at home, Matthew straps up his face and continues to play. Whether through intense desire to win or feeling pressured through discourses suggesting that team performance comes before personal wellbeing, Matthew disregards his injury and commits himself to the team cause. Over-conforming to the traditional discourses of rugby, Matthew (and many other men) saw the team's performance as paramount, and personal injury as a worthy sacrifice. These "techniques of knowledge and procedures of

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<sup>39</sup> The Killoran player leaps into the air, climbing up over Matthew. Arms raised, he clasps the ball. Concerned only with protecting possession, his elbow crashes down into the eye socket of a wincing Matthew. The impact jolts the ball free, and the Killoran player kicks out at it in frustration. Matthew feels at his face at the point of impact, takes a moment to compose himself, and runs on.

"No advantage, scrum red."

The two packs settle into their positions, ready for impact, when Matthew lifts his hand to his cheek. He stares at the redness that colours his fingertips. He reaches once more, and this time removes a hand covered in dripping blood.

"Oh fuck."

Phil spots him and rushes to his side. Unleashing his water bottle, he squirts water all over Matthew's face. Matthew looks up, and a line of red from his nose to his ear emerges. I watch in horror as it gets bigger and bigger, covering his left cheek in blood within seconds.

"Right, we'll have to take him off and see if we can stop the bleeding," Phil says to the ref, and the pair walk side by side to where the coaches stand.

discourse” (Foucault, 1978, p. 98) promoted physical stoicism within the club’s power relations.

*And just, ahh like Jamie talked about that good pain after a match, you know? When your shoulders are raw but you know the reason for that is because you were getting stuck in, you were stopping people, and you were, you know? You were part of the brotherhood and you weren’t gonna take a step back, and football [soccer] never had that, you know? We trust each other, we know each other and there’s that respect that can only be gained out there on the battlefield. You know, Orwell talked about sport being ‘war minus the shooting.’ Well, rugby is the best example of that. I used to get a strength from it. Regardless of how sore I was on a Sunday and Monday, you would feel good all week, and people would notice that, you know? Because, yeah, I did my job. (Richard)*

Overcoming this threat is seen as not only an integral part of the game, but an enjoyable one. The bonds forged through repeated shared experience of adversity are deep and meaningful for these players. The final stage of the Killoran match<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Three metres from our line, Killoran lay siege to our line.

Thhhhhuummmppp.

One pass from the ruck, Killoran’s biggest players launch their bodies into contact. One after another, they crash, and time and time again our team hurtle their bodies back desperate to withstand any advance. Like bulls fighting in a field. Collision after collision after collision.

Thhhhhuummp.

“Hold. Hold. Hold. Up.”

Thhhhhuummp.

“Arrrrggghhh.”

Thhhhhuummmppp.

“Hold. Hold. Up.”

Despite the glacial temperature outside, from the field resembles a sauna. Steam veils everything. Still Killoran batter away.

“Get low,” Connor screams. One knee on the ground, he launches himself as Killoran ram-raid towards him. Connor kneecaps him and Matthew finishes him off over the top. They set again.

“Get in closer,” I yell, “hold....up.”

The Killoran flanker’s head rocks back as Finn crushes his chest with a huge shot. But he hits the ground and Killoran recycle.

is an illustration of the combined bodily effort that can be exerted in a tight rugby match. Through intense, physical, shared experiences, a deep sense of togetherness, often described at Ballycross RFC as “brotherhood,” is developed.

Declan describes how he felt afterwards:

*We played Killoran away on the worst pitch I've ever played in my life. And we had them, ahh, on our line at the very end for about ten minutes like, and that was probably one of the best experiences I've ever felt in my life, like, it was just such camaraderie and guys were just “woaahh” [reverent noise of respect]. I've never seen so, so many guys just throw their bodies on the line in my life. I actually never felt – throughout my whole career in GAA – the same amount of camaraderie as I felt on that day with a group of guys. It was like a brotherhood, like I never, ever seen anything like it. Um, and I think that's why rugby is a lot more, you know, like a brotherhood than GAA is, because it's more physical, because you're putting, you're really putting your body on the line for those guys behind you, those 14 guys. Um I love the idea of it, like it was just, it was, it's just so manly as well [laughing]. (Declan)*

Jewkes (2005) used the concept of fratriarchy to explain this sense of brotherhood in her study of masculinity in two English men's prisons. As opposed to the term

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“Up and hit ‘em,” Jamie roars. But as the Killoran lock thrusts from the ruck, Jamie is too high. He hits with his shoulder, but rises up and over. Killoran's giant lock lunges forward, reaching his arms out and over our line. Descending into glory, a broad toothy grin shines through the muddy picture. He is but a few inches from the white chalked line when Harry slides in underneath the ball. He latches on like a possum to its mother, clinging for dear life.

Twisting and turning, the giant cannot break the ball free.

Huudth. Harry and the ball are lifted and crashed to ground, but still they remain inseparable.

Jamie leaps on top, then Finn, then Connor. A horde of Killoran men smash at the bodies, but they cannot move them.

patriarchy (the rule of the fathers), fratriarchy (the rule of the brothers) is used to explain the disconnect between public male power and private male powerlessness (Jewkes, 2005). While patriarchs embodied many levels and kinds of authority, brothers try to maintain male power while engaged in a sibling rivalry (Brod, 1990). Typically, these involve contexts where men form close relations with each other outside of settings involving children and families (Higate, 2012). Fratriarchies are based on the self-interest of the group, they privilege in-group trust and loyalty, they emphasise toughness, the endurance of pain and humiliation and obedience to superiors, and they reflect young men's pursuit of fun (Wadham, 2013). Remy (1990) explains that fratriarchy "reflects the demand of a group of lads to have the 'freedom' to do as they please, to have a good time" (p. 45). Those who choose not to comply often withdraw, leaving a highly conforming group.

I would like to have thought that I was conscious of these discourses and able to make logical decisions around my health and well-being. However, within two games I aggravated a pre-existing injury that continued to hamper my ability to play consistently. Injury did not just mean missing the ability to play – it meant being at a distance during games, warm-ups, trainings, and in changing sheds. I had not yet built a strong rapport with many players, and standing on the sidelines hindered my ability to show my ability and commitment, to be part of the 'brotherhood.' I continued to rush my rehabilitation and played for long periods where I was seriously compromised<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> My injury was a high-ankle sprain. On three occasions during the season I would feel it 'give' in a tackle and be unable to run without significant pain for the remainder of the match. For the majority of the season I was unable to punt, which is a requirement for most players in my position (10).

Men that heavily overconformed to these sporting discourses, it must be said, were in a minority at Ballycross RFC. There were not many physically large men at the club (in comparison to other clubs), so the team had to develop alternative strategies to the traditional ‘contact dominance’ game. As such, discourses of toughness were not obviously conspicuous, and the majority of club members were understanding if a player left the field. There was still the expectation that the player would play through pain for the benefit of the team, but there was a level of empathy exhibited. If a player hobbled off, there was an acknowledgement that the player was impaired and that they knew their body best. Trust was placed in the player’s judgement that continuing to play would ultimately be at the club’s detriment, whether through immediate loss of mobility or through potential long-term damage.

*I don't think you should ignore an injury to the extent that you are gonna do yourself long-term damage. But only you can be the judge of that, and I don't think you can criticise another player for thinking that their injury is not enough for not playing or going off the pitch. But I kind of contradict myself because I am also of the opinion that in certain circumstances you do just need to kind of get on with it. I feel like I've had plenty of bumps and knocks over the years, it's a physical sport and I think, you know, you should expect to be sore from week to week and you should learn how to take a knock and get up and get on with it, and you know, for the sake of your team. (Matthew)*

This perspective was echoed by Connor:

*Unless you think you're not gonna be able to play on, or it's too sore, you're gonna try and play on. At the end of the day, you're there to play rugby, like. (Connor)*

These players acknowledged that pain and injury were a common part of playing rugby. Bruises and scrapes were normal, and the consensus from the majority of Ballycross RFC players was that these minor injuries were a reasonable sacrifice for a sport they enjoyed. Like the men in Pringle's (2009) study, overcoming the danger of injury and pain added to the excitement and enjoyment of playing rugby for some Ballycross RFC men. Yet they stopped short of overconforming to discourses that glorified and pressured players to continue when hurt. A broken bone, or a concussion, or anything that would cause long-term issues were acceptable reasons to leave the field or make themselves unavailable for selection.

Further in contrast, there were a small number of players who abhorred the enforcement of rugby's discourses on pain and injury, and who had no hesitation in withdrawing themselves if they felt it was not in their best interests to continue.

*I just don't see the point. I don't think it shows you as soft or anything. If you go off with an injury, you're only doing yourself more damage in the long term. Say you've rolled your ankle and you're playing on, in my opinion you're just a hindrance to the team. You're just basically operating on one leg, and you're doing yourself more damage for the rest of the season as well. (Adam)*

From a Foucauldian perspective, these individuals were not docile subjects within the dominant discourses, but had begun to “think about themselves, act for themselves, and transform themselves within power relations” (Rail & Harvey,

1995, p. 167). Yet, this is not to suggest that these players were dismantling the power relations (Thorpe, 2008), and though these players were willing to defend this stance, it is unlikely that they would have endured sustained abuse. Refusal to conform to the sport ethic was not seen as immediate grounds for expulsion from the team environment by most Ballycross RFC members. However, these players considered their position to be relatively low on the competitive pyramid (J. J. Coakley, 2017). The clubs lack of success in prior years had bred indifference and many players were critical of overconforming to discourses suggesting athletes play through pain and injury. Players who had entered the club from more successful backgrounds expected more from themselves, from others, and were far more committed to the sporting ethic.

### Homosociality

*Our mates that don't play rugby slag us because whenever we see rugby ones out on a night out, like it's all hugs and shaking hands and like our mates don't understand at all. It's like 'oh, rugby' and 'rugby friends.' But it is kinda nice like when you see people on a night out and you know pretty much every one around you as well. Especially after matches when people say, 'everyone's invited back to mine,' and you're sorta all together and you go out together. Not all of us come home together, like, but...(Will)*

Ballycross RFC is a male environment. Players have wives and girlfriends and mothers and sisters and daughters that (occasionally) watch their men from the sidelines. On occasion there might be a female referee or an opposition team may have a female physiotherapist. After the game the barperson or the server of food

may be a woman. It is highly unlikely that any of these people will be identifiably LGBTQI. In town, many young women will have to negotiate the intimate advances of certain Ballycross RFC men. But these are all peripheral roles in the context of the Ballycross RFC environment. Of the roughly 65 people that make up the day-to-day existence of Ballycross RFC, all identified as heterosexual men.

Ballycross RFC is therefore a quintessentially homosocial environment. The concept of homosociality “describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex” (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 1). All behaviour within this environment can be understood as strengthening in-group bonds. Everything has a role in determining the boundaries of acceptable masculinity and sexuality, and fortifying the connection of Ballycross RFC members within these boundaries.

In masculinity studies, the focus on homosociality examines how men’s lives are organised by relations with men (Flood, 2008). It is frequently used to explain how manhood is performed for other men’s approval, with markers such as wealth, power, status, and women as objects constantly paraded for homosocial evaluation (Kimmel, 1994), and how men’s friendships function to maintain the gender order (Bird, 1996). However, Sedgwick (2016) offers a more complex view, discussing homosociality in terms of desire, and arguing for a continuum from homosexuality to heterosexuality. As such, male bonding may be understood as homosocial intimacy as well as homosexual panic (the fear of male intimacy becoming homosexual desire) (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014).

## Relationship with women

Rugby clubs have often been cast as sites of unrestrained misogyny. In 1973, Sheard and Dunning wrote that men responded to the suffragette movement, and the associated 'threat' to their masculinity, by "developing rugby football as a male preserve in which they could bolster up their threatened masculinity and, at the same time, mock, objectify and vilify women, the principal source of the threat" (p. 12). In 1996, Schacht described the rugby club this way:

Rugby players situationally do masculinity by reproducing rigid hierarchical images of what a "real man" is in terms of who is strongest, who can withstand the most pain, and who relationally distances himself from all aspects of femininity through forms of misogynistic denigration. (p. 562)

In 2015/16, Ballycross RFC certainly contained problematic masculine behaviours. The prevalence of "lad culture" was particularly significant. Laddish behaviours typically focus around activities including drinking, sport and sex (Dempster, 2009), banter conveying discourses of sexism and homophobia (Nichols, 2018), and generally involve attention seeking, competition and disruptive behaviour (C. Jackson, 2010). Lad culture has frequently been linked to neoliberal rationalities, characterised by a focus on consumption (Phipps & Young, 2015). This has typically focused on behaviour within tertiary education and heterosexual relations, where consumerist values are expressed through the quest for effortless achievement (Phipps, 2017). This is exemplified by Chris and

Andy's conversation in *The bus journey to the game*<sup>42</sup>. Sexual gratification is the primary aim of these relationships (or at least this is how they are presented for their audience) and this much be achieved with as little effort and sentiment as possible. Success is desired, but for the achievement to be impressive in front of the other lads it must appear that only minimal effort is expended (C. Jackson & Dempster, 2009).

Until recently, there was a strong association between lad culture and the working class, largely drawing from Paul Willis' (1977) work on white, working class boys. Phipps (2017) argues that attempts to attribute the problematic elements of lad culture to the working classes is an example of how privileged men are rendered invisible as perpetrators. More contemporary accounts have focused on the links between laddish behaviour and backlash politics (C. Jackson, 2010).

Defiant in the face of the 'new man', feminism and women's rights, Phipps and Young (2015) argue that laddism can be viewed as a response to misconceptions surrounding men's slipping position in relation to women. Sport plays an important role in reasserting this male dominance (Wheaton, 2000). It is this laddish sexism of white, middle-class men, Phipps (2017) explains, that is more likely to mutate into sexual harassment and sexual violence. Growing up in Northern Ireland, within a neoliberal society, when backlash politics are prominent globally, it is unsurprising that lad culture is a prominent feature in the lives of the young men of Ballycross RFC.

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<sup>42</sup>"I know, you see that girl I pulled last night? Easily an eight, maybe an eight and a half. And we're fooling around and she says, 'I'm a virgin.' And I'm like, 'Oh fuck. Do you wanna not be?'" "Hahaha." A few laughs are genuine, a few faces slightly strained. "But I get nowhere. So, do I put in the graft, and it'll be a lotta hard graft, or do I get my dick sucked by a three tonight?"

Key to laddish behaviour is the need for social acceptance, identity and voice within their group (B. Clayton & Harris, 2008). The ability to banter is of central significance for men to express their laddish identity and be accepted as part of the group (Nichols, 2018). A form of jocular interaction, often based upon impolite or offensive language (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012), banter typically attempts to deflect criticism through disclaimers of humour, and by giving voice to sexist and homophobic sentiments (Phipps & Young, 2015).

At Ballycross RFC, both tacit and visible provisions are enforced asserting that nothing can be interpreted as purely literal. The interchange of words that plays on prejudices and stereotypes is often merely a device to gain a reaction from the victim, but this interchange is often framed as humour. Regardless of what is said or done, everything is “meaningless fun” and there is an expectation that it will be treated as such. There can be no blame because everything can be dismissed post facto as a misinterpretation.

*“Lesbian, lesbian?” Chris whispers, laughing.*

*I close my eyes and shake my head.*

*“Oh, it’s just a bit o’ banter,” he laughs at me. He rubs his hand forcefully on my head in a sign of intimacy. I have to catch at my beer as it nearly spills again.*

*“Aye, aye,” I reply, nodding, smiling.*

*“Hahaha.” Chris laughs, happy the scenario has balanced and remains jocular.*

Upon realising that his statement is not universally endorsed, Chris modifies his behaviour. It is in Chris' interest to control this interaction (Goffman, 1959). He knows that even within this environment, he could damage his reputation by losing an argument about sexuality. By labelling his statement 'banter' he attempts to avoid any potential loss of face for himself. Additionally, he seeks to limit damage to my reputation by including me within the boundaries of a humorous interaction. This acts to include me 'in the joke' preventing a loss of face for me. 'Banter' covers all manner of indiscretions and renders the statement valueless and purely play within the Ballycross RFC context. My response is to accept this justification rather than challenging Chris. In the moment, with the pressures of Ballycross RFC 'banter' discourses strongly discouraging me from disrupting the status quo, I acquiesce, and allow Chris to dictate the direction of the interaction.

In this world, the aloof is king. To be quick of wit and dismissive of slander is to win. To react honestly - furious, embarrassed, offended - is to fail. To choose not to engage is to be labelled the ultimate social insult at Ballycross RFC: no craic. Alcohol commonly facilitates this process, acting as a "disinhibitor" which affords these sentiments a normally-disallowed space and enhances men's feelings of companionship (B. Clayton & Harris, 2008).

Ballycross RFC members did not all subscribe heavily to the "performativity of recklessness" associated with lad culture (Garcia, 2016). There was a variety of commitment to these behaviours, but the pervasiveness of the culture meant that everyone was forced to engage in some way, even if that meant resisting discourses. Nearly all interactions were subject to the rules of performance. From

the bus to the changing shed to the warm up to the game to the changing shed to the after-match function to the bus to the house party to the nightclub to the house, Ballycross RFC members communicated in groups. Only in the fringes of these experiences are there opportunities to talk privately with another person, and most of the conversations are within earshot of at least one other person.

Yet lad culture is typically considered a temporal, juvenile state (Garcia, 2016). Laddish behaviours are associated with a lack of maturity and there is an assumption that individuals will “grow out of” this culture (C. Jackson, Dempster, & Pollard, 2015; Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Clayton and Harris (2008) also point out that lad culture is not a solid identity, but partial and dependent on a specific social context. For example, an individual’s behaviour with the lads at a sports club will often stand in stark contrast to their behaviour at home with parents, wives, girlfriends, and/or kids.

Players would typically transition from ‘new’ to ‘senior’ status over the course of their Ballycross RFC career, maturing as they aged. Just as Greif (2009) views male friendships as changing with age, I understand these Ballycross RFC males as transitioning through different masculinities and different relationships with themselves, other men, and women in their lives. These individuals, and the masculinities they engage with change over time as they learn and adapt to various personal and cultural processes (Barker & Barker-Ruchti, 2016). There were exceptions to this trend, as younger players were able to exhibit signs of maturity and some older players showed no desire to abandon the problematic aspects of laddish behaviour. The context would therefore best be described as a

site where a variety of masculinities are present, holding different significance according to the space, time and participants.

‘New’ players were eager to impress; boisterous and loud and engaging heavily in ‘traditional’ forms of masculinity that they expected would be central to their acceptance at a rugby club. As players became more established in the club, they became more confident in their roles as club members. They became components in forming the culture at Ballycross RFC, often becoming the ‘performers’ of the more problematic misogynistic and homophobic masculine discourses. Yet these individuals, such as Chris and Andy, despite their status as players, were still considered to be ‘boys’ rather than ‘men’. It was generally accepted that they were still finding their masculine identities, or enjoying the freedom that a more youthful masculinity afforded them.

*Away from the pressures of family and work*

At Ballycross RFC, there was a perception that male-only spaces and the male friendships that developed were a release from the pressures and constraints of public life. The feminine is closely associated with these restraints, in both private and public spaces. The “wife” represents the financial and temporal pressures of Northern Irish home life, while the “female work colleague” is used to represent the restrictions of social rules that dictate what is acceptable in the public sphere. Rugby presumably offers freedom from these responsibilities and perpetuates the association between pressure and the feminine.

*Tom: Do you like the way that the rugby club is largely a space for just men?*

*Joel: That's a good question. I suppose, aye, especially if you have a wife and kids at home hahahahaha*

*Tom: Why's that?*

*Joel: Coz you just get to, you go away from, from...you know yourself, the pressures of home life and it's just a place you can go and not have to worry about where the money's coming for your next bill or whatever, you know? You give a couple of hours where you're just there, focused and in that moment in time. You're not thinking about anything else, just the rugby and enjoying it. So...*

Here we can see that Joel views his sport time as his 'man time', and as separate from time with his family. He is able to be a 'lad', or 'one of the boys' in an environment he enjoys before having to engage with the pressures of home and work. His responsibilities in this sphere are chosen, rather than compelled. His perception of masculinity is relational, lad time viewed in opposition to family time (Nichols, 2018). As a result of this homosociality, a specific type of environment is evident: an environment largely free of women, where certain behaviours are accepted that might otherwise be policed. Socially, Ballycross is a place where fear of appearing 'politically incorrect' can be shelved; where sectarian, hypermasculine, homophobic and racist opinions can be aired or explored under the guise of banter. The strong group bonds and familiarity can serve to reinforce and intensify these values (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). The control shown in other aspects of social life can be loosened. These inhibitions cannot be fully released; players are still bound by a myriad of social cues, but the rules are far more relaxed. Adam explains:

*Um, in particular my workplace, I feel that there's a lot of that sort of stuff [gossiping and in-fighting] goes on and I like, when I come to rugby, that things are sometimes more simple when the guys are together. They talk about stuff that is just so stupid, but it's hilarious and it's funny. I enjoy that aspect of things. It's just guys talking shit, and it's hilarious, and its total respite from the day-to-day grind.*

The rising role of women in society at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century saw concerted efforts to reassert male dominance. Messner (1990) claims that organised sports became a direct response to the threat of femininity to male power and privilege. By popularising physical contact sports, not only were men afforded a space to bond in separation from women but through the promotion of 'maleness' and the sanctioned use of violence, men were able to continue their ascendancy over women and other masculinities.

#### *Picking up girls*

The majority of men at Ballycross drink, socialise and pick up girls together, and much like the men in the defence academy in Flood's (2008) study, their intimate sexual relations become the stories shared down the back of the bus. These tales of sexual prowess inform what is normal at Ballycross. As such, Chris and Andy's conversation at the back of the bus in the chapter *The bus journey to the game*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "Oi, what happened with that chick the other night."

"What chick?"

"You know, the one you were talking to at the bar."

"Oh, yeah, the little Southern girl. She's tidy, eh? Na, second night in a row she asked me back to hers and all I get is a finger bang." Chris holds up two fingers like a gun.

"You gonna keep trying? I'll give it a crack."

"I dunno, eh? Like, she's fit, but do I wanna waste like a month trying?"

"I know, you see that girl I pulled last night? Easily an eight, maybe an eight and a half. And we're fooling around and she says, 'I'm a virgin.' And I'm like, 'Oh fuck. Do you wanna not be?'"

"Hahaha." A few laughs are genuine, a few faces slightly strained.

can be understood as a discursive tool that structures what is acceptable, what is meant to be idealised, and functions to “establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts” (Butler, 1990, p. xiii).

For Chris and Andy, the women in the stories are considered in two ways: first in terms of fulfilling a heterosexual criterion of objectivity, and secondly as providing a sexual depository. “How fit is she?” and “Did you get anything?” Like the men in Curry’s (1991) study of locker room behaviour, these women were referred to simply as sexual objects to be conquered. These women must also satisfy the conventional norms for sexual attractiveness within the culture (Waitt & Warren, 2008).

*Chris: It’s always nice to have someone to, you know, someone there at the end. When you go into a club, you don’t want to like be with a girl the whole time. You want to be with the lads as much as you can and sorta have like a lad’s night and then...*

*Andy: Go off by yourselves.*

*Ian: Spend the night with the lads and then meet up with her when you get home sorta thing.*

*Chris: Coz them lads that ditch the lads for girls, and they’re away home at like 11oclock with some girl...*

*Andy: Boring.*

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“But I get nowhere. So, do I put in the graft, and it’ll be a lotta hard graft, or do I get my dick sucked by a three tonight?” Andy leans back as he poses the question which is met with murmurs of contemplation.

*Chris: It's just, no banter, like.*

*Group: Hahahaha*

Stories about sexual relations are an important part of the homosocial banter at Ballycross and function to establish a competitive pecking order (Bird, 1996). Men are given status based on the frequency and 'standard' of sexual relations. This storytelling is a social act, as the group collaborates and interacts as both actors and audience (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Chris and Andy are reliant upon each other and the group to validate the messages. Laughter from the group acts to condone the stories, and the objectification of women becomes a means of bonding within the group, constructing a heterosexual masculine norm (Thurnell-Read, 2012).

Flood (2008) argues that homosociality "mediates men's heterosexual relations through the presence of an imaginary male audience for one's sexual behaviour" (p. 348). Thus, the performances for the all-male audience at the back of the Ballycross bus, and in turn, the reactions they receive, serve to inform the meaning of Chris and Andy's sexual relations. So as Chris and Andy engage in heterosexual sexual relations, they are performing for this imaginary audience, shaping their behaviour for 'the boys'.

*Umm, it's harsh like, but if I, if I didn't pull on a night out, I would say it's not been a success, like. It's like a competitive thing with your mates I think, when you go out. Like if I didn't, he would slag me, like. I basically have two nights: I either go out to pull or else I go out with my mates. But then I always haha [end up] leaving them anyway. So...ach, I'm not too bad like.... you can always come back... (Will)*

Such explicit and misogynistic views were certainly not shared by everyone. Yet, within the context, it was seen as socially unacceptable to directly challenge, or promote an alternative masculinity, when discussing sexual relationships. Wait and Warren (2008) argue that homosocial bonds operate to extinguish any discourses which challenge the position of women as primarily objects of sexual desire. Explicit, superficial encounters were the culturally acceptable discourses and any deviation from this could only be discussed privately in ‘safe’ conversations.

As a married man, a father of two daughters, and a researcher that is critically aware of gender issues, these conversations were always troublesome for me. I was by no means shocked or surprised that the topic was frequently raised as it has been a constant companion in all male-dominated contexts throughout my life, particularly rugby environments. In my early adult years, I was guilty of perpetuating the same discourses myself. However, conscious of how these interactions function to demean and objectify women, I found it hard to sit on the bus amongst these conversations without challenging some of the attitudes. *What if they were talking about my daughter?* I would think to myself. For the sake of my research, I bit my lip when language conflicted with my beliefs, or I offered a response that I felt would be acceptable to the group if pressed in a conversation or a drinking game.

The treatment Joel receives in the chapter *In the changing room*<sup>44</sup> shows how alternative displays of masculinity can be sanctioned. Certain members of the club

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<sup>44</sup> Scrunching his belongings to his left, Andy asks Joel, “Oi, what was that shit you put on Facebook?”  
“What shit?”

possessed enough social and cultural capital to perform similar actions without any repercussions, or were able to easily defend their position. Joel does not hold such a privileged status and is publicly humiliated for showing emotion and affection towards his partner. Lacking the confidence in his masculine identity to defend his relationship, he submits to the dominant discourse, and crassly reduces his sentiment to sexual gratification. Concealing his heartfelt feelings, he conveys an attitude that he hopes others within the context will accept (Goffman, 1959). Instead, he does more damage to his reputation as his justifications are perceived as a fraudulent performance.

The older players, generally in their late 20's or into their 30's, would mature and begin to question these discourses. These were individuals who were typically married, with children, and held steady jobs. Their relationships with the women in their lives were meaningful. Matthew was a senior player who typified this group. He was friendly and engaging with all members of the club but would distance himself from conversations he deemed problematic. He would only occasionally be able to make the club's social functions, and when he could, it was normally one or two quiet pints of Guinness, an opportunity to show his face

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"Don't gimme 'what shit?' The fucking, "oh my god baby I love you so much. You're the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't know what I'd do without you." Andy's voice goes up several octaves.

"So, what?"

"Whattaya mean, 'so what?' That is the gayest shit I've ever seen. I don't wanna open up my phone and see that lovey dovey shit."

"It was just to get a blow-job, chill out."

"Oh, fuck off."

"You gotta do what you gotta do for a blowy."

"Oh fuck, Joel." Andy winces in disgust. Had this been Chris or Ian or any other of the other young, single men, I imagine Andy would have been digging for details. But Joel is old. His status within the club is relatively low. He is in a committed relationship. And he is overweight. "More shit I didn't wanna hear."

"Didn't even get one anyway." He throws his top into his bag in mock frustration, his bottom lip bent in a deep frown.

and reinforce his commitment to the club. Yet, I never witnessed any animosity towards him by players who viewed social engagement as a crucial factor for club membership. On the contrary, Matthew was held in great respect, and his moral values and commitment to his family were seen as his strongest attributes.

*With my daughter being born, I did prioritise her, obviously, over training and some matches. And not just her, I think prioritising Emma and being a help for her straight after the birth and things. There's no way I would have been coming out to trainings and matches fully committed whenever she had just given birth. Although rugby is very, very important to me, work and having a good family life and being a good husband is important to me too. (Matthew)*

Generally, the older men in the team and the management group provided a template for less problematic masculinities. There were no rants reprimanding language or actions, or even speeches imploring better behaviour. There was just an example of how players could conduct themselves. Obviously, this was not a blanket rule, as certain individuals were exceptions (as evidenced in Joel's immature response above), and on occasion, senior players were prone to reinforcing the discourses they had widely renounced. But typically, these players would provide an example if only with their lack of engagement with, and advocacy of, storytelling performances such as Chris and Andy's.

And overseeing everything at the club was John. Through a quiet word to an individual, a calm speech to the group, or through the example he set, John consistently provided a template of a mature, accepting masculinity for the club. Never agitated, out of control, violent or abusive, John kept the club operating

smoothly and calmly. His relationship with his wife, daughter, and sons, who were often present at rugby events, showcased love and respect. His interactions with his male friends, many of which function around the shared experience of sport, appear meaningful and built on trust and support. Several players mentioned John as a role model. John was not a flawless individual, but as the senior figure at Ballycross RFC, he provided a strong positive influence on the many young men who passed through the club.

### Alcohol

Alcohol was a constant companion to Ballycross RFC endeavours. Events, both sporting and non-sporting, nearly always included alcohol. There are strong links between gender and problematic drinking behaviours. Hunt, MacKenzie and Joe-Laidler (2005) exclaim that, “In general, men are more likely to drink, are more likely to drink heavily, and are more likely to experience problems with their drinking” (p. 227). This becomes even more significant when observing sportspeople, who have been shown to drink in a more hazardous manner, engage in more risky behaviours, and engage in antisocial behaviour than non-sportspeople (O’Brien, Kolt, Webber, & Hunter, 2010).

*Tom: Do you think it's [drinking excessively] proving yourself as a man or just...?*

*Will: I don't think your mind goes 'yeah, I'm a man by doing this,' but I think subconsciously it is something that's there. You're always...*

*Andy: You're always aware people are watching.*

*Will: Like, obviously if everyone in the room's looking at me, then, you know, you have to do it. But like that court session we had, I didn't need to drink, but everyone's looking, and if you say 'no' then everyone's gonna [say] 'Arrrrrrggghhh.' I was wrecked that night, ha, absolutely out of it. And I didn't need it, and I know I didn't need it but I did it anyway because everyone was watching.*

Drinking to excess is firmly embedded in the rugby club tradition. Beer drinking is seen as a marker of masculinity (Willott & Lyons, 2012) and the ability to consume excessive quantities of alcohol is an important step in gaining acceptance into the group (C. Palmer & Thompson, 2007). Excessive drinking is exhibited through ritual binge drinking, rewarding performances with alcohol, and regular alcohol-fuelled trips, reinforcing the message that alcohol is integral to club participation (Crundall, 2012).

In many respects, Ballycross RFC was a site that reinforced these messages strongly. When the club organised a bus trip to an away fixture or at any of the club social functions alcohol was not just present but a central focus for many individuals. Getting drunk was the goal for some, proving themselves through handling large quantities of alcohol the aim for others.

*Will: As a collective it's not sensible [Ballycross RFC's approach to alcohol]. I think when everybody's together it's a drinking battle, everyone's trying to outdo each other. The more people there is, it's the whole macho thing, you know? 'Aye, you drink that, you drink that, I'll down this,' and it's basically what the club is, like.*

*Adam: Yeah but you have the senior players who are also there, they've done all that drinking, they just wanna go out and have a good night. So, they're, I've seen it where senior players have looked after the younger ones...which is still good to see, but it's the younger ones are just going mad.*

Despite the health risks associated with heavy drinking, it is important to understand that the intentions behind drinking for the young men of Ballycross RFC are associated with pleasure as well as power. While they are aware of the problems associated with excessive drinking, they were motivated by feelings of fun, friendship, sociability and feeling good. Research on alcohol and friendship suggests that young people view drinking as a social act where bonding with friends and the sense of community in shared experiences are central (Lyons & Willott, 2008; Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2013; Tutenges, 2012). Yet the awareness of danger associated with drinking also necessitates a level of trust and protection (Szmigin et al., 2008). Ballycross RFC members, especially those heavily intoxicated such as Harry in the chapter *In Town*, were (generally) not left isolated and vulnerable, they were cared for and assisted.

There were also many who engaged in alcohol consumption more reservedly. Management were unlikely to play a role in alcohol-related activities, the exception being a post-match beer or two in the clubrooms amongst themselves. Whether through preference for their own company, or through the maintenance of the power relations between management and players, these men maintained a strict divide. The fear of over-familiarity and subsequent loss of authority restrained interactions with players post-match as frivolity began. Management

were to provide an example; to be controlled and sensible and ultimately responsible.

The more reserved players within the group were likely to engage only at 'compulsory' moments (when a game or a singing rotation reached them), and generally chat quietly with friends, perhaps sipping quietly at an alcoholic drink, perhaps rehydrating with water after a hard match. Depending on their status within the group, they were at times urged to take a more active role in the social elements but were generally left to their own devices.

The final group were the Christians of Ballycross RFC. Yet there is heterogeneity even within this group. Some removed themselves as far as possible from all engagement. This meant certain players would leave straight after games in separate cars or sit at the front of the bus with the coaches. They would avoid frequenting the bars and nightclubs with groups of players, and team 'bonding' sessions completely. Not only did these activities conflict with their moral values, but they were often upset with how they were treated at an early session. Rather than being allowed to watch or play a support role, as a way of being 'equal' and 'inclusive', those in charge would force the Christians present to consume a non-alcohol drink. Raw eggs were a common choice.

*Connor: Coz I think it is actually better to drink at the, either the court or the initiation than not to drink. It's safer.*

*Finn: there's ahh Christian fellas in the club who don't drink but like it's not like they were excluded. Like there was a thing made for them which was probably more disgusting than what we had to drink. So, it's like, inclusive, if you know what I mean.*

*Connor: Yeah, everyone's... no one gets targeted.*

*Finn: Yeah, no one's excluded, everyone's included.*

The second way was to engage in all activities, but to limit consumption of alcohol to a minor amount. This choice was popular among the club, with the perception that the young Christian men were “making an effort” to be part of the club culture. They would attend social functions, sometimes playing a central role, yet would escape without alcoholic (or substitute) punishment. However, they withdrew from elements they saw as problematic, such as drinking games which involved high levels of explicit and foul language.

So rather than simply being problematic, alcohol consumption at Ballycross RFC was varied and offered multiple forms of engagement. Some of these were unhealthy, even dangerous, and reinforced discourses of misogyny, homophobia and proving masculinity through drinking. But others were less competitive and used alcohol merely as a commodity that aided their emotional and aesthetic experiences. Therefore, concepts such as “calculated hedonism” are useful for understanding how these Ballycross RFC members construct their identities through pleasurable consumption (Crocket, 2014).

#### *Drinking games/songs*

When drunk, the players engage in games and songs that attempt to enhance the atmosphere of joviality and camaraderie. These practices construct and express meaning for members of Ballycross RFC (Wheatley, 1990). Drinking games were predominantly about sexual relations reaffirming their status as heterosexual and virile, but despite promoting them as team-bonding exercises, their central

purpose was as a means of rapidly increasing alcohol intake. Examples of these are evident in *Bus Trip Home*<sup>45,46</sup>. The game 'Fat fuck' is crude and unnecessarily demeans women to start but is predominantly a memory game that seeks to catch individuals in a cycle of intoxication and memory loss. It promotes a masculine ideal of being able to "handle your drink": to stay in control of one's senses and demeanour whilst heavily drinking. 'Never have I ever' is less about consumption and more about explicitly reinforcing the traditional discourses of superficial heterosexual relations and misogyny. Sexual conquests are promoted, especially when a "disgraceful" story is attached.

Yet while there are a number of people engaging with these games, it is only the few central individuals who are deeply invested. Finn, Chris, and to a lesser degree Nathan all identify heavily with the rugby drinking culture and are always eager to promote them as a team bonding experience. Not only do they organise these games, but they also consume the most alcohol, attempting to show a "lead from the front" attitude. Here, they are careful to show they are not an authority inflicting punishment on others, but an equal. Through their over-conformity to other hegemonic masculine ideals, they are also typically the most punished.

Here, Finn's role as a leader of social activities means he is able to identify

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<sup>45</sup> "Oooooooooohh, fuck you, you motherfucking whore."

Finn begins, "Fat fuck, fat fuck, can I get a silly fuck?" He points to Chris.

Chris immediately replies with, "Silly fuck, silly fuck, can I get a dirty fuck?" He looks towards Nathan.

"Dirty fuck, dirty fuck, can I get a....."

Finn roars. "Aaaaaaahhhhh, drink you dirty fuck."

<sup>46</sup> "I'll start. Never have I ever fucked a chick bigger than me."

"Where the fuck would we find one that big?" Connor asks. "Easter Island?"

"Hahaha."

"Just play the game, eh?" Finn says with a wry smile. Connor's eyes shift westward and his mouth peels back sheepishly. He lifts his can of Foster's to his mouth.

strongly with other members who construct their masculine identities around their ability to drink alcohol. Finn's ethno-religious status, while still the focus of much discussion, decreases in salience amongst the 'drinkers.'

Drinking songs feature heavily in rugby ethnographies. These songs typically vilify and defile women and homosexuals in the name of 'good-natured fun' (P. Donnelly & Young, 1985; Sheard & Dunning, 1973). Women are depicted as loathsome creatures, and rape is depicted as a joke as these rugby songs serve as a vehicle to perpetuate their masculinity at the expense of men who do not embody traditional markers (Muir & Seitz, 2004; Schacht, 1996). However, problematic rugby drinking songs played almost no role at all at Ballycross RFC during my study. At one stage, Finn attempts to engage the team in the rugby drinking song 'I used to work in Chicago' but he fails miserably and only ends up inciting a retaliatory sectarian song. The younger players, which formed a majority population, appeared unfamiliar with traditional problematic rugby songs. Many had not been introduced to this aspect of rugby culture, and while Finn attempted to provide this education, he received little support from other senior members and little interest from the younger players.

In contrast, popular music was used to bond the team around a neutral, global topic. The singalong that occurs in *The bus journey home* is typical of Ballycross RFC bus trips in 2015/16 and stands in stark contrast to the images of a rugby club singing abusive, offensive, derogatory songs about 'others.' The songs are chosen to promote team cohesion around a common interest without defining in and out-groups. Placed within a wider context that includes misogynistic drinking games and sectarian chants, these songs can be viewed as a temporary reprieve

rather than a utopian phenomenon. Within the Ballycross RFC environment, songs are part of a complex “sport-alcohol nexus” (C. Palmer, 2011, p. 168) rather than a negative, reductive relationship between sport and alcohol.

#### *Hazing*

*Tom: Should you be punished for just being new to the club?*

*Finn: Ach, I wouldn't say it was punishment.*

*Connor: It's not a punishment, but it's a way of...*

*Finn: It's a welcoming.*

*Connor: A rugby style welcoming.*

At Ballycross RFC, a hazing ritual of some sort is customary to “welcome” the new players. Senior players enforce a set of tasks that must be completed to gain membership within the club. These typically involve large quantities of alcohol but have been known to include being yelled and cursed at, wearing embarrassing clothing, eating disgusting foods, being blindfolded, and nudity. Hazing has been defined as:

... any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your teammates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises. (Hoover, 1999, p. 8)

Hazing practices include activities perceived as “physically and emotionally demanding, embarrassing, socially deviant, degrading, painful, and sometimes dangerous or brutal” (Keating et al., 2005, p. 105). These rituals serve to create and maintain a hierarchical power structure in terms of seniority, and reinforce the discourses deemed acceptable within the club (Groves, Griggs, & Leflay, 2012; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). Often they provide a platform for cathartic/sadistic purposes as “veterans” play out grudges from their own hazing experiences (J. Johnson, 2011). Players are forced to “prove” they are worthy and display their willingness to “take one for the team” as docile subjects (Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009).

Hazing supporters assert that the practices promote team cohesion, enhance a team’s ability to work together, and foster organisational respect, discipline and loyalty (Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005). However, recent studies have shown a negative relationship between team cohesion and hazing, with humiliation, degradation and sexual acts preventing the expression of community (J. Johnson, 2011; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Linder, & Brewer, 2007).

Harry, for participating in his first club game, is forced to complete a hazing task in *The bus journey home*<sup>47</sup>. This consists of enforced drinking against a time

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<sup>47</sup> Jamie pours cider into three large red plastic cups. When all are near full, he drizzles Sambuca in from a height. “Harry, you wanna make your way down here?” Harry stands, and negotiating the wobble of the moving bus, walks to the back seat. “You’ve got 10 minutes, make sure they’re finished.”

Harry immediately starts sculling. Nine adult men stare intently. He gets midway through the first cup before he stops.

“Ah, jeez,” he says, wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

“Stop wasting time, get it down,” Connor says dryly. Harry fights against his stomach, and with eight minutes thirty on the clock, he finishes the third vessel.

“Good effort,” Jamie says proudly.

“Well done lad,” Richard reaches out his hand and shakes Harry’s. Harry grasps at his stomach, his face off-white and uneasy.

“Wooah ho ho.” Richard scrambles to exit the splash zone. But the moment passes, colour returns to Harry’s face, and he slots his cups inside each other and starts returning to his seat. “No, no,

restriction and performing a tale that fits within the club's sanctioned discourses. As far as literature suggests, this is a fairly tame hazing ritual. Harry, whilst probably preferring not to engage, would nonetheless likely be relieved. Yet even if Harry chose to refuse, there are typically very few opportunities to opt out or question hazing ceremonies (J. Johnson, 2011). Initiation processes sort those willing to accept group values and norms from the unwilling, ensuring consensus throughout the group (Barker & Barker-Ruchti, 2016; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002). Harry can conform and participate, or he can refuse and potentially block his path to group membership. As Holman (2004) explains, "resistance is minimized by the ever-present threat of greater degradation" (p.53) as the humiliation and isolation that occur when a player refuses is often more intense than the initiation itself. Ultimately, membership is what Harry covets, and he is willing to withstand a hazing ritual to become an in-group member.

Participation involves many negative aspects (excessive alcohol abuse, misogyny), but for Harry there is also a number of positive messages of belonging which reinforce his acceptance into the club. He receives immediate recognition through words of praise and sanctioned acts of intimacy for complying and for showing himself to be a "good sport". Throughout the evening he is included and protected by his new "brothers" and instantly made to feel part of a collective.

Therefore, there is more complexity to Harry's experience than a simply reductive, negative incident. As Mechling (2009) argues, this kind of practice

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you're not done yet, Harry. Come back. We want to get to know you. I want you to tell everybody a story. Something that people don't know about you."

opens the door for alternative interpretations. Hazing can be pleasurable, he contends, and humiliation is highly-context specific. Instead, Mechling (2009) argues that the focus should be directed at how power is exercised and what opportunities to resist are available. Harry indicated during an interview that, given the opportunity, he would enjoy repeating it alongside the next rookie who arrived. This is not to suggest that the next initiate would enjoy the same process, but there is room for understanding hazings as more than simply oppressive performances of power.

### **Relationship with sexuality**

#### *Heteronormativity*

There is an assumption within the context of Ballycross RFC that everyone is heterosexual. Rather than a dynamic, shifting product of socialisation that is established and maintained through embodied performances (Butler, 1990), members of the club adhere to notions of fixed, rigid, biological sexuality. This reiteration of gender norms is most evident through the disavowal of identification with homosexuality (Butler, 1990; S. King, 2008). They reject that which is not 'normal' to reaffirm their identity as 'normal' (Gerdin, 2017). This does not mean that the men of Ballycross advocate homophobia or believe that they are homophobic in any way. They assume that as they do not engage in overtly hostile or violent practices towards homosexuals, that they are not responsible for perpetuating homophobia. So, they continue to (uncritically) engage in covert practices that perpetuate the marginalisation of 'others':

*Tom: Do you think anybody would be gay in the club?*

*Adam: Dunno, Ryan looks at me funny like, haha*

[Rather awkward laughter from all]

*Nathan: No, I think it's just, you sort of assume that everyone's not gay in the team. Just...*

*Adam: Down the straight and narrow.*

Despite Ireland legalising same-sex marriage in the 2015 referendum (Murphy, 2016), Northern Irish society has often been associated with high levels of religiosity, conservative views towards same-sex relationships, and acceptance of heteronormativity and homophobia (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009). These have often been reinforced with messages by public figures. Speaking to Ireland's *Hot Press* magazine in 2005, Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) minister Ian Paisley Jr. stated:

“I am pretty repulsed by gay and lesbianism. I think it is wrong. I think that those people harm themselves and – without caring about it – harm society. That doesn't mean to say that I hate them – I mean, I hate what they do.” (cited in Duggan, 2011)

Jarman and Tennant (2003) argue that homophobia is regarded by many as ‘normal’ and a ‘respectable and acceptable prejudice’ in Northern Ireland. Participants in their survey reported that 82% had been subjected to homophobic harassment and 55% had experienced homophobic violence. Those rumoured to be gay have come under pressure to leave tight-knit communities, while paramilitary organisations police their communities for ‘anti-social behaviour’, which includes homosexuality (Kitchin & Lysaght, 2003). This all leads to an

environment where ‘coming out’ remains risky and challenging for many young people (Schubotz & McNamee, 2009).

The pre-game speech<sup>48</sup> from *The game* illuminates how these discourses of homophobia are utilised at Ballycross RFC. The use of homosexuality as a symbol of weakness is pertinent here. Connor overtly calls out the physical performance of the team as inadequate, using the homosexual as a symbolic reference. To be gay is to tackle poorly: to show insufficient aggression, and to be dominated. Homosexuality in this instance is less about actual sexual identity, and more to do with “failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess and strength or in anyway revealing weakness or femininity” (Pascoe, 2005, p. 330).

Thus, homosexuality serves as a distance marker, establishing Connor’s identity in opposition to homosexuality and calling out the rest of the team to do the same. As Schacht (1996) points out, the meaning and intent of these comments is to relationally establish the boundaries of masculinity, by continually reminding players what it is not – feminine or a feminized masculinity.

Richard’s second addition to this conversation reinforces this point. This is a most overt vocalisation of Pronger’s (1999) symbolic phallus and anus. Pronger describes this as the “masculine colonizing will to conquer the space of an ‘other’

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<sup>48</sup> “Let’s fucking go out there, and hit em’ hard, right from the first kick off. Look at each other’s eyes, look at the fucking fire. Go out there and do it for your brothers. Let’s play for that fucking badge on your chest,” Richard spits as he screams. He is all fury and madness and the dramatic increase in intensity catches me by surprise.  
“Come on lads,” Connor says firmly. “We’ve gotta hit these fuckers. The last few weeks we’ve been waving our arms about, tackling like faggots. I want to see you hit them with your shoulders and smash them back.”  
Red faced and blowing, Richard continues, “We could go out here and fuck about, and get fucked. But I know I don’t want to be fucked. So, let’s do the fucking instead of getting fucked.”

while simultaneously protectively enclosing the space of the self” (1999, p. 376). Typically a metaphor for sporting domination, Richard literally uses sexual dominance, or “fucking”, as a metaphor for sporting success, and resistance to penetration, or “being fucked”, to signify sporting failure. This casts the entire sporting endeavour within the context of the homoerotic and homophobic. To submit to penetration is the antithesis of competitive sport, and homophobia is the resistance to this penetration (Pronger, 1999). Richard relies on this discourse of homophobia and the associated belittling of players’ heterosexual masculinity to provoke aggression in his teammates. In this way, he also asserts his own aggressive, dominant masculinity, urging his teammates to follow his example.

But while aggressive, homophobic masculinities are being publicly performed in line with traditional rugby discourses, there is also criticism of these displays<sup>49</sup>. Chris, a man who represents so many of the destructive masculinities at Ballycross RFC, is also the biggest critic of hypermasculinity. Hypermasculine performances are problematic, excessive displays of toughness, stoicism, loyalty, aggression, violence and the valorising of victory (Crocket, 2013; Hickey, 2008). These performances do not produce coherent identities, but idealized images of an extreme form of masculinity (Pringle & Hickey, 2010). Ranting and raving about physicality and dominance and symbolic rape is farcical to Chris, and he frequently mocks such discourses.

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<sup>49</sup>I try to focus on the intended sentiment, to use Richard’s passion as motivation. But a smile teases at my lips. Chris catches my eye and grins back . . . I wait as the most hyped up players jostle in the queue, eager to begin. Chris sidles up beside me, “Fucking hit em’, fucking rape them, fucking arrrrrrghhh.” He flails his head about madly while he imitates Richard. I grin at him, then shelve the feeling, trying to re-enter my ‘game mindset.’

However, he is resistant only within the relative safety of friendly faces, and rarely vocalises his dissent to more than one or two. To publicly dissent would be strongly disapproved of, as the players ‘motivating’ the team are ‘providing a service’. This is a role that is not always welcomed, but there is an expectation that senior players will fulfil it for the team’s benefit. So, a team member that openly mocked this process would likely find themselves reprimanded by either management or a senior player. To challenge the hierarchy could even place an individual’s place in the team at risk, management using a public act of authority to deter others from similar stances (Sparkes, Brown, & Partington, 2010). Thus, the role of hypermasculinity is valued much higher than a critical voice in pre-match proceedings. It is a protected position within Ballycross RFC, reproduced generation after generation. Those in positions of authority reinforce the status quo and ‘weed out’ dissenters, resulting in a perpetuating cycle promoting the same notions of hypermasculinity.

#### *Shower*

At Ballycross RFC, there is a trifurcation of relationships with the naked body: An awkwardness verging on fear normally associated with the newest members of the club; an acceptance of, and conformity to, the regulation of nudity; and an over-conformity resulting in deviant behaviour.

*... when I was younger – and my Dad played for quite a high level of football – and they all used to just, were naked and stuff, and I was asking my Dad for car keys and walk in, just like, ‘what the fuck’s going on here, does this always happen?’ (Declan)*

The first category is made up of predominantly younger players, this potentially being their first year in a senior club. They are tentative about their time in the changing room; it is a place of uneasiness, but a necessary transition from clothes to rugby gear or vice versa. They are unsure of where to look and speak little to anyone other than friends who are part of the same category. Before training and games, they come prepared with undergarments already on, limiting exposure. They slip whatever warm-up gear they need on quickly and make their way outside. Afterwards, they either wear their dirty rugby clothes into their vehicle or change their shorts for clean tracksuit pants. A heavy amount of deodorant is normally applied to cover the smell before they can get back to their residence and shower privately.

This group feels awkward. They are uncomfortable with the public nudity they can see and are very reluctant to engage in it themselves. Yet the dominant discourses within this field suggest that this should be the normative behaviour, that individuals should not only shower after exercising, but they should feel comfortable being naked in front of a large group of men. Therefore, they hide their behaviour: they attempt to slip away unnoticed and they present a face-saving front, pretending that they are comfortable, producing excuses for why they choose other showers or are too rushed for time.

*Mmmm, I don't... I don't, I don't really shower with the rugby ones after the match because usually after training, like Nathan said, you do just wanna be on your own. But then like, usually I wear thermals, so I'm not usually muddy... (Adam)*

But their behaviour does not go unnoticed, and their masculinity is often questioned by the others. The problem for most in the first category is the abrupt and brutal confrontation with widespread nudity. During school years, there are seldom situations where rugby players are forced to shower communally. Suddenly, they are faced with older men parading about the changing room with nothing on, and a showering scenario where they will have to vulnerably expose themselves for several minutes. Naked bodies are being lathered and washed in close proximity, conjuring images of denied homoeroticism (Probyn, 2000). For many of these young men, their masculine identity is also intrinsically linked to the size of their genitalia. The shower is thus a brutal testing ground.

*Ian: I would say definitely like, initially, whenever all the boys are getting their wabs out, you're like, 'hmmm, dunno if I'm OK with this.' But you get on with it. Maybe it's part of becoming a man. Maybe.*

*Jamie: I remember in my first year out from school and that was the first time that I was faced with the fact that, if I wanted to get clean here, I was gonna have to shower with these old men naked.*

*All: Hahaha*

*Jamie: At school, nobody did. After training, you put your uniform back on and went home. Whereas, I came here and I was like, 'all these dudes are getting their kit off. Do I really want to be the one going into the shower with my boxers on?' No, I didn't. So, I remember the first time I took my boxers off and you know, I huddled my way into the showers, ahh I stood facing the wall, trying not to turn around for fear of someone seeing my*

*genitals and, but I don't know.... Actually, to be honest, my biggest fear was...*

*Ian: What's in store here...? [laughing]*

*Jamie: What if my penis isn't big enough? Or something of that nature....*

The majority of the club falls into the second group: those who are comfortable enough to shower yet are private in their changing in and out of clothes. There is a small amount of chatter between these players, normally casually engaging in light hearted topics as they cover themselves in their towels for as long as possible, shower reasonably quickly and return to their clean clothes. The main group feel comfortable in this environment. For most of these individuals this had been a gradual acceptance of the discourses, something they initially felt slightly embarrassed engaging doing but have come to embrace as part of the rugby experience.

*...um there's certainly more camaraderie because you're so comfortable with each other in the shower, like [laughing]. It's weird like, it's nearly another form of team bonding or something man. (Declan)*

Once this step has been taken, it is not uncommon for players to laugh at those who have not transitioned, to look down upon this group as outside the fully accepted 'inner circle'.

Finally, there are a small number who fall into the exhibitionist category. These players have no inhibitions about being publicly naked and stand for long periods exposed. They often have lengthy showers, making direct eye contact during

engaging conversations. They do not rush to change back into clothing, instead often taking positions of high visibility to dry and clothe themselves.

The exhibitionists revel in the changing room environment. They talk openly about people's bodies, about being in the showers and sometimes engage in deviant behaviours. Club members who are not in this group often comment on how the exhibitionists make them feel uncomfortable, or how they are annoyed or disgusted with their actions.

*Connor: I know we might all shower together but, you have boxers on and shorts on, then after childhood your boxers come off.*

*Connor: When you're old enough...*

*All: Hahahahaha*

*Tom: So, is there, is there anything that you should or shouldn't do when you're in the, in the showers?*

*Connor: Get an erection. Probably a no-no.*

*All: Hahahahaha*

*Finn: Like whenever Mike and all were showering, we used to sing songs in the shower, like lie and roll about on the floor and everything.*

*Connor: Aye*

*Tom: Right?*

*Connor: Remember Alex. 'Lying naked on the floor.' [singing]*

*Finn: Yeah, we used to sing that, lie down.*

*Connor: Wild craic.*

Years of participating in various sporting programs has led Finn and Connor to uncritically accept this behaviour as normal in this environment. Lying naked on the floor of a shower singing with other men is not harmful behaviour, but it a considerable deviation from discourses of acceptable showering behaviour in other spheres of society. Sheard and Dunning (1973) comment that this type of behaviour is frowned upon in public life, but is condoned as ‘high spirits’ when enacted by a group of ‘rugby boys’ within the confines of the clubrooms. Rugby provided these players with social interaction which culminated in deviance before, during and after the matches and functioned “as a figurative proving ground for excessive bravado and audacity” at the expense of women, homosexuals and less virile teammates (Muir & Seitz, 2004, p. 306).

*Tom: What about the behaviour of some of the players in the showers? Do you think that’s, that’s typical of...?*

*Ronan: [Laughing] Yeah*

*Tom: I take it you know what I’m referring to...*

*Ronan: Yeah, peeing on other ones...*

*Tom: Lying on the ground and...*

*Ronan: Yeah, definite contact when naked with other guys. I don’t know, I think rugby’s a very masculine sport and people identify with that masculinity and therefore I think that gives them a bit of an ‘OK’ to*

*behave in ways that would probably be considered to be a little bit more favourable towards other guys, I suppose, bit more of a gay thing [laughing]. Not the peeing [laughing]. That's not a gay thing. But it's like there's just familiarisation, there's an OK-ness about ahh, a wrestle because it's very masculine. But when you take it out of the rugby context that behaviour would be deemed a bit... Like you wouldn't really be in a gym and wrestle your mate in the shower. Or peeing on them. That's not something you'd do. But in a rugby context, because of the masculinity and the adrenaline-fuelled context, and also the fact teams are typically very close, it kind of engenders a lot of this, ahh... camaraderie.*

Positive messages from important people in their lives reinforcing the norms of sporting discourses has led to an overconformity which is seen as deviant by the rest of society (R. Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Nearly all of these deviant behaviours occur within the group environment. Independent of the group, individuals receive no social reinforcement for these behaviours and so they become meaningless or disapproved of in wider society (Muir & Seitz, 2004). Only by situating themselves within a culture that fosters or promotes this deviance as normal will athletes engage in such behaviour.

Physical contact is a boundary that is constantly negotiated against discourses of homosexuality. Rugby environments allow varying degrees of contact, from the violent to the relatively intimate (Brook, 1997). There are also large degrees of nudity and close contact in changing areas (Sheard & Dunning, 1973). What is considered 'acceptable' masculinity is subject to significant regulation, with the levels of physical and emotional intimacy expressed highly contingent on the

context's perception of homosexuality (Robinson, Anderson, & White, 2018). Connor's comment in the previous quote "Get an erection. Probably a no-no" – and the subsequent raucous laughter from the group – highlights the danger of being considered guilty of homosexual arousal (Plummer, 2006). Subsequently, Price and Parker (2003) argue, the performance of songs, rituals and derision of homosexuality functions to repel fears that homosocial activity could lead to homosexual desire. Yet many of these homosocial practices – especially those involving genital contact and genital exposure – seem ripe with homoeroticism (Flood, 2008).

Connor's explanation of his 'windmill' experience in the chapter *In the shower*<sup>50</sup> illustrates how normalised these deviant behaviours can become. In wider society, this behaviour would be viewed as highly deviant, and potentially abusive. However, demonstrating superiority against an inferior and victim-like other is an important, and normalised, element of male bonding in sports (Curry, 1991; Kane & Disch, 1993). Joel and Chris' forceful restraint, and sexual abuse, of Connor may be understood within laddism's advocacy of 'rape culture' where aggressive male sexuality is eroticised and sexual assault is, in certain contexts, seen as inevitable, desirable and excusable (Keller, Mendes, & Ringrose, 2018).

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<sup>50</sup> "You wouldn't like a wee windmill?"

"A what?"

"It's, hahahahaha, its hahahahaha," he tries, and fails to explain over the top of his infectious laughter. He stops to breathe and compose himself. "It's when somebody, they ahh, they spin um around their penis as if it were um the blades of a windmill."

"Oh, right."

"You know, in a circular fashion."

"Hahaha. Like what Chris did to you." Finn joins the conversation.

"What?" I ask.

"Aye, last year. Well Chris wind-milled me till I had to..."

"Bite his dick." Finn interjects.

"...self-defence, I had to bite his penis."

Forcing genitalia into the face of another man is a performance of power (Kirby & Wintrup, 2002). Connor is subordinated and Chris demonstrates his dominance with his most prominent symbol of masculinity, his phallus. To accept this would be to symbolically admit to homosexuality. To resist is to express acceptable fear of homosexuality. For Connor, biting at Chris' penis is to resist as strongly as possible, regardless of the fact that it involves having another man's penis in his mouth.

This environment allows Chris to engage in all-male contact with naked bodies without being labelled 'homosexual' (Pronger, 1999). Despite the obvious homoeroticism, the 'lads' are still able to convince themselves that this is part of heterosexual rugby banter. Only individuals who will 'play the game' are chosen as participants (victims), and for the watching audience, a new set of discourses which normalise this behaviour are established.

Donnelly and Young (1985) point out the irony of the vilification of homosexuals in rugby clubs. These same men prefer an all-male setting, a contact sport (which for certain positions includes hand placement in some rather intimate areas), and communal bathing. These notions conflict strongly with heteronormative discourses though and are (wilfully) ignored. At Ballycross RFC, any suggestions that communal showering or intimate touching could be in any way linked to homosexuality were met with uncomfortable snorts of laughter and dismissal. As rugby players, men who engaged in 'mock battle' and consumed excessive amounts of alcohol, they were "proving" their distance from such ideas.

From Connor's retelling of the story it is unclear how large the audience is. It is fair to assume that this was not performed in private though. As such, this

example also poses questions of other members who gave their tacit approval by remaining passive and silent. There is an inherent defensiveness about male violence in sporting cultures, and bystanders can be reluctant to confront the actions of teammates (Katz, 1995).

### *Men helping men*

While homosociality within Ballycross can lead to impoverished social relations between men and between men and women, significantly, homosocial environments also offer the development of male friendships which play an important role in positive male identity construction (Thurnell-Read, 2012). Friendships developed that were considerate and allowed these young men to feel supported. Just as Waitt and Warren (2008) described how the homosociality of shared experience cemented their surfing participant's bonds, the young men of Ballycross RFC develop their relationships of care through playing, training, socialising and sometimes living together.

Rather than constantly fearing that they would be perceived as homosexual, close friendships developed that allowed a level of intimacy and vulnerability. Sport provides a site of emotional support and camaraderie for many men who would otherwise feel they were always having to present a front of stoicism and toughness and control (Mac Giolla Bhain, 2008). Typically for young men, conversations about feelings and relationships were shrouded in self-deprecating jokes (Greif, 2009), but they were still forms of communicating about issues meaningful to them. As Thurnell-Read (2012) notes in his study of men's homosocial bonding during stag parties, much research on homosociality has focused on how men's friendships are characterised by superficial banter that

suppresses intimacy. In contrast, he argues that rather than lacking intimacy, men's friendships are "meaningful and played out through complex, embodied, practices" (Thurnell-Read, 2012, p. 253). This banter plays an important role in male communication at Ballycross RFC.

*Nathan: Me and Will have our own wee special seats at the bar...*

*Will: Same seats, and you don't even have to speak or anything, you just hold the pint glass. Hahaha*

*Nathan: Two old men*

*Will: That's my night, like. I have a good night.*

*Nathan: Yeah, those are good nights.*

These relationships never appeared to be as intimate as those described by Robinson et al., (2018) where male friends would kiss and sleep in each other's beds. However, they occasionally allowed potentially sensitive topics that would typically have been suppressed to be discussed. In an age where the mental health of young men is an increasingly highlighted as a significant issue (Garcia, 2016), Ballycross RFC male friendships allow for vulnerability and support mechanisms. This was not every relationship, and just as there are many masculinities present, there were many different ways in which they interacted. There were certain people who would have played the traditional Northern Irish male role – to cope in silence, and to expect others to do the same. However, there were also individuals who often offered a hand of welcome or support.

Ballycross RFC is not a simplistic site idolising a particular hegemonic masculine identity but a complex and dynamic site where multiple identities are present and changing as individuals interact with one another. Northern Ireland's violent history plays a role in shaping these masculinities and any analysis of Northern Irish masculinity should consider how sectarianism intersects to reinforce discourses and identities. The specific rugby environment of Ballycross RFC offers numerous examples of 'traditional' rugby discourses, but contains multiple contradictory ways of performing masculinity as well. Individuals within the club negotiate these paths, and through their participation, contribute to the production of new and reinforcement of established discourses.

## Chapter Six:

Be white

(Be other)

## Introduction

*One of the things I remember was actually the first coloured [player] coming along. [He] was the butt of [a few] humorous jokes about black men. I don't think... nothing [of] malice about it. But I can remember going to places and some of the youngsters standing on the touchline had never seen a black man before. Northern Ireland, by its nature, tended to be more racially... [secluded]. I'm not sure why, probably partially because of the Troubles... (John).*

Northern Ireland is a country with little ethnic diversity<sup>51</sup>, and until fairly recently, there was a widely-held belief that this led to a country with no racism (McVeigh, 1998). Minority ethnic groups<sup>52</sup> have long been in the shadow of the conflict that has dominated interest in Northern Ireland, and have often felt the wrath of groups with a long history of conflict and mistrust of the 'other' (Knox, 2011). Race hate crimes have dominated media coverage but it is the institutional and everyday racism that is often unintentional and unrecognised that perpetuates a culture of disadvantage and discrimination (Essed, 1991). Ballycross RFC provides an insight into how this takes form at an everyday level; how racist discourses are used to 'other,' how they are sanctioned by the group, and how action is taken to protect against accusations of racism. Before I explore these issues, first I explain the theoretical context for discussions of race, then outline

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<sup>51</sup> According to the 2011 census, 98% of the Northern Irish population identify themselves as white, 1.1% Asian, 0.3 % Mixed, 0.2 % Black and 0.1 % Other (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> The two main ethno-religious groups in Northern Ireland are the Protestant and Catholic communities. I use the term ethnic minority group to refer to groups such as the Chinese, Portuguese, Irish Traveller and Polish populations.

how racism has functioned in a society that has traditionally been hostile towards 'others.'

## Racism

In the age of Trump, Brexit and the Syrian refugee crisis, the topic of 'race' is as pertinent as ever. The world seems an unstable place, particularly for those who see their social status slipping in comparison to immigrants and people of colour (Kusz, 2016). Accordingly, an undercurrent of nationalist populism has burst to the surface in reaction to the 'threat' of rising immigration and changing communities which are perceived as placing the morals of nation and/or culture in jeopardy (Gusterson, 2017; Haidt, 2016).

In order to think about Ballycross RFC in terms of race, then, it is important to consider what 'race' and 'racism' mean. *Race* is a marker of difference based on corporeal characteristics linked to systems of control, exploitation and resistance (Omi & Winant, 2015). The concept of race classifies people into groups, implicitly or explicitly promoting a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority (Hartigan, 2015). It is a signifier of difference (Hall, 2017), a process of 'othering' where people are visually read, understood, and narrated with symbolic meaning (Omi & Winant, 2015). Through ideas, beliefs, actions, customs, practices and policies, race functions to enforce a social order which structures the way opportunities are available and works to disadvantage and/or discriminate against particular groups based on visible markers of race (P. Connolly, 2002).

Historically, initial theories of race were based on assumed biological differences, usually skin colour, and the assertion of white superiority was used to justify

economic and political inequality arising from colonialism and slavery (Frankenberg, 1993). These inaccurate and misleading representations become discourses which obscured and concealed the factors which functioned to privilege certain groups (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). The key development in studies of race has been the shift from understanding it as a biological fact to seeing race as a historical and cultural construct (Frankenberg, 1993; Hall, 2017; Montagu, 1942/1997).

But while it might not be 'real' in a biological sense, 'race' is real as a social category with social consequences (Omi & Winant, 2015). It plays a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world through the circulation of social meanings. Whether implicitly or explicitly, the vast array of popular representations we consume reaffirm these social meanings (Spencer, 2014). These are often transmitted through everyday practices that are normalised and often go unrecognised by the dominant group, shaping daily experiences and sense of self (Essed, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993). These practices, or microaggressions (Sue, 2010), are the brief, usually unintentional, verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities that communicate hostile, derogatory and negative slights about race, gender, or sexuality to a person or group.

While racism can be expressed and experienced at an individual level, it is more significantly reproduced through the routine customs, policies and practices of organisations and institutions within society that maintain, reproduce and legitimise the advantages of one group over another (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001; P. Connolly, 2002). By controlling policy and public discourse, powerful elites are able to maintain their positions of power (Van Dijk, 1992). If we

understand power as exercised, not possessed, and dispersed through all society (Foucault, 1977, 1978), we can understand how discourses of racism act to shape and constrain opportunities, and perceptions of reality, self and others (Hokowhitu, 2004). The everyday language and beliefs - as well as systems of power - that organise the distribution of wealth, resources and knowledge, continue to operate within a racialised system of classification (Hall, 2017).

Accordingly, we can understand individuals as actors within a power structure (Essed, 1991), and acts of racism as linked to the media frameworks, government policy and institutional practices of society (Burnett, 2017). This system must be understood as historically situated, shifting with time and the context in which it is embedded rather than a fixed, static entity (Essed, 1991). For example, over time, Irish immigrants to the United States who were classified as 'non-white' came to be understood as 'white' (Kusz, 2003). Racism in Northern Ireland must be understood as specific to the region, and thus different, to racism in the United States or New Zealand.

### Whiteness

Investigating Ballycross RFC, a solely white club, whose understanding of 'race' is structured nearly exclusively by interactions with other white people, it is salient to explore what it means to be white. The study of whiteness is an attempt to make white visible. 'Common sense' beliefs view white, not as an ethnic status, but as 'natural' (Spencer, 2014), unmarked and unnamed (Frankenberg, 1993).

This allows white people to avoid thinking about the racial dimensions of their lives (Hartigan, 2015). As long as race only applies to people of colour, whites function as the human norm (Dyer, 1997). Whiteness studies seek to disturb this

invisibility, to foreground the transparency of white identity and its associated privileges (Butryn, 2009).

Identifying the structures that advantage ‘whites’ should not be about branding white as guilty. Kusz (2003) argues that by recognising the historical, social and cultural complexities of ‘whiteness,’ we can understand it as much more than a reductive term of oppression and domination. Like all understandings of race, whiteness intersects with age, class, gender, geography, sexuality and nationality and we should not overlook the heterogeneity of white experiences (Myslinska, 2013). Examining Ballycross RFC through the lens of whiteness, I attempt to expose how the club operates as a site where whiteness is invisible, participants are assumed to be racially unmarked, and whiteness is, at times, a source of common identity (Kusz, 2003).

## Racism in Northern Ireland

For years, the Northern Irish conflict created an undesirable location for arriving migrants (Donnan & O’Brien, 1998; Irwin, 1998; Warm, 1998). However, immigration began to rise with events such as the ceasefires and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and rapidly increased with the enlargement of the EU in 2004 (Knox, 2011; McKee, 2016). In a society where conflict, violence and mistrust of ‘the other’ became normalised, racism followed sectarianism as a natural progression of hate crimes (Knox, 2011).

Sectarianism and racism share a number of features. Brewer (1992) contends that both sectarianism and racism are social markers that categorize people into groups, are rooted in colonial exploitation, involve social stratification and

structured inequality, and are experienced and expressed in similar ways.

McVeigh and Rolston (2007) argue that the dispossession of land and subordination of Irish in all areas of society was justified and advanced by a racial ideology that saw the Irish as morally and intellectually inferior to the British. And while there is much merit to the discussion of sectarianism as a form of racism, I cover Northern Irish sectarianism in 'Be Protestant,' and in this chapter focus on whiteness, a characteristic that at times supersedes sectarianism as a marker of identity. Whiteness is an essential part of both nationalism and unionism in Northern Ireland and being white is typically associated with belonging to either the Catholic or Protestant communities (P. Connolly, 2006).

As communities in Northern Ireland became increasingly homogenised and insular, they sought protection from the perceived threat of outsiders (Hassan & McCue, 2011). The relative peace and economic growth that had attracted migrant workers to less-crowded loyalist working class areas saw people of colour located within volatile situations (McKee, 2016). They became targets of loyalist rage from people who viewed their communities as under threat from outsiders (McVeigh & Rolston, 2007). Northern Ireland struggled to cope with a more multicultural society, and in the 2000's, gained media attention after race hate crimes against the Chinese and Romanian communities earned Northern Ireland the moniker 'the race hate capital of Europe' (Knox, 2011). This backlash can be understood as a reaction to the challenges to white domination and superiority (Kusz, 2004), especially amongst the loyalist community who already felt their position of power was under threat from the nationalist community.

*Just from having friends, people I went to school with, even though maybe they weren't going on about things in school, when you would visit their house they still do live in estates where curbs are painted, flags are flown, bonfires are built and people still have the same opinions that they've always had. And I think it floats into different things, sometimes there's more like racism towards the Eastern Europeans that have come in or um the Chinese or different things like that or the Muslims at the minute. Um there's sort of hatred maybe towards them by some of these people. Um but it never fully takes over from then I think their Protestant/Catholic views, I think. (Matthew)*

The conflict between Catholics and Protestants tends to subsume everything – and everyone is seen in relation to the fundamental sectarian bifurcation – which has a significant influence on the treatment of ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland (McVeigh, 1998). With so few ethnic minorities, race is considered an irrelevance for the majority of Northern Irish people (P. Connolly & Khaoury, 2008) and there is an (inaccurate) assumption that racism is not a problem (Irwin, 1998). What people who claim this really mean is: racism is not a concern for the dominant white population (Hassan & McHue, 2014). Minority groups are peripheral to the main objective, which is to continue, and improve upon, the peaceful relations between the Catholic and Protestant communities.

Therefore, the needs of the minority populations are not always addressed. Connolly (2002) found ethnic minorities faced problems accessing services, lack of awareness of services, failure to meet basic cultural needs, and significant

levels of racism and racial harassment in Northern Ireland. Travellers<sup>53</sup> in particular have experienced hardship in Northern Ireland, facing opposition to legislation classifying them as an ethnic group (Hainsworth, 1998). The deeply conservative unionist political parties have often expressed scepticism of extension of anti-discrimination policies, and have been prone to expressing controversial public opinions<sup>54</sup> (McVeigh, 1992).

*Its pure bigotry. I mean you listen to some politicians and I'm thinking, 'God, people actually elected you to represent them.' And they're coming up with ridiculous statements. The last First Minister said he 'wouldn't trust Muslims to pack his groceries.' And that was our First Minister. How in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a western European country... if he had been in England, he would have had to be kicked out straight away. But because it's Northern Ireland, it's just like, 'oh right, did he say that? Ok.' You just move on. (Ian)*

Ian, though inaccurate with his quote<sup>55</sup>, despaired at the leniency such harmful dialogue received. The Brexit referendum in 2016 did little to improve race

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<sup>53</sup> Irish Travellers are a nomadic ethnic group that make up a very small minority of the Irish population (M. Hayes, 2006). Accused of “nomadism, beggary, backwardness, superstition (later ‘popery’), anarchy, sexual profligacy, and violence”, Irish Travellers have faced a marginalisation from Irish society which is uncannily similar to the way the Irish were ‘othered’ by the English colonial project (M. Hayes, 2006, p. 138). Anti-Traveller racism, which McVeigh (1992) coined sedentarism, is the normalisation of sedentary modes of existence and the rejection of nomadic lifestyles. Travellers have faced widespread social, economic, cultural and political exclusion and numerous attempts to force assimilation into sedentary life (Noonan, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> McVeigh (1992) cites the notorious statement from a former deputy mayor for the ‘incineration’ of Travelling people.

<sup>55</sup>The controversy that surrounded Peter Robinson, the DUP leader and First Minister, in 2014, was his defence of a Christian preacher who denounced Islam as evil and satanic. Mr Robinson said he too did not trust Muslims to provide spiritual guidance, those who had been involved in "terrorist activities," or those who were "fully devoted to Sharia Law." However, he did say he would "trust them to go down the shops for me" and undertake other day-to-day tasks (Manley, 2014). He later offered a formal apology, but continued in his role until 2015. Ian was not the only person disheartened by such speech. This, and a racist harassment incident in Belfast, led to the

relations in Northern Ireland. My research occurred in the leadup to this referendum, during a time when discourses surrounding the ‘threat’ of rising immigration, and ‘taking back control’ from politicians in the Leave campaign gave voice to nationalist populist rhetoric that had been unacceptable beforehand (Burnett, 2017; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Fuelled by a rhetoric of intolerance, this ideology is typically hostile towards immigrants and ethnic others, especially Muslims (Carr & Haynes, 2015), and calls for retreat towards an imagined ‘tradition’ (Knight, 2017) and a desire to ‘regain control’ (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). In the UK, and Northern Ireland specifically<sup>56</sup>, racist incidents and hate crimes increased dramatically in the wake of nationalist discourse surrounding immigration in the lead up to the Brexit referendum (Burnett, 2017). While the details around a ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ border are still being finalised as I write, it has been suggested that those who will find this most difficult will be ethnic minorities, who will be subject to *ad hoc* mobile immigration control and ethnic profiling (Holder, 2017).

### Ethnic minorities in Northern Irish sport

Ethnic minorities face several barriers to sports participation in Northern Ireland, including language, knowledge and competency of different sports, navigating a sectarian divide, and racist abuse (Hargie et al., 2015). Despite this, Michael was

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only Chinese-born parliamentarian, Anna Lo, leaving Northern Irish politics later in 2014 (McDonald, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> In 2011/12, 696 race-hate incidents and 458 race-hate crimes were reported in Northern Ireland. In comparison, there were 1,356 incidents and 920 hate crimes prior to the EU referendum in 2014/15 (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2018). England and Wales experienced a similar spike, registering 35,944 race hate crimes in 2011/12, and 49,419 in 2015/16 (Corcoran & Smith, 2016).

optimistic that the increase in diversity would eventually lead to more ethnic representation:

*...there aren't that many people playing rugby from racial minorities. It would be interesting to see in the next few years, do we get people [of] Polish, Romanian, Portuguese extraction coming through. I think that's happening quite a bit in Dublin now...those communities have been a bit more permanent. You know, I don't think we're that far off – we could have a Polanski playing for Ireland. (Michael)*

There is always the chance that one player from a minority background may rise through the ranks and represent their country despite the extra barriers that they face. Perhaps that would be the inspiration for other minority people to follow. But there is little evidence to suggest that sporting role models lead to long-term increased sporting participation (Lyle, 2009; Payne, Reynolds, Brown, & Fleming, 2003). Even if ethnic minorities began playing rugby in large numbers, would that dramatically change the way they are perceived and treated in Northern Ireland? Would a “Polanski playing for Ireland” lead to improved race relations in rugby environments or increase the visibility of ethnic minorities, and subsequently, increase incidents of racial harassment?

The small number of players of colour in the Northern Irish Football League (NIFL) have often been subject to racist abuse in the form of serious verbal harassment, monkey chanting, and death threats (Hassan & McCue, 2011; Hassan & O’Kane, 2012). Association football is played within a very different cultural context (Bairner, 1999; Cronin, 1999), but it provides an example of how

representation of diversity is not a foreshadowing of tolerance, understanding and acceptance.

### Rugby context

Rugby has always claimed a gentlemanly code as its defining philosophy (Dunning & Sheard, 1979). As with sport generally, rugby has always seen itself as above political squabbles, national conflicts and issues of class and race. In Northern Ireland in particular, rugby is triumphantly proclaimed as untarnished by the sectarian conflict (Tuck, 2003).

Similarly, racism is presumptuously dismissed: ‘there are so few people of colour, so how could there be racism?’ (McVeigh, 1998). Sport is considered a naturally-neutral pursuit, and a promoter of harmony, so racism is often denied (Long, 2000). Coalter (2007, 2010) argues that these ideologies are largely based outside sociological research and do little other than perpetuate ‘common sense’ myths of sports’ transformative properties. Instead, Kidd (2008) explains, sport should be understood as a social construct that is malleable to the forces around it, not as an inherently peace-building process. Just as sport has the ability to invigorate sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland, it has the ability to reinforce racial prejudice.

And rugby in Northern Ireland is not free of high-profile racist incidents. In 2006 an Ulster rugby player was accused, and later cleared, of racial abuse in an incident against London Irish in the Heineken Cup (“McCullough cleared of misconduct,” 2007). In 2007, two players from Welsh team Newport Gwent Dragons complained of racial abuse from Ulster rugby fans (“Ulster fans accused

of racist abuse,” 2007). And in 2014, Ulster Rugby were forced to apologise after a photo was posted on Twitter of five players attending an Olympic-themed party, all wearing black face and Ethiopian team colours, with one player in slave chains and a neck collar (“Ulster Rugby apologises for Twitter photo,” 2014). The Ulster rugby team of 2015/16 featured several overseas imports from New Zealand and South Africa, but no one from the ethnic minority communities of Northern Ireland.

## Racism at Ballycross RFC

To play rugby for Ballycross RFC you do not have to be white. In fact, officially, people from all sectors of society are welcomed and encouraged to join the club. If you can play rugby – particularly if you can play well – then the management team will try to aid your transition into the club in whichever way they can.

*We take everybody, no matter what they are – Black, White, Hindu [little chuckle], Catholic, Protestant, you know. I suppose it’s actually one of the very few places where there’s no barriers, you know? Doesn’t matter about nationality. Like we have had Chinese guys play for us, we had a Portuguese guy, Romanian, German, guy from America, Spaniard, French, all playing the same team. Not one of them had a word of English between them, you know? Hahahaha. And we made it work. We won.*

(Michael)

A closer look reveals that these statements are misleading: part of wider rugby ideologies espousing the sport as available to all. There have been non-white members of the club in the past, but they make up a tiny percentage of Ballycross

RFC's membership. Since 2005, only one non-white individual has played more than a few games for the club. In practice, the club is homogenous in its 'whiteness'.

Of the roughly 60 Ballycross RFC members, the only ethnic minorities were a young French man, another New Zealander, and me. We were fluid minorities, both in our geographical transience and in how we were perceived; all three of us planned to leave Northern Ireland within two years, we were English-speaking males from Western countries, and possessing rugby talent, we were quickly accepted as 'honorary locals.' As such, we were perceived as distinct from the minority ethnic communities of Northern Ireland. Most importantly, we were white, and did not fall outside the group norm.

Ballycross RFC has never actively targeted the recruitment of foreign players but a number, myself included, have happened upon the club and worn the Ballycross shirt. This happens irregularly though, and the majority of those players are British, or from former colonial outposts, and are white. Unfortunately, this creates a strongly homogenous group. This is a group where all the faces are white. A group where all the tongues speak English. A group where there are no alternative social or cultural conventions to be understood or negotiated. A group where the presence of 'others' is a radical diversion from what they know.

*Jamie: Right enough, actually. Yeah, cause the times when I go to England, you're walking down the street and there's Black people, ahh Asian people. You going into Belfast, it's a fairly, it's a predominantly white scene you're walking into...*

*Adam: Sure, the most common name in London is Mohammed...*

*Jamie: No, it's not!* (in disbelief)

*Adam: It is!*

*Jamie: My days!* (whispered)

Jamie's uncritical acceptance of Adam's 'fact' shows how easily mis-information can be transmitted and acknowledged as reality. Reicher (2007) explains that people accept prejudicial views that converge with and reinforce their own prejudice. Therefore, the circulation of racist beliefs is relevant as reflections of socially-shared representations (Essed, 1991). Jamie is unlikely to do anything other than add Adam's information to fuel his mistrust of the 'other.'

"Whiteness" is so normalised at Ballycross RFC that merely the thought of a multicultural society is met with gasps of astonishment. Through discourse such as this, the young men describe and comprehend their position in the racial order (Frankenberg, 1993) and perpetuate negative stereotypes surrounding the 'threat of the invading immigrant' (Chavez, 2013).

*It does make me a wee bit uncomfortable that our government, I suppose, isn't fully in control on a lot of things, whether its financial as much as migration, or is there a higher risk of terrorism because we're in or out of Europe? I don't know. (John)*

Ballycross RFC members were anxious about the social transformation of the UK. Just like the white and Latinx residents feared their shopping mall becoming "too Chinese" in Saito's (1998) ethnography, Ballycross RFC members harboured apprehension about the changing social landscape in England, and what that would mean for Northern Ireland. It is this concern over immigration that anti-EU

political parties such as UK Independence Party (UKIP) exploited in the period before the 2016 Brexit referendum (Cutts, Goodwin, & Milazzo, 2017; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017).

On the rare circumstance when they encounter minorities, Ballycross members, en masse, engaged in explicit verbal racism. A culture of pointing and joking about racial stereotypes is fostered, and an environment of exclusion is perpetuated. On several occasions, Ballycross RFC members would press themselves against a bus window, smirking and boisterously jostling for the limelight with comments such as:

*“They’ve got a black guy! Look, a black guy.”*

*“I bet he’ll be fast, they’re always fast.”*

*“He looks like...every black guy I’ve ever seen.”*

*“I just want to give him a feed. Is that bad?”*

*“They let monkeys out in the wild here?”*

Contrary to what members of Ballycross RFC believe, in-group prejudice is harmful regardless of whether it is experienced negatively by a member of an out-group or not (Van Dijk, 1992). Their interpretation of what constitutes racism is firmly rooted within an individual definition of the term, and players can justify their behaviour with the knowledge that they are ‘a good person,’ and they are different to other people they know who are overtly racist (Doane, 2006). But as Essed (1991) explains, everyday racism is never merely individual, but always linked to broader systemic structures.

In 2015/16, 1,221 racist hate incidents were reported in Northern Ireland (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 2018). As with sectarian violence, race hate crimes largely follow socio-economic trends (Knox, 2011). The members of Ballycross RFC are predominantly middle class, grammar school educated young white men, who are unlikely to be engaging in explicitly-violent racist hate crimes against ethnic minorities. This does not mean that Ballycross RFC members do not engage in racist behaviour, but the form this racism takes is through less violent, more ‘acceptable’ cultural discourses. The violence associated with working-class racist crime means they are able to dissociate from the problem. The middle and upper classes can dismiss racism as something that happens ‘over there.’ And by detaching themselves from the issue, they can ignore their own complicity in reproducing systemic racism (Sue et al., 2007).

Examples of racist behaviour at Ballycross RFC were nearly exclusively confined to verbal disparagement of the ‘other’ from within the safety of the homogenous group. However, on one occasion, just like the members of the Ulster rugby team, Chris and Andy dressed in blackface for a fancy-dress party.

*“Do you think this is racist?” Chris asks, turning his phone to face me as we sit upon his couch. I lean in to see a photo on Facebook of Chris and Andy from last night, wearing basketball shorts and singlets, covered head to toe in a very dark shade of fake tan. In the comments section are several messages accusing him of racism and chastising his lack of cultural awareness.*

*“Yeah,” I reply. “That could definitely be interpreted as racist.”*

*“Ach,” he sighs in frustration. “Sure, how was I supposed to know it’s like a big deal in America?”*

While the use of blackface minstrelsy is typically linked to racially-motivated mocking of black inferiority and binding the audience in a position of white superiority (S. B. Johnson, 2012; Sampson, 2013), it is not my intention to provide a detailed analysis of blackface performances. Rather, I use this as an example of one of the many discursive practices used to ignore or deny racism by members of Ballycross RFC.

Chris assumes that Nelson, Adams and Salter (2013) outline how members of a dominant group often deny racism due to ignorance about historical issues. This is the language of cultural racism, and the inference is that cultural difference is the issue rather than racial inequality (Lentin, 2014). Chris does not accept that he has made a mistake, instead he blames others for the situation and presents himself as reasonable and unwittingly implicated in causing offence. The subsequent inference is that the ‘politically correct’ masses will always find something to be offended by. Chris also dismisses the issue as specific to the United States, a claim which also displays his ignorance of blackface minstrelsy in the UK (Pickering, 2017). Ignorance should not absolve Chris and Andy of responsibility (Sharpe & Hynes, 2016). In this case, further communication with Chris’ friends suggested that the pair debated whether their ‘costume’ was appropriate before they departed, indicating they were well aware of how they could be interpreted.

At least as she's not black...

The conversation about girlfriends in *The bus journey to the game*<sup>57</sup> broaches prejudice on multiple levels, including sectarianism and homophobia as well as racism. Here, I focus on the racial element, though it is worth noting how these elements intersect, and how performances of one prejudice open the door for multiple expressions of prejudice.

This aversion from forming relationships outside their group is distinct from sexual racism (racial discrimination among sexual partners) (Callander, Newman, & Holt, 2015), as it is not sexual relationships but long-term relationships which would require family acceptance that are suppressed. Yancey explains that many individuals are more willing to date interracially as it is seen as less serious:

Dating couples are not expected to plan for children, combine household budgets or engage in other activities married couples must handle. One who dates across his/her race can be seen as "sowing wild oats" rather than making a permanent relationship with family and racial identity ramifications. (2007, p. 915)

Short-term sexual relationships with racialised and exotic 'others' are acceptable to these men, but they ensure that they don't develop into meaningful attachments. Wang, Kao and Joyner (2006) found that adolescents in interracial couples were less likely to tell their friends and families about their relationship. The family is a

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<sup>57</sup> "Haha, I don't think my parents would care what religion a girl is, as long as she's not black." Andy says. Nathan nods his head.  
"Yeah, but like, what about if you landed home with some Muslim, that'd be worse. Like, 'hey Mum, here's my ISIS girlfriend.' Muslims are way worse than blacks," Jamie reasons.  
"Yeah, I spose, I hadn't thought about that," Andy responds calmly.

dominant feature in the lives of the young men of Ballycross RFC, and they are still bound by many of the discourses of home. Attitudes of racism from their families are not seen as problematic behaviours to be challenged; they are uncritically accepted as the status quo, and the dominant discourses of the house are adhered to without question.

As discussed earlier, endogamy plays a key role in the maintenance of ethnic group boundaries in Northern Ireland, so it is not surprising that this philosophy is applied to racial as well as sectarian categories. The young men of Ballycross RFC are aware of a racial hierarchy when they make these decisions surrounding romantic partners (Vasquez-Tokos, 2017). The families of Jamie, Nathan and Andy (and presumably many others) reinforce the preference for their sons to have romantic relationships with – and eventually marry – a white, Protestant girl of at least the same socio-economic class. Perry and Whitehead (2015) highlight that there are strong links between religious conservatism, which as discussed earlier is remarkably high in Northern Ireland, and an unwillingness to relax boundaries of whiteness, expressed through disapproval of marriage outside their group. The choices of these young men may seem to be personal decisions, but they are shaped by structural forces such as racial politics and family conventions (Vasquez-Tokos, 2017). By performing in front of an audience on the bus, Chris, Andy and Jamie reinforce the racial hierarchy and reproduce the limitations to relationships which may be acceptable for Ballycross RFC members.

## Friday

Chris' banter in the chapter *In town*<sup>58</sup> provides an example of how racist expression can be normalised and the opposition to such sentiment can be discredited. It can also be understood as part of the discourses of backlash, where shifting gender and race relations have, slightly, disrupted the privileges of white males, resulting in populist rhetoric from angry white males eager to recuperate their social advantages (Brayton, 2005; Kusz, 2004). The 'crisis of multiculturalism' is seen as a threat to the 'dominant national culture' (Lentin, 2014). Chris' statement can then be viewed as part of a set of discourses that aim to protect his 'culture.' Chris considered his initial statement to be a light-hearted joke that hurt no one. Nobody of colour heard him, and several people laughed. However, as Newman (2011) explains, it is the normalisation of outspoken racism that is more disconcerting than the content of the bigoted yarn.

Until very recently, overt notions of racial inferiority had largely dwindled in Western society, displaced by more covert, cultural-based arguments (Hartigan, 2015). These cultural arguments were used to blame ethnic minorities for their poverty, and their slow rise in the system, while reproducing the underlying

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<sup>58</sup> "Gee, she looks like she's seen a bit of sun," Chris calls out. Andy and Finn chuckle as I look up to see three girls walking towards us. One of them is black.

"Oh, jeez," I mutter.

"Oh, sorry Tom. Mr. PC. Is that too much?" Chris scoffs indignantly. "Actually, it's OK. I can say that, coz I bucked her. Two weeks ago. Her name's Friday."

"Aye, Black Friday," Andy quips from behind us.

"Ach, that was my joke." Chris slumps his shoulders, disgruntled. He looks at me sideways. "You know, we're not racists...."

I begin to reply, but Andy interjects. "He won't care, he's from like the most racist country anyway."

"What?" I respond quizzically.

"With all those fucking dingoes stealing your babies, it no wonder." Andy's imitation Australian accent drips thickly. He jabs at me with his right hand then skips ahead, winking as he passes the three girls.

Jamie and I smile awkwardly as they stroll by.

discourse that white standards are the normal and positive standard (Essed, 1991). This more nuanced racist discourse presented negative out-group sentiment as 'reasonable' and 'justified,' and protected speakers from charges of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2010).

But in the contemporary global political climate, right-wing nationalist voices of discontent are becoming more widespread in society (Gusterson, 2017). The cultural backlash against multiculturalism, neo-liberalism and 'political correctness' has allowed discourses of racism to filter back into circulation in society (Burnett, 2017; Chacko & Jayasuriya, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2017). Racist sentiment at Ballycross RFC is a product of this context. For years, individuals were encouraged to conceal expressions of racism, but in the lead up to the Brexit referendum, they were exposed to multiple discourses of thinly veiled intolerance (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017).

Chris assumed that this group would be unanimously accepting of his racist 'joke', and that there would be no resistance. These outward expressions of racism are calculated as part of the general ideology of the group (Bobo, 1999). If the views are shared by the wider group, then perpetrators feel it becomes safe to express racist views and their actions are legitimised (Knox, 2011). Within a 'private' sphere, Chris does not feel obliged to provide a 'public opinion' which would be appropriately censured (Hill, 1995, 2009). While unacceptable in many spheres of Northern Irish society, at Ballycross RFC, overt racism is admissible within the 'band of brothers.'

Here, the collective whiteness is more salient than the sectarian divisions within the group. This stands in contrast to Matthew's quote above proclaiming that

racism is an accompaniment to sectarianism, but never the dominant discourse. At Ballycross RFC, in-group bonds were seemingly strengthened by the communal whiteness, and the 'othering' of non-white bodies. The sectarian divide faded from relevance as the group were able to construct banter about someone different.

This fostering of racist prejudices and the consequential reinforcing of institutional racism is harmful to Ballycross RFC as an organisation and wider Northern Irish society as a whole. Chris' statement could be described as a 'distance marker' (Van Dijk, 1992) that highlights someone, positioning them as different, 'other', and part of an 'out-group.' This additionally acts to strengthen 'in-group' bonds, solidifying feelings of 'us' versus 'them.' But it is not simply in-group preference or outgroup bias that makes this problematic. It is the power differential of one group over another that transforms race prejudice into racism (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001).

Importantly, the interaction surrounding Chris' joke shows how anti-racism can function to disturb this everyday racism (Sharpe & Hynes, 2016). My utterance, "Oh, jeez," is a softly spoken expression of surprise, but it holds a number of implications for the group. Firstly, the statement highlights that the group is not universally endorsing of Chris' joke. Rather than playing the role of the quiet bystander, and being complicit in the acceptance and reproduction of the discourse, I provided a space where other interpretations were valid. By demonstrating an intolerance to prejudice, Stewart, Pederson and Paradies (2014) propose, anti-racist action has the potential to change behaviour and show that such racist beliefs are not as widely held as the perpetrators think. Ideally, I would

have been quick-witted enough to produce a humorous response that highlighted the problematic nature of Chris' comment, but alas, my tongue was too slow. The benefit of a humorous response in such a setting, Wolf (2002) explains, is that it both embarrasses Chris, and re-invites him back into the social fold by inviting him to laugh at himself, enhancing group solidarity among those who share the joke. This is not to suggest that humour is a prescriptive remedy in all anti-racist activity, Sharpe and Hynes (2016) warn, as it may be highly inappropriate in confrontation of more brutal forms of racism. But humour, and especially banter, can play an important role in mitigating everyday racist discourses in homosocial settings.

Was it my role to be intervening in this situation though? After gaining informed consent, I had tried to allow my role as a researcher to gradually fade into the background. Methodologically, I was prepared to acknowledge that my presence would have an influence on my participants behaviour, but was my impact "excessively directive or substantive" (G. A. Fine, 1993, p. 281)? By not conforming, was I jeopardising the interpersonal relationships I had developed with my participants that my research depended on (Guillemin & Heggen, 2009)? Or, as a civically and politically informed individual, am I right to act according to what I believe is morally wrong (Ferdinand, Pearson, Rowe, & Worthington, 2007)?

Secondly, my comment thrusts Chris' offering under the spotlight as an example of racism, and by association, casts Chris as a racist. This reductive term jars with Chris' more pluralistic sense of his own identity (Sharpe & Hynes, 2016), and he lashes out at me for classifying him so negatively and simplistically. van Dijk

(1992) explains that many charges of racism are often not only met with denial, but with outrage and may even be treated as a more serious violation of social norms than the racist sentiment itself. Immediately, Chris chooses to attack my standing as “Mr PC”, attempting to belittle my position as overly sensitive and out of touch with the common person. As a New Zealander and a PhD student, I am an easy target for dismissal into ‘out-group’ status and my status quickly shifts from insider to researcher. Augoustinos and Every (2010) explain that this strategy is commonly used to counter opposition to conservative stances on immigration, refugees and indigenous people:

As such, antiracists are constructed as an out of touch, privileged minority.

As part of the maintenance of social inequity, the construction of anti-racists as pernicious, oppressive, discriminatory or just plain crazy (the ‘loony left’) is a potent way of silencing prejudice claims. (p. 253)

Chris then defends his statement and position, justifying his racism with an equally problematic statement of sexual possession. Because they had shared a sexual encounter, she was now fair game for any and all ‘banter’ based on familiarity. Notably, that familiarity does not extend to actually talking to the woman in question, only deprecating her behind her back. There is also an implied assumption that having had a sexual relationship with someone from a different ‘race’ is an indication that Chris cannot be racist. Still flustered, Chris begins another stage of defence with the typical disclaimer “we’re not racist” before Andy interrupts.

Finally, Andy’s interjection plays two roles: to protect his group from charges of prejudice, and to defend the identity of his co-partner, Chris, from charges of

racism (Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson, & Stevenson, 2006). As van Dijk (1992) notes, racism has a social as well as an individual function, with speakers not only resenting the accusation of racism, but acting to defend the in-group as a whole. Yet again, there is an attempt to switch the attention on to the accuser, this time using the oft-used joke: 'Tom is Australian.' The associated implications are twofold: 'A New Zealander will hate being called Australian,' and 'Australia is a racist country.' By focusing on the race relations of Australia, Andy not only sways the argument from the racist statements made by Chris, he pardons the behaviour by placing me within what he perceives is an even more 'racism-friendly' culture. Therefore, I am both accepted and implicated.

Sharing in humour is one of the defining features of a cultural group (Critchley, 2002), and though not intending to ostracize myself, I am putting my place at risk by dividing consensus of the group's comedy. The offer of acceptance back into the group is presented, but with the expectation that I will compromise my stance, and accept the exchange as 'just a joke', stabilising the situation. By applying an Australian accent, and mocking a 'typical racist Australian', he casts the whole matter within the context of a humorous exchange, once again negating any chance of me challenging the scenario without being labelled and possibly ostracised. The use of humour enabled the racialised comment to be dismissed rather than confronted, and allowed Chris and Andy to control the scene once more.

Friday, the innocent party in this affair, would be more than aware of the glances, the staring, the whispers, and the covertly-racist questions and statements that accompany her everywhere in Ballycross. These microaggressions (Sue et al.,

2007) are so pervasive and automatic that they are often dismissed as innocuous, but they send denigrating messages to people of colour – especially women of colour – creating inequality. To spot Chris, a familiar face, snigger and joke out of earshot, and have his friend wink as he walks by, can only reinforce feelings of sexual objectification, separation from society, and isolation. The everyday racism that frames her experiences is confirmed and extended by moments of explicitly racist behaviour (Essed, 1991).

Ballycross RFC is subject to the same issues of everyday racism that pervade Northern Irish society in general. Its culture of ‘hidden’ overt racism is uncritical of the environment it is complicit in reproducing. Cultural expressions of racism have become normalised and are not perceived as harmful, and even overt displays are dismissed as members view racism in reductive ‘racist or not racist’ terms. These behaviours serve to strengthen in group bonds and reinforce out-group bias, further segregating the ethnic minorities that happen to cross their path. There have been few non-white Ballycross RFC members in the past, and though publicly welcoming, the club environment would produce many challenging moments for a member of an ‘other’ group. ‘Othering’ has been such a dominant feature of Northern Irish history, and Ballycross RFC is unintentionally involved in perpetuating a culture of discrimination. As a case study that is sure to be comparable to many organisations, especially rugby clubs, across the country, this is a reminder that there is much work to be done to address attitudes towards race in the North of Ireland.

In the chapters *Be Protestant*, *Be a man* and *Be white* I have discussed the ways in which members of Ballycross RFC interacted with the three dominant discourses

at the club. Using an inductive approach, it became apparent that masculinity, race and especially the sectarian divide structured Ballycross RFC members' understanding of their social worlds and their interactions with each other and with 'others.' These chapters focus on this understanding and the interactions that took place within Ballycross RFC. They highlight how lad culture and banter contribute to the marginalisation of ethno-religious, feminised and racialised 'others' through disclaimers of humour which function to protect the speaker (Phipps & Young, 2015). These chapters also showcase that despite the problematic nature of much Ballycross RFC behaviour, there is space for interacting with these discourses in alternative ways. In my coda, I use an autoethnographic vignette to offer some thoughts and tease at these ideas. I write this, not as closure, but as a starting point for further discussion.

## Chapter Seven:

The sense of an ending?

(Coda)

## Leaving Ballycross RFC

I slump down onto the wooden bench. Laughter bounces off the tight walls and sunlight streams in through a small slotted window. I gratefully accept a cold beer from Finn who hands them out from a torn cardboard box. I lean back and feel my muscles pang as they begin to cool, each one reminding me of a specific tackle or ruck.

Ttssssscchhkkkkrrrkkkk.

Foam spills from the lip of my can as I open it, so I slurp at it to avoid beer spilling over my mud and blood-smearred jersey. I smile and charge my can against Jamie's who reaches out to toast everyone as he walks to his seat.

"Not a bad way to finish the season," Connor says, trying to temper the broad smile and twinkling eyes that threaten to burst across his face.

"Yeah mate, bloody good." I throw my left arm over his shoulder in a sign of affection I would feel uncomfortable showing in any other environment. This moment signals the final game of the 2015/16 season, the last game of my fieldwork, and potentially my last rugby match. I look about the room and see unadulterated joy; grown men smiling and laughing, singing and whooping, shaking hands and hugging. I see young men who have shared adversity and through toughness, skill, speed, endurance and tactical nous have overcome the challenge together.

Finn pulls out two cans from the box. He slips one into his open bag, then cracks open the other.

“You can never trust a Catholic, eh?” Andy grins cynically. I laugh as Finn and Andy play out their performance. These young Catholic and Protestant men have snipped and snapped at each other all year, constantly highlighting the division between the two communities. Sport has provided these young men with a platform for identification and conflict (Sugden & Bairner, 1993). At Ballycross RFC, there has been hesitancy and mistrust from some members who still express sectarian attitudes. Sectarian jokes and jibes are part of everyday interactions from Protestant members of the club who attempt to assert their dominant position at the club. These discourses reinforce difference, it is a process of ‘othering’ that promotes an ethno-religious hierarchy and delineates the rugby environment as a Protestant domain. Utilising ‘banter’ as a means of expressing these sectarian sentiments has allowed individuals to deflect criticism and responsibility through disclaimers of humour (Phipps & Young, 2015). Catholic members of the club, while retaliating with their own banter, are always doing so from a subordinate position: Catholics hold a minority population within the club, within Northern Irish rugby, and have suffered historical discrimination in Northern Irish society. Therefore, discourses are seldom challenged for fear of being classified as too serious, ‘no craic’, and unable to take a joke. Instead, individuals conform and accept that these discourses are part of the culture of Ballycross RFC.

Yet, it can offer more, and how groups and individuals relate to each other is contingent upon the discourses available to those people. Nevertheless, the rugby fields and training sheds are sites where Catholics and Protestants have been able to interact with each other and build friendships in an organic process. Many members of the club talked about Ballycross RFC as a site which had allowed these connections to develop.

*Although I knew some Catholics before, I'd never really had to converse with them on any great length. It would have been a nod and, 'hello, how you doing?' I can remember a few guys, when I told them where I was from, we regarded each other with a certain wariness. But, you know, we talked and went to the bar and we actually became friends. So, that, to me, helped break down perceptions and barriers that we would have had about each other. If it hadn't of been for my rugby experience and being put in an environment where you became friends with Catholics, I don't know where I would have ended up, but it would have been impossible to have gone through [Ballycross RFC] without that happening. (Michael)*

Young men who would never have met and would have continued to perpetuate discourses of fear and prejudice have been given a platform where they have worked towards a common goal, placing their trust in each other and bonding through the social elements of the environment. The overwhelming outcome of this platform has been the reinforcement of discourses which highlight sectarian differences, but a number of these relationships have been meaningful enough to foster understanding and trust, even if self-deprecating or potentially offensive humour has been the vehicle to achieve this.

My methodological choices have allowed me to capture this nuance. A more-detached observer, noting language and behaviour from the outside would have quickly noticed the problematic nature of many interactions, but would not have been privy to much of the information made available only to group insiders. As I mentioned earlier, my position needs to be understood as more complex than a simple insider/outsider binary, but by becoming a teammate I assumed a much

more engaged position than a researcher on the sidelines. I was always involved in the drills and games on the fields, and the chat and banter that occurred in changing rooms and on bus trips. Throughout this process, not only did my rapport develop with other club members, but I was able to gain an understanding of individuals' perceptions of the community divide and the relationships between individuals. I was able to recognise that if Nathan called Finn a 'Fenian' that he would often claim it was an ironic statement to justify a genuine expression of sectarianism. However, if Chris used the same language it was more likely to be part of their playful repartee. Like all aspects of human interaction, these relationships were also fluid, and just as Nathan could express playful humour, Chris could also express expressions of sectarianism. My position allowed me an opportunity to understand these distinctions.

"Any more beers left?" Andy yells.

"Last one," Finn replies as he bends into the box then throws a can towards Andy.

"Aaaah thankyou thankyou," Andy proffers in a theatrically haughty manner, doffing an imaginary top-hat. He proceeds to drink from his can with his little finger protruding. *This is such an interesting group, I think, but how well does it exemplify the young men of Northern Ireland? What is the relevance of studying a largely middle-class group in a country where it is the working-class who are more likely to hold extreme views, to commit acts of violence, and suffer the consequences of such violence?* In fact many ethnographies have studied Northern Ireland's housing estates and rural regions (see Kelleher, 2004; Sluka, 1989) to interpret the attitudes of those most likely to engage with extreme ideologies and most likely to experience violence. Instead, I observed a group who, for the most

part, could remove themselves both physically and ideologically – members of the so-called “aloof” middle-class who were responsible for doing less than they could to affect change when Northern Ireland sat on the brink of civil war. My study illustrates that it is not just the ‘vulgar working class’ that perpetuate discourses of sectarianism, problematic masculinity and racism – the same issues permeate the middle-class, they just occur at a much more passive level, and receive much less publicity. I think back to my early fieldnotes and how dismissive and/or unaware some middle-class individuals were of sectarianism especially.

*“You know how you’re researching us?” Jamie asks me as we exit the changing room. “What are you looking for?” When I explained that sectarianism would be one element he immediately stopped me. “Really? Oh, there won’t be much of that. You’ll probably want to look at the other stuff, the masculinity and what not, coz it’s not really an issue any more.”*

These young men were largely unaware of their role in perpetuating everyday sectarianism, believing that only the bombings and shootings of paramilitaries and the discriminatory expressions from public figures constitutes sectarianism. Their privileged position allowed Ballycross RFC members to detach themselves from responsibility. The role these young men will play in Northern Ireland’s future is unlikely to be as a violent enforcer or agitator, but it would be mistaken to assume that only those directly involved in violent conflict have a role in how these situations develop, evolve and end. The interactions with the ‘other’ community at Ballycross RFC will have been crucial in establishing how these individuals understand Northern Irish society. As a group that is less intrinsically connected

to divisional ideologies, the men of Ballycross RFC give a perspective of Northern Ireland that is more optimistic, more open to change, and more likely to work together, a narrative that stands in contrast to much writing on the small country. As Bell (1990) laments, writing about Northern Ireland can be a sobering and depressing affair. While this research posits more questions of Ballycross RFC's issues than its strengths, it still offers a perspective of cooperation and tolerance between individuals who would normally stand in opposition.

I rest my beer carefully on the slatted wooden bench and bend to untie my mud-covered bootlaces. From my ground-level perspective, I notice Michael's clean brown dress shoes enter amongst the clods of grassy mud and strewn electrical tape.

"Heyyyyyyy, Mikey, I heard the team's having drinks at your place tonight?"

Jamie says with a wink and a smile.

"Sadly, I won't be home tonight, I'm off to the Ulster match," Michael replies.

"That's OK, as long as your wife's there," Jamie quips, wrapping a filthy arm around Michael's shoulder.

Throwing mock punches into Jamie's gut, Michael murmurs, "Oh, you're too big for her." Startled looks are everywhere. "What?" Michael, dry as a desert, pretends that he hasn't spoken.

I look about, both bemused and amused. I catch Matthew's eye, who looks back equally shocked. Jamie finally bursts with laughter and pops the tension. The giggles and sniggers that had been suppressed are released in a bubble of joviality.

*That is an odd sense of humour, I think, one very specific to this context. I am sure*

*Michael would not have felt comfortable expressing such sentiment in any other sphere of his life, certainly not in front of his family.* This is an environment that fosters discourses of violence, stoicism, misogyny, homophobia and deviant overconformity to sporting norms. Elements of the culture definitely cultivate problematic relationships with women and with other men (Messner, 1990). Yet these problematic masculine identities are also balanced by a number of more mature identities. These men hold meaningful relationships with women, and vary in their conformity to discourses around violence, pain and injury, deviance and homosexuality. The homosocial environment also provides a space where men can share with other men, becoming vulnerable and intimate, in a way that is usually unattainable within the strictly-delineated masculine identities in other spheres of Northern Irish society (Thurnell-Read, 2012). At once, the discourses available at Ballycross RFC function to both impair and improve the masculine identities of club members.

Or is my attachment to this team skewing my perception? The bonds that are developed on the rugby field run deep. Knowing that close friends will read this, am I romanticising my experiences and minimising the problematic elements of Ballycross RFC? Will the banter that I have described as part of developing inter-community relations or productive male friendships be viewed by my audience as wholly problematic? Will my position as teammate be understood as blinding my ability to be critical? Or is my enthusiasm to be accepted in the academic world making me more critical? Was I interpreting hostility or mistrust or offence where there was none?

I tug at my boots until they slip at the heel and slide off my toes. Grabbing a boot in each hand firmly, I clatter them together and large clumps of mud fall from the studs.

“Oi, watch it,” Richard yaps as a piece flicks against his leg. I pick my collection of dirt from the rough concrete floor and toss it into the blue barrel that acts as a bin beside the door. Resting back against the wall once more, I sip at my beer and gaze upon Will, Ronan and Nathan. The three young men stand in the centre of the room, tearing their shirts from their bodies and laying them gently on the orderly pile. Their exposed skin has not felt the rays of the Irish sun yet and glares a blinding white. Like every other body. I think of Michael’s musing about a “Polanski playing for Ireland” and wonder if Ballycross RFC will ever see individuals from Northern Ireland’s ethnic minority communities become frequent members of the club. When will it be normal to see bodies that aren’t white donning the Ballycross RFC jersey? Will that be a sign of improvement in race-relations in Northern Ireland? Would the discourses around race and ethnicity in Ballycross RFC shift in those circumstances? Would race be a legitimate topic of banter in the presence of non-white members?

Chris, wearing only a towel, saunters into the room with a speaker blaring Justin Bieber’s *Sorry*<sup>59</sup>. He is greeted with a cheer, and joined in dance by men in various stages of undress. I take a mental note of the scene in front of me. *How will I capture this in my writing? I think. How will I express the detail, the complexity, the intersecting discourses?* The Northern Irish conflict casts a long shadow over the contemporary landscape and plays a large role in framing how

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<sup>59</sup> (Scrillex & BloodPop, 2015)

many individuals understand their own identity, and those from the ‘other’ community. Yet it also influences understandings of masculinity, and ‘others’ who do not fit within this bi-cultural perspective. Being Protestant, being a man, and being white are not isolated discourses, they are mutually constitutive.

To contend with this challenge, I have used an unconventional approach. By writing creatively and utilising a novella, I hope that I have creaked open the door and allowed my audience a wee peek into Ballycross RFC. This is not the only way that Ballycross RFC could have been represented, but a way that I felt portrayed the club in the most effective manner. There is no way of working an entire year training, playing, socialising with, and listening to roughly 60 men into one piece of writing (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Furthermore, there is no way of turning experiences into words without exerting some authorial influence (Richardson, 1995). Yet by writing autoethnographically, I have created something that I feel showcases the club, my experiences, and my role in producing this research.

Encouraged by Wolcott (1994, 2005), I have tried to take a thoughtful position regarding the many ethical, methodological and philosophical issues that have arisen during my research. Like Sparkes’ (2003) autoethnography, my stories are not written to provide answers, but to ask questions. I have presented my interpretation of events and I have sought the advice of a wide range of authors to explain what I felt were the most significant aspects of Ballycross RFC. This thesis offers something different; it adds to sport sociology literature in Northern Ireland by presenting an in-depth, first-person experience of rugby culture; it builds upon the work of Sugden, Bairner and Cronin linking sport to the wider

context of Northern Irish society; it offers a contemporary perspective (during a time complicated by Brexit) of sectarianism, masculinity and racism in Northern Ireland; and it challenges traditional methodology by exploring novel ways of structure and representation.

But how do you conclude a representation of a group in a way that does not attempt to tie everything in a neat bow? Is there a way to convey the messy and enduring nature of any section of society? To be consistent with this messiness, this sense of process, I follow Tosha Tsang's (2000) example and use a story to write my last words. As I began to pack away my boots, Connor nudges me with his elbow.

“How do you think we’ll cope next year in a higher league?”

“I dunno. How many from this group are leaving?”

“Couple. You foreign lads. Should get big Rog back though, hopefully John can recruit us a decent 10, that’s what we’ve really lacked this year.” He elbows me again.

I laugh as I shake my head at him, well used to deflecting Ballycross banter now. Despite ending my season, the rugby cycle never ends, even if the playing element lies dormant for a few months. There is no final whistle.

Society functions in an even less scheduled manner. The Catholic-Protestant relationship, gender dynamics, and race relations in Northern Ireland will not conclude, they will forever be part of an ongoing process. The men of Ballycross RFC will continue to refine their understanding of these issues in relation to the discourses that are available and their interactions with others. So, I try to write

my final words, not as closure, but as an opportunity to continue this discussion. I invite the reader to interpret the moments from their vantage points, to reflect on their experiences and make their own meanings (Sparkes & Smith, 2012).

All spheres of Northern Irish society deal with discourses of sectarianism, masculinity and racism to varying degrees. The specific discourses which are available at Ballycross RFC perpetuate many problematic aspects of Northern Irish society, but also offer glimpses of optimism. I hope that if the players of Ballycross RFC read my account, they can appreciate my account and critically reflect on their experiences within the club. I hope that a wider audience can identify with elements and elicit meaning from my words. As players exit the showers and clothe themselves in shirts, ties and trousers, I recline against the painted blockwork, savouring my final moments in a Ballycross RFC jersey.

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# Appendix

## Information sheet for participant observation

### Project Title

The life of a rugby player - an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club (working title)

### Purpose

This research is conducted as partial requirement for a PhD. This project requires the researcher to study the lives of club rugby players and conduct research on the topic through participant observation, focus groups and interviews.

### What is this research project about?

I will look to provide an in-depth study into what shapes rugby players in Northern Ireland. This will include religion, economic status, ethnicity, age, race, gender and how they understand and confront issues like masculinity and identity within rugby environments.

### What will you have to do and how long will it take?

The research being conducted is called participant observation. I will be taking part as a full member of the club and taking field notes in a journal. Nothing will be recorded. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate you may decline participation or withdraw at any stage. There will be no repercussions if you do not participate, you will not be excluded from any social activities.

### What will happen to the information collected?

The information collected will be used to write a research report for a PhD thesis. It is possible that articles and presentations may be the outcome of the research. Only the researcher and supervisor will be privy to the notes, documents, recordings and the paper written. Afterwards, notes, documents will be destroyed and recordings erased. The researcher will keep transcriptions of the recordings and a copy of the paper but will treat them with the strictest confidentiality. No participants will be named in the publications and every effort will be made to disguise their identity.

### Declaration to participants

If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

- Ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during your participation;
- Be given access to a summary of findings from the study when it is concluded; and
- Refuse to answer any particular question, and to withdraw from the study at any time

### Who's responsible?

If you have any questions or concerns about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Researcher:

*Thomas Kavanagh; trk11@students.waikato.ac.nz*

Supervisors:

*New Zealand: Associate Professor Robert E. Rinehart; rinehart@waikato.ac.nz*

*Northern Ireland: Dr. Alan McCully; aw.mccully@ulster.ac.uk*



## Information sheet for focus group discussions

### Project Title

The life of a rugby player - an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club (working title)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*



### Purpose

This research is conducted as partial requirement for a PhD. This project requires the researcher to study the lives of club rugby players and conduct research on the topic through participant observation, focus groups and interviews.

### What is this research project about?

I will look to provide an in-depth study into what shapes rugby players in Northern Ireland. This will include religion, economic status, ethnicity, age, race, gender and how they understand and confront issues like masculinity and identity within rugby environments.

### What will you have to do and how long will it take?

The research being conducted that you will participate in is called a focus group. With approximately 3-4 other people, we will discuss matters central to living in Northern Ireland and playing for UUCRFC. These discussions will take approximately one hour. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate you may decline participation without any repercussions. However, any involvement in the group discussion cannot be withdrawn as this is also a recording of others participants' contributions.

### What will happen to the information collected?

The information collected will be used to write a research report for a PhD thesis. It is possible that articles and presentations may be the outcome of the research. Only the researcher and supervisor will be privy to the notes, documents, recordings and the paper written. Afterwards, notes, documents will be destroyed and recordings erased. The researcher will keep transcriptions of the recordings and a copy of the paper but will treat them with the strictest confidentiality. No participants will be named in the publications and every effort will be made to disguise their identity. However, although I will make it clear that what we say will stay private, I cannot guarantee that others in the focus group will uphold the confidentiality of our discussion.

### Declaration to participants

If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

- Ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during your participation;
- Be given access to a summary of findings from the study when it is concluded;
- Refuse to answer any particular question.

### Who's responsible?

If you have any questions or concerns about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Researcher:

*Thomas Kavanagh; [trk11@students.waikato.ac.nz](mailto:trk11@students.waikato.ac.nz)*

Supervisors:

*New Zealand: Associate Professor Robert E. Rinehart; [rinehart@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:rinehart@waikato.ac.nz)*

*Northern Ireland: Dr. Alan McCully; [aw.mccully@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:aw.mccully@ulster.ac.uk)*

The life of a rugby player - an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club (working title)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Tē Whare Wānanga o Waikato*



**Consent Form for focus group discussions**

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I have the right to:

- Ask any further questions about the study during participation;
- Be given access to a summary of findings from the study when it is concluded; and
- Refuse to answer any particular question.

I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the **Participant Information Sheet**.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the **Participant Information Sheet**.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Consent as Required**

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher:  
*Thomas Kavanagh; trk11@students.waikato.ac.nz*

Supervisors:  
*New Zealand: Associate Professor Robert E. Rinehart; rinehart@waikato.ac.nz*  
*Northern Ireland: Dr. Alan McCully; aw.mccully@ulster.ac.uk*

## Information sheet for interviews

### Project Title

The life of a rugby player - an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club (working title)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*



### Purpose

This research is conducted as partial requirement for a PhD. This project requires the researcher to study the lives of club rugby players and conduct research on the topic through participant observation, focus groups and interviews.

### What is this research project about?

I will look to provide an in-depth study into what shapes rugby players in Northern Ireland. This will include religion, economic status, ethnicity, age, race, gender and how they understand and confront issues like masculinity and identity within rugby environments.

### What will you have to do and how long will it take?

The research being conducted that you will participate in is an interview. In private, we will discuss personal matters relating to your upbringing, your rugby experiences and your position within the club. This will take approximately one hour. Once transcribed, you will be given an opportunity to check and amend your transcript. This will take approximately 30 minutes. Once transcriptions are returned to you, you will be given two weeks to assure they are accurate. Your participation is voluntary. If you do not wish to participate you may decline participation or withdraw at any stage.

### What will happen to the information collected?

The information collected will be used to write a research report for a PhD thesis. It is possible that articles and presentations may be the outcome of the research. Only the researcher and supervisor will be privy to the notes, documents, recordings and the paper written. Afterwards, notes, documents will be destroyed and recordings erased. The researcher will keep transcriptions of the recordings and a copy of the paper but will treat them with the strictest confidentiality. No participants will be named in the publications and every effort will be made to disguise their identity.

### Declaration to participants

If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

- Ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during your participation;
- Be given access to a summary of findings from the study when it is concluded;
- Refuse to answer any particular question, and to withdraw from the study at any time

### Who's responsible?

If you have any questions or concerns about the project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Researcher:

*Thomas Kavanagh; trk11@students.waikato.ac.nz*

Supervisors:

*New Zealand: Associate Professor Robert E. Rinehart; rinehart@waikato.ac.nz*

*Northern Ireland: Dr. Alan McCully; aw.mccully@ulster.ac.uk*

The life of a rugby player - an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club (working title)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*



### Consent Form for interviews

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I have the right to:

- Ask any further questions about the study during participation;
- Be given access to a summary of findings from the study when it is concluded;
- Refuse to answer any particular question, and to withdraw from the study at any time;
- Withdraw any information I have provided within two weeks of the transcript being returned for amendment.

I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the **Participant Information Sheet**. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the **Participant Information Sheet**.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Additional Consent as Required

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher:  
*Thomas Kavanagh; trk11@students.waikato.ac.nz*

Supervisors:  
*New Zealand: Associate Professor Robert E. Rinehart; rinehart@waikato.ac.nz*  
*Northern Ireland: Dr. Alan McCully; aw.mccully@ulster.ac.uk*

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Thomas Kavanagh

**cc:** Associate Professor Bob Rinehart  
Dr Karen Barbour

**From:** Associate Professor Garry Falloon  
Chairperson (Acting), Research Ethics Committee

**Date:** 6 May 2015

**Subject:** Supervised Postgraduate Research – Application for Ethical Approval (EDU028/15)

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Thank you for submitting the amendments to your application for ethical approval for the research project:

**(Working title) The life of a rugby player – an ethnography of a Northern Irish rugby club**

I am pleased to advise that your application has received approval.

Please note that researchers are asked to consult with the Faculty's Research Ethics Committee in the first instance if any changes to the approved research design are proposed.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Garry Falloon'.

**Associate Professor Garry Falloon**

Chairperson (Acting)

Research Ethics Committee