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“Loyal to the Truth”:
Gary Mitchell’s Aesthetic Loyalism in *As
the Beast Sleeps* and *The Force of Change*

RICHARD RANKIN RUSSELL

*It’s reviews that scare me. [...] Someone leaving the theatre saying it’s not very good,
that I haven’t been completely truthful.*

—Gary Mitchell, “Truth and Nail”

Despite real progress toward peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland since the landmark Good Friday Agreement in 1998 that set up a power-sharing executive composed of Catholics and Protestants, violence continues in many sectarian areas of the province, as impoverished inhabitants struggle to survive in a rapidly evolving society. Protestant members of these communities feel particularly beleaguered, because they fear the economic and political advancement of Catholics and perceive that the British government, whose protection they could always count on as faithful citizens of the United Kingdom, has deserted them. Their situation requires an unblinking chronicler who understands and sympathizes with their plight yet is able to critique it. Working-class Northern Irish Protestant playwright Gary Mitchell has done just this over the last few years in an impressive body of work that analyzes the crisis of identity within loyalism, that contractual belief held by a segment of the Protestant population committed to maintaining the province’s union with Great Britain, often through violence. This essay examines two plays by Mitchell, *As the Beast Sleeps* (1998) and *The Force of Change* (2000), to understand how these works steadfastly depict intensely complex personal and political loyalties in impoverished Protestant communities. The attraction of these allegiances combines with dire economic circumstances to exert unbearable pressures upon his isolated characters. These characters often then crack and resort to real or threatened violence in an effort to ease their strain. By forcing his audience to vicariously experience intensely conflicted circumstances revolving around loyalties, Mitchell suggests their proclivity for committing violence if they were put under similar pressures. At the same time,

our imaginative entrance into the gritty loyalist world of his drama augurs a new understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland, if we realize how that struggle pits fundamentally similar human beings against one another.

As a Protestant playwright from the working-class housing estate Rathcoole in north Belfast, Mitchell feels that his ultimate loyalty is not to Great Britain or to Protestant conceptions of the province of Northern Ireland as isolationist and independent as many loyalists believe, but to his art, which is based on depicting the complex conditions of working-class Protestant communities. This unwavering, unbiased posture constitutes an aesthetic revision of traditionally contractual and provisional political loyalism as understood by Northern Irish loyalists, which holds that personal and especially political allegiances must be earned. As he told Fiachra Gibbons, loyalists are “loyal to the truth. I have not let the side down by writing this play [*The Force of Change*]. If anybody has let the side down, it is the RUC and those criminal elements within paramilitaries” (Gibbons). Mitchell’s artistic appropriation of loyalty from the political realm suggests his full commitment to aesthetically portraying all the various complexities in political loyalism. Mitchell is no apologist for loyalism, and his work does not offer a propagandized version of the situation that glorifies Protestant loyalism or blames Catholics for dire living conditions. He instead dramatizes the often bewildering range of pressures brought to bear upon his working-class characters by themselves, by their friends and family, and by local police and politicians, and their sometimes violent responses.

While local thugs have come by his flat to discuss his plays and have even threatened him, Mitchell is more concerned about conveying the dark truths in local loyalist communities, as he told Gibbons: “It’s reviews that scare me. Someone leaving the theatre saying it’s not very good, that I haven’t been completely truthful” (Gibbons). The human capacity for violence inspires Mitchell to write about loyalism. As he told a shocked panel of Northern Irish writers, including soon-to-be-named Nobel Peace Prize winner Seamus Heaney during a BBC Northern Ireland radio program devoted to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Troubles, “I think that everybody has the capacity to commit violent crimes. And maybe they haven’t found it within themselves, but it’s there; it’s an animal thing that’s within everyone” (“Whatever You Say, Say Nothing”).

While the Northern Irish public is lulled by the seeming peace ushered in by the Good Friday Agreement, Mitchell dramatizes what David Grant has termed the “furtive and festering” violence in the province in the wake of loyalist and IRA ceasefires in 1994 in an effort to realistically portray the continuing problems in working-class impoverished Protestant communities (47). Punishment beatings and betrayals do not often make the evening news anymore, even in the province, but they continue unabated, suggesting the violence simmering just below the surface in many communities. In their

depiction of this underground violence, Mitchell's works are suffused with an atmosphere of menace, immediacy, and claustrophobia, laced with obscenities, and often set to pounding music in order to evoke an onstage atmosphere analogous to the same feeling experienced by Protestants living in the rough-and-tumble world of Rathcoole. His desire to put his audience through such an experience was reflected in a remark to critic Karen Fricker: "Realistically, what you have to hope for is that you will not beat people over the head with some big message but that you make it [a play] like life itself" (55).

In two of his best plays, *As the Beast Sleeps* and *The Force of Change*, Mitchell portrays the side of Protestant communities in which personal and political loyalties are tentatively advanced, withdrawn, and negotiated, usually as the result of economic pressures. *As the Beast Sleeps* focuses on the conflict between newly minted political expressions of fringe loyalism and the desire of some of the hard men within loyalism to continue operating with impunity, while *The Force of Change* deals directly with a previously taboo subject in the loyalist community – the charges of collusion between the largely Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary (now the Police Service of Northern Ireland, or PSNI) and Protestant paramilitaries.

The complexity of *As the Beast Sleeps* is such that a detailed plot summary is necessary. The play dramatizes the vacillations of Kyle, as he is alternately loyal to his commander in the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), Larry, to his wife, Sandra, and to the other young men in his squad, especially his best mate, Freddie. Kyle ultimately chooses loyalty to himself and the UDA over allegiance to Freddie, a dramatic illustration of political loyalism's tenet that loyalty must be earned. As the play opens, Freddie is very upset because several of their mates have been barred from the local club. He cannot fathom this punitive action, since his and Kyle's cell have provided illegal cigarettes and liquor to the club in the past through a string of thefts. Kyle promises Freddie that he will speak to Larry about getting their mates reinstated. Sandra is desperate for money, and because Freddie and Kyle have been ordered not to commit any more robberies for the near future, she has been borrowing from her mother. Her plea to Kyle is to ask Larry for money when he sees him. Already Kyle's loyalty to his wife and best mate is established, but each link will soon be tested by Larry's orders to him as part of his offer of a new position in the organization.

In scene two, Larry's loyalties are torn between his violent past and his current political aspirations. This scene is fittingly set in a former punishment room where he has directed many beatings and tortures. As he speaks to Alec, the current politician representing the UDA, he admits he does not know what to say to the young toughs like Freddie he has trained to commit violence. Alec urges him to calm them down; in exchange for this loyalty, Larry wants to become part of Alec's political party, but Alec is wary, only promising him he will talk to some people. Larry ominously tells him, "Because if you can't

change their minds for me then maybe I can't change these young fellas' minds for you" (22). Alec is alarmed but promises to do what he can. Both of these characters also evince characteristics of contractual and provisional loyalty, again suggesting it must be earned despite their long history together.

Kyle and Larry eventually enter into a contractually loyal agreement as well. Kyle tells Larry about the ban on his mates, which he promises to lift on a provisional basis, implying that they will be admitted to the club as long as they remain loyal to Larry and refrain from misbehaving. He also meets Kyle's demand for a separate drinking area for his team. In exchange for lifting the ban, Larry asks Kyle to head up a punishment squad to keep the violent young man such as Freddie in check. Kyle resists Larry's suggestion at first, but Larry indicates that in taking on this new position, he will be affirming his loyalty to the UDA:

LARRY. We're soldiers. Brought on board to do a job, not to think about it, not to ask questions but to follow orders because we are loyal. Loyal to Ulster, loyal to the community – loyal to the chain of command.

KYLE. I am loyal. I do follow orders, I do, do what I'm told but all I'm saying to you is this ... I don't want to do this. I'm better than this, I have more to offer than this. (49)

After Larry tells him he can best help the cause in this new capacity and praises him for being perfect for the job, he clinches his argument by again referring to the loyalty that must be given to the chain of command in the UDA: "But the thing is, Kyle. If they don't come on board and they don't do what has to be done – what does that say about them?" (50). Because Kyle is worn down by his verbal assaults that appeal to his ingrained political conception of contractual loyalty, he warily and reluctantly agrees to punish people who are not being loyal by refusing to follow Alec's orders to calm down.

Throughout these early scenes in the play, many of the men of violence, such as Freddie, Kyle, and even Larry, express a deep sense of frustration with their changing roles. All of them long for earlier, simpler days when decisions were immediate and physical, not protracted and political. As Larry tells Alec in scene two, "It all seems to have been easier then. And I even think of them in black and white. The Prods [Protestants] were the good guys and the Taigs [Catholics] were the baddies. Simple as that" (20). In scene five, Freddie wistfully recalls those earlier days to Sandra, bragging about his and Kyle's robbery of a van loaded with half a million cigarettes. After Sandra says, "Those days were great," Freddie blurts out, "And do you know why? Because they were simple. Straight forward. Everybody knew where they were. Not like now" (55). Freddie's lament is felt by many young Protestants committed to using physical force to maintain their superiority in the province, but who, having been told to stand down, are seething and waiting to return to that

world of action they know so well. These contemporary defenders of the province remain unconvinced that the ballot box is superior to beatings or even worse violence.

Kyle finally tries to address both Freddie's concerns about the club and Sandra's about money with a speech about loyalty: "It's not just about money. It's about loyalty. Freddie says he's a loyalist, well if that's true, then Freddie has to come on board, do you understand? There's nothing to do. There's no jobs to be done at the minute. Not the jobs that we normally do" (63). In response to Sandra's query, "Then what are you going to do?" Kyle again invokes loyalty: "I'm going to be loyal. Loyal to you, loyal to my family, loyal to my country. How far do you want me to go?" (63). Kyle's mantra tellingly leaves out loyalty to his friends, as he has already calculated that these other allegiances are superior to friendships, even to his relationship with Freddie. Sandra quickly realizes that he has become part of a punishment squad, but Kyle attempts to play down his role, telling her that his squad has very limited objectives and will probably operate only once: "Punishment squads do housebreakers and glue sniffers – what I'm talking about here is renegades – bad men. And it would be a one off" (64). Kyle finally reminds her that other men would hurt or kill their close friends if he does not have a chance to deal with them first, also telling her that if he does not join the punishment team, *he* will be disloyal and could become a target.

As the play hurtles to its climax in the close confines of the punishment room, Kyle foregoes his loyalty to Freddie and allows him to be beaten repeatedly as punishment for robbing Alec's club, in order to demonstrate Kyle's loyalty to the UDA. Freddie's "disloyal" theft has hurt the UDA's political wing, since the money from the club is being funneled to the party. While they debate whether or not he should be killed, with Kyle attempting to manifest loyalty to his old friend and to his new job, Larry's thug Norman rushes in again and beats Freddie repeatedly. A disgusted Larry stalks out, and eventually Kyle struggles out with Freddie's body (94).

Kyle finally questions Sandra about new friends that Freddie might have found to help him rob the club but slowly realizes that she was the other robber; she has provisionally allied herself with Freddie, since Kyle has refused to commit any more violent acts. She refuses to tell him where the money is, spits in his face, and leaves the room. While she has not been directly disloyal to him, she is now beginning to compromise his new job and his loyalty to Larry. Kyle is anguished and throws the phone against the wall, finally dissolving into maniacal laughter (98). He realizes that he cannot beat the information out of his own wife, but neither can he shirk his new duties.

Caught between martial and marital loyalty, Kyle is trapped in a dilemma both uniquely personal to him and symptomatic of the way in which personal and political loyalism on a variety of levels continues to exert strong – even overwhelming – pressures on members of working-class Protestant communi-

ties in Northern Ireland. Mitchell's refusal to show Kyle making a choice between his wife and his job at the conclusion demonstrates his commitment to depicting the utter complexity of the situation: the audience and Kyle want resolution, but none is forthcoming. Mitchell suggests that there are no simple answers to the lingering problems the current peace process has ushered in: the Good Friday Agreement's emphasis on open dialogue between opposing factions makes no provision for the hundreds or thousands of young men like Kyle and Freddie, and their counterparts in grass-roots republican movements, who speak nothing but the language of force. In this sense, *As the Beast Sleeps* transcends its specific paramilitary, even Protestant, milieu and addresses all communities in Northern Ireland that are under similar pressures.

Along with subtly showing the vexed personal and political situation in the province, the play suggests strongly that transcultural poverty lies at the heart of sectarianism in the province. Larry's attempt to move into politics and transcend his working-class background finally fails as he again embraces violence by having Freddie beaten. Larry, Kyle, and Freddie are products of their impoverished upbringing, and of the sectarian conditions that flourish on lower-income housing estates like Rathcoole, as Eamon McCann's program note suggests:

The air is felt thickest with sectarian threat in the places where the lower orders lurk. The poorer you are the more likely you live in an area where there's only one religion – with wretched bikes and busted prams on the flat roofs of maisonettes, weary schools, the play-park strewn with scrunched cans and squelchy condoms, and every index of social deprivation wavering off the register. *Yet no component of the day-to-day bleakness ordinarily overlaps into shared experience with people similarly situated on the other side.* (italics added)

McCann's approval of Mitchell's examination of the class basis for sectarianism is especially revelatory, since McCann has long been a spokesman for republicanism, even while pointing out the necessity of a class-based analysis of the conflict in Northern Ireland. McCann and Mitchell both imply that lower-class Catholics and Protestants share a culture of poverty that should provide the seeds of a unity needed to protest the dire economic conditions that breed sectarianism.

As the Beast Sleeps suggests that only through an examination of class issues can that hatred be reduced and perhaps eliminated. Sandra's and Kyle's very real search for financial security symbolizes the similar search for decent paying jobs in the province by both lower-class Catholics and Protestants. Kyle's decision to head up the punishment squad stems not only from Larry's appeal to his loyalism, but also from Kyle's very real need for money to support his family. The peace process works best, Mitchell seems to argue, for those, like Alec, the aspiring political face of the UDA, who can now afford it

and who do not have to find work within paramilitary organizations, which often provide the only source of good income in working-class areas. The title of his play suggests that there is a growing anger and frustration among those who feel left out of the political and pecuniary rewards for refusing to engage in violence anymore.

In addition to the depiction of simmering frustrations associated with continued class inequities, *As the Beast Sleeps* is meant to force the audience members to examine their own proclivities for violence. Although Kyle has rejected Freddie's violence, he himself resorts to it by threatening his friend and then allowing him to be killed. Kyle's recourse to violence, suggests Mitchell, might become our own if we were put in a similar bind. As he remarked in 1994, "It's all too easy for everyone to say that anyone who has committed a crime, or who is in favor of committing crimes, there's something wrong with them, when there isn't. All there is is that they have actually done something. But we've all got those capabilities" ("Whatever You Say, Say Nothing"). Ultimately, no one escapes culpability: the violence enacted by the actors and the brutality of which the audience is also capable bind us together as depraved human beings.

While economic pressures and internal violence within Protestant paramilitary groups such as the UDA drive the issues in this earlier play, pressing financial concerns and the issue of collusion between these same organizations and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) are the focus in *The Force of Change*. Formerly a largely Protestant force, the RUC has been transformed recently by recruiting more Catholics and being renamed the Police Service of Northern Ireland, as part of the Good Friday Agreement's Patten Commission on Policing. Nationalists and republicans have long criticized the force for excessive violence against Catholic protestors.¹ Murals linking the RUC and the sectarian Orange Order can be found throughout nationalist areas of the province, such as the mural on Lecky Road in Derry that portrays an RUC officer wearing the sash of the Orange Order and holding an automatic weapon.² While the RUC has vigorously protested the most damning charge of all – collusion with paramilitaries such as the UDA – a recent admission of extensive collaboration between the two groups by former RUC officer John Weir suggests otherwise.³ As the RUC has sought to dissociate itself from the sectarian image held by nationalists, it has incurred the wrath of Protestants who feel abandoned by the force, which is still largely composed of young Protestant men.

The title, cover of the script, and setting of *The Force of Change* evoke its thematic concerns. The title is a double entendre: it refers both to the RUC as a police force made to change because of the recent recommendations from the Patten Commission and to the general force of change in Northern Irish society with the ongoing peace process. Just as in *As the Beast Sleeps*, however, characters in this drama fear change and long for the days of clear-cut

actions, not ambiguous politics. This historic realm of action is evoked by a photograph of a raised open hand manacled to a clenched fist adorning the cover. The first part of this disturbing image suggests the symbol of the ancient province of Ulster, usually depicted as a red hand, which is rendered white here. More ominously, the major Protestant paramilitary groups have adopted variations upon the red hand symbol for their own insignia. Neil Jarman points out that the Ulster Defence Association depicts “a Red Hand on a blue field under a crown,” while the UFF (the Ulster Freedom Fighters, the codename employed by the UDA “when carrying out acts of violence”) uses a clenched fist. The Loyalist Prisoners Association’s emblem shows “the red hand entwined in barbed wire [...] with the crown over it [signifying] continued loyalty despite imprisonment.” Finally, the emblem of the Ulster Defence Force depicts “a winged Red Hand with the motto, ‘Sans Peur’” (218).⁴ That open hand on the script’s cover, however, possibly signifies the universal symbol to stop, making the drama a plea for a halt in the violence to listen to its message. Finally, the clenched fist, specifically a symbol of the UFF, symbolizes the general brutal violence employed by those who seek to defend Ulster from its perceived enemies such as Catholics. Thus both the raised hand and the clenched fist evoke an overwhelming series of violent images that are not offset by the peaceful potential of that open hand, which suggests the festering violence in the province during the supposed halt in the peace process.

Just as *As the Beast Sleeps* is set in the enclosed spaces of Sandra and Kyle’s house, the club, and the punishment room, *The Force of Change* is set in similarly confined spaces: two cramped interview rooms and the narrow corridor of Castlereagh RUC station, which was the RUC’s main detention and interrogation center for many years in Belfast. Whereas the earlier play is at least marginally more spatially open because of the movement between multiple buildings, the latter is more claustrophobic since it takes place entirely in two different interrogation rooms at the station. This tightly confined setting evokes the closed atmosphere of the RUC and the secrecy within that organization until fairly recently. It also enables Mitchell to cleverly use his location to interrogate the unraveling of loyalist identities in the province, even as a loyalist thug is questioned by several RUC officers.

The play’s action is as confined as its setting, taking place over the course of a day. Its plot focuses upon Detective Sergeant Caroline Paterson’s attempt to make a UDA goon, Stanley Brown, talk about his involvement in the organization. Caroline is also up for promotion, and making Brown talk by the end of the day is crucial to her success. Bill Byrne, an older detective constable, is fighting a running battle with Caroline and has filed a number of petty complaints against her in an effort to stop her ascent within the RUC. Detective Sergeant Mark Simpson supports Caroline but is sympathetic to Bill’s complaints and to those of David Davis, a young detective constable who sees

himself as the guardian of the populace of Northern Ireland and resents Caroline's meteoric ascent at least as much as Bill does.

In Act One, Bill's sympathy with loyalist organizations is slowly revealed, undermining his and Caroline's interrogation of Brown (16–25). Caroline's efforts range from sophisticated to crude, but all of them fail, and she finally leaves in disgust (25). As the action switches to Interview Room B, Mark and David interrogate petty car thief Rabbit Montgomery, who they suspect has been recently working for the UDA (25–37). After Rabbit refuses to name anyone, the first act concludes with a very brief and disturbing scene in Interview Room A in which Stanley asks Bill for Caroline's personal details, presumably so he can order a hit on her. Bill, who already hates Caroline, is committed to the UDA, but in giving out her personal information, violates his loyalties to a fellow officer and to the RUC itself.

Later in the play, Caroline complains to Mark about her lack of prospects in the male-dominated RUC. Loyalties within the force have traditionally been heavily masculine, and she has found it difficult to break into its structure, which will prevent her desired rapid advancement (44–45). Despite being surrounded by male characters throughout the play, she has no real rapport with any of them and often finds herself alone, even in the midst of these fellow officers. She is committed to changing the force but is also looking out for herself.

When Bill returns from lunch, he makes a wheedling pitch for Stanley to inform on his superiors and tells him that if he does, he will be released and can then take charge of the UDA (48–50). The gist of Bill's longest speech invokes the changes he feels are contributing to the dissolution of the RUC and the Protestant community generally. Alarmed by Caroline's ascent in the RUC and the prospect of more Catholics joining the force with the Patten Commission's recommendations, Bill attempts to convince Stanley that they are both victims of change in the Protestant community that is giving the traditional enemy, Catholics, an advantage:

I've sat in this station and watched my own organisation crumble. We even have Catholics involved these days. And the government wants more and more of them brought in. If they had their way the IRA would take over the Police force. Seriously, education today, security tomorrow. Promotion and recruitment is going to be at least fifty-fifty. Is our population even fifty-fifty? No. That's reverse discrimination, Stanley and we're going to suffer, in years to come you're going to be in here being interviewed by two Catholics, do you hear me? Me? I'm going to be ignored for promotion after promotion and then eventually shelved. (51)

When Stanley does not talk after Bill's imprecations, Caroline tries a few more times, but with no success. She soon realizes Bill has colluded with Stanley and tells Mark her suspicions. Deeply frustrated, she finally leaves (52–58).

Adhering to the masculine code of loyalty in the RUC, Bill reveals to both Mark and David that he is heavily in debt to the UDA and that he pays it off by doing favors for them (59). When he admits having given her personal details to Stanley, Mark is furious, but David plays it down, as does Bill, claiming that the UDA will only try to scare her, then use her too. Bill's lack of concern for Caroline is chilling but demonstrates how habitually, in his mind, the UDA has been able to blackmail members of the security forces. For Bill, a representative of the old RUC, this is business as usual. Mark and David argue to Caroline that by going after Bill, one of their own, she is actually being disloyal to the force and contributing to its dissolution (64–65).

Back in Interview Room A, David turns on Stanley, suggesting the rupture in perceived and sometimes actual bonds between the RUC and Protestant paramilitaries, and shows his disdain for his kind, vowing to protect the community from criminals like him. He even equates him to the IRA in his thugishness: "When I look into your eyes I see a reflection of every IRA man you claimed to be protecting us from. I see old men closing their shops and going home penniless because you took their profit and more" (76). David's penetrating equation of the IRA and the UDA implies that both organizations are economic drains on their community and perhaps just as much a threat as the traditional enemy has been perceived to be.

This dramatic economic analysis departs from that proffered by Mitchell in *As the Beast Sleeps*, where he suggests that employment by paramilitary groups is often the only viable option for attaining a humane standard of living. Here David articulates the position that these groups can suck the fiscal life from those they claim to be defending, a charge of fiscal selfishness that resonates through the latter half of the play and demonstrates the dissolution of a formerly tightly bound web of allegiances. As the paramilitaries prey on members of their own communities, these law-abiding citizens now are withdrawing support from them, increasing the tension almost unbearably.⁵

More loyalties unravel as the play proceeds. As Mark and Caroline threaten to make Rabbit leave the station, he violates his loyalty to the UDA by cracking under the possibility that UDA thugs are waiting for him outside. He names a UDA member for whom he stole the car but also swears that Stanley is uninvolved. Mark finally grabs him and forces his face into the table, but Caroline commands him to stop, showing her loyalty to the law, and tells Rabbit he is entitled to legal representation. A worried and disappointed Mark leaves the room fuming (80–81).

In the concluding scene, Bill and David lament the demise of Protestant unity and the various feuds among loyalists, but when Stanley lashes out at them, David turns on him and threatens him, demonstrating his loyalty to Caroline when she is threatened by an outsider to the force. He tells Stanley that if anything happens to Caroline or her family, he will blame Stanley. Mark enters, and Stanley complains that *he* has been threatened, asking Bill for cor-

roboration. Bill refuses to incriminate David, thus maintaining his loyalty to his fellow officers, presumably in exchange for their not informing on his exposure of Caroline. After Mark orders Stanley to leave the station, the play ends on David's unsettling words to Stanley: "How safe do you feel now?" (83). While *The Force of Change* began with at least a pretence of solidarity among the RUC officers, now personal safety has become the major concern for each character. Caroline fears reprisals from Stanley and his UDA friends, while Mark fears a reprimand or legal punishment for physically abusing Rabbit. Bill knows his days on the force are numbered and that the UDA could kill him at any time. Finally, David's bold threats to Stanley have also exposed him to future UDA recrimination.

Mitchell's commitment to depicting the complexities of loyalism, including its violence, is manifested in the play's enactment of real collusion that has taken place among some members of the RUC and Protestant paramilitary organizations such as the UDA, and through the demonstration of the various loyalties claiming his characters' allegiance. Thus he juxtaposes Caroline's selfish quest for promotion and Bill's self-serving search for money in a highly pressured situation that pivots upon Stanley, who alone has the power to speak and give both what they want. Caroline's unnecessary ridicule of Stanley leads him to refuse to cooperate with her and angers him to the point that he asks Bill for her personal details, a request with which Bill feels obliged to comply, given his debts to the UDA. Caroline ultimately demonstrates little loyalty to her fellow officers, and after Mark's initial support of her, they show themselves to be disloyal to her, except for David, who decides to be loyal to the force by standing up for her to Stanley.

The way in which the cloistered world of the police station is metaphorically exploded, leaving the characters isolated and open to physical attack, brilliantly depicts the unraveling of the previously tight loyalties between some members of the former RUC and paramilitary groups. These two groups, both of which have often had recourse to unjustified violence (though the RUC has had many hardworking, upstanding officers), now are having political force applied to them so that they might modify their tactics. As new members (including a higher percentage of Catholics) enter the force, it will remain a contested zone in which personal, political, and tribal loyalties conflict.

Reading *As the Beast Sleeps* along with *The Force of Change* reveals just how much confusion and isolation abound in both Protestant paramilitary groups and in the Police Service of Northern Ireland, formerly the mainly Protestant RUC. The dramatic characters such as Kyle, Freddie, and Stanley, and presumably many of their real-life counterparts are dismayed that their previous relationships within and without their paramilitary groups are crumbling; this collapse will continue to precipitate a series of existential crises about individual and societal loyalties. Kyle and Freddie thus seek a restoration of the web of male relationships to which they have devoted their lives.

While Kyle eventually is forced into a sorry substitute for those associations by heading up the new punishment squad, Freddie's desperate nostalgia for the past leads him to rob the club and to become the target of a provisionally allied group of men whose relationships will be shattered by his death. While David, Bill, and Mark in *The Force of Change* evoke their allegiance to each other in the course of the play, their alliance too will crumble as soon as Stanley leaves the station. Each man, under mounting personal, political, and fiscal pressures, will probably turn increasingly inward while only nominally taking part in his vocational relationships.

There is a movement, then, in both plays from communal solidarity to personal loneliness: Kyle sits alone on the floor of his house at the end of *As the Beast Sleeps*, and while David, Bill, Mark, and Stanley are all on stage together at the conclusion of *The Force of Change*, each man has been condemned to his own private hell. The increased isolation of each of these "defenders of the faith" parallels that felt by many Northern Irish Protestants, especially in the context of growing numbers of Northern Irish Catholics. While Northern Protestants remain the majority in Northern Ireland, there are now more young Catholics than Protestants of similar age. Despite the easing of tensions and some progress toward reconciliation with Catholics, significant numbers of working-class Northern Protestants fear that they will soon be outnumbered by Catholics. Their reaction has been alternately confused, defensive, and aggressive. This segment of the Protestant population largely feels that they have been "sold out" by established, middle- to upper-class Protestant politicians such as Alec in *As the Beast Sleeps*.

These individual and political identity crises are exacerbated by economic concerns that exert additional pressures on these groups and on the PSNI. Kyle's lack of money leads him further into bondage to the UDA in an effort to maintain his family's already low economic status, while Bill's financial debts to the UDA enables it to gain a hold on him and compromise his investigation into that organization. In a less sinister but nonetheless damaging manner, Caroline's determined efforts to move up in the force and attain a higher position at a higher wage, while laudable from the standpoint of workplace equality, compromise her work for the force and alienate her from her fellow officers. Throughout this society, Mitchell suggests, inadequate wages are more crippling than any beating and are even more pervasive and divisive. While Northern Irish politicians speak repeatedly about the need for disarmament and trust, their pronouncements are seldom based on an accurate understanding of the dire fiscal situation endemic to the working-class ghettos and housing estates.

The decline of Northern Ireland's economy during the latter half of the twentieth century has at least indirectly led to an influx of men into both legal and illegal occupations that are based on force, a process that is reflected in the jobs of Mitchell's characters in these two plays. A comparison of these

characters' joint advocacy of force to the varied skills practiced by another group of fictional but realistic Northern Irish Protestant characters – in Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* – demonstrates the decrease generally in vocational variety in the province. McGuinness' characters demonstrate the range of rural and urban crafts across Northern Ireland in the 1910s including weaving, baking, shipbuilding, blacksmithing, preaching, and sculpting (Russell 10). Working-class Protestants, especially those employed in manufacturing in Belfast, have been hit particularly hard. Mark McGovern and Peter Shirlow have noted that from 1971 to 1991, "Three-quarters of jobs lost within Belfast's manufacturing sector were previously held by those from Protestant working-class communities" (195). Additionally, given the rate of pay offered to PSNI officers, which is the highest in the world for a state police force, and the high profits available to paramilitary groups engaging in a host of illegal activities, poorer Protestant citizens often choose to serve in the security forces or become involved with paramilitary groups such as the UDA.

The money generated by both legal employment in the security forces and the illegal economy of the paramilitary groups, however, is revenue that could be better spent on creating long-term financial opportunities in other employment venues. In both plays, Mitchell suggests that the Northern Irish economy is debilitated by its continued prohibitive fiscal need for an armed police service to quell the political violence and quash the burgeoning underground financial practices of paramilitary groups such as the UDA and IRA. McGovern and Shirlow point out the subvention of funds by the British government into the Northern Irish economy so that the state might maintain social stability in the midst of continued sociopolitical conflict there accounted for 35.8 percent of the province's GDP in 1993 (188, 189). But as Britain increasingly withdraws financial support and members of its army and the security forces from the province in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement, Protestants, especially loyalists who are committed to maintaining Northern Ireland as British, even by force, feel abandoned. Responses have included attacking members of the security forces or preying on citizens who share their own political or religious persuasions, damaging the legitimate economies of those communities even further, as David correctly tells the UDA goon Stanley in *The Force of Change*.

Perhaps most disturbing, as public service employment continues to grow, McGovern and Shirlow show that the result has been the creation of a large middle class with a representative proportion of Catholics relative to that of the total population, which has consolidated "non-sectarian middle-class solidarity while at the same time alienating sections of both the Catholic and Protestant working-class" (190). As working-class Catholics and Protestants compete for a limited number of jobs, some of these Protestants have channeled their frustration into sectarian antagonism against what they see as "the

rise of the Catholic community on the back of IRA violence" (196). Republican activist Eamon McCann recognizes this Protestant anger in his program note to *As the Beast Sleeps*:

To the extent that deprivation in life in Rathcoole gave growth to individuals and organizations filled with furious hatred of uppity Catholics, it has been the State and the class in control of the State which contrived it so. Having contrived it, the State then disowned it, and provided amplification for dainty pleas to "the men of violence" to scramble up and join the decent folks on higher and more comfortable ground.

Random killings of innocent Catholic civilians by Protestant paramilitaries have resulted from this perception of rapacious Catholics. Mitchell's realistically rendered poor Protestants, conditioned by sectarianism and its inevitable accomplice, force, often then lash out with a fury that bespeaks their lack of personal and political power. These characters are vocationally equipped as enforcers, whether they wield the illicit power exercised by Kyle, Freddie, Larry, and even Stanley, or the authorized but sometimes abusive power by the RUC/PSNI officers. As such, they are naturally inclined to employ physical attempts to solve the problems around them. Unskilled in diplomacy or even advanced argumentation, these individuals speak the language of force with often devastating consequences for themselves and others.

If the conflicts of Mitchell's characters are torturous, he ensures that the audience's response is also conflicted: allowed to enter into his characters' situations, the audience must remain open to the full force of Mitchell's artfully rendered world to assess the varying loyalties, realizing its own capacity for violence in such circumstances. Only then, Mitchell suggests, can the particular and universal difficulties afflicting contemporary loyalism (and indeed working-class communities across a range of political and religious persuasions in the province) be made clear. Mitchell's theatre thus successfully subverts the usual binary thinking about the Northern Irish conflict that pits republicans against loyalists and instead demonstrates the utter complexity of the situation.

What might result from our imaginative entrance to Mitchell's cloistered world of brutality, besides realizing our own capacity for violence? It may lead to a recognition that open dialogue, represented by his choice of genre with its focus on discussion and expressed in the real conversations his characters are sometimes capable of, despite their propensity to violence, can lead to mutual appreciation of different traditions in the province and a celebration of our common humanity, a necessary step toward reconciliation. Many people who appreciate the Catholic struggle for civil rights in the province often also ally themselves with Irish nationalism, even republicanism, sometimes because of their romanticized notions of it. These individuals might benefit from an imaginative immersion in loyalist culture through reading and viewing Mitchell's

plays and may understand better the actions of loyalists, while not condoning them. This new balance in understanding political and cultural conditions in Northern Ireland is only one of many possibilities offered by his work.

The crucial maneuver in the process of allowing ourselves to appreciate but not endorse even such a violently realistic vision lies in fully entering Mitchell's onstage world and suspending preconceived political notions about the conflict in Northern Ireland. Literature, not politics, seems best able to unravel the cat's cradle of contradictions and confusions attendant upon identity in the North and weave a new design that explodes nativist and exclusivist ideas in all of the communities in the province. Cultural and even religious reconciliation may follow.

Mitchell's varied body of work about different aspects of the crisis in Northern Irish Protestant identity suggests that loyalism will continue to provide themes for his fertile dramatic imagination in years to come. He holds an unswerving commitment to an aesthetic loyalism (rather than to the traditional contractual political loyalism whose view is that loyalty must be earned) that depicts realistic conditions among working-class Protestants in the province. He successfully puts his audience and readers through intensely conflicted situations that reflect the deep complexity of contractual personal and political loyalties endemic to these communities, enabling them to enter that confusing world. This focus will continue to lend a high degree of artistic integrity to his work. Politicians, police, paramilitary groups, and ordinary people are starting to take notice of this talented young playwright's grittily realistic plays that hold a mirror up to working-class Protestants who often have been reluctant to see themselves in it. This angry young man from Rathcoole is dedicated to protesting in the best tradition of his religious and cultural milieu that some things remain terribly wrong in Northern Ireland, peace talks and politics notwithstanding.

NOTES

- 1 In her definitive history of Northern Irish Catholics, Marianne Elliott points out that in its inception in 1922, a full third of the RUC was supposed to be Catholic. Although only 400 Catholics from the Royal Irish Constabulary transferred to the new force, by 1936, 17.1 percent of the force's senior officers were Catholic. By 1963, the proportion of Catholics had dropped to 11 percent, and it became increasingly more sectarian: "The force became visibly more 'Protestant' as [B] Specials [former members of the original Ulster Volunteer Force who were hated by nationalists and revered by loyalists] were given favourable entry conditions, accounting for between a quarter and a third of recruits to the RUC, until the Specials' disbandment in 1970. Increasingly it came to be seen by Catholics as a partisan force, soft on the Orangemen, hard on the Catholics when they clashed" (380).
- 2 For an illustration of this mural, see plate 80 in Rolston (42).

- 3 In an affidavit of 1 March 1999, Weir supports journalist Sean McPhilemy's 1998 book *The Committee*, which details alleged collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and the RUC. Weir details extensive involvement between himself and other RUC officers and various loyalist paramilitaries in a number of murderous attacks on Catholics in the province. See Weir.
- 4 For an example of a Belfast mural with these symbols of the UDA, UFF, and LPA, see plate 11 in Rolston (6).
- 5 While the loyalist groups are increasingly losing support from their communities, they also continue to experience a great deal of internal conflict. Despite the joint ceasefire previously announced by the Combined Loyalist Military Command in 1994 soon after the IRA ceasefire was declared, the establishment of the Loyalist Volunteer Force in 1996 indicated a growing fissiparity within loyalist paramilitaries.

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