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Northern Ireland is no longer the relentless headline-maker in the global media it once was, when multiple killings and bombings provided a daily diet of depressing news and images. But the sequence of political moments in its recent past, pronounced by government leaders in London, Dublin and Washington to be ‘historic’ – the 1994 paramilitary ceasefires, the 1998 Belfast agreement, the establishment of power-sharing institutions in 1999 and their renewal in 2007 – have embedded in states across the globe a hazy but widely shared notion that this is a remarkable success story of a transformation from irrational sectarian violence to peace and reconciliation. This superficial grasp of a far more complex historical trajectory has opened up a disconnection between the Panglossian international perception and objective reality on the ground, rendering inexplicable such events as the recrudescence of lethal violence in 2009.

I have been engaged with the Northern Ireland conflict all my adult life: I still recall the shock of the TV images of police officers batoning civil-rights demonstrators in Derry on 5 October 1968 (two days before my fourteenth birthday) and digesting on the morning of 31 January 1972 the polarised newspaper coverage of Bloody Sunday, trying to make sense of it all. In a box under my bed I have a sixth-form essay supporting power-sharing as a political solution.

Over succeeding decades, as a journalist and think tank director I have worried away at the theme broached in that exercise book. This book – hopefully something of an advance on that jejune thinking – is the product of a Ph.D. on which I was able to focus after becoming an independent researcher in 2006. By bringing a broader intellectual and comparative perspective to bear (including via the privilege of being at the heart of the debate in the Council of Europe on intercultural dialogue in the mid to late 2000s), by trawling the archives in London and Dublin on the 1970s power-sharing experiment and by interviewing many of those involved with the

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more recent protracted effort to establish stable power-sharing, I have tried to present a more sophisticated, if more sobering, perspective than the conventional portrayal of the 'peace process'.

As a long-term supporter of the slogan favoured by Antonio Gramsci, 'pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will', I have also, however, concluded with positive proposals as to how Northern Ireland can yet make the political step-change required to achieve the normality its long-suffering citizens deserve. These draw on the work of the research team which since 1999 has monitored the outworking of devolution in the region (part of a wider project coordinated by the Constitution Unit at University College London), led by Professor Rick Wilford of Queen's University Belfast, who also supervised my thesis, and myself. I am obviously entirely responsible for my conclusions.

Many people deserve copious thanks for their generous assistance. My interviewees, including very senior officials, were often willing to give inordinate amounts of their time and Alison Gray diligently transcribed their responses. My friends Quentin, Lorna and Neil in London and Theresa and Gerry in Dublin were unfailingly hospitable during my work in the National Archives. Above all Professor Wilford was a constant source of help, criticism and advice. I am also indebted to Tony Mason at Manchester University Press for taking this project on board and making the book a reality.

Robin Wilson