

Chapter 1

A Walk of Life

Entering Catholic West Belfast

On a Friday afternoon in September 2004, shortly before returning home from my ethnographic fieldwork, I took my video camera and filmed a walk from the city centre into Catholic West Belfast up to the Beechmount area, where I had lived and conducted much of my research. I had come to Catholic West Belfast fourteen months prior with the intention of learning about locally prevailing senses of ethnic identity. Yet I soon found out that virtually every local Catholic I talked to seemed to see him- or herself as ‘Irish’, and apparently expected other locals to do the same. My open questions such as ‘What ethnic or national identity do you have?’ at times even irritated my interlocutors, not so much, as I figured out, because they felt like I was contesting their sense of identity but, to the contrary, because the answer ‘Irish’ seemed so obvious. ‘What else could I be?’ was a rhetorical question I often encountered in such conversations, indicating to me that, for many, Irish identity went without saying. If that was the case, then what did being Irish mean to these people? What made somebody Irish, and where were local senses of Irishness to be found? Questions like these became the focus of my investigations and constitute the overall subject of this book.

One obvious entry point for addressing such questions consisted in attending to the ways in which Irishness was locally represented. Listening to how locals talked about their Irishness, keeping an eye on public representations by organizations and the media, and explicitly asking people about their Irishness in informal conversations and formal interviews all constituted ways of approaching this topic. But for reasons that will be discussed in the next chapter, my theoretical interests went beyond the level of representations. I wanted to come to terms not only with ‘representational’ practices of Irishness but also with the realities of therein ‘represented’ practices of Irishness, and finally with the interrelations between these two levels.

For this purpose, the Irish language caught my attention. Irish is one of six Celtic languages usually classified as a branch within the Indo-European language family, which is composed of several other branches such as the Germanic languages including English, to which Irish is only distantly related. Although Irish historically constituted the mother tongue of most of Ireland’s inhabitants, it was increasingly replaced throughout the nineteenth century with English as the dominant first language (Hindley 1990; Purdon 1999; Murchú 2000; Price 2000; Schrijver 2000). Against this background, the Irish language experienced

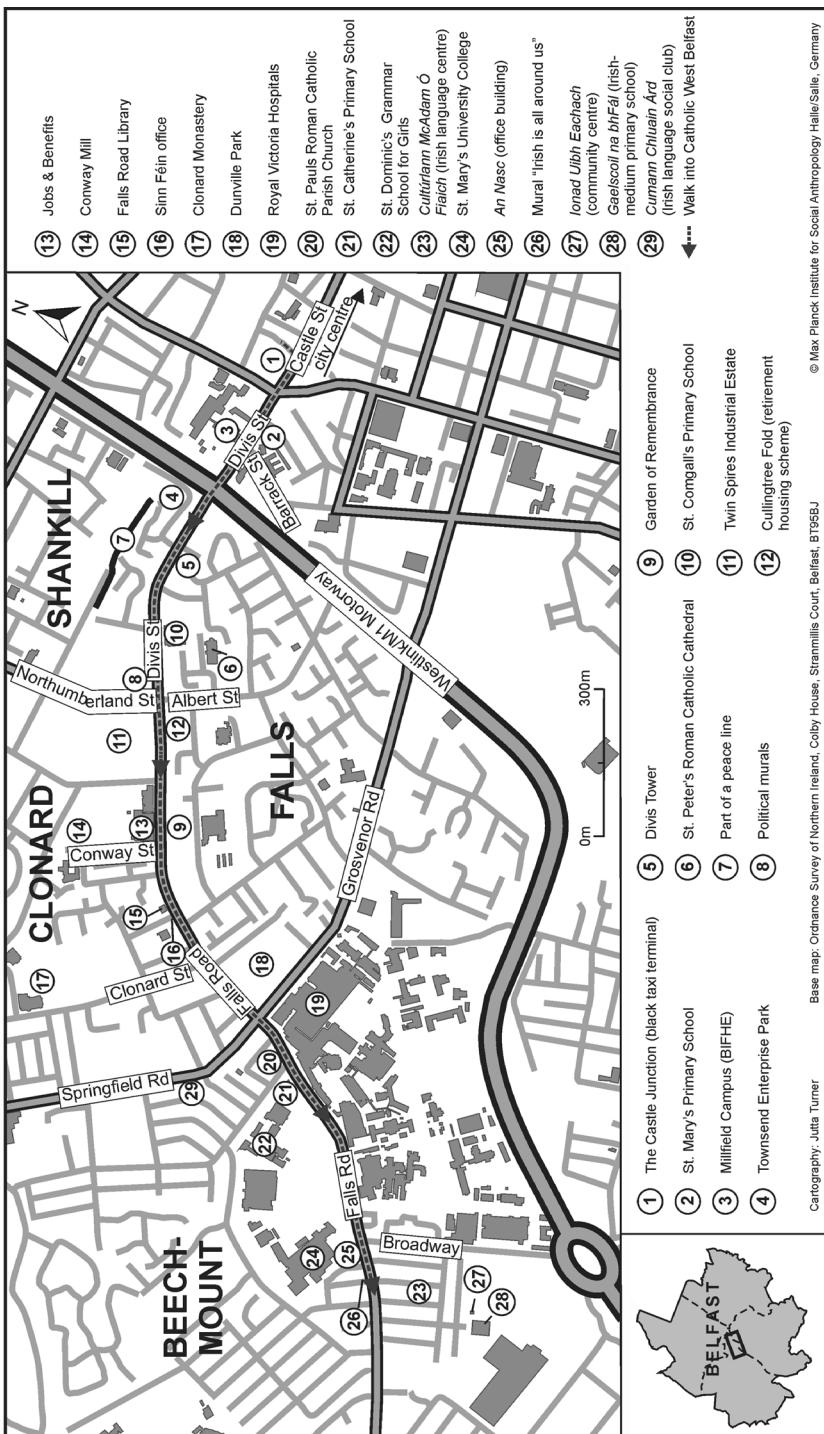
some local revival in Catholic West Belfast during the second half of the twentieth century despite its continued minority status in a predominantly English-speaking world. As I soon learnt during my stay, the Irish language was thereby represented by many locals as related to their Irish identity and also constituted a practice, the realization of which could be investigated in daily life.

My point of reference, therefore, narrowed down to the category of *Gaeilgeoirí* (i.e. Irish learners and speakers), with whom I could get in contact and hang around in various Irish language classes, groups and meeting places in Catholic West Belfast. While my research thus came to focus exclusively on local *Gaeilgeoirí* and on how they represented and practised the Irish language (and hence deliberately excludes the perspectives of non-speakers on both language and identity), I continued to ask both how these actors represented and practically experienced their sense of Irishness, and how language and identity were interrelated for them. Thus, if senses of Irishness were possibly but not exclusively found in representations and practices of the Irish language, where else could they be found? This question persistently stuck with me, and it was behind my idea of filming and later describing some of the impressions I had when walking in(to) my field. The following observations from my walk are therefore aimed at letting the reader participate in an initial search for local Irishness. At the same time, they are also intended as an introduction to the social field in which I conducted my research, thereby transforming this walk into a preliminary emblem of local walks of life.

Thus on that particular Friday afternoon, I left my place in Broadway and hailed one of the many black taxis that drive along the Falls Road to and from the city centre, as I had done so many times before when travelling within Catholic West Belfast. Established as a ‘community’ transport system in the 1970s when public buses for some time stopped serving West Belfast during the height of the Troubles, the classic black London taxis can be entered and exited at any point along their various routes. I got off in the city centre at the black taxi terminal, which was located in the basement of a parking block labelled ‘The Castle Junction’ in English and ‘*gabhal an chaisleain*’ in Irish (1).¹ I took out my video camera, started filming and slowly walked up to Divis Street the way I had just come.

During my stay, I had only rarely used my video camera. I had been afraid that extensively filming within Catholic West Belfast would nurture suspicions of me being a spy. I had consciously decided against a cross-community research setting and deliberately focused exclusively on the Catholic side of Belfast in order to reduce such mistrust from the very beginning. However, I had still encountered suspicions that I was a spy and was aware that some locals seemed unconvinced that I was only doing research; thus I did not want to further enhance their distrust. However, shortly before leaving, I felt that filming the Falls Road into Catholic West Belfast would be no big deal. I assumed that people would take me for a tourist, and indeed,

1. Encircled numbers refer to those landmarks that are marked through corresponding cyphers in Map 1.1.



with the exception of some pupils who later jokingly asked what I was doing, no one paid attention to my filming.

Walking up Divis Street, I could see the ridge of the Black Mountain, which delimits the city of Belfast to the west. I passed St Mary's Primary School ②, which like many schools in Catholic areas was run by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). At the corner of Divis and Westlink, the recently opened Millfield Campus of the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) ③ rose into the partly cloudy sky.² There was quite a bit of traffic, with many cars entering the motorway. Those heading straight entered what a road sign indicated was 'Falls (Divis Street)'. Someone had added in yellow graffiti the letters 'HQ' on the sign, presumably standing for 'headquarters', thereby expressing a widespread perception that one was now entering a heartland of Irish Nationalism and Republicanism. There were also other boundary markers communicating a similar message: on a number of lampposts around the junction were attached flags. Some had appeared a couple of months earlier during the annual marching season of the Protestant Orange Order, while others were weatherworn and seemed older. Apart from the Irish tricolour, I could discern the remnants of a Starry Plough, a flag that was first used by James Connolly's socialist Irish Citizen Army in the early twentieth century. Featuring the constellation of Ursa Major (known as The Plough in Ireland and the U.K.) against a blue background, this flag has been used by various socialist and Republican groups. Another flag displayed the name 'Larsson' against a green and white striped background. Having spent a year in Belfast, I knew that it referred to the Celtic Football Club in Glasgow, and to its famous Swedish striker, Henrik Larsson. Larsson had just left Celtic for FC Barcelona in the summer of 2004 after having played seven years for the club with the emerald green and white hooped jerseys. As the saga goes, Celtic, whose emblem is a four-leaf shamrock, was founded in 1888 in Glasgow with the stated purpose of alleviating poverty among the local working class, many members of which were Irish migrants. Thus having an 'Irish dimension', as I was so often told, Glasgow Celtic had and continues to have a strong following among Irish Catholics in Ireland. The longstanding rivalry between Glasgow Celtic and the Rangers Football Club in Glasgow, whose supporters include many Protestants from Northern Ireland, has thereby transported and restaged religious, ethnic and political antagonisms prevalent in the North of Ireland.³

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2. This is also the place where the *Árd scoil* ('High School') was once located. As we will see in Chapter 5, the *Árd scoil* was built in 1928 by the Northern Irish branch of the Gaelic League, *Comhaltas Uladh* ('the Ulster Fellowship'), as its headquarters and, before accidentally burning down in 1985, subsequently constituted one of the focal points for the local Irish-language scene (Mac Póilin 2006: 129).
 3. In the politicized Northern Irish context, the use of words referring to the region is itself a matter of dispute, purportedly reflecting one's own ideological position on the conflict. Within the Nationalist/Catholic community, terms such as 'the North of Ireland', 'the six counties' or the 'occupied counties' are common currency, while Unionists/Protestants tend to speak of 'Northern Ireland', 'Ulster' or 'the province'. Given that I am concerned with a reconstruction of perspectives within 'Catholic' West Belfast, I will predominantly use the terminology of local Catholics.

Passing these boundary markers, I entered the Nationalist and Republican areas of Catholic West Belfast. Yet what is Catholic West Belfast? At the time of the then last Northern Ireland census in 2001, a total of 277,391 people lived in the city of Belfast as defined at the level of Local Government District (LGD).⁴ Belfast is subdivided into four parliamentary constituencies: Belfast East, North, South and West. However, the figure of 87,610, indicated in the census as the total population of the parliamentary constituency Belfast West, is in a way misleading.⁵ This is so because in 2001 the constituency Belfast West consisted of seventeen electoral wards, four of which on its south-westerly edge did not belong to Belfast but to Lisburn on the level of LGD.⁶ In other words, only thirteen of the seventeen wards of the constituency Belfast West, with a total population of 70,447, also belonged to the LGD of Belfast (see Map 1.2).⁷ Taking these thirteen wards as an approximation for what I refer to as ‘West Belfast’, a pronounced internal division between these wards can be observed in terms of the religious backgrounds of their inhabitants. In the 2001 census, a new variable, ‘community background’, was introduced, recording ‘a person’s current religion, if any, or the religion brought up in for those people who do not regard themselves as currently belonging to any religion’ (see Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA] 2003).

Distinguishing between ‘Catholics’ and ‘Protestants’ on the basis of their community background rather than their religious practices and beliefs, this variable is useful because some of my informants had become atheist or even strongly anti-Catholic and anti-religious in their lives despite (or even because of) their Catholic background. When talking about Catholics and Protestants throughout this book, I thus refer to peoples’ religious backgrounds and reserve the terms ‘practising Catholic’ and ‘practising Protestant’ for those who describe themselves as religious. Thus, when one looks at dominant religious backgrounds in the thirteen wards of West Belfast as indicated in the 2001 census, a sharp division emerges. At the northern fringe, three wards – Glencairn (85.20 per cent), Highfield (94.01 per cent) and Shankill (94.34 per cent) – were predominantly Protestant, as the respective percentages indicate. In contrast, the remaining ten wards to the south were overwhelmingly Catholic: Falls (96.93 per cent), Clonard (96.09 per cent), Beechmount (92.19 per cent), Whiterock (99.04 per cent), Falls Park (97.72 per cent), Upper Springfield (96.90 per cent), Glen Road (97.19 per cent), Andersonstown (98.49 per cent), Glencolin (98.08 per cent) and Ladybrook (86.45 per cent). Against this backdrop, I refer to these ten wards with

4. See Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Table KS01 (‘Usually Resident Population’).
5. See Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Table KS01 (‘Usually Resident Population’).
6. See Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Look-up Table (Ward to Parliamentary Constituency) KS.
7. This figure is the sum total of the resident population of the mentioned thirteen wards as indicated in Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Table KS01 (‘Usually Resident Population’), Ward Level.

a total population in 2001 of 57,327, of which a total of 95.85 per cent were of a Catholic religious background, as unambiguously constituting ‘Catholic West Belfast’ when presenting statistical data.⁸ In everyday conversations, however, local Catholics tended to include with ‘Catholic West Belfast’ not only the above-mentioned four other wards in the south-west but also adjacent areas such as parts of Finaghy, which technically did not belong to West Belfast at all but were frequently inhabited by Catholics originally from West Belfast.

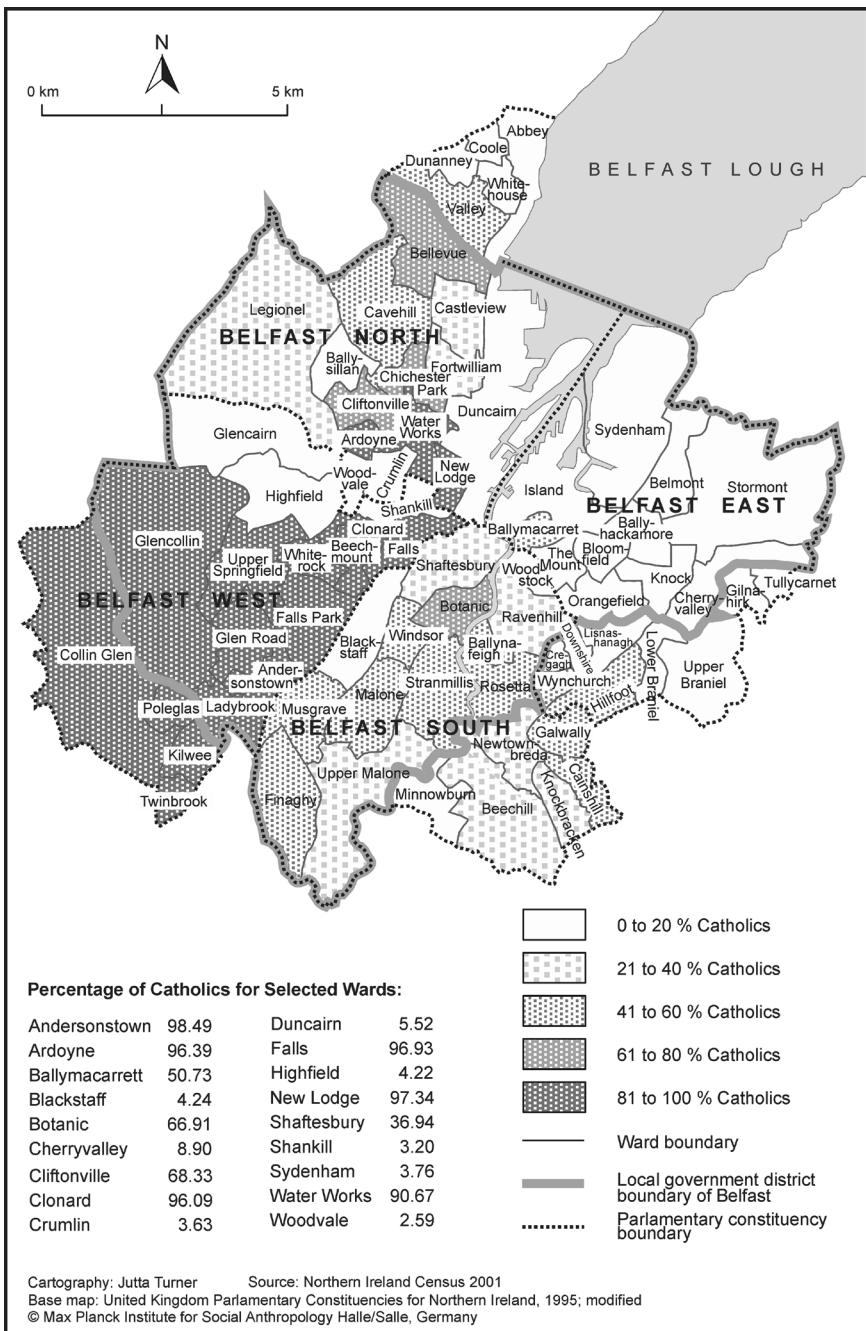
Map 1.2 depicts the distribution of religious backgrounds in 2001 for the whole of Belfast at the ward level, indicating the extent of religious segregation in the city. As Doherty and Poole (2000: 189) show, the current residential pattern can thereby be seen as the outcome of a ratchet effect whereby segregation since the nineteenth century has intensified, with precipitous increases following violent episodes and only slightly moderated in times of relative peace.

When I was crossing the Westlink, I was thus entering Catholic West Belfast. Yet the boundary markers I referred to above were political and possibly ethnic rather than religious. The flags seemed to mark some sense of Irishness as well as the political position of Nationalists and Republicans, both aspiring to independence from Britain and a united 32-county Ireland (i.e. including the six Northern Irish counties), though only Republicans endorsed violence as a legitimate means.⁹ Was I not thus conflating political and ethnic with religious identifications? Can these three levels of identification be used interchangeably? In his account of contemporary Northern Irish society, Coulter speaks of “two principal communal blocs” in Northern Ireland, one variously described as “Catholic”, “nationalist” and “Irish”, the other designated as “Protestant”, “unionist” and “British” (Coulter 1999: 10). In her analysis of self-ascribed ethnic identities among Catholics and Protestants, Trew (1998: 66) summarizes her findings in the following way:

Protestants identify themselves as British, Northern Irish and Ulster but not Irish. Catholics identify themselves as Irish, Northern Irish or British but not Ulster. The majority of the population clearly identify themselves as either Irish Catholics or British Protestants but there is a sizeable minority who are Northern Irish.

This observation is supported by Coakley’s recent analysis of all available public opinion data on the topic, in which he shows that ‘religious background has been the most fundamental determinant of national identity in Northern Ireland’

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- 8. See Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Table KS07b (‘Community Background: Religion or religion brought up in’), Ward Level.
 - 9. In local discourse, the term ‘Republicanism’ typically refers to a more radicalized version of ‘Nationalism’, with both aspiring to unite Ireland. In contrast, ‘Loyalism’ constitutes a more radicalized form of ‘Unionism’, with both fighting for the maintenance of the United Kingdom. Throughout this book, I use the small-letter version of ‘nationalism’ to refer to an overarching analytical concept, while reserving the capitalized term ‘Nationalism’ for that particular strand among local nationalisms that aims for a united Ireland.



Map 1.2 Distribution of religious background in Belfast (2001)

(Coakley 2007: 577). What this cursory overview indicates is that, in practice, there is indeed a considerable homology between ‘Catholic’, ‘Irish’ and ‘Nationalist/Republican’, on the one hand, and ‘Protestant’, ‘British’ and ‘Unionist/Loyalist’, on the other, although some variations and cross-cuttings do exist and need to be explored.

However, while these layers of religious, ethnic and political identification do not often intersect in locals’ actual self-ascriptions, this does not mean that they are not conceptualized by these actors as cross-cutting ties of affiliation. To put it differently, while there is a broad consensus in Northern Ireland about who has a Catholic or Protestant religious background, Catholics and Protestants have tended to disagree in terms of the ethnic identities they respectively ascribe to themselves as well as to associates of the other faith (and also about what political aspirations should follow from these ascribed ethnic identities). It is therefore convenient for researchers as well as for locals to use the labels ‘Catholics’ and ‘Protestants’ to refer unambiguously to the two blocs of actors, which have been largely self-reproductive given the high rates of endogamy on both sides (McGarry and O’Leary 1995: 186, 207). However, this pragmatic use of religious terminology is not meant to suggest that religion is the underlying source of conflict. In fact, this idea was strongly rejected by most of my ‘Catholic’ friends and informants, although they often also used this distinction as shorthand in conversations. Since the term ‘Catholic’ thus unambiguously refers to that category of actor with whom I exclusively conducted my research, I will continue to use this label throughout the book. But to reiterate, my pragmatic usage of the term ‘Catholic’ is meant to ascribe neither particular importance to religion/religious background in daily life and the local conflict in general, nor to Irishness in particular; instead the potential significance of Catholicism will have to be explicitly explored in subsequent chapters.

But back to Divis Street. To my right I could see Townsend Enterprise Park ④, adjoining the nearby Protestant Shankill area, which is separated by a so-called ‘peace line’ or protection wall from the Catholic Falls area. To my left, the multistorey residential Divis Tower ⑤ together with the twin spires of the nearby St Peter’s Cathedral ⑥ rose above as the landmarks of an area that, like most of West Belfast, is largely dominated by seemingly endless rows of two- and three-storey terraced houses. But the area I was walking through had not always looked like this. During the 1960s, the Divis Flats complex of twelve medium-rise blocks and the Divis Tower were built, replacing the older poor housing in this Lower Falls area. After the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 and the subsequent split of the IRA into the Official IRA and the increasingly dominant Provisional IRA in 1970, the Lower Falls area around the Divis Flats got a reputation for being a stronghold of the Officials and other dissident Republican groups such as INLA (Irish National Liberation Army) (Sluka 1989: 5; Patterson 1997: 140–79; Coogan 2002: 97). Despite their continued presence in the Divis Flats, in the late 1970s the British Army established a fortified base on the roof of Divis Tower, bristling with electronic surveillance equipment. With the demolition and replacement of

the medium-rise blocks since the mid-1980s, all that remained when I was living in West Belfast was Divis Tower and the military base on its rooftop. It was to this situation that the phrase ‘Demilitarise Divis Tower’ referred, painted among other Republican slogans on a wall that I passed when walking up the gently inclined street.

In a way it is tempting to dwell further on local political history, which is associated with the area through which I was walking on that Friday afternoon. I could refer to the peace line⁷ that I saw rising up behind some terraced houses. I could describe in much detail the political murals⁸ up the road, which reiterated typical positions among Republicans: the ridicule of the allegedly reformed Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) that for many locals was but a new name for the same old biased Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC); the rejection of the recent war against Iraq started by President Bush, whose right-wing republicanism many local leftist Republicans had hastened to distance from themselves in conversations with me; and the support for and perceived similarity with other liberation movements in the Basque Country, Catalonia, Palestine, Turkey and elsewhere. I could draw the attention of the reader to the Falls Curfew of 1970, when approximately three thousand British Army troops for two days conducted a weapons search of approximately fifty small streets in this very area of the Lower Falls, and which, together with the introduction of internment (i.e. imprisonment without trial) one year later, strengthened rather than broke local support for the armed struggle (Coogan 1996: 128). I could go on to characterize the local Garden of Remembrance⁹ dedicated to fallen IRA volunteers. For my friends, places like these indicated that the armed struggle had long ago ended – ‘You only start to commemorate once a war is over’, as one had put it – although it would take another year before the Provisional Republican movement would officially declare the end of its armed campaign and decommission what the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) described in September 2005 as the ‘totality of the IRA’s arsenal’ (IICD 2005). Or I could use the road sign, further up the Falls, pointing towards Clonard Monastery to indicate an ‘interface area’ (i.e. a border zone between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods) in which sectarian violence was particularly intense in mid-August 1969. Three-fifths of the houses on nearby Bombay Street were then burned down by a Protestant mob, one of the key incidents typically seen as marking the outbreak of the subsequent Troubles (Coogan 1996: 96–106; Fraser 2000: 36–47).

All of these political details could be important aspects for my search for local Irishness, but such a focus would be flawed in two ways. Firstly, such an approach would overemphasize the importance of politics at the expense of other equally important contributors to local senses of identity, thereby contributing to the misleading image that conflict alone defines daily life in Northern Ireland. Secondly, explicitly focusing on territorial inscriptions of political meanings can have the paradoxical effect of obstructing an equally important aspect of these political landscapes, namely, that local understandings and remembrances of these landscapes in everyday life tend to happen in a largely unnoticed and unconscious

way, occurring as other activities are being consciously engaged in. This refers to Billig's distinction between 'waved' and 'unwaved flags' of 'banal nationalism' (1995). Although Billig (1995: 41) is surely right in pointing out that Irish tricolours in Belfast are generally more consciously perceived – or more 'waved' – than those hanging on public buildings all year round south of the border, these and other nationalist markers like murals are also considerably 'unwaved': 'they merge into the local landscape and while they remain notable to outsiders they may be virtually invisible to local residents' (Jarman 2007: 99).

Thus, turning towards less political but equally unnoticed landmarks, I saw a factory building when leaving behind Divis Tower. Situated opposite the derelict St Comgall's Primary School (10), the factory was possibly part of the neighbouring Twin Spires Industrial Estate (11), that faced an impressive building: *Teach Chrann Chuilin* ('Cullingtree Fold') (12). This expensive-looking complex was a retirement housing scheme that opened in 2000 and was run by the Fold Housing Association. The immediately surrounding neighbourhood stretching further up the road consisted of equally new and to my eye middle class housing blocks. Across the street, however, the Jobs & Benefits centre (13) was accommodated in an older-looking concrete building at the corner of Conway Street. This street branched off to the right, leading to Conway Mill (14), in which the Falls Flax Spinning Company operated from the mid-nineteenth century until the early 1970s as one of the biggest local employers in the by then decaying linen industry. In the early 1980s the vacated complex was then turned into a community centre.

These brief observations taken together are reminiscent of a phenomenon, which had fascinated me throughout my stay in Catholic West Belfast, namely, its class structure. West Belfast, East Belfast and most of North Belfast tend to be depicted in the literature as 'working class areas' (e.g. Murtagh 1996) and are typically contrasted with the 'middle class districts' of South Belfast such as the classy Malone Road and the upper stretches of Antrim Road in the north of the city (e.g. Coulter 1999: 39). The vast majority of local Catholics with whom I spoke described themselves as 'working class' and held corresponding views about the prevailing class nature of West Belfast. This spatial distribution of class is to some extent confirmed by data from the 2001 census. The census classifies occupations according to the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SeC) (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2005: 2). The census data in Table 1.1 is presented in the collapsed three-class version of the NS-SeC, providing a general overview of the distributions between the hierarchically ordered 'managerial and professional occupations', 'intermediate occupations' and 'routine and manual occupations' (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2005: 15), which I will refer to as the 'middle', 'lower-middle' and 'working class'.

In 2001 within the whole of Northern Ireland, about 25 per cent of the working population belonged to the middle class and 20 per cent to the lower-middle class. The largest category, however, was the working class, composing approximately 40 per cent of all persons aged sixteen to seventy-four, excluding the long-term unemployed and full-time students, who made up about 7 and 8 per cent respectively.

Table 1.1 Percentages of three classes (collapsed NS-SeC classes) for all persons aged 16–74, by area and religious background¹⁰

All persons aged 16 to 74	Distributions of 3 classes			Never worked and long-term unemployed	Not classified - full-time students
	Managerial and professional occupations	Intermediate occupations	Routine and manual occupations		
Northern Ireland	1,187,079	25.23	19.82	40.47	6.57
Belfast LGD	197,519	25.12	14.83	40.46	8.52
Protestants in Belfast LGD	97,461	24.92	15.19	45.01	6.81
Catholics in Belfast LGD	92,709	24.78	14.34	36.84	10.37
Catholic West Belfast (10 Catholic wards)	38,760	15.43	14.55	47.19	13.78
Clonard	3,003	10.52	12.99	53.57	15.02
Falls	3,292	7.15	9.53	52.52	21.51
Whiterock	3,419	8.39	8.83	52.50	22.61
Upper Springfield	3,868	9.31	10.45	51.78	19.78
Beechmount	3,845	17.27	14.41	47.17	11.34
Glencolin	4,862	16.46	15.47	46.85	13.22
Ladybrook	4,495	19.55	17.76	44.31	8.15
Glen Road	3,874	17.25	15.85	44.29	13.21
Andersonstown	4,088	20.59	18.24	42.53	9.27
Falls Park	4,014	23.12	19.11	40.23	7.68
					9.87

These figures were echoed in the Local Government District of Belfast for the middle and working classes, while the slightly higher rates for the long-term unemployed (9 per cent) and full-time students (11 per cent) made up for the 5 per cent difference in the lower-middle class. Looking at the religious backgrounds of these classes, the middle and lower-middle classes were composed of Protestants and Catholics equally. However, Catholics were almost twice as likely as Protestants to be long-term unemployed, which, together with the higher proportion of full-time students, explains why Catholics (37 per cent) were underrepresented vis-à-vis Protestants (45 per cent) among the working class. These figures thus indicate that Catholic working class individuals enjoyed comparatively less access to the city's labour market.

Comparing the rates for Catholics in Belfast as a whole with the aggregated data for the ten above-mentioned wards of Catholic West Belfast, the figures show that the

10. These rates are based on the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Tables KS14a ('National Statistics – Socio Economic Classification – All Persons') and S349 ('NS-SeC By Sex And Community Background (Religion Or Religion Brought Up In)'), various levels.

latter area was indeed more ‘working class’. Only 15 per cent of the local population belonged to the middle class, which is almost half the proportion of Catholics in that category for Belfast as a whole. While the percentage of local Catholics in the lower-middle class was nearly the same as at the city level (15 per cent), their local working class share (47 per cent) was considerably higher than the 37 per cent of working class Catholics in Belfast overall. In addition, in comparison to the 7 per cent of long-term unemployed Protestants in the city, the local proportion of long-term unemployed was higher (14 per cent) than the already high rate for such Catholics in Belfast (10 per cent). When combining the middle and lower-middle class rates, on the one hand, and the working class and unemployment rates, on the other, the picture becomes even more pronounced. A Catholic in Belfast was almost as likely to belong to one of the upper two classes as to be working class or unemployed; in contrast, two out of three people in Catholic West Belfast were either working class or long-term unemployed. This shows that Catholic West Belfast was indeed more working class and less middle class compared to the position of Catholics in the city overall.

Coulter (1999: 41) notes that before the Troubles started, the Catholic middle class was relatively small in comparison to its Protestant counterpart, and was engaged in a narrow range of activities, primarily providing services to their co-religionists as doctors, teachers, priests, publicans, and so on. As he further observes, the Catholic middle class has grown remarkably since the 1970s, facilitated both by growing post-secondary education and employment opportunities in the public sector due to Fair Employment Legislation, although Catholics have continued to be underrepresented in the upper echelons of many occupations (see Duffy and Evans 1997). However, the same period also negatively affected the Catholic working class because the decline in manufacturing resulted in higher levels of unemployment, which affected Protestants less than Catholics because the former had access to thousands of relatively lucrative positions within the security forces (Coulter 1999: 42).

Various authors have focused on this emerging Catholic middle class and have emphasized a pattern by which many of these social climbers have moved out of their working class neighbourhoods and into wealthier middle class districts that were formerly the preserve of wealthy Protestants (O’Connor 1993: 13–43; Coulter 1999: 39, 82). For Belfast, Cormack and Osborne (1994: 83) mention the expensive areas of Malone and Stranmillis in South Belfast, with their new suburban housing estates, as well as areas immediately adjacent to Catholic West Belfast such as Dunmurry and Derryaghy, as the target areas of such Catholic middle class relocations. These observations further contribute to the image of West Belfast as a continuing working class district from which the emerging Catholic middle class has been moving away.

Yet this is only half the story. As the respective distributions of class rates for the ten wards of Catholic West Belfast in Table 1.1 indicate, there was also considerable variation within this ‘working class’ area in 2001. Having arranged the wards in descending order according to their working class proportions, the figures show that the first four wards – Clonard, Falls, Whiterock and Upper Springfield – exhibited an even more pronounced bias towards the working class and long-term unemployment than did the overall class structure for Catholic West Belfast, which

in turn was largely echoed in Beechmount. However, the remaining five wards – Glencolin, Ladybrook, Glen Road, Andersonstown and Falls Park – were increasingly middle/lower-middle class and decreasingly working class than average. Within this gradually shifting class structure, the residents within the last ward, Falls Park, were thus not only considerably more likely to be middle and lower-middle class than the average inhabitant of Catholic West Belfast but also better off than Catholics in Belfast more generally: while comparable proportions belonged to the middle class (23–25 per cent), the ward rates were higher for the lower-middle and working classes and lower for long-term unemployment than those for Catholics in the city overall. This suggests that although ‘Catholic West Belfast’ can be characterized in relative terms as a working class district, there has been considerable variation between its constituent wards, which also has had a geographical dimension: the centre tended to be more working class, whereas the areas further from the centre to the south-west tended to be more middle and lower-middle class.

In such a context, it is interesting to note that not all of the above-mentioned locals describing themselves to me as ‘working class’ had working class jobs. To the contrary, my interlocutors worked in a broad range of occupations, including, for instance, professionals such as teachers, who are categorized as ‘middle class’ in the NS-SeC. This practice, I think, to some degree reflected their original working class background as well as their economic situation, which for many could not be described as affluent. However, it also expressed a general attitude, particularly prominent among older informants, according to which self-consciously ‘middle class’ Catholics were suspected of having sold out their ‘own community’ and become part of the pro-British establishment of the state. Such an attitude was occasionally articulated through the idiom of ‘Castle Catholics’, a local curse word reflecting the realities of the past when Catholics could not be upwardly mobile unless they denied their roots and ‘chummed up’ to the British establishment of Dublin Castle, the seat of British rule until Irish independence.

Against this background, I interpret my briefly sketched observations – the new and somewhat expensive-looking houses and elderly residential facilities, the Twin Spires industrial estate and the Townsend Enterprise Park as well as the mill-cum-community centre on Conway Street – as alluding to some economic regeneration that has occurred over the past few decades and particularly as a dividend of the peace process since the 1990s, when violence largely ended and Belfast as a city opened up again. Although Catholic West Belfast in general and the Falls area – through which I walked on that Friday – in particular have surely retained their working class character, some upward class mobility and internal diversification has occurred. While some of these new middle class Catholics have moved out of the area, others have stayed within their local community. In my experience, not a few of the latter have consciously decided against moving and following a route into potential ‘Castle Catholicism’, preferring instead to stay in the area, remaining committed to their personal background and their original ‘Catholic’, ‘Irish’, ‘Nationalist’ and ‘working class’ community. It was this commitment, I think, that together with often-aired sympathies with socialist politics found expression in continued self-ascriptions of

'working class' among many of those West Belfast people who could equally be described as having become middle or lower-middle class.

This class diversification within Catholic West Belfast was to some extent also apparent in the clothes that people wore. This brings me to a realization that, thus far, my walk had been unnecessarily void of people, even though I encountered quite a few pedestrians that day. To begin with, it was a Friday at around three in the afternoon, when the 'day' and 'week' ends in some jobs and most local schools. Pupils from the schools further up the road congregated, waiting for black taxis or local buses to pick them up. Given that school uniforms are compulsory in Northern Ireland, their clothes indicated little more than the particular institutions they attended. Apart from these students, I came across men in suits and ties; young lads wearing tracksuits, sneakers, baseball caps and soccer tricots of Manchester United or Glasgow Celtic or yellow jerseys representing the local County Antrim team in Gaelic games; a few elderly women and men, strolling along the road; and busy workers in boiler suits, to mention but a few. The clothes of some of these individuals indicated their occupations: manual workers wore boiler suits, and white-collar workers wore suits and ties. Apart from this, the main difference I noticed was between sportswear and 'ordinary' clothes. In a way, it is tempting to identify these two types of dress with class: sportswear could be reserved for the working class. Working class males I saw during my stay often had their hair short and gelled and wore gold chains, earrings, tracksuits, sport tops and sneakers. Working class females usually had long hair (occasionally dyed blond), wore big golden earrings and comparable sportswear or tight clothes. This caricature could then be contrasted with the 'ordinary' and somewhat more 'decent' clothes of the middle class: good-looking, higher quality shirts, pullovers and trousers, occasionally jackets, and leather shoes. Although it seems to me that there is a grain of truth in this ideal-typical classification, it is also grossly misleading, as local clothing also had a strong age component. A quick glance at my teenage informants revealed that youngsters from various class backgrounds wear sports apparel. In addition, Celtic or County Antrim tops were quite common and not restricted to any particular class, age or gender group. Conversely, the 'decent', 'ordinary' look seemed to be more common with middle-aged and older people, regardless of class. All in all, distinctions in local clothing were thus not only indicative of variations in class but also more generally of differences in lifestyle, age and gender in line with Jenkins' (1983: 50) observations regarding Protestant working class youths.

Leaving Jobs & Benefits behind, the Falls Road led me to an area in which there were pubs, offices, shops and the like interspersed amongst the houses. I could see the Falls Road Library (15) in the distance. One of its walls facing me was adorned with a huge mural-like tapestry depicting the ten Republican hunger strikers from 1981 along an H-shaped 'table' reminiscent of both the Last Supper and the H-Blocks in the Long Kesh prison, where the strikers died demanding recognition as political prisoners. Just behind the library was the party office of Sinn Féin (16). I passed a few shops and offices, while down Clonard Street was Clonard Monastery (17).

At this street corner, I could see the social club of the Michael Davitt's Gaelic Athletic Club, one of the fifteen local clubs of the Gaelic Athletic Association

(GAA) in Catholic West Belfast. Up the road, there was the bar of another Gaelic Athletic Club, Séan MacDiarmada's. Both clubs were named after prominent Irish Nationalists, a practice not uncommon for clubs within the GAA. Founded in 1884, the GAA standardized the rules for Gaelic games and established an organizational structure for competitions, thereby (re)establishing 'Irish sports'. Such sports have been extremely popular among Catholics, while due to the long-standing identification of the GAA with Irish Nationalism, Protestants have tended not to participate (De Búrca 1999: 79; Sweeney 2004: 7–21).

The following stretch up to the junction of Falls, Springfield and Grosvenor Road was dominated by Dunville Park (18) to my left and various shops to my right, including one indicating its threefold purpose in Irish: *Sólaistí* ('Confectionery'), *Tobacadoir* ('Tobacconist'), and *Nuachtánaí* ('Newsagent'). This shop also displayed an advertisement for the local *Andersonstown News*, which together with the northern Nationalist daily, the *Irish News*, is quite popular in Catholic West Belfast. After crossing the junction with Grosvenor Road and Springfield Road, the Royal Victoria Hospitals (19) were on my left, while small shops continued on my right. This latter section also incorporated the Catholic parish church St Paul's (20), until it adjoined to the premises of St Catherine's Primary School (21) and the leafy park of St Dominic's Grammar School for Girls (22).

Both the schools and St Paul's were physical manifestations of the local influence of the Catholic Church. Education in Northern Ireland has largely remained segregated along religious lines, with 'maintained schools' under Catholic management predominantly catering for Catholic pupils, and the formally non-denominational 'controlled schools' run by the state attended mainly by Protestants. As data provided by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland (DENI) from the annual school census shows, in West Belfast in 2003/04 only 6 per cent of pupils in state schools were Catholic, while 80 per cent were Protestant, with the remaining 14 per cent consisting of 'other Christian', 'non Christian' and 'non-religious' pupils. In contrast, 98 per cent of pupils in schools under Catholic management were Catholic. Although so-called 'integrated schools' specifically designed to cater for both 'communities' did indeed educate more or less equal proportions of Protestant (45 per cent) and Catholic pupils (40 per cent), this sector composed only about 5 per cent of the total student population in Northern Ireland, thereby underlining continued educational segregation in general and the persisting impact of the Catholic Church on its 'community' via schooling in particular.¹¹

11. These rates are based on the table 'Religion of pupils by school type and management type, 2003/04: Nursery, Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools' (DENI 2006). I have calculated the rates for state schools by combining the data for 'controlled' and 'controlled/voluntary' institutions. The overall figures for Catholic schools follow from the combined rates for 'Catholic Maintained', 'Catholic Maintained/Other Maintained' as well as 'Voluntary Schools under Catholic Management'. The rates for integrated schools include 'Controlled Integrated' and 'Grant Maintained Integrated' institutions. I have left out the data for 'Voluntary Schools under Other (than Catholic) Management' – catering for about 7 per cent (of which 71 per cent were Protestants) of the total student population – because these schools could not be easily attributed to any of the three categories.

The Catholic Church has of course also continued to exercise a considerable though somewhat contested influence through its religious beliefs and practices, to which local devotion has remained relatively high as the figures for self-ascribed ‘religion’ in the 2001 census show. While, as previously mentioned, 96 per cent of the local population in the ten wards of Catholic West Belfast indicated their religious background as Catholic, nearly the same amount – 89 per cent – identified as actively practising. This high rate of self-declared religiosity was not only echoed at various other regional levels for Catholics but also for Protestants, exhibiting an overall pattern in which rates for self-declared religion were persistently only slightly lower than the rates for religious background: in the city of Belfast (LGD) in 2001, 42 per cent of residents were practising Catholics as opposed to 47 per cent with a Catholic background; 40 per cent indicated their religion as ‘Protestant (including other Christian or Christian related)’ as opposed to 49 per cent with such a religious background. This pattern was exhibited at the level of Northern Ireland overall with, on the one hand, 40 per cent of the population being practising Catholics and 44 per cent of a Catholic background; and, on the other, 46 per cent of the population being self-declared Protestants and 53 per cent of a Protestant background.¹²

Besides denominational identification, other measurable levels of religiosity such as church attendance have also been remarkably high in Northern Ireland, especially when put into a comparative framework. Commenting on data from his survey conducted in 1968, Rose (1971: 264) notes that church attendance in Northern Ireland then was ‘probably higher than anywhere else in the Western world – except the Republic of Ireland’. Subsequent surveys have shown that the proportions of local Christians attending church at least once a week dropped between 1968 and 1998 from 95 per cent to 67 per cent among Catholics and from 46 per cent to 29 per cent among Protestants (Rose 1971; McGarry and O’Leary 1995: 173–74). Nevertheless, religious decline has been considerably less pronounced in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the U.K., where between 1950 and 2000, Mass attendance dropped by 50 per cent in England and Scotland and by 40 per cent in Wales, while falling by only 10 per cent in Northern Ireland (Brewer 2002: 34). The North of Ireland thus still deserves its reputation as a religious society, although there have also been marked differences within. In West Belfast, for instance, decline in church attendance has been more noticeable than in other areas (McGarry and O’Leary 1995: 190), partly reflecting the ambiguous relationship between the Catholic Church and locally strong Republicanism. For despite some affinity with the latter’s ideals, the Catholic Church has consistently condemned IRA violence and has sent conflicting political messages, for example, with its ambivalence regarding the burial of IRA volunteers on consecrated ground (Jenkins 1997: 118; Coogan 2002: 103). This, as well as the inherently conservative and ‘pro-Establishment’ attitude of the Church, reaching various accommodations with the Northern Irish regime (McGarry and O’Leary 1995: 206) while – as local perception goes – doing little to improve conditions for its own constituency, has resulted in a substantial alienation among Catholics. This has

12. These rates are based on the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 2006: Tables KS07a ('Religion') and KS07b ('Community Background: Religion or religion brought up in'), various levels.

contributed to a situation in West Belfast in which many of the practising Catholics I talked to felt somewhat alienated from the Church hierarchy and maintained an attitude nicely summarized by an elderly friend of mine and practising Catholic who proclaimed, ‘We have remained Catholic *despite* the Catholic Church’.

Back on the Falls Road, the street passed the park of St Dominic’s, opening up to a view of terraced houses. In the distance rose the verdigris-roofed, red brick tower of the former Broadway Presbyterian Church, which since the early 1990s has housed the Irish language, culture and arts centre *Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich* ('Culture Place McAdam Ó Fiaich') ⁽²³⁾. Moving on, I passed the local branch of *Glór na nGael* ('Voice of the Gael'), an all-Ireland organization promoting the Irish language through a nationwide competition in which the achievements of local branches of the organization are rewarded. Leaving behind the ‘Voice of the Gael’, I was now approaching my own neighbourhood, situated near the junction of the Falls Road and Broadway, where I lived during my fieldwork in a flat shared with students. Some of my flatmates studied at St Mary’s University College ⁽²⁴⁾, which adjoined a row of terraced houses near the junction. St Mary’s has been a teacher training college for Catholic schools since 1900. Offering courses taught in Irish since 1996 and hosting the Irish Medium Resource Unit for Irish-medium schools since 1998, St Mary’s commitment to the language thus obviously did not stop at its gateway, where the name of the institution was also displayed in Irish: *Coláiste Ollscoile Naomh Muire*.

Located immediately at the junction with Broadway, two pubs – Caffrey’s and the Red Devil Bar – faced one other on opposite sides of the Falls Road. Both regularly showed live football matches from the English Premier and Scottish leagues, as well as from European competitions. The Red Devil provided a venue for supporters of the English club Manchester United, the nickname of which gave the pub its name. Apart from sports, both pubs also offered weekly live music sessions with Irish folk, in addition to various disco nights and quiz evenings. The Red Devil Bar had recently been refurbished, and subsequently displayed its name in Irish as ‘*beár an diabhal deirg*’ against its bright red walls. This was symptomatic of a recent trend within Catholic West Belfast towards bilingual inscription on shop and office signs. This was not surprising given that the neighbourhood accommodated a cluster of Irish language organizations and groups, including the economic development agency *Forbairt Feirste* ('Belfast Development'), which was engaged in a campaign encouraging local businesses and organizations to implement bilingual signage and services. Many of these language groups had their offices in the previously mentioned Irish language centre, *Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich*, or in the new office building *An Nasc* ('The Connection') ⁽²⁵⁾.

Walking through an area that I had deliberately chosen as my ‘base camp’ for exploring representations and practices of Irish and Irishness among local Gaeilgeoirí, I reached another landmark that is the last focal point of this walk, namely, a mural ⁽²⁶⁾ opposite the *Cultúrlann* (see Figure 1.1). Having been commissioned by the Irish language umbrella organization *Pobal* ('Community'), this bilingual mural proclaimed ‘language rights’ to be ‘human rights’ and demanded that ‘the unique circumstances of the Irish language’ be reflected in the ‘Bill of Human Rights’. The mural thereby referred to the then ongoing process mandated by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998



Figure 1.1 Mural – ‘Irish is all around us’ (photo: Olaf Zenker)

of the newly established Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to prepare a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which would define rights in addition to those enumerated in the European Convention on Human Rights, reflecting the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Office 1998: Section 6-II/III-§3-4). Against this backdrop, the mural underlined demands for specific language rights for which Pobal had continuously lobbied.

Throughout my stay in West Belfast, I passed this mural hundreds of times, and it repeatedly caught my attention, not so much because of its general human rights message but because of one particular slogan that directly appealed to and continuously reminded me of my own research interest. This slogan read: ‘Irish is all around us’. In a way, I could immediately relate to this statement. Did I not constantly experience the plausibility of this representation in daily life given the manifold presence of Irish, be it in local language organizations and bilingual signage, or in the shape of local Gaeilgeoirí? Yet, as a political claim demanding more support for an endangered minority language, was it an accurate description of reality? In what sense did this slogan reflect the actual practice of the language, and to what extent was it simply a politicized claim with little substance in daily life? And by extension, given that people constantly linked the Irish language to their Irish identity, in what sense and to what extent was Irishness ‘all around us’, both in terms of representations and with regard to practical lived experiences?

Standing in front of this mural to which the main title of this book, ‘Irish/ness is all around us’, refers, I have brought you back to where this walk began. In narrating this journey, I have also briefly introduced the focus of this book, namely the interplay between representations and practices in the interrelation of the Irish language and Irishness among Gaeilgeoirí in Catholic West Belfast. This focus will now be specified in the next chapter before it finds its application in the remainder of the book.