



SONS OF ULSTER

Exploring Loyalist band members attitudes
towards culture, identity and heritage

Northern Ireland Youth Forum
October 2013



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FOREWORD

Ulster Loyalist bands have been marching along on the margins of our consciousness for decades. They have often been dismissed, frequently ignored, sometimes feared, and usually disparaged by those who consider they already know more than enough about them before they even bother to look.

Coming from the 'other tradition', I was among those who considered these thunderous flute bands more trouble than they were worth: that is, until I spent a year embedded as an observer with one of them. Since then, I have learned enough to undermine all of my previous certainties about the bands, their role, the motivation of those involved and the music they play in a recurring and evolving celebration of who they are.

Loyalist flute bands instil pride of place and identity, as well as confidence and skills in the estimated 30,000 young people in their ranks. They are fundamentally important to the communities they represent, articulating the story of the past in the present, while providing hope for the future. Yet most of all, these bands are about cultural heritage.

In our enforced isolation, we have nurtured two vibrant cultural traditions that deserve to share this place with pride. Together, they make us all the richer.

Darach MacDonald, Author

Blood & Thunder: Inside an Ulster Protestant Band

ULSTER BANDS

Many different images evoke memories of Northern Ireland's recent troubled history; however one of the most familiar and striking is that of the 'parade'. Usually only covered by the media when there was some sort of controversial aspect, these parades had one common feature – the Ulster Band, consequently the Ulster marching band has for many a negative image. They are associated with violence, with sectarianism and paramilitarism. In turn they get automatically tarred with many negative characteristics within modern society such as alcohol abuse and vandalism.

These assumptions cannot be further from the truth. Many are constructed purely from the sensationalist media coverage, others from ill informed anecdotal evidence; while some are founded in direct political motivation against the culture and community from whence bands come. In truth bands are about expressing identity, about celebrating heritage. They educate their members and instill discipline. They perform a role uniting small communities, providing entertainment, opportunities to socialise, and most of all give something to motivate and to be proud of.

The Ulster Band movement has been on this island for a long time. For two centuries the Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist people of Ireland have expressed themselves musically through the marching band, a legacy of that community's historical ties and connections with the British military. In fact, its foundation in Ireland and its continual development here arguably gives it the right to call itself Irish Traditional music more-so than any other musical genre!

Many outside the ranks of bands continually proclaim that they need to explain themselves. And they should, but more collective responsibility needs to be taken on these issues. Today this movement has almost 30,000 members. It is growing and there are now more bands within the six counties of Northern Ireland than have ever existed within their borders before. This body is not going away anywhere soon. Like all aspects of our society that have controversial elements, it is incumbent on us all to make efforts to educate and understand as opposed to give uninformed blanket condemnation. For the detractors of bands- it is not enough just to ask for explanation. You have to listen.

Quincey Dougan

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In October 2012 the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) were successfully awarded a grant from the Northern Ireland Youth Council, through the Lottery Young Roots Heritage Programme, to explore the attitudes and experiences of young band members from the Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist community.

The NI Youth Forum had identified through their membership, media stories, and academic and practitioner research a sense that young people from the Protestant community were becoming increasingly frustrated with the debate around 'expressions of culture and identity'. More specifically, there was a sense from young people that their identity was being diluted by a perceived Nationalist and Republican agenda within the devolved institutions. Furthermore, these young people were feeling increasingly marginalised within wider society, and disengaged from the political and peace processes. Unionist leaders have spoken about how working class loyalist people feel detached from the 'peace dividend' following the Good Friday Agreement. Through this project we intended to support loyalist working class young people so that they can be empowered to publicise exactly how they feel, leading to a fairer representation of their culture and heritage within the media and society in general.

In response the NI Youth Forum with the support of an independent steering group decided to investigate these claims and engage with a number of young people attached to Loyalist flute bands. It was anticipated that through these discussions the Youth Forum would be in a position to articulate the views of young people and capture their attitudes on issues surrounding their 'expressions of culture, identity and sense of community'.

The 'Sons of Ulster' band in Neillsbrook / Randalstown helped inspire the NI Youth Forum to take on this project and this study, as in their mind the story of the Loyalist Flute Bands and the young people that make up the majority of its membership have been largely ignored by mainstream media and academic study. We have been inspired by young peoples energy and willingness to discuss their band life. We want to say a special thank you to each and every one of those young people and all the supporting adults in the local communities that participated and enabled this study. Special thanks must go to Corey Godfree, Chris Mellon and Stephen Wilson who worked extensively on the project.

1.1 PROJECT AIMS

The central aim of the action research was to allow young people to explore, debate and articulate their views and opinions around how they express their culture and commemorate their heritage, and determine how these behaviours are interpreted across society. Furthermore, the project aimed to:

- Bring together young people from different flute bands to discuss methods of expressing culture and identity;
- Support young people in developing new methods of articulating the importance of band culture;
- Create opportunities for band members to share their experiences with individuals and organisations from across the political, voluntary and statutory sectors;
- Produce a written report, which captures young people's views, opinions and understanding about 'life in the band'.

In summary, it is anticipated that through this project, NIFY will work to develop an understanding of loyalist culture and how it manifests itself; and explore how culture, heritage and identity are expressed through bands, the community, music and other associations.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted over a twelve-week period from April 2013 and involved a number of distinct elements:

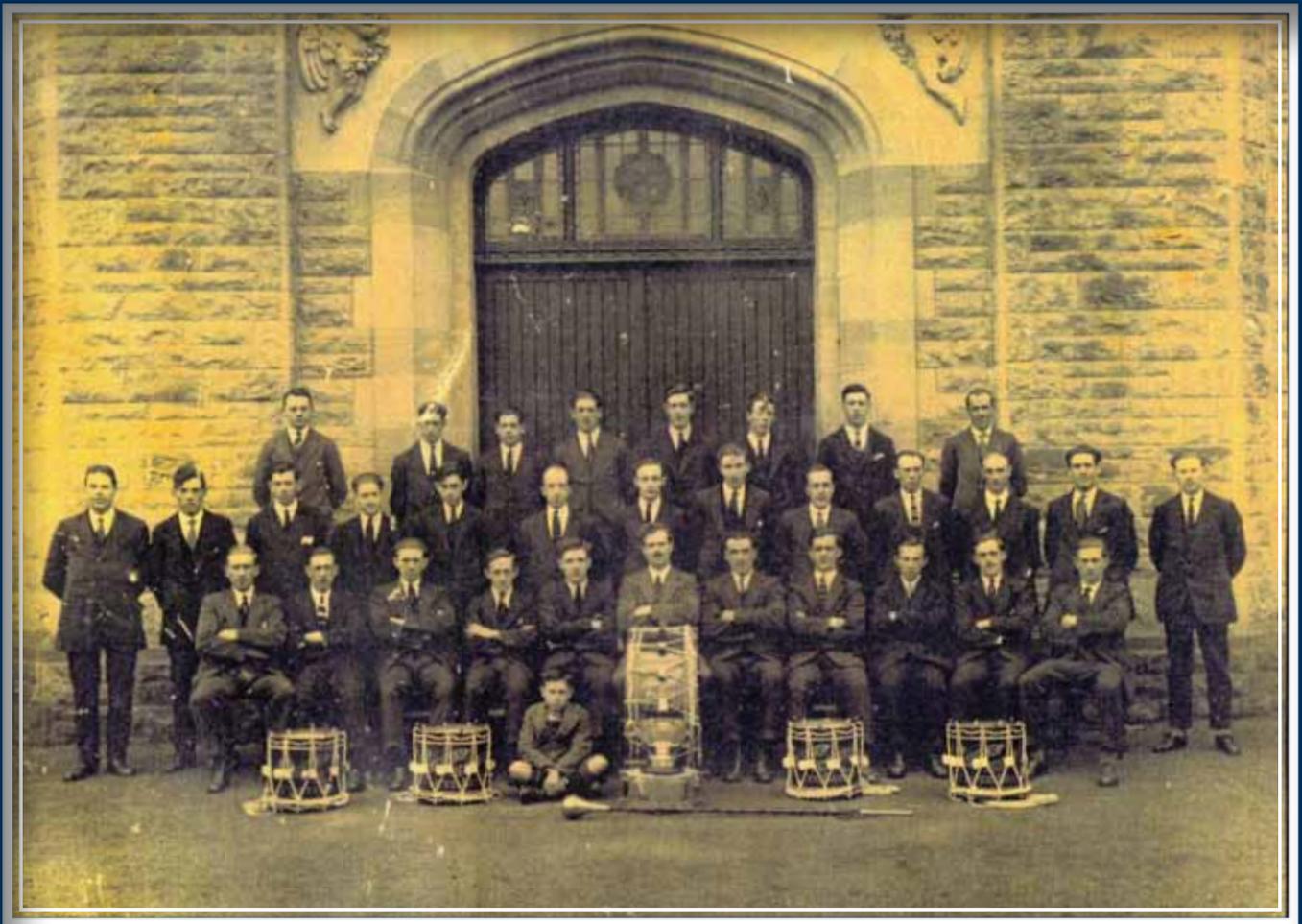
- a. Establishment of a steering group to confirm collective and individual roles and responsibilities;
- b. Recruitment of young people responsible for leading the action research within each of the selected bands – confirmation of actions, expectations and tasks;
- c. Delivery of a series of interviews, focus groups and personal testimonies with bands members;
- d. Dissemination of findings.

2.1 STEERING GROUP

From the outset of the research the NIYF recognised the importance of establishing a steering group consisting of young people, youth leaders, and band leaders from a range of different geographical areas. The group met on three occasions to consider the remit of the research, the themes used to guide the conversations, and issues around accessing particular bands and disseminating the findings. The steering group also provided oversight in terms of the process in which participating bands identified their representatives responsible for working with NIYF in capturing the information from band participants.

2.2 RECRUITMENT OF YOUNG RESEARCHERS

A key component of the research was involving young people in the collection of data. Members of NIYF identified young people within five bands that were willing to work alongside NIYF in facilitating focus groups and informal interviews. NIYF provided initial training to these individuals in terms of conducting research; research methodologies; ethical considerations, and health and safety.



2.3 THEMATIC AREAS OF DISCUSSION

In terms of exploring the participants knowledge, understanding and experiences of 'band life' a series of questions were developed under particular themes:

- **Rationale surrounding band membership and association**
 - Family influences
 - Friend influences
 - Influences of the media/historical stories
 - Expression of identity
- **Positives around band membership**
 - Band activities
- **Impact of band membership on ones personal life**
 - Levels of commitment
 - Potential personal skills
 - Potential financial cost
 - Negatives of band membership
- **Celebration of culture and identity**
 - Interpretation
 - Relevance and importance
- **Relevance with wider community**
 - Levels of outside engagement
 - Role of the band in the community
 - Opportunities for the band
- **Nationalist perceptions of bands**
 - Influences and interpretations
 - Role of the media
 - Impact on bands

These themes were used in the focus groups and interviews to guide conversations. Researchers collected written notes from the discussions.

2.4 NUMBERS AND LOCATION OF PARTICIPANTS

In total eight bands from a range of geographical regions participated in the research (figure 1)

Figure 1: Participating bands

- Randalstown Sons of Ulster
- Craigavon Protestant Boys Flute Band
- Randalstown Cultural Youth Forum
- Ballinamallard Accordion
- Dunloy Accordion
- Derryloran Boyne Defenders (Cookstown)
- Tullylagan Pipe Band
- Ballymagroarty Accordion Co. Donegal
- Broughshane - Sir George White Memorial
- Ballykeel Loyal Sons of Ulster

In terms of participants, 100 young people aged between 13 to 21 years of age engaged with the research (figure 2)

Figure 2: Total number of focus group and interviewed participants

Methodology	Numbers
8 Focus Groups	80 individuals
14 Interviews	14 individuals
6 personal testimonies	6 individuals
Total	100 participants

Aside from the interviews and focus groups the participants were provided with an opportunity to write down in two paragraphs a personal memory that related to their life in the band – six band members contributed to this element of the research. The remainder of this report sets out the main findings from the conversations with participants under a number of themes. The report concludes with a series of observations on young people's views, experiences and understanding about how they express their culture through membership in flute bands.



3.0 FINDINGS

It became apparent from a review of the main findings that there were several themes which best-captured young peoples' views and experiences of life in the band. These ranged from their rationale for joining; the benefits and impacts of membership; the challenges around celebrating one's culture and identity; the relationship between the band and the wider community, and a reflection on Nationalist perceptions of bands. The remainder of this chapter explores in detail the young people's personal views on the bands. Aside from the themes discussed, several personal stories from participants have also been included. These accounts allow the reader to share in their experiences and develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to be a member of a band.



3.1 REASONS FOR JOINING THE BAND

Initially, participants were asked to consider their reasons for joining the band and whether there had been a particular event or personal intervention, which had influenced their involvement. There was a range of responses, which included:

- **Family connections** – a large number of young people indicated that parents and older siblings affiliation with the band meant it was inevitable that they would become involved;
- **Friendships and feeling belonged** – young people seen the band as an opportunity to maintain and develop friendships and feel part of something;
- **Protecting their culture** – young people maintained that through the band they could actively celebrate their culture and remind society that Loyalism has not disappeared;
- **Fun and enjoyment** – for some young people being in the band allowed them the opportunity to travel to different places, meet different people, and engage in an activity, that was fun;
- **Learn a musical instrument** – several young people noted that learning to play an instrument had been a key catalyst for joining the band.

Overall, there was a sense from the young people that joining the band had been an entirely personal decision, which had several positive benefits. As one 16 year old male noted:

“It is important that we can express our identity by being in a band. My local band (Ballinamallard Accordion) strongly focuses on our Christian and protestant principles. A band is a way in which we can publicly express our identity”

In most cases, participants had memories of bands long before they became part of them and seen ‘joining the band’ as a natural development within their respective communities.

3.2 BENEFITS OF BAND MEMBERSHIP

Discussions then focused on the perceived benefits of belonging to a band and the different ways in which these benefits manifested themselves. All of the participants noted that being in the band had positive benefits in terms of improving their quality of life, more specifically:

- **The sense of family** – according to the participants, being in the band was akin to having a second family, pointing out that members shared birthdays, weddings, deaths and births with everyone in the band;
- **Friendships and travel** - several young people talked about the different towns and villages they have visited across Northern Ireland whilst playing in the band. They also reflected on new friendships made, and how these continued outside of the band environment;
- **Treated as an adult** – interestingly a number of young people noted that being in the band meant they were often viewed as 'older' and therefore attributed with a different status to one normally assigned to them outside of the band;
- **Sense of pride and joy** – generally young people talked about their pride in wearing the uniform and playing the music while being applauded and cheered by their supporters.

Significant elements of the discussions were taken up with participants recounting the benefits to being in the band. There was no focus on the perceived negatives because the young people didn't believe there were any. As one young male noted:

"I also like that I have my friends with me doing something you love. I play the flute and have always craved the challenged of learning new tunes and expressing my culture through the music we play. I have also had the chance to play in special places like city hall and the ulster hall"

There was an acceptance that through their membership they had the opportunity to participate in events and have experiences that otherwise would have been beyond their reach.



Too Windy

So the day came, after looking forward to it for months it was finally here. So I woke knowing by the end of the day my legs and feet would be in agony. Putting my uniform on I felt a sense of pride and excitement. Grabbing my hat as I walked out the door and hearing my parents say 'good luck, see you later', it sunk in that the day was actually here. 'The Covenant Parade'. Walking out the door and the sun hitting my face, I knew today was going to be a good day! Meeting with the rest of the band and everyone's faces were lit up with excitement. So travelling down in the bus with the band and the lodge, it was quite quiet. Everyone was thinking about the walk that was lying ahead, so we arrived and the bands were lined as far as we could see. So we started to march, the proudest day of my life - adrenaline, excitement and nerves all at the same time. I continued walking and I felt the wind getting stronger. Walking past a large crowd, I felt the wind hit my face and all of a sudden my hat was gone. It rolled down the road behind me. I stopped playing the tune and I ran back, dodging band members to try and catch the hat. I finally caught it and suddenly the girl's hat behind me flew off as well. So after looking forward to the proudest day ever it was an embarrassment.

3.3 IMPACT AND CONSEQUENCES

Participants were then asked to consider whether they felt being in a band had any specific personal impacts or consequences on their family or themselves. Aside from the enjoyment gained from participation and association it became apparent that impacts included:

- **Life skills development** – several young people indicated that through the band they had gained self-confidence, had become more articulate in expressing their views and opinions, and had improved their organisational and team-work skills;
- **Provides a purpose** – for a large number of young people (especially those in rural communities) the bands were a hobby and leisure activity which was the focal point of their personal time;
- **Financial implications** – it was acknowledged that one downside of the band was the constant battle around finances. Members were constantly thinking of new ways to raise funds (aside from membership costs) for instruments and uniform. As one young person put it:

“Being in a band is very costly, especially as I have no job and am still at school. Each week every member has to pay £2 and this helps with paying for the electricity and rates. When we go on a bus to a parade or function we have to pay £10 to help meet the cost of the bus. We recently changed our uniform and it came to roughly £400 per man and in order to offset the cost to the band each man was asked to raise £150 by getting sponsorship for a sponsored fun run and play and selling ballot tickets for a raffle. We got a grant for the instruments we are currently playing but if any one loses part of their uniform, instrument or needs something replaced it is done at their own cost”

- **Personal commitment** – for a small number of participants there was a sense that being in the band placed extra pressures and demands on their personal lives. One member illustrated this by referencing the amount of time they commit to their band:

“With my band being a top band a lot of time has to be put into practice to maintain the standard of the band and also to improve. We practice two hours on a Monday night and also have a learners practice on a Thursday for an hour. With me being assistant bandmaster, teaching learners is one of my duties along with many other things. During parading season (March - October), we would mostly do 2 parades a week; sometimes we may have two parades on the one night. The most parades we have done on the one day is four”

- **Sense of camaraderie** – the participants constantly talked about the spirit of the band, and the sense of togetherness created among its members. As one member articulated:

“I play in a football team and we have never been able and never will develop the sense of team that exists within the band...it also provides you with a sense of responsibility, self discipline and pride”

It was clear from the discussions that young people you associate with the band as having a very positive effect on their life in terms of making friends, providing opportunities to see new places, and developing confidence and new life skills.



My Proudest moment of being a 'Son of Ulster'

My proudest moment started on the 27th September 2012. I had just got my cast off my arm two days before the greatest parade ever – 'The Covenant Parade'. The build up to this parade was awesome. We paraded Randalstown on the 28th to celebrate 100 years of the signing of the Covenant and to make even more memorable it was my birthday. So the feeling of walking with all these women and men in front and behind the band was absolutely unreal. On the Saturday morning of the big parade in Belfast, I woke two hours before I was due to and I was pure thriving with excitement. Got on the bus and everyone started singing songs like 1912, the Sash, etc. When we arrived in Belfast we were starting from Sandy Row. We weren't walking the streets of Ulster until 12' O Clock so I had time to go for a wicked Zinger Meal at KFC. When we took off the crowds were pumping and the atmosphere was amazing. Walking up the Newtownards Road in East Belfast, people were shouting and cheering and it was absolutely class. But the best moment of that day was coming round the corner to enter Stormont Estate. Walking up that hill bloody killed me but just to see over thousands of people standing watching us was class and marching past the Statue of Sir Edward Carson just made me so proud to be a part of a once in a life time parade and knowing that I am a Son of Ulster. Once we finished parading I was able to stand at the top of the hill and seeing more and more bands marching and Orangemen coming up the Hill was a great sight to see. So that is my greatest moment of being a 'Son of Ulster'.

3.4 CELEBRATING CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Following conversations about the positive impacts of being in the band, discussions then turned to how young people seen the band as an opportunity to express their culture and identity. Several points emerged which included:

- **Significance of the band** – young people viewed the band as the key mechanism in which they could celebrate their culture and identity. There were limited opportunities for young people to participate in activities which they could safely celebrate their Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist identity;
- **Understanding who we are** – the band was a tool which allowed young people to explore their heritage and begin to understand the historical significance of how bands emerged. As noted by one participant:

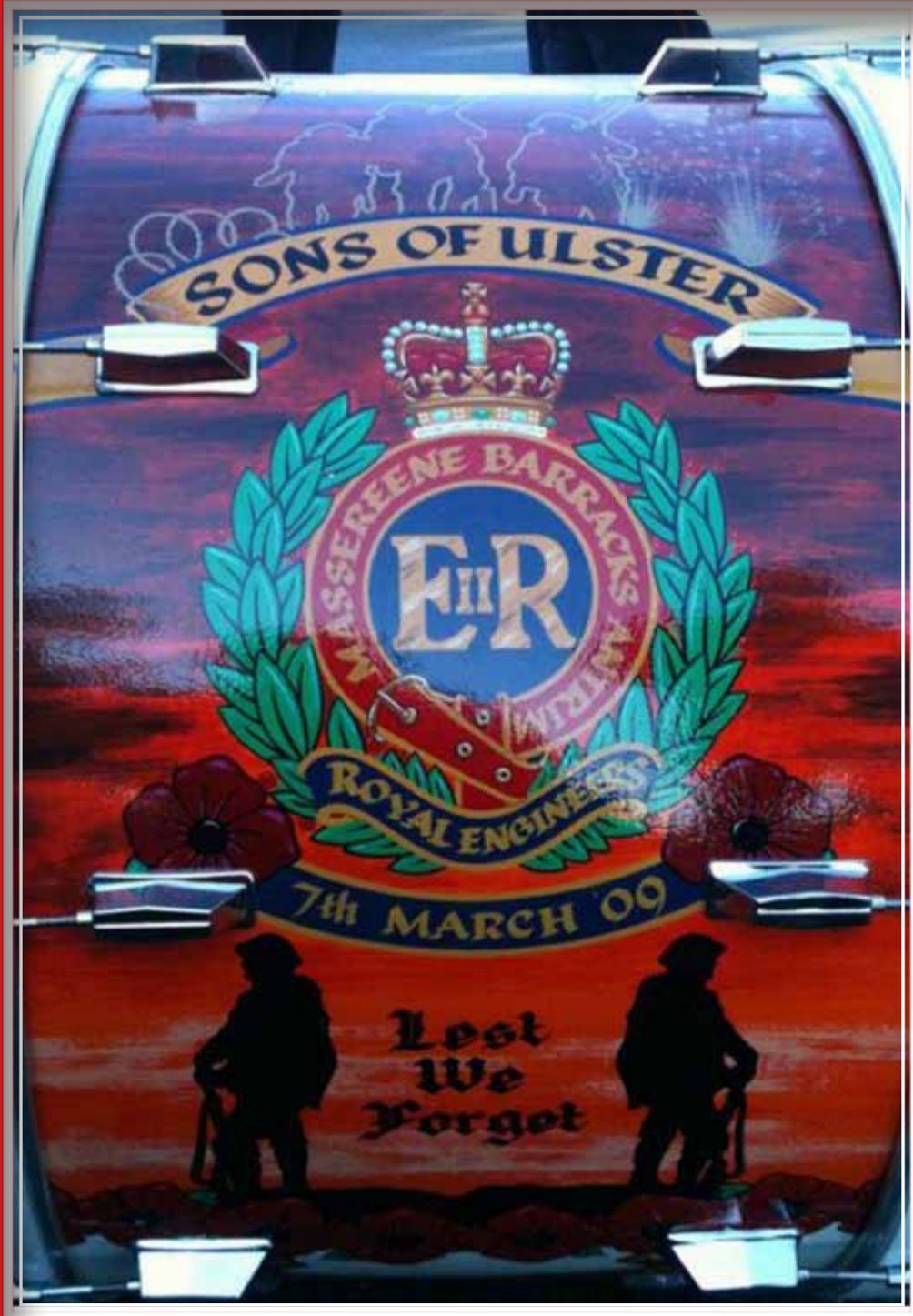
"I'm a great believer that you should celebrate your culture and identity through music and the band allows me to do that. My culture and identity is important to me and the band allows me to openly celebrate this with pride. My culture and identity is important because if you don't you could be socially excluded and left out. I am a protestant and most of my mates are Protestant I therefore belong to a group in society and I have a sense of belonging. We should all be allowed to express our identity and celebrate our culture without being tarred with the stereotypes brush"

- **Informing the wider community** – the participants felt that the bands were a unique opportunity to share their culture with wider society through their music and uniforms;
- **Remembering the traditions of the past** – a small number of young people talked about the band being a place where they could remember their forefathers and family members that were in the band:

“By being in the band I get the opportunity to play on the 12th July and express my culture through parading. It means I am celebrating King William III’s victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and I am keeping the tradition of my forefathers alive today”

- **Demonisation of bands** – it was also noted from the young people that ‘others’ have used bands to criticise Unionist and Loyalist culture and identity. The point to media stories which often describe bands as consisting of drunken louts abusing using their culture as an excuse to intimidate different communities;

Overall the participants seen the bands as their only real opportunity to express the culture, remember their past and share their identity with wider society.



My proudest memory

Would have to be every time I'm out with the band walking Her Majesty's highways playing our tunes loud and proud with the red uniform on. There are always great moments with the band if it's at a parade or at band practice or even just a normal day. I have been in the band now 5 years playing the flute I have seen us at our lowest points when we were struggling to get a band out for local parades, seen us parade our hometown with 2 drummers and 6 flutes at points. Seen us trying to collect for new drums, uniforms and flags, it had been told to us that we would never have a new uniform, drums or flags but the members of the band pulled together and pushed on to try and get it all sorted for the 12th day in Randalstown which was a big day for the Protestant community in the local area because of what the date stands for. So when the band marched down the street with their flags flying high, the drums sounding like thunder and the flutes playing true.

The local people had nothing but good things to say about the appearance of the band and the playing ability of the lads and the amount of members that we had that day a great improvement from when I first joined the band. This day I am sure is a proud moment for any member that was there. The band still continues to build on its high reputation from teaching new members about their history and how to play instruments. Randalstown Sons of Ulster is not just a band, we are not just a once a week thing, we are a family and look out for each other on an everyday basis and are always willing to lend a helping hand.

3.5 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BAND AND COMMUNITY

Focus then shifted onto the how band members perceived the relationship between their band and the wider community in which it was located. According to the young people, the band played a significant role within their community:

- **Organising community events** – the participants talked about the bands hosting garden parties, kids sporting days, and fundraising events;
- **Addressing anti-social behaviour** – the band was an opportunity for young people to get involved in activities that reduced the potential for them to become involved in anti-social behaviour:

“They said that the best thing the band does for the community is keeping all the young ones off the street. They all admitted that if they weren’t in the band they’d likely be causing bother, drinking on the streets and even taking drugs”

And,

“The band plays a big part in the community. For me the biggest thing it does is takes young boys in and keeps them off the streets doing the wrong things. I’ve seen boys join who were causing all sorts of bother in the estate, after a few months in the band their behaviour completely changed. They come in, learn an instrument and socialise with other people, it gives them something to focus on”

- **Organising charity events** - several participants noted that they had been involved in street and river clean-ups, and raising funds for local charities through barbeques and quizzes;

“Every year the band uses one of the parades we are attending as a sponsored walk. We will chose a different charity each year and raise as much as we can for it. About four years ago we decided to raise money for Ballykeel Youth Club, the reason being was because members of the band were past and present members of the youth club and we thought raising money for the club would be a great was to put something back into the community”

- **Support local institutions** – the bands often support local organisations such as religious institutions and youth groups in their celebrations:

“We only participate in events or parades if there is a religious service or element involved. Every band has a variety of ages and genders which always results in a family style atmosphere where the older look after the young and the young look after the older”

- **Engaging with groups across the community** – according to participants there were certain groups that simply refused to engage with the bands, while there were others that were more accommodating. Although, it was also noted from participants that there are particular groups that would be uncomfortable engaging with the bands. It was also interesting to note that several young people had been involved in cross-community programmes with Catholic and Nationalist young people from their community.

There was a general consensus from participants that the band was an integral part of the community, and contributed positively to the overall sense of spirit and identity.

3.6 NATIONALIST INTERPRETATIONS

As the discussions were coming to a close, participants were asked to consider how they felt those from the Nationalist and Republican community viewed the bands. There was a sense that the 'other' community:

- **See bands as sectarian bigots** – generally the young people felt that the 'other' community viewed the bands as sectarian, and only interested in causing trouble and raising tensions. They believed this was partly because the 'other' community was segregated from their own, and had limited or no opportunity to familiarise themselves with the bands and their members;
- **See bands as an inconvenience** – the participants specifically discussed traffic disruptions as motivating this perspective;
- **Don't want to understand the bands** – interestingly several young people were under the impression that members of the 'other' community had no intention of understanding the band culture. This lack of knowledge was a factor in their negativity expressed towards the bands:

"I would safely say we are viewed as bigots, orange bastards and huns by the Nationalists. To be honest they are entitled to their opinion and for what it is worth I think it's the wrong impression. They don't take the time to read or research what bands do, bands do more than parade"

- **Has the wrong impression** – all of the young people felt that the 'other' community had simply the wrong impression of the bands. This was either out of ignorance, or because of the media. Participants were extremely critical of the media and the way they portrayed the bands:

"Nationalists get the wrong impression because the media focuses mostly on the negative sides for parades in contentious areas in Belfast such as the lower Newtownards Road and the Carrick Hill area, or in Dunloy, Rasharkin and Londonderry. If the media focussed on the community fund raising and the positive sides then maybe we may be viewed in a different light"

- **Has been influenced by the media** – there was a strongly held view that there were elements within the media that had a specific agenda in terms of demonising the bands:

“Nationalists would view the bands as bigot’s, sectarian thugs, who trample over people’s rights, because that’s what’s implied by sections of the media”

And,

“Again it’s all about the media, they won’t focus on the hard work bands do behind the scenes but will focus instead on the minority unruly bands who let the majority of bands who work intensely to improve cross community relations, down”

In terms of how the ‘other’ community viewed bands, the participants were clear and concise with their position that they had been demonised and heavily criticised because of ignorance, fear and inaccurate assumptions.



3.7 SUMMARY

These findings have provided an initial exploration into the views, opinions and experiences of young band members. They clearly highlight the pride they have in being associated with the bands, and illustrate the positive impacts that the band has had on their lives. Furthermore, the discussions provide an insight into how young people think that their bands are viewed in the wider community, more specifically, by Catholics, Nationalists, and Republicans.



4.0 CONCLUSION

This project provided an opportunity to engage young people on an issue that had been relatively under-researched. Furthermore, it was conducted in such a way that meant young people were actively involved in the development of research questions, the collection of data, and the dissemination of the final report. The study has provided the author with the opportunity to explore in some depth the reasons why young people join Loyalist Flute Bands', the benefits to young people whilst members of the bands, how young people within the bands see the link with the expression and learning of their culture and identity and also what role the band plays in providing young people with a better sense of community, belonging and pride.

It has become clear through the research that young people have a very strong affinity to the band. It means more than playing music and parading in villages and towns throughout Northern Ireland. The young people talked about how being in the band provided them with more self-confidence and allowed them to develop stronger communication skills. Furthermore, being in the band allowed them to feel part of something special, and it became a vehicle in which they could explore their own personal and community history, culture and sense of identity.

This was key for a large number of young people as there were limited opportunities for them within their own communities in which they could both explore and celebrate their culture. The band allowed them to be proud to come from a Protestant, Unionist and Loyalist background and express that sense of pride in a safe and fun environment. However, it was also noted that the 'other' community viewed the bands in a negative context. With either the media or a lack of knowledge about the culture and ethos that underpin bands shaped this.

In conclusion, this research has provided a unique insight into the lives of band members. It has allowed for a critical analysis of what motivates young people to join bands, and more importantly illustrates the relationship between culture, identity and belonging to a band. Although, there is a significant amount of negativity about Loyalist flute bands, this research goes some way to dispel particular myths and refocus attention on the positive aspects of this unique world.

Simply misunderstood

I joined when i was 14 years old in 1989 as a flutter. The band was all we ever talked about in the estate as kids. Watching the Randalstown Flute Band as they were at that time and just waiting until we got the nod from our mums that we were allowed to join. I was the youngest in the newly formed Sons Of Ulster Randalstown that started a year earlier in 1988 but was not allowed in it until the next year. To me I thought it was the be all and end all of life. I had my new one key flute in my hand every minute I was awake. I had to learn 10 tunes before Gary Knapper would let me lose on the roads. I had them done and dusted in 6 weeks and I was ready! In the early years we were small in numbers well in dedicated numbers. People would only show if there was nothing else on and as a young boy it was frustrating. We would talk about it in school and my mates would ask where we were parading that weekend and I would list off the parades we were meant to be doing. Reality was that when we got to the hall there was only a handful of ones there so it might have been called off and I would go back to Neillsbrook disappointed that i was going home.

It takes a lot of time to run a band and keep people interested. For me even now as a man of 37 I still love it. The feeling of your stomach jumping on the 12th of July morning or the night of your annual parade. Some people see it as a young mans pastime but I still get the buzz of a parade. I have two sons in the band and see it as a way of them learning music and about our heritage along the way. They get to parade in different towns every weekend and it makes a change from being around their own front door. Marching bands are very misunderstood. People think we go out solely to antagonise Catholics and other creeds but that is nowhere near the truth. We do it for the love of our tradition and our culture and the love of music. I personally believe it keeps kids off the streets and away from parks drinking and getting in to trouble. Bands enforce discipline and pride and thats important in our youth of today. On that note I will finish up here and say that we will continue walking the Queens Highways of Ulster and that this part of our culture will live forever. As long as our children have the right to enroll in such "Families" and walk the province with pride then I shall stay a happy Ulsterman and maybe in my retirement from the scene can still enjoy the sounds that have kept me smiling for so many years.



