

5.IRL Politics and Society in Northern Ireland | Sample answer

What was the impact of one or more of the following on Northern Ireland: Bernadette Devlin, John Hume and Seamus Heaney? (2016)

Bernadette Devlin personified the young radical Catholics of Northern Ireland at the onset of the modern troubles. She intermixed socialism, Irish republicanism, anti-clericalism, and feminism with general political impracticality and radical brashness. Although from the outside, sectarian violence may be the most visible aspect of the Irish Troubles, an equally significant part of the conflict was cultural. During the troubles, established artistic bodies, such as the Northern Ireland Arts Council, the main theatre companies and the leading art colleges, advised artists not to get involved in the politics of the troubles. Some artists, both Protestant and Catholic ignored this advice. Seamus Heaney is one such artist. This essay aims to explore how Bernadette Devlin and Seamus Heaney impacted Northern Ireland.

Bernadette Devlin was born in 1947 in Co. Tyrone. Her father could rarely find work, not only because he was a Catholic, but also because he was a Republican. Devlin was influenced by her mother's kind and caring nature based on her religious beliefs. This prevented her from becoming overly bitter with the injustices she found in society, leading her down a political rather than a violent path. British welfare state allowed all residents in Northern Ireland, Catholic and Protestant, free secondary and third-level education. Due to this, Devlin could attend Queen's University, Belfast, in 1965, where she studied psychology.

Devlin became involved in the civil rights movement as a student at Queen's. On August 24th, 1968 she took part in the first civil rights march and in all subsequent marches. Outraged by the violence meted out to the civil rights marchers in Derry (the marchers had been assaulted by police auxiliaries and other Unionist militants at Burntollet Bridge along the route) a group of students which included Devlin founded the radical left-wing students' group, the People's Democracy.

Devlin was an articulate speaker, and her television appearances gave her a huge profile. In the 1969 Stormont by-election, she stood against Chichester-Clark. Her youth and energetic way of speaking attracted media attention and she was selected as the 'unity' candidate to oppose the unionists in a by-election to the Westminster Parliament in 1969. She won the seat, and at 21 became the youngest woman ever elected to the House of Commons. She kept the seat until 1974.

She took part in the 'Battle of the Bogside' in Derry in August 1969 and in 1970 received a six-month jail sentence for her activities. In the House of Commons, after Bloody Sunday (January 1972) she punched the British Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, when he said that the British army fired in self-defence. After she lost her Westminster seat, she helped to found the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) when it broke away from the Official IRA. But she later left it when it was involved in violence.

Devlin came to the United States in 1969 to raise funds for Northern Irish relief and also to meet the secretary-general of the United Nations. She soon alienated many of the older and more conservative Irish Americans, including those who would become supporters of the violent Irish Republican Army (IRA), by her radicalism on issues other than Irish unity. A celebrated incident was her handing over to the Black Panthers, a racial radical group, the keys to the city of New York which had been presented to her by the mayor.

In 1979 she stood for election to the European Parliament to publicise the blanket protests by republican prisoners opposed to the British government's policy of treating them as criminals. She got over 38,000 votes. This showed that many nationalists would support republicans if they rejected violence and it helped to encourage Sinn Féin's move towards a political solution. In 1981 loyalist paramilitaries attacked her and her husband Michael McAliskey, leaving them seriously wounded. After she recovered, she continued to campaign on left-wing issues and criticised Sinn Féin's part in the peace process.

Seamus Heaney was born in 1939; his home was a farm called Mossbawn and his memory of it later shaped his poetry. At 12, he won a scholarship to St Columb's College, a Catholic boarding school in Derry city. This move, which he described as from 'the earth of farm labour to the heaven of education' is a recurrent theme in his work. While Seamus was in school, his 4-year-old brother Christopher was killed in an accident, an event that inspired two poems, 'Mid-Term Break' and 'The Blackbird of Glanmore'. Heaney lectured in Queen's University in Belfast until 1972 when he

moved to Co. Wicklow where he worked as a poet and lecturer. As his reputation grew, Harvard University gave him a part-time post which allowed him to spend more time writing.

In 1966 Heaney published his first collection of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*. People associated him with several other young writers like Michael Longley and Derek Mahon, saying they formed part of a new “Northern School” of Irish writing. Indeed, after the Welfare State made higher education more common, a new generation of poets, both Catholic and Protestant, emerged in the 1960s. Seamus Heaney was typical of them.

After the Troubles began in 1969, Heaney had to consider his attitude to violence. Should a poet be free to concentrate on his work or should he reflect his place in a divided society? Heaney discussed these issues in a book called *The Government of the Tongue* (1988). Generally, his poems do not refer directly to violence, but it often appears indirectly in them. In the 1980s and 1990s his poems were concerned with Ireland’s Gaelic past. He produced several long poems based on Gaelic stories, among them *Sweeney Astray* (1983).

Perhaps Heaney’s best-known words relating to the Troubles are from his play ‘*The Cure at Troy*’, a version of the Greek tragedy ‘*Philoctetes*’ by Sophocles. Here, Heaney is careful not to take sides in the conflict. Instead he balances the grief of a Republican father with that of a Unionist mother as they each grieve over the death of their sons. But amid the no-hope situation, the poem looks forward to a bright new day when justice will triumph and “hope and history rhyme”.

In 1980 Heaney became involved in the Derry-based Field Day Theatre Company. Working with other poets such as Tom Paulin and Seamus Deane, and with the playwright, Brian Friel, Field Day explored the crisis in Northern Ireland through plays, poems and pamphlets. Despite the international reputations of its founders, the Protestant art critic Edna Longley continued to attack Field Day for promoting a narrow Nationalist view, while another critic referred to it as “the cultural wing of the Provos”. Longley held the view that it was not the role of artists to be the mouthpiece for their respective communities.

Bernadette Devlin’s age and bravery made her, at the outset of the Northern Irish troubles, a potential charismatic leader for the new wave of Northern Irish Catholics interested in civil rights more than in national unity. She also personified the soon-to-flourish cause of Irish feminism. However, her radical tactics and manner alienated many and her ideology failed to draw substantial support. In addition, her message was too intermixed with other themes to satisfy those who supported the single-minded irredentism of the Provisional IRA.

In 1995 Seamus Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 2013. He is generally regarded as the most important Irish poet since W.B. Yeats. For the most part his poetry remains aloof from Republican and Loyalist activities; for that reason, his poetry is not obviously political or militant. But his horror at the violence of the Troubles was always apparent and evidenced in his many poems about the tragedy and trauma that permeated life in Northern Ireland. As such, his work gives us an important insight into life in the North during this violent and unstable time.