Abstract
Histories of Northern Ireland have often been shaped by the binaries of sectarianism and of dominance and oppression. This tendency has served to create an impression that the sectarian divide is something ahistorical, immovable, and inevitable. Recent work in Irish historiography, however, has begun to recognize the inadequacy of the uninterrogated sectarian dichotomy as a framework for understanding the nuances of the Northern Irish experience. Scholars such as Sean Farrell have called for the consideration of sectarianism as a historical phenomenon that is often rooted in contemporary concerns, quite outside the notion of tribal animosities.

This paper addresses the problem of complicating and historicizing sectarianism through the use of discourse analysis, with special attention to the role that language plays in the processes of knowledge production and social interaction. It considers the passionately contested “end” of Northern Ireland’s Troubles, using the Drumcree parading dispute as a lens through which to examine how communal dynamics, power relationships, and the sectarian divide itself were changing during the peace process.

An examination of a wide variety of textual manifestations of the public debate surrounding Drumcree reveals a discourse saturated with the familiar rhetoric of siege, civil rights, victimhood, “no-go,” and “no surrender,” and ubiquitous canonical symbols like the Boyne, the Somme, and 1969, that seem at first simply to confirm the static nature of the conflict in Northern Ireland. I argue that, instead, Drumcree’s stakeholders were actually using these familiar tropes in new and self-conscious ways, often adapting or even inverting them, in order not only to express their understandings of the parading dispute, but also to attempt to make sense of the changing power dynamics between Protestants and Catholics that the peace process heralded – and was threatening to accelerate. I examine these texts as spaces of exchange, resistance, contestation, and negotiation, and as sites wherein the fluid and historically contingent nature of the sectarian divide becomes visible to historians.