Trades and Occupations in Northern Ireland

Paul Nolan

The winter wind that whips Belfast Lough forces the men who work in the Titanic Quarter to keep their heads down as they move from their site offices onto the moonscape where the giant earth diggers bulldoze piles of brick, soil, and glass—the detritus of former glories. One hundred years ago, as that same wind blew up the Lough, men stood under the shadow of the vast walls of the dry dock, looking up at ships so large they seemed to belong to some other world. It was here that the great White Star liners were built, ships with names like *Olympic*, *Gigantic*, and *Titanic*. Everything was on a grand scale. Belfast, which emerged from swamp in the second half of the nineteenth century, turned into one of the engines of the industrial revolution: here, the largest shipyard in the world, there, the largest rope works. When the evening sun settled, its light fell upon the red brickwork of the new engineering buildings and the tea- and tobacco-processing factories to convince the citizens that the dark, satanic mills were creating a New Jerusalem.

After the long process of deindustrialization, the cranes on today's city skyline are clear evidence of a twenty-first-century boom. The developments on the old Titanic site are emblematic of the changes in the society as a whole. The developers in charge of the project claim it will be the largest mixed-use development in Europe and that it will employ 20,000 people over the next fifteen years. They will not have jobs that the horny-handed toilers of the old shipyards would recognize; instead, they will have service jobs in steel and glass cathedrals. Hotel and retail will dominate the new landscape. And when Belfast Metropolitan College moves into the Titanic Quarter—close to the forthcoming technology center of Queen's University—the city will shift from a manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy.

Belfast shipyard workers leave Queen's Island at the end of their shift at Harland and Wolff, circa 1911. The ship in the background is the *Titanic.*
Photo courtesy Ulster Folk and Transport Museum

Those who gather in the waterfront bars and eateries will be the accountants, real estate developers, and technology wizards of the new economy. They will have more in common with their colleagues from Bilboa or La Défense in Paris than they will with the industrial workers who once built ships and planes on this site.

The changes do not mean that the traditional factory and farm have disappeared. Northern Ireland has always been a rural society; more people work in agriculture, forestry, and fishing than they do in any other part of the United Kingdom. There are still 28,500 active, mostly family-run farms and another 400 food-processing businesses. Taken together, however, they account for only 5 percent of total employment in Northern Ireland. Given the amount of air time the agricultural sector gets on local radio stations, the casual listener might be forgiven for thinking that many people earn a living from farming and related businesses. But there has been a steady attrition of approximately 2 percent per year for the last fifteen years. The decrease in milk prices and the restructuring of the European Common Agricultural Programme do not offer much hope for the future.

Manufacturing continues to account for some 20 percent of the economy, but that percentage is now sustained through small firms rather than the big industries of old. Ninety percent of local firms employ fewer than ten people. The common term "small-to-medium enterprises" (SMEs) should perhaps be changed to "tiny-to-small enterprises" to describe the low-rise landscape of local manufacturing. Northern Ireland follows the general pattern of the U.K. economy in which manufacturing is increasingly outsourced to China, Eastern Europe, or India. The safe option for new workers is to enter the services sector, which accounts for 70 percent of employment in Northern Ireland. Government officials are concerned about the struggling private and the highly subsidized public sectors of the economy. Presently, the economy amounts to approximately £22 ($44) billion per annum of which only £14 ($28) billion is raised locally. The other £8 ($16) million comes from the British exchequer.

There are, however, two comforting factors about new patterns within the workforce. Unemployment is now at the all-time low of 4.2 percent, lower than the U.K. average of 5.5 percent and considerably lower than the European Union average of 7.7 percent. The overall employment rate includes foreign nationals who drive taxis, work in poultry factories in mid-Ulster, and serve as health workers in hospitals and nursing homes throughout the country. The babel of accents in every high street may seem odd to the locals, but it is evidence of the normalization of the Northern Ireland workforce, which has pulled itself from its own backwater into the European mainstream. Unionists and nationalists, anxious to detect any sign of bias, pay much attention to recruitment of officers into the new Police Service of Northern Ireland. When the service set quotas for unionist and nationalist officers, it never expected that Polish residents would account for 1,000 of 7,700 applicants. No other statistic could speak so eloquently of the changing face of local employment or the prospect of breaking decisively with a past in which jobs (or unemployment) were passed down the family line. Northern Ireland is now firmly part of the new, modern Europe, and so, too, is its workforce.

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Plans for the future of Belfast's Queen's Island include the post-industrial Titanic Quarter development.
Photo courtesy Titanic Quarter