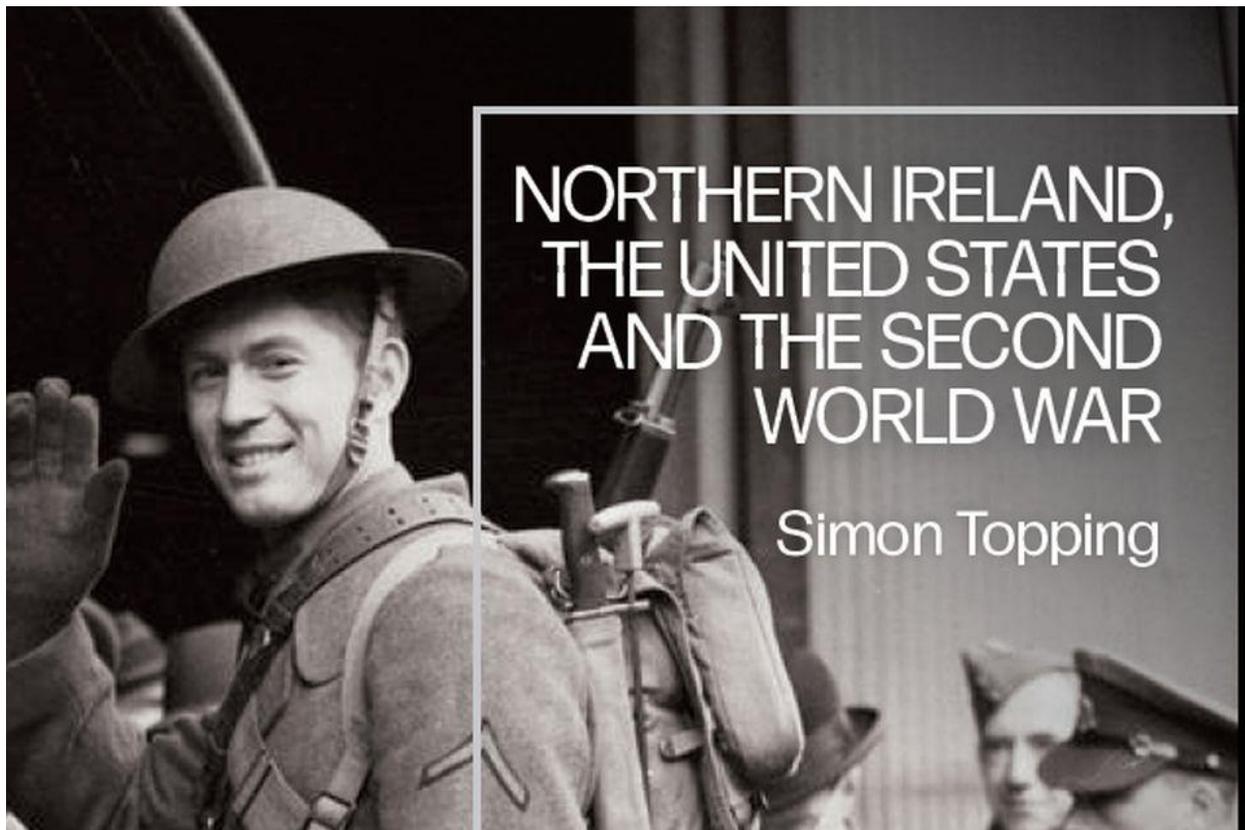


‘Don’t argue politics and watch out for the whiskey’... how GIs coped with life in NI

Eighty years ago this weekend, American troops arrived in Northern Ireland. As author Simon Topping writes, it was a bittersweet experience for both the hosts and the visitors



Simon Topping's book, Northern Ireland, The United States and the Second World War



Over here: First Sergeant Christopher McGuire (centre) and other men of the US 5th Infantry Division listen to an address by Lieutenant General George S Patton while on manoeuvres in Northern Ireland in 1944. Credit: Imperial War Museum

‘Don’t argue religion; Don’t argue politics’ was the eminently sensible — if belated — counsel in the American Pocket Guide to Northern Ireland.

It was sound advice, admittedly offered six months after the first GIs had arrived.

American commanders, and ordinary soldiers, understood the delicacy of their new posting, landing in a divided society bordering a neutral state.

In some respects Northern Ireland was an odd destination for the first Americans in Europe since the Great War but it made good military and diplomatic sense.

Speculation was rife that they would cross the border to resist any German invasion of Ireland, and Washington and London (and, indeed, Dublin) felt that American troops would be more welcome than British.

The Americans also enabled the British garrison to go to North Africa, while these raw American forces completed their training.

The American arrival also implied an early invasion of Europe (this, of course, took two more years) forcing Hitler to weaken his forces on the Eastern front.



US soldiers show local youths how to play baseball

The GIs disembarked at Belfast's Dufferin Quay (Milburn Henke of Minnesota was officially the first) only seven weeks after Pearl Harbor, but preparations dated back a year.

By the summer of 1941 American technicians, ostensibly British employees, were building a naval base at Lisahally outside Londonderry, to protect Atlantic convoys, and other facilities, while in the autumn Churchill suggested to Roosevelt that he send troops to Northern Ireland.

Roosevelt, having already stretched the credibility of American neutrality, demurred.

The Americans lifted the grim wartime mood, arriving less than a year after the devastating Belfast Blitz. Now, for the first time, the war seemed winnable.

The welcome was not, however, universal. Nationalist politicians complained that Dublin, despite no jurisdiction, had not been consulted and compared the Americans to the Germans occupying Norway or France, but, more problematically, America had endorsed and legitimised partition.

The protests, unpopular in the States, quickly subsided in favour of simply ignoring the Americans.

They were briefly resurrected in October when Cardinal Joseph MacRory, the Catholic Archbishop of Armagh, complained about being “overrun”, drawing condemnation in America and little support in Ireland.

Nevertheless, despite these protests, the US consulate in Belfast believed that the Americans “were received just as heartily by nationalist groups” as by unionists, a view echoed by the Ministry of Information.

The IRA, after failed campaigns south of the border and in England, linked a new campaign in Northern Ireland to Americans, a link the unionist press was happy to publicise.

The group never actively targeted Americans, beyond some beatings in the blackout, but the perceived threat created considerable anxiety at the consulate.

Managing the 300,000 Americans who passed through fell to Sir Basil Brooke, the Minister of Commerce and Prime Minister from May 1943.

Brooke was the most dynamic minister of a government heavily criticised for its handling of the war, but he did an excellent job, setting up 45 hospitality committees by D-Day. These volunteer groups, almost invariably run by unionists, organised events, outings and dances to keep Americans away from the ‘pub and the pick-up’.

The American Red Cross arrived in February 1942 taking over the Plaza in Belfast’s Chichester Street, and many other venues, including the Ormeau baths, to look after the GIs off-duty.

Numerous celebrities dropped in, including Bob Hope, Merle Oberon, and Al Jolson with Glenn Miller and his orchestra coming in August 1944 (even performing at Gartree parish church in Antrim), while First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt made a flying visit in November 1942.

The Americans brought their sports and their music. To mark the Fourth of July 1942 Windsor Park hosted a baseball game between the ‘Kentucky Wildcats’ and the ‘Mid-West Giants’.

To celebrate Thanksgiving, American football or ‘gridiron’ was played at Ravenhill between ‘Hale’ and ‘Yarvard’ (reflecting its popularity as a college sport) before 8,000 spectators. The Belfast Telegraph declared the game not simply “a test of brute strength” but “a highly technical business”.

Many Americans, including Lockheed technicians from the Langford Lodge air base near Lough Neagh, formed swing bands to accommodate the ‘jitterbug fever’ which swept the land.

More unusually, US Marines in Londonderry formed a highland band, complete with bagpipes but drawing the line at kilts, but they did claim third place in the Dromora contest of 1943.

To many, the Americans, in their immaculate uniforms, Hollywood accents and confident demeanour, seemed to have stepped off the silver screen. One group, however, had an added exotic appeal.

Most locals had never seen a black person before, generating considerable curiosity about these particular newcomers.

The Telegraph declared that these “dusky doughboys have been winning all hearts by their cheery ways”, and, although patronising to modern eyes, this coverage was very well-intentioned.

Generally African American GIs and the population reacted positively to each other; the troops appreciated no formal segregation and being made welcome by a white population.

One wrote “the Irish treat us as if we were one of them”, and that they “never hear of discrimination and stuff like that”.

Indeed, trouble was caused by white Americans imposing ‘Jim Crow’ segregation, especially resentful that local girls danced with and dated their black comrades; whites also threatened to lynch African American veterans in America after the war.

The truism that the Americans were ‘overpaid, oversexed and over here’ certainly applied to Northern Ireland.

The sentimental ‘Johnny Doughboy found a Rose in Ireland’ was a big hit for Kay Keyser in 1942, and love blossomed with 1,800 local women marrying Yanks.

Couples had to overcome numerous hurdles, as military bureaucracy, local hostility, religious conservatism and sudden deployment, all delayed weddings.

All of this safely negotiated, wives, and often children, still had to get to the States, but so frustrated were war brides that 100 occupied the consulate in January 1946 demanding transport.

The consul cancelled non-urgent business and secured ships for most of the brides that spring.

There was a darker side to the Americans as, along with gum, nylons and jitterbugging, they brought crime, racism and drunkenness.

Drunken Americans killed five civilians while a bus driver in Dungiven was shot when his vehicle accidentally joined a convoy carrying General George C. Marshall. The soldier responsible was, however, exonerated.

The 1942 Visiting Forces Act ceded criminal jurisdiction to the American military, meaning trials by courts martial, including for crimes against civilians.

Fears that the US military would be lenient proved largely unfounded, as military justice was often harsh, both to maintain discipline and good relations with civilians.

Alcohol was central to bad behaviour. The Guide warned against whiskey and especially poteen (‘watch it. It’s dynamite’), warnings regularly unheeded.

Women reported being constantly harassed, some carrying pepper pots and whistles for protection, or being reluctant to go out alone, with one woman stating: “It was by no means safe to be out in the darkness while they were around.”

The physical remnants of the American presence are scattered throughout Northern Ireland, from the rusting and decaying skeletons of old bases and installations, to the memorials at Lisnabreeny, and, most prominently, the unpretentious column at Belfast City Hall.

The psychological impact of the American presence is harder to determine.

The war was undoubtedly transformative for Northern Ireland. Experiences such as the Blitz, rationing, hardships and casualty lists, along with hosting Americans, drew Northern Ireland closer to the rest of the UK and made it arguably more ‘British’ than ever.

Equally, Éire’s neutrality hardened the border and thus the divisions between the two states, making ending partition even more remote.

The war and the Americans did not, moreover, ease internal sectarian dynamics, as nationalist hostility to the state and unionist domination remained thoroughly entrenched.

By early 1944 there were 100,000 GIs in Northern Ireland, but by July almost all had departed for France.

The American presence formally ended a year later with the return of Langford Lodge’s keys, but it really concluded in August 1945, just as the Japanese surrendered, with the visit of General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In January 1942 Eisenhower had privately declared: “We’re going to regret every damn boat we sent to Ireland”, but now his praise was fulsome.

Greeted by tens of thousands of well-wishers and an improvised ticker-tape parade in Belfast, he accepted the freedom of the city and an honorary Doctor of Laws from Queen’s.

At Stormont he declared that “without Northern Ireland I do not see how the American Forces could have been concentrated to begin the invasion of Europe”.

Eisenhower’s eulogy proved a fitting testament to Northern Ireland’s hosting of the Americans and the closing of an important and positive chapter in its history.

Simon Topping is Associate Professor of United States History at the University of Plymouth and author of *Northern Ireland, the United States and the Second World War* (Bloomsbury, 2022)