

## BELFAST--EAST AND WEST

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[Assignment: Choose either a place which is important to you, or a person who is important to you. Write an essay in which you describe this place or person utilizing both objective and subjective description. You may choose any specific place, but you should keep in mind that a very large place (a city, for example) will be too difficult a subject for a short essay. Think in smaller terms -- a house, a room, a spot in a park, etc.]

(1) It's a city of unrest, a city plagued by terrorism, a city torn between two religions. It's the Catholics against the Protestants, the West against the East. It's Belfast, Northern Ireland, and there have been nearly twenty years of unrest. Some people claim the problems are political, others claim they are religious, and believe it or not some people claim there are no problems at all. The beauty of the city does not suggest the ever-present discord, even violence, within.

(2) Belfast is a beautiful city, as is the rest of Northern Ireland, and also the Republic of Ireland for that matter. The center of the city contains many beautiful buildings with unique architecture and sculpture on the outside. This is typical throughout Europe. The insides of the buildings are fairly modernized, but on the outside there is no modern look at all. As you would look at the skyline of Belfast, you would notice that there are absolutely no skyscrapers as there are throughout large American cities. The city center is a mass of shops and shopping arcades, and during working hours there are literally thousands of shoppers walking through the streets. On any given day the air is filled with the rustling of shopping bags and the chatter of the shoppers talking in their strange Belfast accents. The distant sounds of cars and busses also fill the air from nearby streets where motor vehicles are allowed. The main shopping area is closed off to all unauthorized motor vehicles due to the threat of car bombs which so often plague the city, destroying buildings and killing people. Probably the tallest building in the city is the Belfast city hall. It is very beautiful inside and out with many sculptures and intricate designs carved on the stone walls. Its huge green dome is noticeable from all over the city. Nowadays a huge red banner stretches across the length of the building which states "BELFAST SAYS NO." The slogan pertains to the Anglo-Irish agreement which gives the Republic of Ireland a say as to what the North does. The street signs, lamp posts, and telephone poles are all covered with stickers displaying the same slogan. The smell in the air is of coal or peat burning in the nearby houses. This is East Belfast, the Protestant section.

(3) If you were in a car you could drive about a

quarter of a mile west and you would arrive at a huge traffic circle. On your left is the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast's largest hospital. On the right is the motorway link which would take you on a three hour drive into the Republic, to Dublin. Straight ahead is West Belfast, the Roman Catholic section. Immediately you would see that the buildings here are not at all maintained, and the streets and sidewalks are full of litter and garbage. Nothing looks clean, for this is the Catholic section, and the Catholics are much poorer than the Protestants; therefore, the people can't afford to keep the place clean. The cars parked along the side of the street are old and rusted out, with paint peeling and oil dripping underneath. The same smell of coal or peat burning is still in the air, but there are no beautiful buildings with unique architecture and sculpture. The police patrol the streets, bound in bullet proof vests, and carrying sub-machine guns. The police patrol in pairs when on foot in West Belfast, and they are always escorted by at least three members of the Ulster Defence Regiment--the British army. All three army men are clad in army fatigues and also carry sub-machine guns. One will have a portable radio and head set on him constantly reporting to a nearby receiver. One of the other two will walk about ten feet in front of the two policemen, and the other will walk about ten feet behind them, walking backwards. These five men will patrol up and down the street constantly, not along different streets. The local people will sneer and swear at them as they pass, saying that they don't need to be protected. Every so often the loud rumble of the army Sirison will drive by. This is a large vehicle, quite like a tank on wheels. The wheels are covered, as is the entire vehicle, in bullet/bomb proof armored steel. The windows consist of a twelve by four inch piece of bullet proof glass just big enough for the driver to see out of. There is a hole in the roof of the vehicle where two army men, one pointing forward and the other backward, stand. They are always wearing helmets, and pointing guns in their respective directions. This is a typical army road patrol in West Belfast.

(4) I have been living in Belfast for the past three years, and I have loved every minute of it. I have friends from both sides of that traffic circle, which is, as described above, two different societies, almost two different cultures. It is normal to be stopped in Belfast, East or West, and to be questioned. These are authorized roadblocks conducted by the police or army, possibly both. I was once stopped late at night in East Belfast by the army. They asked me for my driver's license, which I immediately produced. There were two visible army men and an army truck. I was then asked to step out of my car. This made me a bit nervous because usually they just let me through. As I got out of my car I noticed that there were two more army men crouching down in a ditch alongside the road. Their faces were made up as to make themselves less noticeable, and all four were clad in the familiar fatigues. The two in the

ditch were both pointing guns at me. The other two then proceeded to search my car from top to bottom, including the trunk, spare tire, and under the hood. As they searched they talked to me, just making basic conversation. After they finished they gave me my license back and I drove off, having had my first real scare in Northern Ireland.

(5) Bombs, road blocks, army patrols, police patrols and sub-machine guns are the way of life in Belfast. The people there are quite used to it, as it will most likely continue for a long time. It's a beautiful city in a beautiful country, but the violence which prevails between the two religions is slowly taking that beauty away.