

# Symbolic gestures

James McClean's choice to wear a poppy or not was always going to anger some

By ROBBIE MEREDITH

**W**hat did a humble flower ever do to deserve the annual blast of hot air the poppy is subjected to in Northern Ireland? Barely a November goes by without claims that some bars or businesses refuse to admit people wearing one, or arguments about whether public figures are coerced into pinning a bit of red plastic to their lapel. Due to the unique – for the UK – political circumstances here, the poppy is often, and unfortunately, viewed as a solely Unionist symbol.

This year, by wearing a Sunderland shirt without one on it, James McClean provided a new variation on a very old theme. There has never been agreement about the significance of the poppy in Northern Ireland but, due to our long experience of rows provoked by whether people wear one or not, McClean's decision arguably provoked less controversy here than elsewhere in Britain.

Yes there were a few headlines in the local papers, accompanied by a half-hearted discussion with little real heat or light on a popular local radio phone-in show, but that a young man from the mainly Catholic and Nationalist "Bogside" area of Londonderry refused to wear a poppy is not remotely surprising. Due to our political geography, it would be more startling if McClean or any of his contemporaries from the area, many of whom he's still close to by all accounts, actually sported one.

Besides, one can't imagine that absolutely every member of the multi-national squads which make up Premier League sides these days care deeply about the sacrifice made by Britain's fallen. To some, the poppy is presumably of no more relevance than the Premier League lion on their sleeves. McClean's lonely refusal may have been ill-judged in the eyes of many but it lacked little in sincerity.

The reaction here was predictable. The player already arouses huge antipathy in many Northern Ireland supporters for his

decision to play for the Republic despite being born in the North and making several appearances for our Under-21 team. His vigorous justification of that decision on Twitter led to him abandoning his site due to the level of abuse he received. Most people's minds about him are already made up depending on who they support; what he chose to do in the Remembrance weekend game at Everton just hardened opinions already formed.

The Londonderry Democratic Unionist Party MP, Gregory Campbell, alluded to this in a radio interview in which he mentioned a series of other incidents, and said that McClean had abused the freedom of choice he had been given by those who had lost their lives in the wars.

However, Sinn Féin's Raymond McCartney, a former IRA hunger striker and now a politician, condemned what he saw as the poppy-bullying culture which had led to a witch-hunt against the player.

James McClean himself wisely kept quiet in the aftermath. In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, most of the attention on the story soon shifted to those who took to social media to issue threats to him; individuals obviously far beyond reasoning with. More representative among local supporters I've spoken to is the view that he should have complied with the Premier League's custom in the interests of a quieter life, but perhaps this is to ignore how pictures of the winger wearing a poppy would have appeared to those in the community he grew up in.

McClean's decision goes against the tide of recent history in the country he has

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chosen to play for. In a historic gesture the leader of the Republic of Ireland's government, Enda Kenny, and his deputy, Eamon Gilmore, both attended Remembrance Day services in Northern Ireland for the first time on November 11, while in recent years the Republic has begun to acknowledge the sacrifice of its own citizens who died fighting for British forces.

Whether you view his action as understandable or not, McClean is also, in a sense, suffering from the Premier League's tendency to create an all-encompassing practice out of something – the wearing of a poppy, whether to shake an opponent's hand – which until relatively recently was left to an individual player and their conscience.

The problem McClean had to confront was that he comes from a city and a country in which competing traditions are a real, complex and occasionally crushing reality. Whatever way he observed one of the more recently created "traditions" of the Premier League, he would have been in the wrong for many in his homeland.

