

All the Queen's men?

THE shooting incident last week in Belfast's New Lodge Road in which Peter McBride died and which has involved two Scottish soldiers comes at a time when the very existence of many Scottish regiments is in doubt — due, in the main, to the reverberations surrounding the end of a conflict involving another armed border, the German one.

Priorities have changed at Westminster.

The story of the Scottish regiments and their present predicament has much significance for the relations between Scotland and Ireland and the place of the Irish community in Scotland today.

Last month people attended a rally in the Scottish border town of Galashiels. They were demonstrating against what they perceived as yet another example of Whitehall mandarins' insensitivity to the needs of Scotland. They were lauded by opposition politicians. They were taking up the cudgels against Westminster because Her Majesty's government have decided that they don't need as many soldiers as they used to.

These doughty, tweedy people, unaccustomed to rebelling against Her Majesty's Government have formed a campaign group: Keep Our Scottish Battalions (KOSB). These, of course, are the initials of one of the threatened regiments, the King's Own Scottish Borderers.

Raised in 1689 in Edinburgh to face an imminent invasion by rebel Jacobite Gaels, they first saw action for King William at Killiecrankie. They also have The Bachelors Walk Massacre of 1914 in their unofficial battle honours, when they opened fire on women and children in Dublin after failing to prevent arms being landed for the volunteers at Howth.

Ireland has, of course, been a central feature of the Scottish military experience for the last three centuries. The soldiers involved in the McBride incident were members of the Scots Guards, one of Scotland's oldest regiments, which was raised to protect Scottish settlers in Ulster during the 1641 Rising.

As a regiment of the Royal Household it is protected, this time, from the Treasury. The current threat to the other Scottish regiments, like the regiments themselves, has its own history. It has to be set against an earlier crisis.

In 1968, several Scottish regiments faced the axe. Amalgamations and disbandments were on the agenda. The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders thought they had heard the last post. In the event, the Argylls were saved, not by any popular campaign, but by the fact that the RUC lost the Killiecrankie of the day, The Battle of the Bogside. The partition of Ireland and the union with England have helped shape the Scottish contingent of the British army, and the Irish famine and the Highland Clearances provided a steady supply of recruits.

Close inspection of the phenomenon of the Scottish soldier raises the questions: How Scottish are the Scottish regiments? How British are they? Indeed, how Irish are they? The high proportion of West of Scotland Catholics in the lower ranks of the Scottish regiments, and the "government tartan", which has been a required accessory since 1883, suggest that Westminster has successfully manipulated a sense of Britishness in the form of an imperialist military tradition in order to iron out political differences within the union as a whole.

What does the future hold for Highlanders and Irishmen if the last post is eventually sounded?

It was fitting that the tribute to the troops who fought in the Gulf should have been held in Glasgow Cathedral, for Scottish soldiers made up a phenomenal 40 per cent of the British contingent. The day the conflict ended, TV cameras were on hand to record the responses of jubilant and relieved wives and mothers singing Flower of Scotland. There is a delicious irony in a specifically Scottish patriotic song which celebrates the repulsion of an English monarch becoming the anthem of a British victory.

The British army has come a long way from the days of Culloden when the prospective Scottish recruit was admitted "in return for a solemn oath that he was a Protestant". Such a declaration would certainly come as a shock to those Catholics who, while making up a mere 16% of the country's population, constitute, on one estimate, a staggering 40% of the lower ranks in Scottish regiments.

Of course it should come as no surprise that the British army should draw largely on Scots to do its fight-

ing or that the Scots in question should be drawn disproportionately from the Irish community.

It is standard practice since the days of ancient Rome for a state to draw on immigrants and colonial subjects for its fighting forces.

In a British context, the English Crown first employed Irish troops at the siege of Boulogne in 1544.

Indeed, one of the first patriotic pamphlets printed in English was Edward Walshe's *The Office and Duty in Fighting for Our Country*, published in 1545. Walshe was a Dubliner, loyal to Henry VIII, and he is just one in a long line of expatriates who have faithfully served the British Empire, nascent and moribund.

Holinshed's *Chronicles* records an episode at Boulogne when the

PHIL Mac GIOLLABHAIN speculates on the future of Britain's Tartan Army

English commander despatched an Irish soldier to enter into hand-to-hand combat with a French knight. The Irishman is reputed to have swum across a river, killed the Frenchman, severed his head, and returned with the trophy in his mouth. Such horrific tales converted the colonial stereotype of the "wild Irishman" into an agent of the English crown.

The modern history of Irishmen and Highlanders in the British army is full of ironies. Catholics and Kilties have played a prominent part in some of the British Empire's most colourful expeditions.

The Scots in particular have served the interests of an empire which did not always benefit their own nation. Having proscribed the wearing of tartan in the wake of the 1715 and 1745 Jacobite uprisings, the Crown found it convenient to lift the ban and sponsor a Scottish military tartan which turned a symbol of Scottish resistance to English rule into an emblem of subservience.

It is a matter of historical record that the Irish famine and the Highland Clearances coincided with major recruitment drives amongst displaced young men. If dispossessed Highland crofters were one source of recruits for the British Empire, starving Irish immigrants were another.

The thin red line, immortalised in the Crimea, was composed largely of Irishmen, most of them hailing from Tipperary, and might have been better christened the thin green line.

Quite often the troops drawn from colonies or semi-colonies are used as a threat. Their putative lack of restraint is often extolled. This myth of the dangerous native was a recurrent theme in the press coverage of the Gulf War. Jeremy Paxman, editor of BBC 2's *Newsnight*, wrote in *The Guardian* of the menace of Scots troops, many of whom were ex-offenders, speculating on the effect the sight of a detachment of

"Glasgow crims" would have had on Saddam Hussein. There is arguably a discreet racism at work in such ostensibly patriotic pronouncements.

It has long been recognised that the people of Scotland have an attachment to their regiments that finds no parallel with those raised in counties of England. It has been a great shock to many Scots to discover that their regiments are to come under the axe as part of the defence review. By a strange twist of fate, the last review of Scottish regiments took place on the eve of the troubles in the North, and although the sending in of the troops by the then Labour government did not come quickly enough to save the Cameronians, it did result in a reprieve for the Argylls.

During the Falls curfew in 1970 they repaid their masters' faith in their ability to control difficult "natives" with interest.

When Scottish troops were ordered into Ireland on June 6, 1920, *The Glasgow Herald* carried the headline *Our Boys Go In*, and Conservatives and Unionists throughout the country, who had quivered at events across the water, breathed a sigh of relief as the threat of a radical split in the union was, for the time being at least, shored up. Partition may have been traumatic for Anglo-Scottish relations, but a divided Ireland was arguably more acceptable than a divided Scotland from an English standpoint.

The prominent role of Scottish troops at the time of the Tan War ensured that the spectacle of the Celtic countries turning back on John Bull was temporarily exorcised. John MacLean, the archetypal Red Clydesider, was convinced that a united Ireland and a separate Scotland were both working-class demands, and he saw the Scottish military as the lynchpin of the union. MacLean held that "the Scots ought to line up with the Irish". Westminster's paranoia was not without substance. Now it appears that Westminster's distress is once again the Scottish soldier's opportunity.

The British army came into being just as the unification of Britain was entering its most delicate phase. No discussion of the future of Scotland is complete without a debate on the future of the British army. By running down Scottish regiments, the British government is telescoping debate on the military future of Scotland. This officially sponsored form of Scottishness has pivotal significance for the Unionist community in the North.

Their claim to have a "British identity" is clearly on its firmest ground when they are referring to the tartan Britisher of Scottish regiments.

For here is a British identity that isn't English, but encapsulates what orientates the Ulster Unionists to the KOSB. That is a reality that nationalists and republicans in both nations are foolish to ignore.

The tragic death of Peter McBride reminds us that the Scottish soldier is still an evocative image of Scotland in Britain and Britain in Ireland.

CAHILLS
"Drive a Better Deal"
CAR RENTALS

**RENT LOCAL
NO HASSLE! NO FUSS!**

**Freefone Direct from Britain
0800 242112**