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Troubling Pasts: Teaching Public History in Northern Ireland

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Abstract: This article explores the challenges and opportunities presented for the teaching and practice of public history in a post-conflict society that remains deeply divided over its past. It examines some of the negative ways in which history is used in the public arena, but also the potential of public history initiatives for building a more cohesive and forward-looking society. It examines how students can use the rich cultural landscape of Northern Ireland and engage with a wide range of experienced practitioners to learn more about the ways in which history divides; how we can negotiate these divisions over interpretations; how different communities understand, represent, and engage with their past; and why this matters.

Keywords: public history, Northern Ireland, post-conflict, museums, divided societies

In spring 2021, Belfast once more appeared on people's news feeds around the world as rioting in some parts of the city over several nights made headline news. For many in Northern Ireland, this brought a rather painful sense of déjà vu – that familiar combination of despair that such scenes were playing out on our streets and frustration at having to explain once more to concerned acquaintances that this was very localized rioting, confined to a small number of neighborhoods, and that the city remained a safe and friendly place. But these scenes also brought a deeper sense of disquiet as the context in which Northern Ireland's latest spate of 'recreational rioting' occurred has shifted. Brexit – the UK's departure from the European Union – has, predictably, proved to be a destabilizing and disruptive influence in Northern Ireland. Even the question of whether there should be a 'hard' customs border on the island of Ireland or an Irish Sea border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK has brought the constitutional position of Northern Ireland back into sharp, and unforgiving, focus. At the same time, we are fast approaching the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of Northern Ireland when the Government

of Ireland Act created two separate devolved nations on the island – 'Southern Ireland' which quickly declared independence and became the Irish Free State, later the Republic of Ireland, and 'Northern Ireland' which has remained a part of the United Kingdom and will do as long as the slowly-decreasing majority wishes it to do so. Calls for a border poll from northern republicans have, also predictably, started to come thick and fast while northern unionists have anxiously sought assurances from the UK government that the nation's position within the union remains secure.

Yet, despite the current challenges, and the uphill battle Northern Ireland society has faced as it has moved out of conflict and sought to establish a fair and inclusive form of government, the past decade has seen it experience a booming tourist trade as international visitors flock to the region, attracted by its friendly people, stunning countryside, lively culture, and, of course, its edgy past. For while the region's ancient heritage, its historic stately homes, or the story of the *RMS Titanic* told so successfully by Titanic Belfast undoubtedly continue to draw hundreds of thousands each year, many more are drawn by the region's 'conflict heritage' or dark tourism associated with its more recent, violent past. Black cab tours, many of them run by former combatants, transport eager tourists around Belfast's former flashpoints, regaling them with the stories of murder and violence that these spots witnessed. Meanwhile, the city's 'peace walls,' the high walls that were thrown up to separate rival communities at the city's interface areas during the height of the conflict, and which remain there, have become a major attraction for pen-wielding visitors, keen to leave something of themselves on the visual culture of the city [Figure 1]. While the ability of its violent past to attract an ever-increasing number of cruise ships to the city is undoubtedly good for the economy, it does, as Sarah McDowell points out, raise major ethical issues about uses of the past in the public sphere.¹

In this context, the practice of public history is nothing if not interesting. "Performing Irish history in public," as

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¹ Sarah McDowell, "Selling Conflict Heritage through Tourism in Peacetime Northern Ireland: Transforming Conflict or Exacerbating Difference?," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14, no. 5 (2008): 405–21. doi:10.1080/13527250802284859.



Figure 1: One of Belfast’s peace walls (image, author).

Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O’Neill write, “can be thrilling, enervating and anxiety-laden, and that is arguably the price we pay for an engaged public that is anything but apathetic about the telling of its own story.”² How much more so, then, in a Northern Ireland whose stories of the past continue to resonate so strongly in the present. Indeed, it is impossible to escape the past – aspects of the region’s history, and mythology, are emblazoned on thirty-foot-high murals on the gable walls of houses and embedded deep within the individual and collective psyche. But this is not a collective history: rather, it is a binary of ‘us’ and ‘them;’ of past wrongs and blood sacrifices on opposing sides; one person’s hero being another’s terrorist

or tyrant. Past events are frequently called upon and used by different groups to explain and justify their positions on a range of issues, and their attitudes towards each other, but so often this is in ways that are reductionist, or selective; that pick the particular parts of the historical canon that fit the narrative they embrace, that fail to grasp or engage with the complexities and nuance of history as it actually was.

Take for example the ways in which versions of history are used on gable walls across the city of Belfast to represent identity, or to mark territory. Common in loyalist working-class areas is the representations of the Protestant William III of Orange who defeated the Catholic James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 [Figure 2]. His battle was just one tiny part of a very complex European war between many sides. But in Northern Ireland today the narrative is kept simple: King Billy, as he is generally known, is lauded in loyalist circles as having been the defender of Irish Protestantism against the machinations of Catholic King James, and his victory at the Boyne represented as the decisive moment in establishing the Protestant faith in Ireland. While murals of King Billy have gradually disappeared in many parts of the country, replaced by representations of the Battle of the Somme, or Belfast’s industrial past, it is not surprising that the areas in which they remain most prevalent and are more carefully maintained are those where Protestants feel at their most vulnerable, among marginalized urban working-class males and remote rural areas close to the border. In nationalist working-class parts of Belfast, the Great Famine of 1845–49 features on several gable walls. Sidestepping the tortuous historiographic debates over causation, impact, and the role of ideology, they simply present the Famine, as *An Gorta Mór*, the Great Hunger, ‘Ireland’s genocide by the English’ [Figure 3]. Presented thus, the Famine speaks of the oppression under which the Irish have suffered at the hands of the English, something that continues to resonate in Irish republicanism today. It is in this extreme over-simplification of the past that its symbolic capital lies. Moments, events, and characters from history are appropriated and depicted in monochromatic tones in order to reinforce identity, to denote community and belonging for those on the inside, or the ‘otherness’ of those on the outside, to legitimize a particular present view of society, culture, and politics.

As Ireland, north and south, lurches toward the end of a ‘decade of centenaries’ in which the political and cultural sectors have sought to deal with the hundred-year commemoration of a series of seismic events, most of them deeply divisive, as Northern Ireland faces the hundred-year anniversary of its creation, and as we begin

² Thomas Cauvin and Ciaran O’Neill, “Negotiating public history in the Republic of Ireland: collaborative, applied and usable practices for the profession,” *Historical Research* 90, no. 250 (2017): 810–28, quote on 810. doi:10.1111/1468-2281.12192.



Figure 2: Mural of King William of Orange https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ca/Loyalist_Mural%2C_Donegall_Pass%2C_Belfast_%282%29_-_geograph.org.uk_-_768197.jpg.



Figure 3: Mural of An gorta Mór https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:An_gorta_Mor.jpg.

the process of engaging with the public history of the 30 years of violent conflict known as ‘the Troubles,’ we need to ask what role can public history play in a context where the fundamental understandings of the past are so deeply divided? How can museums, heritage organizations, community initiatives, etc. begin to represent the past of a place where the fundamental understandings of that place’s history remain deeply contested? Is it possible for the public history sector to engage diverse public audiences in ways that are both meaningful and inclusive, that engages all perspectives in ways that bring healing rather than further division?

Challenging as these issues are for practitioners of public history, they provide an incredible opportunity for students of public history to explore at first hand the issues around ‘doing’ public history in divided societies. As we are all too aware, Northern Ireland is far from being the only society deeply divided along issues of identity, religion, culture, class, or race, and where public engagement with, and representations of, the past remain deeply contentious. Indeed, many of the issues that public historians face in Northern Ireland are magnified in other national contexts. Therefore, Northern Ireland provides a valuable opportunity for public history students – the public historians of the future – to explore ways in which history and its representation divide; how we can negotiate these divisions over interpretations; how different communities understand, represent, and engage with their past; and why this matters. It allows us to explore how, in a society in which the past is contested, public history institutions decide which narratives to adopt and present; to ask whether we run the risk of confirming prevailing discourses, or whether we can challenge these by presenting more nuanced or disruptive interpretations of the past. And in the context of still divided societies such as Northern Ireland, to ask how we balance the imperatives of exploring and presenting pluralist and inclusive historical narratives with the need to engage with very divisive issues in an honest manner.

These important issues have shaped the development of public history as an academic subject in Northern Ireland. It has been an important aspect of the Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies MA program at Ulster University and has been to the fore in the development of the MA in Public History at Queen’s University Belfast. ‘Difficult public histories’ is also a central research theme of Queen’s University’s Centre for Public History, where annual conferences and symposia have addressed a range of issues from imperialism, slavery, and the legacies of conflict through to historical institutional abuse in

Ireland’s industrial schools or Magdalene laundries, or the public history of major disasters. This provides a rich research context within which students can engage with difficult issues, moving from the local to the global and applying their learning and skills across a range of contexts. In my own experience of running the MA in Public History at Queen’s, I have been impressed, and humbled, by the thoughtful, insightful, and sensitive responses of our students, who come from many different countries and cultural backgrounds, to the complex public history landscape that they encounter in Northern Ireland. In particular I have watched with interest their engagement with policy makers, community groups, heritage organizations, and cultural institutions as they explore a whole range of issues regarding the practice and experience of public history in a specifically Northern Irish context and then applying that out to a whole range of other contexts. One of the great benefits of Northern Ireland, as many outsiders have observed, is that it is a small place – ‘everybody knows everybody else.’ For students and teachers of public history, this provides unparalleled access to a rich and diverse body of public history practitioners and the opportunity to ‘learn on the job’ through placements and informal engagement with representatives from the region’s national museums, archives and heritage organizations, broadcast and media production companies, arts and cultural organizations, local museums, and community initiatives.

It has been particularly interesting to hear students’ responses to the different ways in which the recent conflict in Northern Ireland is being represented to and by the public. One of these is what might be described as the ‘official’ representation of the Troubles through the permanent history exhibition at the Ulster Museum. Part of National Museums of Northern Ireland, the Ulster Museum, situated in a leafy suburb right next to Queen’s University’s main campus, has a mission to represent the entire community in an inclusive and balanced manner, something that has previously had a significant impact on the representation of period of history that is both deeply divisive and has touched so many people’s lives in painful ways. For many years, the museum’s response was one of avoidance. As Elizabeth Crooke has pointed out, this has, for a long time, been the default position of how museums and heritage sites in Northern Ireland have dealt with the region’s history of conflict. She points to the example of Fermanagh County Museum in Enniskillen, a town rocked in 1987 by an IRA bomb at the Remembrance Day ceremony that killed 11 and injured another 64 people. Despite the huge impact this had on the community, more than a

decade later the event still had not been reflected in the museum's collections in that town.³ It was not until 2009 that the Ulster Museum made its first attempt to tackle the history of the conflict with the opening of a gallery on the Troubles, and, when it did, the result was very heavily criticized. The conflict was represented only through black and white photographs of key events accompanied by minimal factual text, with no attempt at presenting an interpretive narrative and no use of artefacts. It was, as Fionnuala O'Connor pithily wrote in *The Irish Times*, a case of "the past defeating the present ... for fear of giving offence [or] causing controversy."⁴ Or, in the words of another *Irish Times* review, it was "bland, safe and strenuously non-controversial."⁵ Students who visited this gallery (until it was replaced in 2018) commented on the extent to which, in trying to maintain a balanced and neutral representation, it ended up being bland, sterile, and largely failed to engage public audiences in any meaningful way.

As a means of exploring a very different public history landscape, our students spend a few days in Northern Ireland's second largest city, the seventeenth-century walled city of Derry or Londonderry where the focus is on the dissonant heritage represented by the area around its historic walls [Figure 4]. The depth of division over this city's history is even reflected in the controversy over its name. The City of Londonderry was founded in the 1620s by the English government near the ancient monastic site of *Doire*, or Derry. This was part of the larger 'Plantation of Ulster' which involved colonizing the area by English and Scottish settlers, becoming what Brendan Murtagh, Philip Boland, and Peter Shirlow describe as "a prototype for the Grand Colonial model of British plantation planning." They explain that

Backed by finance from the Guilds in the City of London, the small settlement at Derry was renamed as Londonderry, via a Royal Charter and defended by Protestant settlers against rebellions and sieges, especially in the last part of the 17thC. These events are now remembered in annual Orange parades and

in a new Siege museum that relates the experiences of the Protestant settlers to their uncertain place in the contemporary city.⁶

While the population of Derry may have been predominantly Protestant in the 17th and 18th centuries, the nineteenth century saw a rapid growth of its Catholic population as people moved from surrounding rural counties, attracted by employment in its burgeoning textile industry. By the time Northern Ireland was created, Londonderry, which now sat just inside the new state, was predominantly Catholic and nationalist; however the manipulation of political boundaries and discrimination in housing allocation helped maintain unionist, Protestant, and pro-British control of the town's political representation.⁷ The late 1960s saw protests escalate over issues such as the allocation of housing and access to jobs, but the emergence of the Irish Republican Army and the collapse of the Northern Ireland government led to a rapid descent into 30 years of violence. For Derry/Londonderry, as Murtagh, Boland, and Shirlow explain, "a pivotal moment was 'Bloody Sunday,' when on the 30 January 1972, British soldiers shot 26 unarmed civilians, leaving 14 people dead, during a protest march against internment without trial in the Bogside area of the city."⁸

Today, these two very different histories of the city co-exist but rarely meet. The government-funded Tower Museum, run by the local authority, has tried to tread a neutral path, telling the history of the city from a range of perspectives; however, it has struggled over the years to attract much attention for its work. Rather, the very troubled history of this city is largely interpreted for and represented to public audiences through local museums run by and, predominantly for, a particular community. Students have the opportunity to visit and meet the curators of the Museum of Free Derry in the Bogside where the history of Bloody Sunday is presented in a raw and unfiltered way. The museum, run by the Bloody Sunday Trust and situated on the site where the events of Bloody Sunday took place, tells the people's story of the events leading up to and following that fateful day through video footage, recordings, images, and artefacts.⁹ They then visit the

³ Elizabeth Crooke, "Confronting a troubled history: which past in Northern Ireland's museums?," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 7, no. 2 (2001): 120. doi:10.1080/13527250120060169.

⁴ Fionnuala O'Connor, "Troubles display highlights problem of contested past," *The Irish Times*, December 24, 2009, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/troubles-display-highlights-problem-of-contested-past-1.795295>.

⁵ Fionola Meredith, "Minimal Troubles at Ulster Museum," *The Irish Times*, October 4, 2009, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/minimal-troubles-at-ulster-museum-1.761670>.

⁶ Brendan Murtagh, Philip Boland, and Peter Shirlow, "Contested heritages and cultural tourism," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 23, no. 6 (2017): 507. doi:10.1080/13527258.2017.1287118.

⁷ David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making sense of the Troubles: a history of the Northern Ireland conflict* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

⁸ Murtagh, Boland, and Shirlow, "Contested heritages," 507.

⁹ For a full discussion of the Museum of Free Derry see Elizabeth Crooke, "Memory politics and material culture: Display in the memorial museum," *Memory Studies* 12, no. 6 (2019): 617–29. doi:10.1177/2F1750698017727805.



Figure 4: Derry/Londonderry (image, author).

Siege Museum run by the Apprentice Boys of Derry, a Protestant, loyalist organization dating back to the seventeenth century Plantation. Here they hear and experience a very different narrative, telling the story of how the apprentice Boys closed the city's gates on King James and their role in the subsequent siege, but also of the role the Apprentice Boys have played in the city up to the present day.

Moving from the highly regulated and controlled context of state-funded museums through these institutions where the historical narrative is controlled and presented by one particular group or organization, students then consider the totally unregulated form of public history represented by murals in various parts of the city [Figure 5]. Taken together, this gives them plenty of food for thought about issues of ownership and interpretation of public memory and public history, about place and space, and about approaches to contested pasts. However, they also have the opportunity to think in creative and critical ways about the possibilities, and challenges, of interpreting the rich heritage represented

by Derry's seventeenth-century walls to public audiences in a coherent and compelling way, highlighting their significance in the context of other European walled cities such as Dubrovnik, Carcassonne, or York, yet in a way that does not ignore the deeply contentious nature of these particular walls. Meeting with representatives from a range of heritage and community groups based in around the walls and discussing with them what they see as the barriers to and potential ways of developing a coherent and compelling interpretation of the sites, students gain first-hand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities of engaging with divided pasts in ways that are true to those pasts but that find new spaces for shared histories and meaningful collaboration.

Students are, therefore, challenged by the question: is there a middle ground between a bland, neutral, largely ineffective representation of the Troubles, or else the very partisan, community-run representations of a single narrative? Is there a positive role for public history in divided societies? Many conclude that public history has a



Figure 5: A bomb disposal robot used by the British Army to carry out controlled explosions on car bombs planted by the IRA during the ‘Troubles’ (image, author).

hugely important part to play in post-conflict or conflict-affected societies. In Northern Ireland, for example, we are beginning to see some really interesting work being carried out in the public history sphere which is helping to disrupt some of the simplistic or exclusive narratives and creating space for dialogue and engagement with shared, and opposing, senses of the past. As we move away from binary and selective uses of the past to a deeper, more nuanced exploration of social issues and human cost, there is a growing awareness that communities do not have different pasts but share a common past. The Wave Trauma Centre, for example, has recently launched its ‘Stories from Silence’ initiative, in which it collects and makes available oral history testimonies from those who lost loved ones as a result of the Troubles.¹⁰ Meanwhile the Prisons Memory Archive, developed by researchers at Queen’s University, has collected film and oral history from a broad range of people connected with the prison system during the conflict and is now working with the Public Records Office to make this material available to public audiences.¹¹ And the Ulster Museum is now setting the agenda in terms of how museums can deal with conflict, working collaboratively both with academics and with the community, adopting new approaches in its collecting, interpretation, and programming strategies, and rethinking the role that

museums can and should be playing in divided societies. Importantly, where it once sought neutrality above all else, it is now clearly stating that a museum is *not* a neutral



Figure 6: Jacket worn by Greg Cowan from The Outcasts, a Northern Irish-based punk band formed in the late 1970s (image, author).

¹⁰ “Stories from Silence,” Wave Trauma Centre, accessed February 15, 2020, <https://wavetraumacentre.org.uk>.

¹¹ “What is the PMA?” Prisons Memory Archive, accessed May 6, 2021, <https://prisonmemoryarchive.com>.



Figure 7: Mural in Glenfada Park, site of the Bloody Sunday killings (image, author).

space. Rather it a space that provokes; one where ideas, preconceptions and prejudices are challenged rather than avoided or reinforced; one that encourages dialogue, discussion, even dissent; and one that provides a safe space in which to face up to difficult pasts.

Today, students have the opportunity to engage in various ways with the curators of the ‘Troubles and Beyond’ gallery in the Ulster Museum. Opened in 2018, this gallery represents an important addition to the growing number of exhibitions and museums emerging globally in response to conflict, violence, and trauma, such as the National Center for Historical Memory which opened in Bogotá in 2015, the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, Chile, and, in the United States, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, or the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York City.¹² Where the museum’s old Troubles gallery was monochromatic and two dimensional, the new ‘Troubles

and Beyond’ gallery is collection-based and rich in the social history of the period. It has been developed in collaboration with academics through an Academic Advisory Committee, and with local communities through an extensive program of community engagement and collection which has sought to extend the museum’s existing collection and to take it beyond the walls of the museum. The focus of the program and of the resulting gallery was, in curator, Karen Logan’s words, about “going beyond the political narrative to represent broader social, cultural and economic history as well as exploring the impact of conflict on everyday life, people and communities.”¹³

The public response to the museum has been overwhelmingly positive. Some items on display such as weapons, uniforms, banners etc., relate specifically to the conflict, while others such as maps of no-parking zones or

¹² Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

¹³ Karen Logan, “Collecting the Troubles and Beyond: The role of the Ulster Museum in interpreting contested history,” in *Difficult Issues: proceedings of the ICOM Germany and ICOM Nord conference 2017*, eds. Beate Reifenscheid and ICOM Deutschland (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Library, 2019), 167.

tickets for a concert of the local punk rock band Stiff Little Fingers allude to the shared everyday life of the people of Northern Ireland. All are exhibited alongside political posters and ephemera and are accompanied by a written narrative which provides the context for the objects and images on display. Some of the items speak to the hurt and grievances of one community or the other. Others bear testimony to the universality of the trauma. Some of the images and objects speak to individuals' or communities' very specific memories or experiences, while others draw in people of all backgrounds into a shared remembering. Some of the objects on display are reaffirming in their familiarity; others, which speak of a different experience of the conflict, challenge and disturb, creating a sense of discomfort and possibly stronger emotions in the visitor [Figures 6 and 7]. But it is in this capacity to turn the spotlight on past and ongoing trauma in an ethical way, and to provide the space for people to reflect on their

responses as they bring their particular perspectives to the objects on display, that the power of the gallery lies.

Public history, therefore, has a hugely important part to play in today's society, and particularly so in societies where the past continues to resonate in divisive and painful ways. Engaging with the public in developing a richer, more nuanced, understanding of such pasts, and communicating these pasts to public audiences, is challenging. But it is also vitally important. Public history in Northern Ireland brings its own set of challenges, including negotiating diverse and often conflicting historical narratives. But it also brings unique opportunities in terms of studying how history works in public, how it can be used by different publics, particularly in divided societies, and the challenges, and opportunities, facing public history practitioners as they seek to engage public audiences in a more nuanced, meaningful, and forward-looking understanding of their past and that of others.