Graffiti, Gobnascale, Derry, August 1992.

The practice of painting murals on gable walls in working-class areas dates from just before the First World War. Until 1981 it was almost totally a unionist preserve; but the republican hunger strikes of that year inspired a dramatic outpouring of slogans and images on the walls of the nationalist areas (Rolston 1991, 1992). This marked a new beginning in terms of the quantity of paintings being produced and the range of subjects that were depicted. Republican mural painting drew on designs and styles grounded in both Catholic and Celtic imagery, which were used to elaborate and visualise slogans graffitoed on the walls. This in turn led to a resurgence of loyalist paintings, which utilised both long-established subjects and also explored new themes and practices generated during the Troubles. Contemporary loyalist murals have moved away from the traditional subject-matter to constitute a distinct discourse that differs from, and sometimes conflicts with, mainstream unionist positions. The two bodies of mural works have developed in parallel over the past decade or so, and depict many similar themes and images; but the two communities are not engaged in a debate with each other via the murals – rather it is the shared socio-political environment that has helped to generate the similarities. The murals remain a part of two largely separate internal discourses.

Most murals are to be found in the working-class estates of Belfast and Derry, the areas that have been most affected by the violence and most polarised by sectarian divisions; but wall paintings can be found in many other towns and villages across the north. The impetus for much of the painting is the commemorative parades of the summer marching season, when these areas are extensively decorated with flags and bunting. Loyalist areas are decorated with red, white and blue bunting, and Union Jacks and Scottish and Ulster flags flown from permanently fixed flag-holders on houses and shops, while kerbstones, bollards, postboxes, lampposts and traffic lights are often painted red, white and blue and, more rarely these days, Orange arches are erected. In nationalist areas the displays of colour are more muted, and are often confined to flying the Irish tricolour, although lampposts

and kerbstones are painted green, white and orange and bunting is hung out in some areas. The flags and bunting appear only for the marching season, and encode a restricted range of largely uncontested meanings; but the murals are on display more permanently, and may be visible for many years. They permit more elaborate ideas to be expressed: ideas that increasingly challenge or refocus the traditional values of the community, which are displayed on the banners, and re-present them as revalued by the experiences of the Troubles.

The colour-coded lampposts and kerbstones often mark the entry into a distinct territory; but most murals tend to be hidden away in back streets. They are rarely painted as provocative statements, and rarely make any obvious reference to the other community or any sense of conflict. In part this restraint has been to avoid the dangers of painting political statements in areas where one might be exposed to either the security forces or one's political enemies, but it also exerts a degree of control over the image and its meaning. It targets the image at the people who will more readily understand the nuances and allusions. Just as the marching orders control access to their images through restricted temporal display, so access to the murals is of a restricted spatial nature. The messages on the murals are not intended to convert the unbelievers.

Gable walls at the end of terraces provide the largest, most prominent sites on which to paint murals, although extensive redevelopment throughout the city has meant that murals are nowadays painted on a wide variety of walls. Sometimes images are painted on a board, which allows elaborate details to be included and enables the paintings to be replaced more readily, or to be protected from bad weather. The gable ends offer a large space to create an image; but this does not mean that all available space will be utilised. Some murals are painted two storeys high; but as this involves more work and more equipment – at least a ladder and sometimes scaffolding – many are therefore painted only to a height accessible to a pavement-level painter or use only a proportion of the wall area. In theory the consent of the owner of the building must be obtained before painting begins; but with much of the working-class housing rented from the Housing Executive, this is not possible: the Executive do not allow wall paintings on their properties. However, it is also known that they will not remove murals as they would graffiti, primarily because

of the association between murals and paramilitary groups, and so their houses are often used. A controversy was generated at Easter 1993 after a letter to the *Belfast Telegraph* complained about a UDA mural on the Newtownards Road that had been painted without permission by 'three or four youths' over a period of days some months earlier. Although residents advocated that the painting should be removed, the police were unwilling to do anything and the Housing Executive would not send workers in because of the involvement of the paramilitaries (*BT* 6.4.1993, 13.4.1993; *News Letter* 14.4.1993). Three years later the murals were still on the walls; they have been repainted at least twice, and additional walls have since been incorporated into the display. Furthermore, the images are regularly and widely reproduced both in print and on television.

The earliest murals were the work of skilled paint craftsmen, house or shipyard painters, for whom it was an extension of their existing skills (Loftus 1990). But nowadays murals are more often the works of untrained, often unemployed men and youths (there are only a few murals that have been done by women) who are prepared to 'have a go'. Lyttle (n.d.), for example, records that a number of murals in the Mersey Street area of east Belfast were painted by two schoolboys. Usually the painting is done by people living in the area rather than by outsiders, although there are exceptions. Murals may even be collective efforts, with a more skilled designer setting out the main outline in chalks while friends help by filling in the colours. One Sandy Row painter claimed that the King Billy mural he was painting was his first attempt, although he had 'tidied up' another painting the previous week. He claimed no previous artistic experience, and based his design on a small photograph that he carried. The impetus for the mural was the Twelfth of July parade, and he worked steadily for several days to finish it on time. However, he returned to add some more detail and improve the framing columns in the week leading up to the march to mark the Tercentenary of the Boyne in September 1990. This painting was finished in time for the parade; but murals that are not ready by their appointed deadline may well be abandoned and left partly finished. Two years later the outline of a UDA emblem had been sketched out next to the King Billy, but no paint had been added: it was only completed after the loyalist ceasefire was declared, over four years after it had been started.

More recent (1995) encounters with mural painters suggests

some changes in the practice. The man who painted the Cúchulainn series in east Belfast was asked to paint them because of his known artistic skills. He has subsequently established himself as a sign-writer. A commemorative mural in the Shankill was also 'commissioned' from a man who painted landscapes and portraits professionally. In this case an extensive array of gloss paints and scaffolding were provided for the work. In 1995 the West Belfast Festival commissioned a series of murals to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Famine: these were designed and overseen by a varied group of artists who worked with local schoolchildren during the summer holidays. A small group of painters now work almost full-time producing murals and other political images for the republican movement.

Once the work is finished, the painter loses control of the mural. It becomes the property or responsibility of the householder, the organisation who had commissioned it, or the community. They can be added to and changed as required. In this sense, a mural need never be regarded as complete or finished. There is no sanctity surrounding the painter's relationship to the work or the form of the image. Some murals are clearly valued: they are repainted if damaged or worn, and maintained over several years. But both loyalist and republican murals are frequently painted over and their sites reused. Sometimes, if the painting has been damaged or if it related to a specific political campaign, it will painted out and the wall left bare; on other occasions the image will be replaced with a more up-to-date image. Several walls could in theory be 'excavated' to reveal a succession of layers accumulating as the different images have been painted over the years. But there is little sentiment about mural paintings: a few have been maintained almost as monuments, but most are expected to have a short life. Whereas the images on banners have been restricted to a limited number of traditional images and avoid commenting on contemporary events, murals are much more closely reflective of political events and processes. They represent the most dynamic element in the commemorative political cycle.

Ulster Freedom Fighters: Snugville Street, Belfast, July 1994.