

| The War of the Walls: political murals in Northern Ireland

by Bill Rolston

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Historical background Loyalist murals

In 1690 decisive battles for the English crown were fought on Irish soil. Prince William of Orange had challenged the incumbent king, his father-in-law James II, and their armies, with both kings present, met at the Battle of the Boyne, near Dundalk. William's army won. But the decisive battle which led to James abdicating and fleeing to France was later in the year, at Aughrim, near Limerick. Whatever the changes William's victory brought to English society and politics, they had profound effects on Ireland. The defeated native Irish in the centuries afterwards were subjected to brutal penal laws which blocked their economic and political advance and kept the peasantry in abject poverty. Catholicism was suppressed as the 'Protestant ascendancy' was established and held sway until well into the nineteenth century.

One hundred years after the Battle of the Boyne, an organization was formed to

celebrate the victory. The Orange Order, as it was known, celebrated on the date of the battle, 12 July,¹ with marches wherein they honoured ‘the pious, glorious and immortal

biblical stories, etc. But by far the dominant image was that of King Billy, as he was affectionately termed, on his horse crossing the Boyne.



9. King Billy’s victory at the Battle of the Boyne, 1690. West Street, Ballycarry, County Antrim, 2000.



10. Portrait of 15th US President Buchanan whose parents came from County Donegal. Ainsworth Street, Belfast, 1999.

memory of King William’ who had given to them as Protestants in Ireland their ‘freedom, religion and laws’. The order went through a number of peaks and troughs in the years that followed, but by the end of the nineteenth century was well established. Its annual celebration, ‘the Twelfth’ as it was popularly known, brought together Protestants of all classes who marched with bands and banners. The banners were carefully painted by artisans and showed scenes of British imperial power,

By the start of the twentieth century, this image began to be transferred onto gable walls where it could be viewed all year round rather than on one day only as was the case with banners. Eventually other themes were painted too – such as the Battle of the Somme, or the sinking of the Titanic, built in Belfast. But the image of King Billy was central. Each Protestant area vied with others to have the most ornate depiction of Billy and the Boyne, and these murals were repainted each July, sometimes over five decades. Even before partition in 1921, they

WHAT SITE?

were the focus for the unionist population of the north of Ireland celebrating its solidarity. Once the Northern Ireland state had been born in bloodshed and built on discrimination, the significance of 'the Twelfth' and its murals became even more important for unionism.

But Northern Ireland in the last quarter of the twentieth century was a very different place from what it had been in the first quarter. Civil rights campaigners had been beaten off the streets, the British army had been deployed as the legitimacy of the state collapsed, British administrators were now demanding that local politicians and bureaucrats act fairly and inclusively, loyalist military organizations such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) were slaughtering Catholics and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had in effect declared war on British institutions in Ireland. Unionism splintered, with some seeing the need for liberalization and others holding out for the old ascendancy. In that situation, the solidarity which 'the Twelfth' celebrations had come to symbolize was no longer there and the King Billy murals faded from the walls as a consequence. For a time they were replaced with ornate depictions of flags, crowns, bibles and other inanimate symbols.

By the late 1980s, the political scene had changed again. An agreement between the London and Dublin governments which gave Dublin some minimal say in the affairs of the North, was met by fierce unionist resistance on the streets. And in tandem, the murals were transformed. Now the over-riding image was of UVF or UDA men, usually wearing ski-masks and bristling with weapons. From this point on the murals no longer represented the

wider unionist community, but became the calling card of the loyalist paramilitary groups. Whichever group controlled an area festooned the walls with murals of armed men – part self-adulation, part an attempt at reassurance for the local population that the paramilitary group concerned would defend them from the IRA. Sometimes rivalry between the two main loyalist paramilitary groups would lead to feuding and the murals would become victims of the violence which erupted. It was not unusual when the battle was over for the victors to leave the damaged murals of the vanquished as a reminder of who had won and who had lost.

Paradoxically, even after the loyalist groups declared a ceasefire in October 1994, the paramilitary iconography held centre stage. In fact, if anything, the intensity of the message was increased. Central to the loyalist psyche has always been the slogan 'No surrender'; so it was necessary to impress on everyone that a ceasefire was not a surrender. In addition, as the peace process developed falteringly, part of the reason for the unreconstructed message on the walls was a warning to loyalist politicians not to move too far beyond the paramilitary groups from which they emerged and not to give away too much in negotiations.

A decade into the peace process the heavy military imagery seems increasingly incongruous. As a result, loyalists have come under pressure, quite literally, to change their image. That pressure has, not surprisingly, come from outside – from critics who do not share the political aspirations and fears of the loyalist paramilitary groups. But more significant is the fact that the pressure is also from within, from ex-prisoners and sympathetic clergy who want to keep younger people from

ending up in prison, and more, to give people a sense of community and pride which does not begin and end with depictions of armed men.

There have been some successes in this regard. Some historical themes have been depicted, including a number of new King Billy murals. Perhaps most interesting is the attempt to encourage loyalists to see themselves not so much as British, but as Ulster-Scots, people whose ancestors emigrated to Ireland from Scotland, and some of whom later emigrated to America. So, there are depictions of American Ulster-Scot figures such as the sixteenth United States President James Buchanan and frontiersman Davy Crockett. Another development has been the emergence of community pride murals which depict more local heroes. In East Belfast, for example, 'famous sons' such as C.S.Lewis and George Best now adorn the walls.

In terms of where loyalist murals may be heading, it is still too early to predict. Certainly the historical and community pride murals are a breath of fresh air in a situation where even locals admit the larger-than-life depictions of gunmen are stifling. At the same time, these are the depictions which are still in the majority. And while loyalist paramilitary groups continue to feud among themselves or view any political development with suspicion there is little chance of a much more relaxed approach to the question of who can paint what on the walls of their areas.

Republican murals

Because of the extent to which the Northern Ireland state was run as a one-party unionist state for 50 years, public space was presumed to be

unionist, and that presumption was enforced by a partisan police force. Given that, the opportunities for nationalists to paint murals were slight. That situation changed dramatically with the republican hunger strike of 1981. Politically motivated prisoners had had special category status; they did not wear prison uniforms and were allowed to organize themselves according to the military group to which they belonged. When special category status was removed, they set out on a long and escalating campaign of resistance which led eventually to ten of them starving to death in the summer of 1981. Along with the massive rallies in support of their demands, youths in republican areas began to paint murals – literally 'drawing support' for the hunger strikers. Portraits of the hunger strikers, including the first to die, Bobby Sands, were widespread, as well as some murals which depicted the prisoners as victims of a brutal system. But more common were depictions of the hunger strikers as potentially victorious, breaking the will of the British Government not merely to 'criminalize' them, but also to remain involved in Ireland.



11. Portrait of republican prisoner Bobby Sands, who died on hunger strike, 1981. Falls Road, Belfast, 2000.

WHAT SITE?

In that light, it is not surprising that from the beginning these republican muralists also painted murals portraying the armed activity of the IRA. However, at no point in the intervening years did the paramilitary imagery on the republican side come to dominate in the way it did on the loyalist side. Republicans have always found many other themes to explore. For example, during the hunger strike Bobby Sands had stood for election to the British Parliament and had won. This boosted the arguments of those within the republican party, Sinn Féin, who argued that electoral struggle was as important as armed struggle in achieving their goals. So, as Sinn Féin became increasingly involved in elections in the 1980s, election murals became a common sight. Often these allowed rare moments of humour in an otherwise serious genre; one urged republican voters to 'fight back' and showed a ballot box falling on the head of a British soldier. Another reprised Edvard Munch's 'The Scream', and urged voters: 'Give them that screaming feeling – vote Sinn Féin'.

Unlike loyalists, republicans could also draw on a deep well of history and mythology in their murals. Mythical heroes such as Cuchulainn² or battles involving brawny Celtic warriors were popular in West Belfast in particular in the 1980s. In 1997, on the 150th anniversary of the worst year of the Famine, a dozen murals were painted on this traumatic period of Irish history. But, as during the hunger strike, alongside the depictions of victimhood were those of resistance: the United Irishmen rebellion of 1798, and the Easter Rising of 1916, for example.

Another way in which the republican murals were noticeably different from those produced by loyalists was in the international themes portrayed. The struggles and plight of various oppressed groups globally struck a deep resonance with Irish republicans. So, there have been murals relating to events in South Africa, East Timor, Nicaragua, and Palestine, as well as depictions of global icons such as Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.



12. Depiction of the Easter Rising in Dublin, 1916, with portraits of Padraig Pearse, Countess Marcievicz and James Connolly. Whiterock Road, Belfast, 2003.



13. Portrait of Che Guevara, and Irish republican prisoners reading one of his books. Shiels Street, Belfast, 1998.

As the range of themes indicates, republican murals are the product of a wide republican community which includes community groups, pressure groups, political activists and military activists. This has had significant consequences. Unlike on the loyalist side, murals are not simply commissioned by whichever paramilitary groups is dominant in a local area. Some murals are commissioned by other constituencies within the community, and many simply result from the desire of republican mural painters to make a statement. Muralists on the republican side have a political and artistic freedom which those on the loyalist side do not; they are trusted by the community to paint because they are part of the ferment of discussion and development in that community, not merely artisans painting to order. This is why depictions of IRA men and women with ski-masks and guns became only one theme in the overall repertoire. It is also why republican muralists were able to drop that theme after the IRA declared a ceasefire in August 1994.

Over the last decade the only new murals depicting IRA activities have been memorials to dead colleagues. But even there these murals are not to be confused with contemporary loyalist ones. Although they show men (and women) with guns, these are not masked and anonymous ciphers. Rather, they are portraits of actual people from the community who were killed during the violent conflict. Moreover, they are frequently shown not merely posing with guns, but as an integral part of the community; one mural, for example, shows a fully armed IRA unit being fed lunch in a local house by two white-haired women.

During the same period the other themes in the repertoire have continued to be used to great effect. To take merely the example of murals on international themes: there is a wall on the Falls Road, the main thoroughfare through nationalist West Belfast, which has become in effect an international wall. There are murals depicting Israeli Defence Force soldiers confronting a Palestinian woman; Sevgi Erdogan, a member of the Turkish Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front, who died on hunger strike in July 2001; Leonard Peltier, a native American serving two life sentences for the 1975 murders of two FBI agents during a siege at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota; a pro-ETA mural painted by Basque visitors to Belfast; and a mural in support of Catalan freedom.

Finally, republican muralists have been quick to comment on current and ongoing political events in a way loyalist muralists have been unable to. For example, although the issue of Orange marches attempting to pass through nationalist areas has been at the centre of major political unrest on a number of occasions in recent years, there are no loyalist murals which attempt to communicate to the observer why the Order wants to march where it is not wanted. On the other hand, there are many murals which have explained why nationalist residents do not want such displays of triumphalism in their community.

The situation is such now that the older tradition of mural painting in the north of Ireland, although still clearly strong in terms of the quantity of murals produced, is at a crossroads. Loyalist muralists cannot continue indefinitely to

WHAT SITE?

paint heavy military murals during a peace process without eventually appearing to have lost the political plot. It is too early to say whether the recent trend towards historical murals and community pride murals in loyalist areas will win out and ensure that this century-old tradition restructures and thrives. Republican muralists on the other hand grow out of a community which is confident that time is on their side. Despite being the latecomers in the process of mural production, they have a sense of vision, a belief that change is inevitable; their murals consequently display a confidence and exuberance which is immediately clear to see.

Despite the likelihood that the mural painting tradition will continue, for the most part conservation is not an issue which arises at all in relation to the murals. In fact, most murals are destroyed by muralists, usually the actual muralists who painted the original mural. This is because the political point made in the mural is no longer seen to be relevant, and a more relevant point needs to be made. So, the wall is taken for the new message. In this way, the painters reveal that they are political activists who paint, rather than painters who take on political themes. The only exception to this is a series of murals in Derry painted by a group of three called the Bogside Artists.³ Some of them are trained, and as such display traits more akin to fine artists than the political muralists of the North; for example, they regard their murals as an outdoor gallery, to be preserved and maintained. Interestingly there have been fierce debates between them and the republican muralists who feel that their murals have made the point and should be replaced by others which make more contemporary points.

The art establishment in Northern Ireland has been loath to engage with the political murals. The local art institutions – the Arts Council, the Arts College, etc. – have no involvement in these murals and for the most part have studiously avoided them. In the past this may have derived from a fear of being accused of being soft on terrorism. But the attitude reveals a deeper understanding of the chasm which exists between ‘art’ and ‘propaganda’. They have not even archived photographs of the murals, leaving that for the most part to a few individuals.⁴

The paradox is that, despite a decade having passed since the ceasefires, political murals continue to be a hot political issue for the art establishment. It is not merely that they have missed out on three decades or more of archiving the murals, but that they are reluctant to start working on this memory. If heritage and conservation issues are nowadays considered as tools for reconciliation, then an opportunity is being missed and salvaging the historical memory of these important artefacts is being left to a number of individuals.

| NOTES

1. In fact, the Battle had taken place on 1 July according to the old Julian calendar. England adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1752, requiring the addition of 11 days. Thus, the new date for the Battle of the Boyne became 12 July.

2. In the epic story *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), Cuchulainn is the hero who fights single-handedly against the invading army of Queen Mebh after all his fellow warriors have been put under a spell. As such he became an icon for the republican rebels in the Easter Rising who, like him, faced overwhelming odds, in this case the might of the British Empire.

3. See the work of the Bogside Artists at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bogsideartists/menu.htm/>.

4. See for example, the painstaking Directory of Murals compiled by Jonathan McCormick since the mid-1990s (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/index.html>), as well as my own books, which cover murals from the early 1980s (<http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rolston.htm/>, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rolston1.htm>, <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/bibdbs/murals/rolston2.htm/>).