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The Art of Memory: The Murals of Northern Ireland and the Management of History

Tony Crowley
Scripps College

Fig. 1: West Belfast Taxi Tours. Divis St., Belfast, 2002.

1   Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (New York, 2007), 63–64

2   ccdl.libraries.claremont.edu/col/mni/ (accessed 20 July 2011).

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It was Povertyland. It was the land where the bad things happened … It was the land where they wrote things on the walls.

> Robert McLiam Wilson,
> *Eureka Street*[1]

Introduction

The online archive Murals of Northern Ireland, held in Claremont Colleges Digital Library and covering the period from the late 1970s to the recent past,[2] shows how the nature and function of murals in Northern Ireland have changed. In Derry and Belfast, they are the focal

Fig. 2: Islandbawn Street, Belfast, 1983.

point of a tourist trail that has been established in the decade or so since the official end of the conflict following the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Now figured as 'heritage' and commodified in various forms — postcards, posters, books and guided taxi tours (**Fig. 1**) — the murals have become a source of revenue and profit for a number of organizations: ex-prisoners' associations, artists' collectives, local community groups, and traditional commercial projects. The impulse behind some of the tours appears to be genuinely educative; in others, crassly exploitative. One West Belfast tour, for example, exhorts its customers to 'touch the peace wall, or write your name on it, like millions of others, famous and otherwise, after all it is longer than the Berlin wall!',[3] while another offers a 'welcome to the biggest outdoor art gallery in the world',[4] and yet another promises to 'get into the heart of the areas that bore the brunt of the conflict' while guaranteeing 'the opportunity to take photographs and a brief stop at the souvenir shop'.[5] While it is easy to sneer at the blatant selling of 'history' at £8 per head for an hour and a half's tour, it should be remembered that

the locally based organizations provide employment and wages in some of the most economically deprived areas of Western Europe. Although this commodification is a long way from the directly war-related function of the earliest murals (**Fig. 2**), it is by no means the only change that deserves attention. Two others are: the attempt by the state to influence the development of murals in both republican and loyalist areas; and the shift in the nature of republican murals, particularly in Belfast, and the political difficulties that this poses for the republican movement — or at least that part of the republican movement that signed up to the peace process and is now involved in the political administration of Northern Ireland.

State Intervention

Next to two recently painted murals on Brompton Park in Ardoyne, a republican heartland in North Belfast and site of frequent violence during the conflict, are two plaques. One (**Fig. 3**) announces that the murals were 'Officially Opened By The

3   http://www. belfastcitytours.com/tours. html (accessed 20 July 2011).
4   http://www. belfasttaxitours.info/ (accessed 20 July 2011).
5   http://www.belfast-taxitours.com/ (accessed 20 July 2011).

Fig. 3: Plaque, Brompton Park, Ardoyne, Belfast, 2009.

President Of Ireland Mary McAleese' on the 19 June 2009 [McAleese was born in Ardoyne]. The other declares that 'This project has been funded through the Re-imaging Communities Programme which is supported by the Shared Communities Consortium'. The former declares its aims to be 'Renewing Communities, Rebuilding Confidence, Reviving Hope, Restoring Pride', and it details the sponsoring bodies: the British National Lottery, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the

Department for Social Development, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and the International Fund for Ireland. The murals themselves are representations of the annual Ardoyne Fleadh (**Fig. 4**) and, more abstractly, a triptych of children (**Fig. 5**). A mile or so away, down the Crumlin Road in the heart of loyalist West Belfast, there are two other recent murals with accompanying plaques. One plaque, attached to a mural presenting an 'A–Z history of the Shankill

Road', is situated on North Boundary Street (**Fig. 6**) and indicates that it has replaced an earlier mural that represented the bitter and long-standing Drumcree parade stand-off. It includes a photograph of the former mural, together with an explanation that notes that it 'depicted a fraught time in the late 1990s when violence and dispute attended a traditional Orange Order march to the church at Drumcree through the Nationalist Garvaghy Road district of Portadown' (**Fig. 7**). In contrast, the newer mural has the aim of 'celebrating history and tradition and depicting images of those who have become celebrated far and beyond', and was the product of a research collaboration between the artist, Lesley Cherry, and the Lower Shankill Community Association (LSCA). Installed in 2009, the mural was funded by the 'Re-imaging Communities Programme of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland' and delivered by Belfast City Council together with the LSCA; the plaque notes that the project 'would not have been possible without

the support and participation of the local community'. On nearby Hopewell Crescent, another mural depicts an event called the 'Gold Rush' (**Fig. 8**). In this case the plaque announces that this mural 'replaces a paramilitary image of two silhouetted gunmen representing the Scottish Brigade' (of the Ulster Defence Association). The new image, painted by artist Tim McCarthy, 'represents an event in July 1969 in Christopher Street when children digging in the rubble of the then demolished "Scotch Flats" discovered a hoard of gold sovereigns. Word spread quickly and thus began "the Gold Rush"'. The details of funding and support on this plaque are identical to those relating to the A–Z mural.

The appearance of such murals in republican and loyalist areas is the direct result of a major initiative — the Re-imaging Communities Programme alluded to in the plaques. According to the report that reviewed the programme, it was established in 2006 to tackle the issue of 'the public representation of community

Fig. 5: Brompton Park, Ardoyne, Belfast, 2009.

6   H. Dawson, S. Dunn and V. Morgan, *Evaluation of the Re-imaging Communities Programme: A Report to the Arts Council of Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2009), vi–vii.

7   Dawson, Dunn and Morgan, *Evaluation of the Re-imaging Communities Programme*, vii (hereafter *Evaluation*).

8   Bill Rolston, *Politics and Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (London, 1991), 57.

9   Des Wilson, 'The Painted Message', *Circa*, 8 (1983), 19–20.

10 Rolston, *Politics and Painting*, 63.

separation', in the form of 'public symbolic displays, including marches, banners, flags, wall paintings, bunting, and painted kerbstones'.[6] Introduced with the aim of 'converting and transforming these visible signs of sectarianism and inter-community separation', the intention was 'to encourage communities to reflect on and plan for ways of replacing divisive imagery with imagery that reflects communities in a more positive manner'.[7] Initially intended to last three years, with a budget of £3.3 million, and to cover 60–80 community-based schemes, the programme exceeded expectations by funding 108 projects before its suspension in 2008; further funding of £500,000 in December 2008 led to work on another 15 projects.

The Re-imaging Communities Programme was not the first attempt by the state to influence murals in Northern Ireland. Between 1977 and 1981, the Northern Ireland Office funded a similar scheme through Belfast City Council Community Services Department, the Department of the Environment, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and the Belfast Art College. Responses to the scheme were mixed. As Bill Rolston has noted, a number of murals produced under this scheme were very popular — some becoming 'a badge of local identity' or the locus of communal pride.[8] Others were rejected by the local community, no doubt sceptical about the merit of repetitive depictions of fairy tales, circuses, jungle scenes and animal life; Des Wilson, the West Belfast community priest, denounced the 'astounding absence of sensitivity' in one work.[9] Artistic intentions notwithstanding, the impact of state imperatives was clear in the absence of political content — 'no flags, sectarian slogans, paramilitaries or protesters, British army, police, helicopters, or guns'.[10] This was public art with an official stamp, designed in part to foster the idea that 'government had a caring side' and to legitimize 'the newly established Community Services Department of

Fig. 6: North Boundary St., Belfast, 2009.

Belfast City Council and some respectable community groups'.[11] Whatever its success, and Rolston's assessment is ambivalent, by 1981 the scheme had run its course. But by then, the appearance of the first generation of republican murals — opposed in almost all respects to the officially sanctioned works — had created an entirely different context.

An informed evaluation of the post-conflict Re-imaging Communities Programme would need to take into account the history of wall painting in republican and loyalist areas between the late 1970s and the present. Yet, although the official assessment of the programme pays only perfunctory attention to this history (in a section that begins by noting that 'painting on walls ... is of very ancient origin, often dating back to prehistoric times, and examples can be found in many parts of the world, often in caves or on rocks'),[12] it nonetheless presents a number of significant issues. For example, it stresses a variety of positive aspects of the re-imaging scheme under the headings of shared spaces, community relations, strengthening of communities, building management experience, catalysts for further improvement, building external

relationships, inclusion of the marginalized, opening up the arts, and raising the profile of artists. Some of these developments seem advantageous, even if others appear to be little more than entries on a liberal political wish-list. Who could possibly object to enhanced 'community cohesion', the acquisition of 'skills and experience in the role of management' by working-class people, consultation with 'children, minority ethnic communities, learning disabled, disaffected youth, the elderly, and those living in disadvantaged areas', 'the successful development of a wider audience for, and increased participation in, the arts', and the generation of 'a more complex awareness and perception of the role of art within societies'?[13] When analyzed in detail, however, the success of the statist approach is open to serious doubt. It is questionable, for example, whether the changing of a number of murals in Ardoyne or the Lower Shankill actually has led to 'the creation of spaces that are less intimidating and therefore more welcoming to all sections of the community'.[14] For one thing, it is hardly as if the 'welcoming' murals predominate. Next to the re-imaged Ardoyne murals, there are a number that celebrate nationalist views of Irish history

11 Rolston, *Politics and Painting*, 68.
12 *Evaluation*, 52.
13 *Evaluation*, ix–xii.
14 *Evaluation*, ix.

Fig. 7: Plaque for Fig. 6.

The Drumcree mural depicted a fraught time in the late 1990's when violence and dispute attended a traditional Orange Order march to the church at Drumcree through the Nationalist Garvaghy Road district of Portadown.

The new mural presents an A-Z of the Shankill, celebrating history and tradition and depicting images of those who have become celebrated far beyond.

Artist Lesley Cherry worked with members of the Lower Shankill Community Association to research this digital work which was installed May 2009.

The project was funded by the Re-imaging Communities programme of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and delivered by Belfast City Council with the support of the Lower Shankill Community Association.

The project would not have been possible without the support and participation of the local community.

or commemorate IRA volunteers killed during the war. Likewise, alongside the revised loyalist murals, there are numerous others that represent paramilitary organizations or commemorate the lives of loyalist paramilitaries. But what kind of cultural analysis could assert that it is the 'unwelcoming' murals that keep members of the 'other' community from strolling around the Bone (the Oldpark area of North Belfast) or the estates of the Lower Shankill?

This is not to belittle the efforts of the people involved in the Re-

imaging programme — members of the local community, artists, or even the administrators at the Northern Ireland Arts Council. Nor is it to suggest that the spending of £4 million on the scheme is a waste of money (certainly not compared with the operational costs of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and British army for a day during the war). But it is to argue that the impulse for re-imaging is driven at least in part by the ideological imperatives of the British/Northern Irish state, whatever the effects on the ground. This is clear at a number of points in the review, as when it notes that 'many symbols of sectarian aggression and racism in the form of murals, paramilitary memorials, emblems, flags and territorial colours have been removed and/or replaced with imagery that reflects the aspirations of the communities in a more positive manner'.[15] Apart from the curious conflation of racism and sectarianism, this denies the stark fact that in some areas it is precisely the paramilitary memorials, as well as emblems, flags and territorial colours that accurately indicate the 'aspirations' of the community — or at least sections of it.

Thus, a 'positive' representation is what the state agencies consider communal aspirations should be. It is indeed noted in the review that 'not everyone was immediately persuaded of the value of the projects or of the need to remove or replace locally symbolic art works, especially murals'. Citing the fact that 'the removal of paramilitary symbolism is an emotive subject for some communities', the review mentions '"gatekeepers" who were anxious about what they perceived to be an abandoning of the symbols of their community' and who 'required constant re-assurance concerning the implications of the projects'.[16] The tone of the document is revealing, suggesting as it does that the question is really one of solicitous management of the benighted or disturbed, rather than the presentation of the actual values, fears and beliefs of the communities in question (supporters of paramilitary organizations or not). This is indicated most clearly when the report characterizes symbolic displays, ranging from parades to painted kerbstones and murals, as 'sectarian, antagonistic and offensive'. They may indeed be so; the historical reality

15 Dawson, Dunn and Morgan, *Evaluation of the Re-imaging Communities Programme*, ix.

16 Dawson, Dunn and Morgan, *Evaluation*, xiii.

17   *Evaluation*, xi.
18   *Evaluation*, xi.
19   *Evaluation*, xi.
20   Glenn Patterson, *Lapsed Protestant* (Dublin, 2006, 60.
21   Arts Council of Northern Ireland, *Troubles Archive Essays* (Belfast, 2009), 1.

is that there are different groups ('sects') that are deeply opposed to the 'aspirations' espoused by others. But it is not made clear in the report who finds these expressions of identity 'offensive', and on what grounds. This has the effect of dismissing those for whom such displays (which carry with them a sense of belonging and security, as well as violent exclusion and opposition) are anything but 'offensive'. There is a wider issue here about political expression — did someone introduce a right not to be offended?

The state's use of the Re-imaging programme for its own purposes is also made clear in the official report's approbatory assertion that 'as a result of the projects many relationships between communities and the statutory sector were established or built upon' (the report mentions explicitly the forging of links with the Housing Executive and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).[17] And in comments hailing the fact that community involvement has sometimes led to 'general environmental tidy-ups and the planting of trees and shrubs' (presumably on the basis that a litter-free, verdant estate means a paramilitary-free estate).[18] As well as the suggestion 'by some that the programme itself, along with the attendant publicity, promoted a public sense that Northern Ireland was changing and moving forward, and that this contributed to an important message to the outside world in relation to the generation of investment and tourism'.[19] Developing links with state bodies may be a good thing (it depends on the nature of the contacts), and the same could be said of community tidy-ups (although provision of adequate maintenance services might be a more effective alternative). But it is important to be clear that a particular statist ideology is in play here, not least because the interests of the state may not in fact coincide with those of local communities (fractured as they are). In re-imaging the murals to accord with the official narrative of progress and peace,

for example, there may be a clash of interests around the issue of tourism and its economic benefits. For, as tourist firms well know, the tourists are paying in large part for the voyeuristic frisson of wandering safely around areas in which violence took place relatively recently. The attraction for the tourists presumably is that they are not in any danger (there were not that many back-packers on the Falls Road in 1980), but that they nonetheless feel that they have some sort of access to the reality of a bitter conflict. Would they continue to come if the murals were solely to become depictions of, say, the founding moment of Protestantism or the hedge-schools of eighteenth-century Ireland — anything, in fact, but the war and the ongoing differences between 'sects'. So, if tourism dries up for that reason, the state may well have helped kill the (sectarian, antagonistic and offensive) goose that provided if not quite the golden egg, then at least one source of revenue in some of the poorest areas of Northern Ireland.

Republican Murals: Aesthetics, Politics and War

The appearance of republican murals from around the time of the first hunger strike in 1980 marked a significant development in the realm of public art in Northern Ireland. Yet, while there is some valuable documentary work on these murals, few critical or theoretical studies address them. In fact, the attitudes from established commentators seem to be either hostile, as in Belfast novelist Glenn Patterson's description of the murals as distasteful 'kitsch',[20] or dismissive. The collection of thirteen pamphlets — *Troubles Archive Essays* — published by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland as a companion to the permanent Troubles Archive exhibition at the Ulster Museum, typifies this narrowness. Despite the fact that this 'inclusive resource' claims to be 'reflective of the relevant work of all parts of the arts community',[21] the republican

Fig. 9: Beechmount Avenue, Falls, Belfast, 1981.

murals are not mentioned in a garnering that includes essays on topics such as 'The Impact of the Conflict on Public Space and Architecture', 'Prison Art and the Conflict in Northern Ireland', and 'A Fusillade of Question Marks: Some Reflections on the Art of the Troubles'. Such studied silence is remarkable in light of the critical attention paid to almost all other aspects of artistic production in Northern Ireland during the past forty years, literary work in particular (with poetry given perhaps more than its fair share). It is all the more striking, given that thousands of murals have been painted in public spaces since the late 1970s, that they played an important role in the conflict, and that they have attracted an enormous amount of popular interest. This lack of attention is unfortunate, since it has meant that a number of significant questions have not been addressed. For example: Who commissioned the murals? Who paid for the materials? How much would a mural cost? Who were the muralists (the names of only a few are known)? Were the muralists paid, and if so, how much? Were they trained? Did this change over time? Who decided where a mural would be sited and when it would be painted? If there was opposition to the placing of a mural, what happened? Who decided on the style and content of the murals? What if there were aesthetic or political objections? Who decided when a mural could be painted over, or changed, or renewed? Why were some murals retained, while others disappeared relatively quickly? Were all murals subject to graffiti, or did some have a 'protected' status? There are few answers to these and related questions, which is puzzling. Perhaps it is simply the case that, like the members of the arts establishment, many other interest groups would like to whitewash the past in this respect. But as this essay will now argue, particularly with regard to republican murals, this may be a more difficult task than many appear to think.

Here I can give only a few broad indications of general trends in the development of republican murals. In the early days much of the wall-painting was not organized, nor was it necessarily representational, and it varied greatly in terms of quality and sophistication. The first republican murals of any level of complexity were produced in relation to the hunger strikes, as part of the attempt to gain support both within nationalist areas and, particularly during the second hunger strike in 1981, from an international audience. And it is clear that the target audience influenced the content of these murals. Thus, the effort to garner sympathy from nationalist communities within Northern Ireland, Ireland and Irish America, explains the preponderance of Catholic symbolism in hunger strike murals (**Fig. 9**) (a feature that dropped away relatively early in the development of republican iconography). And the need to address a wider audience demanded a focus on the political aspects of the hunger strikes, a factor that became significant once Sinn Féin had decided on its policy of running prisoners as election candidates, particularly after the election and death of Bobby Sands (**Fig. 10**). Indeed, as the strategy of the Provisional republican movement shifted with its adoption of the 'armalite and ballot box' policy in 1981 (and the eventual dropping of abstentionism in relation to specific elections in 1986), the murals were incorporated as part of the republican movement's political groundwork. That is not to say that the military and political emphases were separated out in the wall paintings, since although they consistently figured the IRA's tactic of armed struggle as heroic, either abstractly, or specifically, for the duration of the war, at least there was no question of playing down the nature of the violence (**Fig. 11**). On the contrary, the murals were sometimes used to celebrate specific IRA operations, as in a representation of the IRA bomb and ambush at Warrenpoint, County Down, in 1979, which inflicted the biggest loss of life on the British army in a single incident during the conflict, when
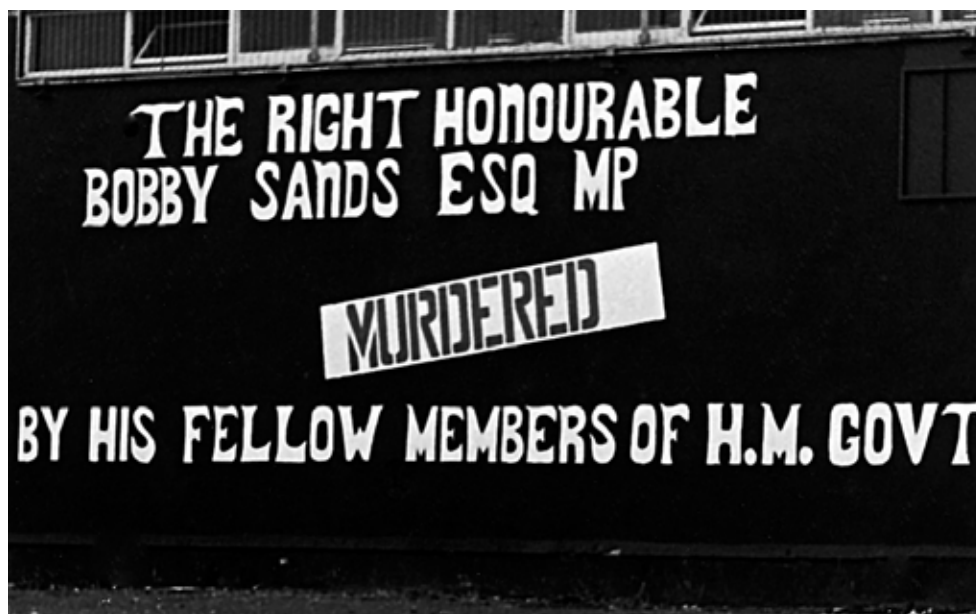
eighteen soldiers were killed (**Fig. 12**). Yet despite the relative crudity of the depiction in this case, this is a good example of the complex ways in which murals functioned, given the overdetermined nature of their audience. For even at the most basic level of territorial marking, such a mural would have operated differentially on distinct constituencies — people living in the immediate vicinity of the street where it appeared, members of the nationalist community in a particular part of the city, other citizens (many murals were on main roads), the media, and of course the RUC and British army. This is not to say that wall paintings were not targeted towards an audience on occasion — as in the opportunistic adaptation of an advert for Harp Lager ('some guys have all the luck') in order to engage members of Crown forces as they entered nationalist West Belfast. At other times murals were primarily directed at an 'internal' audience, as when the local community was reminded, with no doubt unintentional irony, of the nature of the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) presence in the Markets area of South Belfast (**Fig. 13**).

Many of the republican murals painted in the 1980s sought explicitly to represent

the strategy of armed struggle and electoral politics and two appeared on the side of the Falls Road offices of Sinn Féin. The first depicts two workers reading a copy of the Sinn Féin newspaper *An Phoblacht/ Republican News*, which itself figures IRA volunteers firing a salute over the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic. And the second combines an advert for *An Phoblacht/Republican News* with a representation of IRA volunteers firing an M60 machine gun at a British army helicopter along with the Gaelic slogan 'Fiche Blian Ag Streaghailt Bua do Muintir na h-Éireann' ('Twenty Years of Struggle for Victory to the People of Ireland') (**Fig. 14**). As noted earlier, references to violence were consistent in republican murals throughout the war, but the 1980s also saw the use of murals specifically for electioneering purposes as Sinn Féin began to contest elections after 1982 — even though campaigning for general elections to the British parliament was conducted on an abstentionist ticket (a fact that republican wall painters alluded to through frequent attacks on the role of parliamentary politics. As the electoral tactic became increasingly profitable for Sinn Féin, including its president Gerry

Fig. 11: Rosnareen Avenue, Andersonstown, Belfast, 1982.
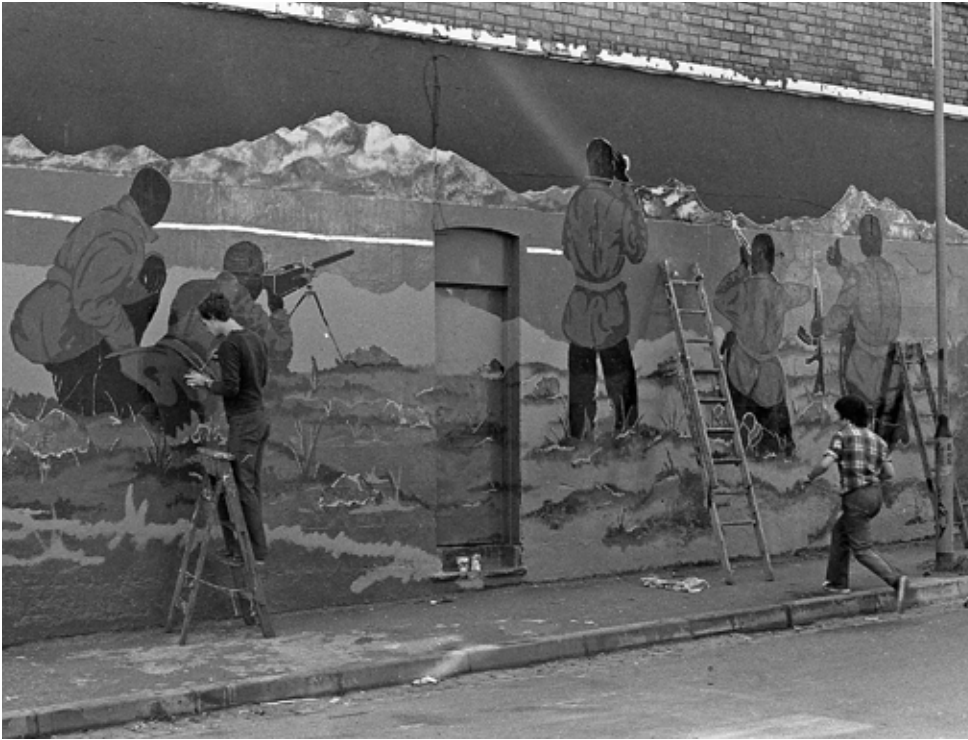
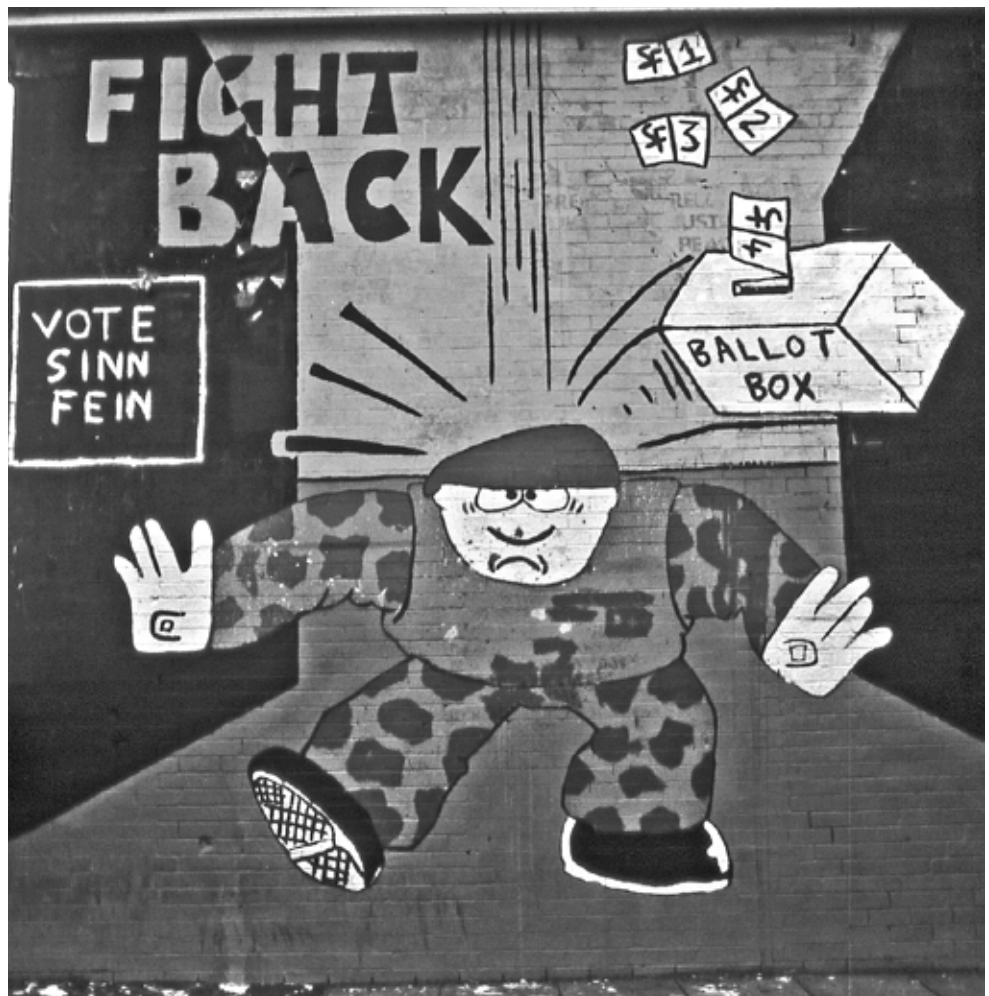**Fig. 12:** Warrenpoint mural, Rockville Street, Falls, Belfast, 1981.

Fig. 13: Markets area, Belfast, 1983.

Fig. 14: Sinn Féin Offices, Falls Road, Belfast, 1989.

Fig. 15: Springfield Road, Belfast, 1989.

Fig. 17: Falls Road, Belfast, 1983.

Adams's victory in the West Belfast parliamentary seat in 1983, claims for its efficiency became more pointed. One mural even suggested that a vote for Sinn Féin was a way of striking against the British army itself (**Fig. 15**).

Sinn Féin's move into electoral politics was accompanied by a realignment of its political discourse to the left, a change that was registered in the murals in a number of different ways in the 1980s and 1990s. The first was the adoption of the rhetoric of revolutionary socialism (an ironic development, given that an emphasis on left politics was one of the causes of the secession of the Provisionals in 1969) (**Fig. 16**). The second was the explicit linking of the republican campaign with national-liberation struggles elsewhere in the world. The third, as Sinn Féin sought to position itself as an anti-colonial movement with a cultural nationalist bent, was an attempt to align political republicanism with the burgeoning Irish language revival

in Northern Ireland. Though this was not always an uncontentious move, republican wall-painting often championed the cause of Irish, not least in the use of exhortatory slogans — 'Saoirse nó Bás' ('Freedom or Death'), 'Sealadaigh Abú' ('Victory to the Provisionals') — as a way of Gaelicizing the public face of republicanism. The fourth development in republican politics that was marked on the walls was the impact of feminism on a movement that, despite the active participation of women in all spheres of its activity, had remained overwhelmingly patriarchal (Sinn Féin's Women's Department was eventually established in 1980) (**Fig. 17**). As this last example indicates, these shifts in republican politics were not discrete but were often related and indeed contingent upon each other. The walls themselves indicated how the discourse of revolutionary socialism entailed a commitment to anti-colonialism, and national-liberation struggles and feminism were linked in ways that challenged the male-dominated structures of republicanism while reflecting larger, international developments.

Republican Re-imaging

As it became clear that the end of the conflict in Northern Ireland was a possibility, particularly during the ceasefires (1994–96, 1997–2005) republican murals began to evolve once more, sometimes subtly and sometimes more obviously. Shifts in content and style signalled changes to republican ideology in the face of altered circumstances. As the military campaign started to wane (despite the reminders of the IRA's capacity to inflict spectacular damage in the 1996 bombings at Canary Wharf and Manchester), the murals began to move away from depictions of the war and to articulate instead current issues and historical concerns. A number of murals, for example, asserted the overarching demand for the withdrawal of British troops from nationalist areas and the disbanding of the RUC as an implicit condition for the end of conflict. Others addressed questions that remained of central significance to republicans, including collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and Crown forces (**Fig. 18**); the use of plastic bullets in nationalist areas

**Fig. 19:** New Lodge Road, Belfast, 1997.

by the RUC; and, most important of all, the release of republican prisoners as part of any peace deal. One particular mural is interesting in this respect (**Fig. 19**), in that it takes the form of a retrospective collage of images which had become iconic and which were taken from different media: BBC pictures of an IRA rooftop protest in a British prison; a portrait of IRA volunteer Mairéad Farrell taken from the Derry Film and Video Collective documentary *Mother Ireland*; republican posters from the 1976–81 prison campaign for the reinstatement of political status; photographs of women protesting during the hunger strikes and banging bin lids at the death of Bobby Sands; and images lifted from earlier murals, including representations of the dirty protestors at the Maze prison and women being strip-searched at Armagh prison, as well as the central motif of wrists bound by barbed wire, first depicted on a very early mural at Beechmount Street,

off the Falls Road (**Fig. 20**). Another development was an attention to cultural history (including local history). Some murals portrayed elements of the cultural nationalist tradition — Gaelic games and traditional music — while others depicted events in nationalist history, such as the Great Famine 1845–52, the Flight of the Earls 1607, the United Irish rising of 1798, and the 1916 Easter Rising, and one was even an intervention in the 'revisionist' debates in Irish historiography (**Fig. 21**). Specific aspects of local history were also represented, as in a striking pair of murals in the New Lodge area of North Belfast, which made a comparison between social conditions past and present (**Figs. 22, 23**). Finally, there was a type of mural that came to prominence in the 1990s and which has endured: commemorations of the republican dead. This was hardly a new theme, since twentieth-century republicanism placed great emphasis on
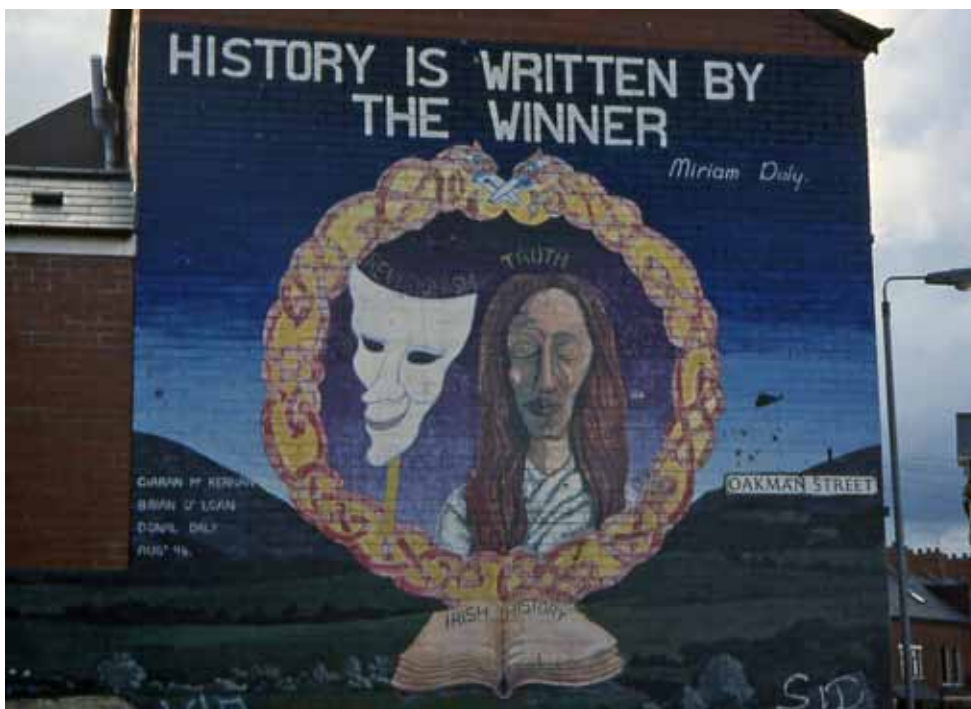
acknowledging the deaths of its activists and volunteers ('… the fools, the fools, the fools! They have left us our Fenian dead …').[22] And recent commemorative murals date from the early 1980s. One of the first was dedicated to two INLA volunteers in Divis Flats, though the mode was only fully established after the hunger strikes, most notably in the memorials to the iconic Bobby Sands (**Fig. 24**).

Since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, there has been a remarkable diversification in the nature, function and provenance of the murals in republican areas of Northern Ireland (the same can be said of murals in loyalist areas). In Derry's Bogside, for example, the work of the independent Bogside Artists' collective covers topics of historical note — John Hume alongside fellow Nobel Peace Prize winners Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother

22 From Pádraig Pearse's graveside oration at the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, 1 August 1915.

Fig. 22: New Lodge Road, Belfast, 1999.
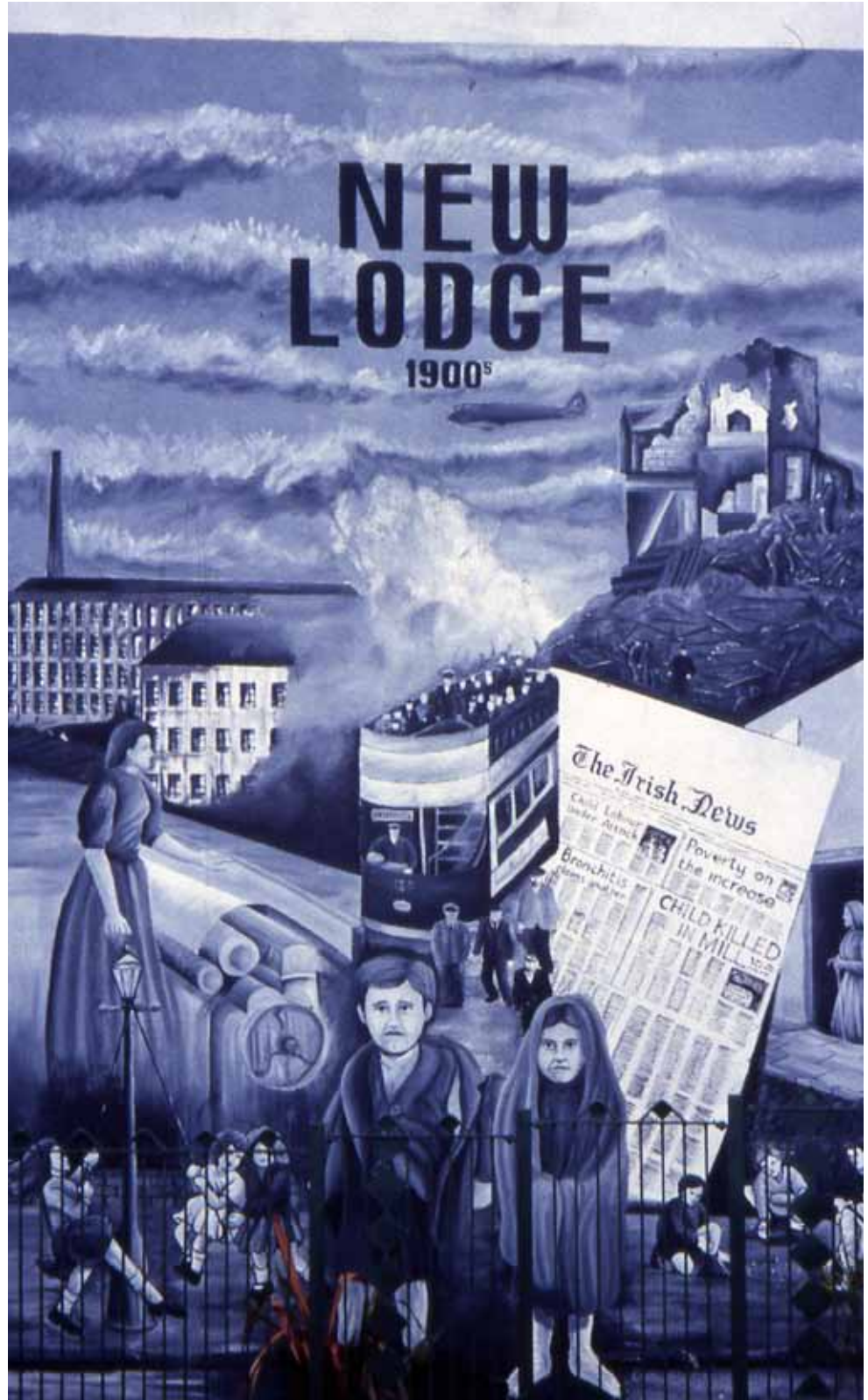
Fig. 23: New Lodge Road, Belfast, 1999.

Fig. 24: Sebastopol Street, Belfast, 1998.

Fig. 25: Beechmount Avenue, Belfast, 2010.

Fig. 26: Rockmount Street, Belfast, 2010.

Fig. 27: Divis Street, Belfast, 2009.

Fig. 28: Divis Street, Belfast, 2006.

Fig. 29: Springfield Road, Ballymurphy, Belfast, 2010.

Teresa, and Nelson Mandela; the civil rights marches of the late sixties, early seventies; and the Bloody Sunday massacre of civil rights marchers by the British army in Derry in 1972 — all of which sit alongside a mural asserting the Irish ancestry of Che Guevara (his grandmother was from Galway). In West Belfast the independent Irish language organization Pobal uses the walls to argue for a Language Rights Act in Northern Ireland, while elsewhere in the area the centenary of the republican youth movement Fianna Éireann is celebrated (**Fig. 25**), the Sinn Féin Trade Union Department hails James Connolly (**Fig. 26**), Beechview Antigonish Credit Union advertises its services, 'joy-riding' is attacked, tourism in West Belfast is promoted, the 2008–09 Israeli war on Gaza is denounced (**Fig. 27**), solidarity is offered to Basque separatists, and anti-slavery campaigner Frederick Douglass's Irish connections are recalled (**Fig. 28**). In short, murals have become a crucial mode by which a whole variety of messages — political, historical, aesthetic, informational — are conveyed in nationalist and republican areas. If there is a significant historical moment to be recalled, or an important ideological message sent, a memory that needs to be fostered, information that has to be shared, a death that has to be commemorated, a cause

that needs to be fought for — somewhere or other it will find expression on a wall, making an intervention in public space, demanding attention.

The recourse to the walls is a fascinating phenomenon, suggesting both a certain type of confidence (even the walls can convey the message) and desperation (only the walls can convey the message). And this makes the absence of critical response all the more peculiar. It may be that the failure to engage critically with the murals is simply a matter of distaste for the war and all its bitter, violent consequences; they are a reminder of a period that is best forgotten. But for the republican movement, memory is an art that cannot be neglected — hence the proliferation of murals commemorating the republican dead and the prodigious number of permanent memorials (there were 444 in 2006). And yet the focus on the suffering of those who gave their lives to republicanism raises a difficult issue for the leadership of Sinn Féin in particular: the relationship between the past and present, or to put it another way, between the dead and the living. Some things — declarations of no-go areas or bold assertions of victory — can simply be painted over and thus confined to the past, although they can sometimes persist in palimpsestic form. Other issues can be kept alive to nourish commitment to

the republican movement — calls for an inquiry into the killing of eleven people in Ballymurphy during the introduction of internment in 1971 (**Fig. 29**), for example, or deaths of the New Lodge Six in 1973, or the shooting of Pearse Jordan, an unarmed IRA volunteer, in 1992. But reminders of the heroic sacrifice and deaths of republican activists can intensify the question, 'How does the present requite the sufferings of the past?' A plaque in the Clonard Martyrs Memorial Garden, in Bombay Street, one of the first streets to be burned out in Belfast in 1969, dedicated to the people of Clonard by republican ex-prisoners, salutes those 'who have resisted and still resist the occupation of our country by Britain' and whose 'reward will only be a united Ireland'. But if only a united Ireland is the appropriate reward, the question arises — how close is it to being achieved? It is a question that cannot be ignored. In an effort to sell the peace process, veteran republican Joe Cahill told IRA volunteers that they would see a united Ireland in 2003 (three years after the unveiling of the Clonard memorial); in 2010 Sinn Féin MLA Conor Murphy proclaimed that it could be 2016 (a prediction, like that of Cahill, that seems guaranteed to remain unfulfilled).

The mismatch between political promise and historical reality also appears in a coded way in a mural on Belfast's Divis Street, which acknowledges the roles of two key republican activists — Kieran Nugent, the first prisoner to go on the blanket protest, and Brendan Hughes, officer commanding of the IRA Belfast Brigade and leader of the 1980 hunger strike. The deaths of Nugent (2000) and Hughes (2008) were highly problematic for the republican movement. The pathetic and isolated death of Nugent, who had become alcoholic, highlighted the lack of organized support for ex-prisoners. Hughes, fatally weakened by the hunger strike, died bitterly critical of Sinn Féin leaders Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinnes for having sold out the socialist republican cause to which

he had dedicated his life. So this particular mural's take on the struggle is, at the very least, sceptical.

Republican activists who died during the war appear as heroic figures from a beleaguered and yet richly endowed community; but the political and economic realities of republican areas of Northern Ireland are shocking. As the latest official report on multiple deprivation confirms, 'Saor agus Sóisialach' ('Free and Socialist') is hardly a phrase that applies to West Belfast. The top four most deprived wards in Northern Ireland — itself one of the poorest regions of the United Kingdom — are Belfast wards Whiterock 2 and 3 and Falls 2 and 3 (closely followed by New Lodge in fifth place and Shankill in sixth).[23] Given the dependency of the Northern Irish economy on public sector employment, the economic situation is bound to worsen. Sinn Féin, like its partners at Stormont, will be forced to do the bidding of a British Tory government whose priority is the slashing of public expenditure and the dismantling of the welfare state. Where will this lead? Brendan Hughes became a 'dissident' (a term that Sinn Féin spins as a way of discrediting anyone who disagrees with its strategy and practices — despite the fact that its own members used to pride themselves on the title) because he believed that Sinn Féin and IRA policies had 'sentenced young people, young Republicans and young working-class people to another generation of fighting'.[24] Hughes, like many other 'dissidents', did not in fact believe that violence was a viable option after the Good Friday Agreement. Others have a different view. Once again the writing is on the wall. Sinn Féin may attempt to control the art of memory through its repertoire of images, but it faces a hard sell in presenting the present situation in Northern Ireland as the successful outcome of twenty-five years of violence and suffering (even if many, for a variety of reasons, are buying it at the

23 http://www.nisra.gov.
uk/deprivation/archive/
NIMDM2005FullReport.pdf
(accessed 20 July 2011).

24 Ed Moloney, *Voices from
the Grave* (London, 2010),
293.

moment). Yet, though walls can be painted over and slogans like 'Brits Out' can be cleaned up, some of the 'dissidents' have deployed precisely the same arguments and, more importantly, the same tactics as an earlier generation of republicans (Adams and McGuinness among them). It is not, to paraphrase Yeats, that the dead men and women of republicanism 'are loitering there / To stir the boiling pot', but they are watching from those walls as the pot heats up in the poverty, dispossession and political disappointment of the years to come.