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Accessing History: The Murals Of Northern Ireland

Tony Crowley, Scripps College

Over the past two years, with the help of a grant from the Dean of Faculty's office at Scripps, and practical aid and advice from Scripps senior Nisa Schoonhoven and my Scripps IT colleague Candice Cetrone, along with several members of the Libraries' staff including—principally—Pat Vince, Allegra Gonzalez, and Mike Emery, I have been working on a new archive in the Claremont Colleges Digital Library (CCDL) collection. Now more or less complete, though of course historical annotation is always liable to be updated and amended, the archive consists of around six hundred photographs of murals from Northern Ireland spanning the period of the recent Troubles (1979–2004). What makes this archive unique as a historical resource—and gives it political significance—is the fact that although there are other collections of images painted after the end of the violence in 1996, this is the only digital archive which includes a large number of the murals from the period 1979 (when the murals first started to appear in a significant way) to 1996. In that sense this is the sole record of the development of the murals as an important medium by which the political conflict in Northern Ireland was represented and indeed fought out.



Loyalist mural, Cultra Street/North Queen Street, Belfast, 2000, in the CCDL



Republican mural, New Lodge Road, New Lodge, Belfast, 1997, in the CCDL

The images of the collection form a record which includes representations of historical events and processes, the political standpoints of all of the main players in the conflict (including the Irish Republican Army, the Ulster Loyalist paramilitary forces, and the British Army), the concerns of local communities at the centre of violence, and modes of formal political and ideological address. The tone and content of the murals range from overtly political declarations to brutal depictions of the violence, from death-threats to the use of humour and irony. Taken together, the paintings constitute an attempt by the various forces in the conflict to use the walls, streets, and public spaces of Northern Ireland to regulate, construct, and possess space for political purposes.

Annotating the collection was a long and laborious process since for each image I had to identify the date



Republican mural, Bogside, Derry, 1989, in the CCDL.

at which it was painted and its location, and—most importantly—to give a description of the image which tells something of its historical significance. This meant not only using my own notes, compiled as I took the photographs over the twenty five year period, but checking my notes and memories against official forms of historical record—maps, newspaper archives, biographies and histories, online resources,

and so on. The aim was to create an archive which will be searchable by non-experts and which will allow detailed access (the images are scanned in high enough quality to allow online magnification) to this unique aspect of Northern Irish history.



Republican mural, Divis Street, Falls, West Belfast, 2001, in the CCDL.

There are two ways in which the archive has been utilised thus far.

First, I have used this primary source in my own teaching either to show how a key moment or event, or a

significant location or person, is represented historically, or to require my students to do their own analysis in order to encourage them to develop some understanding of the sheer complexity of the conflict and its representation. Second, the materials have been accessed by a research team compiling a documentary on the murals for British TV, and specific images have been included within two history textbooks designed for

use in schools. I hope that in the future the archive will afford further access to this violent, difficult, and complicated period of Irish and British history.



Loyalist mural, Shankill Parade, West Belfast, 2002, in the CCDL.



Loyalist mural, Shankill Road, West Belfast, 1987, in the CCDL.