Reading Republican Murals in Northern Ireland: Archiving and Meaning-Making

Tony Crowley
University of Leeds (<t.crowley@leeds.ac.uk>)

Abstract:

In this paper I will use my experience in compiling an online archive of the murals of Northern Ireland 1979-2021 to discuss the benefits and disadvantages of work in the digital humanities. I will argue that such a collection of visual materials from the war and post-war periods in Northern Ireland affords us the opportunity to assess major shifts in stance, policy and practice amongst unionists and loyalists, and nationalists and republicans. But I will also contend that although the archive itself can provide us with a rich set of materials, it cannot in and of itself give us their meaning. That task, I will conclude, depends on a set of traditional skills that long pre-date the digital order of things.

Keywords: Archive, Interpretation, Murals, Northern Ireland, Republican

1. Introduction

In this paper I will use my experience compiling an online archive of the murals of Northern Ireland 1979-2021 to reflect on a series of practical and theoretical issues relating to my work in the digital humanities. The *Murals of Northern Ireland* is based on some 15,000 of my own photographs of the murals; it is an open-access, fully downloadable collection which is hosted at the Honnold Mudd library in California[1]. Each item in the archive contains full metadata, including a description of the image, its political affiliation, date and exact location.

My intention is to set out briefly the difficulties involved in constructing the archive, but to move to historical reading of the materials in order to reveal the opportunities that the collection brings. I will show how visual materials from the war and post-war periods in Northern Ireland afford us the opportunity to

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[1] <https://ccdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni> (05/2022).

assess major shifts in stance, policy and practice undertaken by nationalists and republicans and unionists and loyalists. My claim will be that the archive provides historians and the general public with an invaluable resource through which Northern Ireland's past and present can be interpreted and evaluated.

That being said, I want to point to the limitations of my digital project through a reading of the development of republican muralism and its variable historical functions. Particular attention will be paid towards the end of the essay to a group of republican murals that appeared at a crucial point in the post-war period (1999-2002). What I hope to show is that, as with any archive, although the digital archive itself can provide us with materials, in a manner unimaginable only twenty years ago, it cannot in and of itself provide us with an account of their meanings. That task of meaning-making, I will argue, depends on a set of traditional skills that long pre-date the digital order of things.

2. Digitisation

I have been taking photographs in Northern Ireland for forty years (I began when I was 18). In the early days, I put a roll of film into the back of a camera, focussed, and clicked (each film allowed 24 or 36 shots). Given the expense of the film and its development, this usually meant one, perhaps two, images per mural, and thus the available technology had a direct impact on the number and type of photographs that I could take (these were not the only limitations – taking photographs in war zones was not always the easiest experience). By contrast, and for better or worse, once I started using digital cameras, it was possible in effect to take as many photographs as I wanted. But for twenty years or so, I used the photographic images (and later, slides) for teaching purposes in a contemporary Irish studies course. The images themselves were always of considerable interest to students and they enabled detailed discussion of a visual aspect of the war in Northern Ireland. The difficulties of using the materials in this format, however, are evident: photographs had to be passed around by hand, and slides required finding and setting up a projector (and showing the images in a darkened room).

While preparing a talk on the murals for the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of California Santa Cruz in 2005, a technician mentioned the possibility of "digitising" the collection (I had not previously heard the word). It all seemed a bit far-fetched to believe at that stage that the photographs taken over the previous twenty-five years could be turned into computer images viewable by anyone on the web. In any case, given that I was working at the University of Manchester at the time, it appeared impossible since the resources were simply not available there. That changed when I took up the Chair of Interdisciplinary Humanities at Scripps College, one of the colleges of the Claremont University Consortium in Southern California. Again, there was an element of happenstance involved: a chance meeting with the head of the recently formed Claremont Colleges Digital Library led to a discussion of the possibilities and an agreement to create the Murals of Northern Ireland Archive. Of course there was a great deal of preliminary work – administrative, theoretical and practical none of which would have been possible without the financial support of Scripps College and the patience, generosity, and technical savvy of the digital librarians and production assistants at the CCDL. There were various components to the work. First, the digitisation of the materials: the thousands of negatives, photographs and slides had to be turned into digital images of the right size and format (this was largely undertaken by Scripps students on paid research assistantships). Second, I had to master the intricacies of the software (CONTENTdm acquisition station), in order to upload the images. Third, and most important, I had to understand and work with the

standard international referencing programme for digital archives, the Dublin Core Metadata Elements system. This was the most tricky and time-consuming aspect of the entire process since the purpose of the metadata is to facilitate the discovery, use, management, and preservation of the digital resource, and thus it is separated into three commonly accepted types (with some overlap between them): discovery/descriptive metadata; structural metadata; administrative metadata. My role was (and remains) to supply the discovery/descriptive material, which is essentially the information displayed online to users of the archive (fully searchable through the CCDL interface as well as search engines). This requires, for each image in the archive, information categorised under fifteen "elements": "title"; "creator"; "contributor"; "subject"; "coverage"; "description"; "publisher"; "date"; "language"; "type"; "format"; "identifier"; "source"; "relation"; "rights". In fact during the compilation of the collection, it became necessary to adapt the categories slightly, but the basic structure has remained the same. Of course some elements are simply standard and repeatable (photographer, publisher and so on), while others are highly complex and difficult. Some "descriptions" – in the case of an intricate mural for example – can take a day. There are now some 15,000 images in the collection, which stands as major source for visual materials related to the war and peace in Northern Ireland. Updated on a regular basis, the archive has been used in doctoral research, television documentaries, textbooks and monographs, journal articles, and the British school curriculum.

When considering questions of digitisation, it is important to recall just how recently the technological advances that underpin it were developed. And in this regard, the history of words can be highly instructive. "Digital" as a noun is first recorded in the English language in the fifteenth century as the equivalent of "digit", both meaning "a whole number less than ten"; its derivation lay with the Latin *digitus* ("finger"), hence *digitālis*, "of or related to a finger". This fundamental meaning, based on the practice of counting with fingers, was used consistently for more than five hundred years within the numerical system that depended on the ten "digitals" (0-9) and their combined use in decimal notation. In the twentieth century, however, technological change forced linguistic change. The change affected word function: "digital" became an adjective from the 1940s on and referred to the use of numerical digits to represent information in computing and electronics; it appeared in popular usage only from the 1990s ("digital", *OED*). A similar semantic shift affected the verb "to digitize", which originally dates to the seventeenth century with the meaning of "to touch or manipulate with the fingers" (one of its senses was "masturbation"). The contemporary meaning of "the conversion of analogue data to digital form for storage or processing" dates from 1953, though again it became common usage only within the past twenty years or so ("digitize", *OED*). It is worth noting the evidence that the language affords us in this regard since it reminds us that the digital world is, at best, no more than eighty years old. As it transforms our lives in rapid, unpredictable, and as yet under-theorised ways, that fact is worth remembering.

3. *The Murals of Northern Ireland*

The painting of murals in Northern Ireland is the longest continuous practice of political wall art. Beginning around 1908, it pre-dates the most famous tradition of political muralism – the Mexican work of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros that began in the 1920s. From its inception until the 1980s, wall art in Northern Ireland was almost exclusively unionist in orientation and it originated in the early twentieth century Home Rule crisis that led to the partition of Ireland in 1921. Though there is no photographic documentation (the evidence derives from newspaper reports), the first murals represented

the key moment in the unionist historical imagination – the victory of King William III over James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Based on Benjamin West's painting "The Battle of the Boyne" (1778), versions of which circulated in popular culture (Loftus 1990, 24-25), this became the dominant motif in murals painted in working class unionist areas (figure 1), and indeed it persists today. There were, however, other topics in unionist and loyalist wall art. In 1922 the IRA killing of Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff and a Unionist M.P., provoked complex mural tributes, while later examples included recognition of the British nurse Edith Cavell, executed by the German military during World War One, the Somme, unionist heroes such as Lord Carson, and of course the British monarchy. Such murals functioned as what Nora has called "lieux de mémoire" (1989) and served to inculcate a specific version of history. They reflected the sectarian and majoritarian nature of Northern Ireland, captured in the words of James Craig, the Prime Minister, as "a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State" (Craigavon 1934, 1095). And they contributed to the "visible sectarianisation of public space" (Jarman 2001, 3), part of the construction of a social order in which the Protestant and unionist community benefited legally, culturally, and politically at the expense of the Catholic and nationalist minority.

Figure 1 – King William of Orange, Templemore Street, East Belfast,
News Letter Monday 12 July 1937

Given the hegemonic control of public space exercised by the unionist majority, it is hardly surprising that Irish nationalists did not represent their own history, nor their political claims, on the walls. That changed, however, during the war that developed after the breakdown of civil order in 1969, though even then, it took a decade or so for murals expressing non-unionist views to appear in any numbers. They emerged, quite rapidly and significantly, as part of the political campaign around prison issues conducted by Irish republicans. In fact their appearance can be viewed as part of a desperate attempt to highlight the circumstances of the prisoners in the face of the concerted practice of formal and informal censorship of republican views in Britain and indeed Ireland. That effort began in earnest in 1979 when Bobby Sands, the public relations officer for the Blanketmen in the Maze prison, recognised that republicans "have failed to reach a broader base of support" and "therefore we have failed

to engage any active support outside of our immediate hard-core" (O'Malley 1990, 54)[2]. For Sands, it was therefore clear that republicans had to "broaden the battle-field – nationally and internationally" in two ways: "one, we must make more people aware and engage their help. Two, to get these other people, we must organise our own people effectively and massively on the ground" (*ibidem*). This required new tactics, including the fielding of "an army of propagandists" who would conduct "a massive Paint and Poster Campaign" with the goal of creating "our own mass media" (O'Hearn 2006, 237). Republican murals formed part of that campaign, particularly during and after the 1981 Hunger Strike, and they became a crucial medium through which republicans countered censorship, constructed political hegemony in nationalist and republican areas, and conveyed their message to the wider world. Indeed the dual – internal and external – focus of republican murals shaped their form and content. The appeal to the broader Catholic nationalist audience in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Irish America, for example, informed the use of religious symbolism in many of the first murals that represented the Hunger Strikers (figure 2).

Figure 2 – Hunger Striker and Rosary, Rockmount Street Falls Road, West Belfast 1981

For the republican movement, the Hunger Strike brought mass support, and this served as a catalyst to involvement in electoral politics (this was a decisive turning point in the war in Northern Ireland). And just as the murals served republicans well during the Hunger Strikes, they were similarly deployed in the electoral campaigns upon which republicans (or at least Sinn Féin republicans) embarked in the 1980s (figure 3). One effect of the success of republican murals was that loyalists, whose long-standing tradition of muralism had largely declined during the 1970s, also recognised that the walls of Northern Ireland were crucial sites on which politics, history, and collective memory could be registered and propagated. This joint recognition of the possibilities that muralism offered, explains the appearance of an astonishing number of images over the past forty years or so (my own calculation is that the figure is somewhere between 15-20,000 murals). In a war which was about politics and propaganda as well as militarism, murals became an important weapon.

[2] For an account of the prison protest and the Hunger Strike, see Beresford 1987. Sands was the first of the ten republican Hunger Strikers to die.

Figure 3 – Vote Sinn Féin, Bond Street The Markets, South Belfast 1983

From the early to mid-1980s, murals became a familiar feature in loyalist areas, not least in a striking gallery of images in Percy Place, in the Shankill heartland (figure 4). Some of the images presented the traditional motif of King William at the Boyne, but others were significantly new in terms of semiotic composition, notably in their explicit reference to loyalist paramilitarism (figure 5). The profusion of images had a dual stimulus. First, there was a felt need to respond to the perceived success of the Republican muralists, who were, by this point, extending their repertoire politically and in terms of form (figure 6). Second, amongst working class loyalists, there was a clear sense that their political concerns were not being heard. This partly explains the repeated citing of paramilitary organisations, since this was a way of marking distance from mainstream unionism whose political parties ostensibly represented working-class loyalists, while in reality they disregarded their everyday concerns and realities.

Figure 4 – Loyalist mural gallery, Percy Place Lower Shankill, West Belfast 1984

Figure 5 – Loyalist prisoners, Percy Place Lower Shankill, West Belfast 1984

Figure 6 – An Phoblacht Republican News, Sevastopol Street Lower Falls, West Belfast 1982

Though this brief account addresses the origins of muralism – republican and loyalist – in the 1980s, it is impossible in this context to present a comprehensive reading of the murals from 1980 to the present (I am currently engaged in writing the history of the murals in monograph form). It is worth noting, however, that the murals in their entirety constitute a complex, changing, and fascinating body of public art that brings an added element to the understanding of the war in Northern Ireland and the relative peace that has followed. The range of the images is remarkable. On occasion the murals simply reflect the brutal horror of the violence. For example, the Warrenpoint attack in 1979, in which eighteen British soldiers were killed, is depicted in a celebratory republican mural designed to be seen by security force personnel (figure 7). While a loyalist mural hails Michael Stone, the perpetrator of a gun and grenade attack on an IRA funeral in which three were killed and sixty injured (figure 8). But there are also examples of dialogical engagement between the warring sides, such as Patrick Galvin's poem "Letter to a British soldier on Irish soil" (1972; figure 9). In addition, there are some

surprising murals (Northern Ireland is endlessly complicated). Thus in the arena of language politics, Gaelic has featured from the 1980s as a vehicle of Irish nationalism and republicanism (figure 10), while Ulster-Scots has been the preserve of unionism and loyalism from the 1990s (figure 11). And yet on a mural dedicated to the Red Hand Commando (a small but politically significant loyalist paramilitary group), the Gaelic slogan "Lamh Dearg Abu" appears, along with the (loose) translation "Ulster to Victory" (it means literally "Victory to the Red Hand") (figure 12). And Gaelic mythology, associated since the late nineteenth century at least with Irish nationalism, has also been appropriated. Cú Chulainn, whose statue stands in the Dublin G.P.O., predictably features in Republican areas (figure 13). But, on the basis of his role in the defence of Ulster in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, one of the central narratives of the Ulster Cycle of Gaelic myths, he also stands as a heroic figure of the loyalist re-making of history, along with the Pretani (figure 14). Revisionism itself appears self-reflexively as a topic for the walls. Thus, challenging the debates within Irish historiography with regard to Irish nationalism, one mural depicts the figure of truth in front of the book of Irish history, while the mask of revisionism rests nearby. The image is framed above by a quote from the socialist republican Miriam Daly (executed by a Loyalist assassination squad): "History is written by the winner" (figure 15). Truth be told, there has been a good deal of revisionism over the past couple of decades, much of which has appeared on the walls. The Sinn Féin brand of republicanism, for example, has re-framed the war against the British state as a campaign to deliver equal status for Northern Irish nationalists (as opposed to the often-articulated goal of destroying Northern Ireland and forcing the British to concede Irish unity) (figure 16). Likewise, there are loyalist murals that depict their community as simply victims of a one-sided sectarian campaign of violence over some thirty years (rather than an active participant in a vicious war; figure 17). Indeed although the war may have ended, the conflict continues, as different versions of 1916 make clear (figures 18, 19).

Figure 7 – Warrenpoint, Rockville Street Falls Road, West Belfast 1981

Figure 8 – Michael Stone, Tavanagh Street The Village, South Belfast 1989
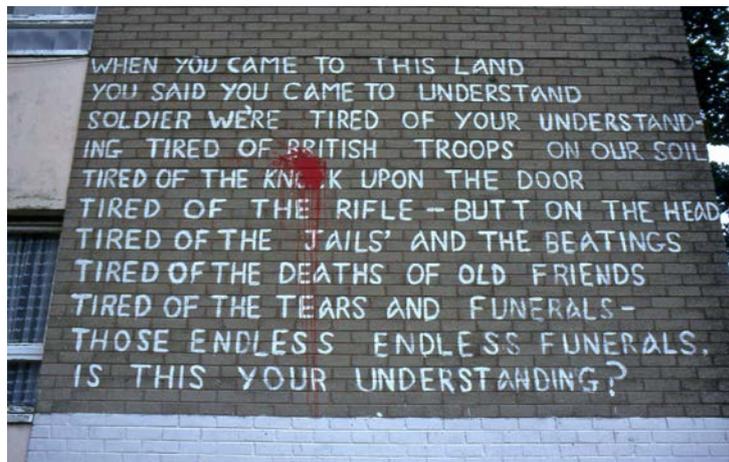
Figure 9 – Letter to a British soldier on Irish soil, Lenadoon Avenue Lenadoon, West Belfast 1981

Figure 10 – Ní Bheidh Síocháin Ann Gan Saoirse Republican mural, Shaws Road, West Belfast 1983

Figure 11 – Ulster-Scots, Templemore Street, East Belfast 1999

Figure 12 – Lamh dearg abu, Glenwood Street Shankill Road, West Belfast 1999

Figure 13 – Cú Chulain, Lenadoon Avenue Lenadoon, West Belfast 1996

Figure 14 – Dalaradia Kingdom of the Pretani, Shore Road, North Belfast 2021
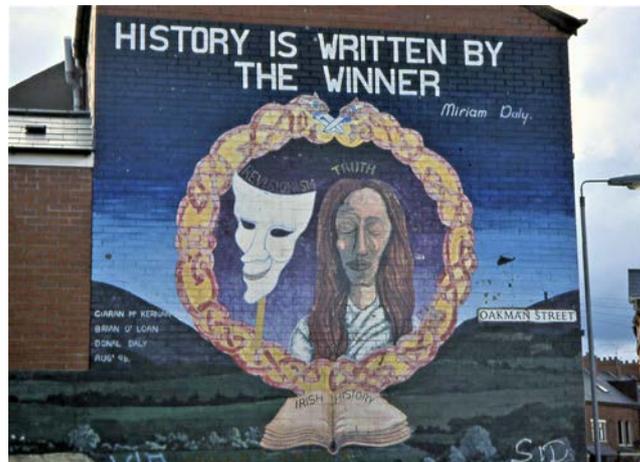
Figure 15 – Revisionism Republican mural, Oakman Street Beechmount, West Belfast 1996

Figure 16 – Republican revisionism, Divis Street Divis, West Belfast 1996

Figure 17 – Loyalist revisionism, Dundee Street Shankill Road, West Belfast 2002

Figure 18 – Republican 1916, McQuillan Street Falls Road, West Belfast 2016

Figure 19 – Loyalist 1916, Northland Street Shankill, West Belfast 2016

4. Managing the Peace: Republican Murals 1994-2006

When the IRA declared its first ceasefire in 1994, the response amongst nationalists and republicans was celebratory. McGlinchey, for example, in an important study of the origins and development of "dissident" republicanism, describes "a cavalcade of cars, including black taxis with tricolours hanging out of their windows, driving up and down the Falls Road, beeping their horns as an atmosphere of celebration and jubilation prevailed" (2019, x). In republican heartlands, there was "a feeling that a deal of sorts must have been done" (De Baróid 2000, 352). Indeed on both sides of the political divide, the same question arose: would the IRA really have ended its armed struggle if it had not achieved an agreement incorporating at least some of its goals? Though this question stimulated republican optimism and loyalist fear alike, it became apparent relatively quickly that "the ceasefire was a republican act of faith" (353), or at least a calculation that more could be gained by political rather than violent means at that point. For there was no deal between republicans and the British, other than that outlined in the joint Anglo-Irish *Downing Street Declaration* (1993), which was in effect that republicans would be invited to the negotiating table as long as they put down their arms.

Within the republican movement itself, the ceasefire was justified on the basis that republicanism was "entering into a new situation in a spirit of determination and confidence: determined that the injustices which created the conflict will be removed and confident in the strength and justice of our struggle to achieve this" (Irish Republican Army 1994). Given the suspension of the armed struggle, it followed that a new political imperative was required, as an internal republican discussion document produced in the summer of 1994 set out: "it is vital that activists realise that the struggle is not over. Another front has opened up and we should have the confidence and put in the effort to succeed on that front" (Cox, Guelke, Stephen 2000, 334). The decision to enter fully into constitutional politics was sealed by the republican movement's commitment to *The Belfast Agreement* (also known as *The Good Friday Agreement*) in 1998, an internationally binding legal and political document which brought the war to an end. But the outbreak of peace brought with it a series of problems for mainstream republicanism. For although republican activists were assured that a new front had opened up, the republican constituency at large was less sure. Moreover, although most people welcomed peace, there were those too who wondered about the price that had been paid during almost thirty years of war. For if republicans had been willing to agree to an internal power-sharing settlement which guaranteed the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, then why – critics inside and outside the republican movement asked – had thousands of people died, and tens of thousands been injured, in a brutal and sustained campaign?

For Sinn Féin republicanism it was necessary that tangible political gains were evinced as rapidly as possible, and the disbanding of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and its re-constitution as the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2001 was taken as an important advance. As was the early release of paramilitary prisoners under *The Belfast Agreement* (the last prisoners were released in 2000). But in general, republican involvement in what became known as the Peace Process was made difficult and slow because mainstream unionists refused to engage with Sinn Féin until the IRA had decommissioned its weapons. Decommissioning became a troublesome and complex issue for republicans, and it met with stiff internal resistance before the IRA finally put its arms beyond use in 2005. But the long delay in doing so, and the obstructionist tactics of unionism, meant that despite its electoral success in becoming the largest nationalist party, Sinn Féin and its republican base was frustrated politically, at least in terms of sharing power at a national level. Such frustration required management.

Sinn Féin became the leading voice of constitutional nationalism post 1998, but conscious of the deep concerns of its activists and base supporters, which were exacerbated by the ongoing problem of unionist marches through nationalist areas, the party was aware that it had to broaden and strengthen. It thus sought to become the hegemonic social, cultural and political force in its heartland areas and beyond. This was achieved in a number of ways. Practically, party activists, through energetic and committed engagement, influenced or indeed directed organizations across the social field (from elected office to local community group). But ideologically, the party sought to forge hegemony through the inculcation of values, ideas, norms and practices in order to create a community with a broadly shared set of beliefs and attitudes that would translate into behaviour and responses in specific historical circumstances. Evidently, for such a project to succeed, these values and practices have to exist in some latent form within the community, but the key to hegemonic rule is to articulate them, to add to them, to disseminate them, and to bring people to the point of recognizing that this is the sort of community that "we" are. In that sense, the post-ceasefire and post-*Agreement* years were crucial for republicans and nationalists since their communal identity was no longer defined by being simply against the British state and the effects of its war machine. In the new context, a developed form of republican and nationalist identity needed to be articulated distinctly – as a particular type of community that embodied a practical stance with regard to its historical situation. Murals were an important medium – public, visually striking and durable – through which that identity was forged and represented.

One example of the way in which murals were used by republicans in this regard was the development of "the International Wall" on a long boundary wall of Andrews flour mill on Divis Street, West Belfast. After 2000, this site became (and remains) a canvas for murals that mainly, though not exclusively, articulate an internationalist outlook and sympathies[3]. This was not a new development, since republicans had sought to "internationalize the conflict" during the war. Post-war, however, the aim was different. There was still a desire to make links with radical causes around the world – for example, with Basque separatists (figure 20), and the Palestinians (figure 21). But the international perspective in these murals was more than simply an extension of provisional republicanism's wartime attempt to make common cause with other radical political and military resistance movements.

Figure 20 – Basque separatism International Wall, Divis Street, West Belfast 2001

[3] The International Wall (sometimes called the Solidarity Wall) was initially confined to Divis Street, but as that space filled up, the adjoining and longer stretch of wall on Northumberland Street (running from Divis Street to Beverly Street and divided by the Peace Line) also became a mural canvas.

Figure 21 – Palestine International Wall, Divis Street, West Belfast 2001

The key to understanding such murals is to put them in the context of the republican attempt to forge cultural hegemony in their own areas. In essence, the murals reflected and shaped political sentiment in nationalist and republican communities in the post-war period by enregistering their inhabitants as radically engaged citizens both at home and globally. As noted above, this was not a misrepresentation of communal feelings and attitudes since the values that lie behind them were latent within the community. But what the murals attempted to do was to channel and organize political sentiments in particular ways, thereby helping to construct a specific identity. This was a process with internal and external aspects. Internally, for those who viewed the images as part of their everyday experience, the murals implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) suggested that like others in the world, they had a just cause that could be fought for politically. Externally, for the increasing number of mural tourists (the International Wall has become one of Northern Ireland's main tourist sites, figure 22), the images characterized nationalist and republican areas as liberal, outward-looking and welcoming.


Figure 22 – West Belfast Taxi Tours International Wall, Divis Street, West Belfast 2002

If international murals were one means to construct communal hegemony, another was through the forging of collective memory. One way of doing this was through images that drew attention to distinctive cultural features such as Gaelic sports, music, the Irish language, mythology, and religion. Above all, however, the murals emphasized a shared history, and they did so by focusing on constitutive historical moments. For example, an ambitious and well-executed mural in Ardoyne (North Belfast) depicted an early nineteenth century hedge school (a native response to one of the provisions of the Penal Code which imposed educational restrictions on the Catholic and Presbyterian population,Dowling 1968, 22-26; figure 23). The class is set in a rural setting (a "Penal Law Education" notice is mailed to the tree) and framed by a message in Irish: "labhair an teanga Gaeilge liom" ("speak Irish to me"). The depredations of the Penal Code are also recalled by a slightly later mural in the same area representing a Mass Rock (a secret location where Catholic Mass was celebrated in defiance of legal prohibition; figure 24). Here a priest saying Mass is unaware of the approach of British soldiers; an inscription above the image declares: "is í an charraig seo ionad adhartha ar náithreacha áit ar cothaiodh an creideamh do na glúnta a bhí le teacht" ("this rock was our ancestors' centre of worship, where religion was preserved for the generations that were to come"). There is one event in Irish history, however, that serves as a metonym for the catastrophic effects of colonial rule within Irish nationalist cultural memory: the Great Famine of 1845-52. And the 150th anniversary was marked in a series of striking murals. In the Ardoyne gallery, for example, "An Gorta Mór" ("The Great Famine") was a reproduction of a contemporary sketch – "Funeral at Skibbereen" – framed by a quotation from Seamus Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies": "They buried us without shroud or coffin" (figure 25)[4].

Figure 23 – Labhair an teanga Gaeilge liom, Ardoyne Avenue Ardoyne, North Belfast 1996

[4] Heaney's poem refers to the 1798 Rebellion, in fact, rather than the Famine.

Figure 24 – The Mass Rock, Ardoyne Avenue Ardoyne, North Belfast 1997

Figure 25 – An Gorta Mór, Ardoyne Avenue Ardoyne, North Belfast 1997

These murals evidently fostered a sense of communal identity that was designed to serve republican purposes. But as well as addressing a broad nationalist electorate, republicans were also assiduous in memorialising their own past, particularly after 1994. For example, the founding moment of Irish republicanism, the formation of the United Irishmen and the 1798 Rebellion, was commemorated in a mural at South Link in West Belfast. Incorporating the insignia of the United Irishmen – a harp with the motto "It is new strung and shall be heard" – the mural depicted the rebels, with pikestaffs, marching against a background of Ireland's lakes and mountains, with Celtic surround and dates recording the bicentenary (1798-1998); at the bottom lies an inscription in Irish – "Na hÉireannaigh Aontaithe" ("the United Irish-men"). To the right, marking the influence of the French Revolution on the rebels, a smaller mural heralds "Liberté Egalité Fraternité" (figure 26). After 1798, the 1916 Easter Rising was the most important date in the republican calendar and it was represented in a series of murals including an ambitious reproduction of Walter Paget's "Birth of The Irish Republic" (figure 27).

Figure 26 – United Irishmen, South Link Andersontown, West Belfast 1998

Figure 27 – 1916, Berwick Avenue Ardoyne, North Belfast 2002

With regard to commemoration, however, it was the prison struggle of the 1970s, and the Hunger Strikes in particular, that became the most familiar trope for republican muralists. Thus Ciarán Nugent, the first republican prisoner to reject the criminalisation policy by refusing to wear prison uniform, was represented in 2005 (figure 28). And the image of Bobby Sands, first painted on the side of the Sinn Féin offices on the Falls Road in 1989, took its iconic form in 2005 and was re-imaged in 2015 (it is probably the most photographed mural in Northern Ireland) (figure 29). Other individual Hunger Strikers were also remembered in murals, sometimes close to where they had lived – Joe McDonnell in Lenadoon, Kieran Doherty in Andersonstown, Raymond McCreesh in Camlough (figure 30) – but more often than not, simply in republican heartlands across Northern Ireland.

Figure 28 – Ciarán Nugent, Rockville Street Falls Road, West Belfast 2006

Figure 29 – Bobby Sands, Sevastopol Street Falls Road, West Belfast 2011

Figure 30 – Raymond McCreesh, Quarter Road, Camlough 2006

As noted earlier, republican commemoration sought to inculcate the notion of an unbroken tradition, stretching from the United Irishmen to the Hunger Strikers. Yet in the 1994-2006 period, it also sought to remember the more recently deceased (murals on both sides have very infrequently portrayed living figures). This was a relatively new emphasis and one that was first evident on a large scale not in murals, but in the construction of more durable memorials[5]. Dedicated to individuals or local sections of the IRA, these were attempts to set in stone the narrative of the heroic republican dead and to take it beyond its traditional location in the graveyard. They appeared across Northern Ireland, ranging from Crossmaglen (figure 31) to Cappagh (figure 32), and they came in several forms, ranging from commemorative plaques, to stone memorials, to large-scale commemorative gardens (figure 33). Memory was, to coin a phrase, made concrete.

Figure 31 – Burns Moley memorial, Ballyfannahan Road, Crossmaglen 1996

Figure 32 – Republican memorial, Cappagh Road, Cappagh 2001

[5] One of the most striking aspects of the murals is the fact that, with a relatively few exceptions, they are not designed to be preserved over the long term, indeed "most are expected to have a short life" (Jarman 1997, 212).

Figure 33 – Garden of Remembrance, Falls Road, West Belfast 2001

5. *The Ballymurphy Murals*

I want to turn now to a set of commemorative murals produced in Ballymurphy in 2001-2002. The area of Greater Ballymurphy lies at the foot of the Black Mountain and at the heart of republican West Belfast, and includes the sub-areas of Ballymurphy proper, Springhill, Westrock, the Whiterock, Dermot Hill, New Barnsley, Moyard and Springfield Park. It is not a large area geographically (it can be crossed in less than half an hour), and it is bounded by republican areas to the south (St. James), south east (Beechmount), and west (Turf Lodge) though, significantly, loyalist Highfield lies to the north east. The district is a twentieth-century development, with the central "bullring" estate of Ballymurphy built during the late 1940s and 50s. It is predominantly a poor, working class area and during the war, three large British Army bases (Fort Henry Taggart, Fort Jericho, and Fort Pegasus) sat at its edges; a large, fortified police station mow overlooks the area. Ballymurphy was the site of two massacres: between August 9th-11th 1971, during the introduction of Internment, British troops shot and killed eleven unarmed civilians, including a Catholic priest and a woman left to die in a field (the Ballymurphy Massacre; de Baróid 2000, 69-100); on the 10th July 1972, British army paratroopers killed five more locals, including another Catholic priest and a 13 year-old girl (the Westrock Massacre; de Baróid 2000, 122-135). In short, Ballymurphy was one of the focal points of the war in Northern Ireland, and many of its inhabitants fought back against British rule in a variety of ways, ranging from armed struggle in one of the republican organisations, to community organising against poverty.

During the war, Ballymurphy was an important location for many murals that reflected mainstream republican views (those of Sinn Féin and the IRA). An early Hunger Strike mural on Whiterock Road, for example (figure 34), hailed those who "hunger for justice", while yoking the Catholic (the angel) and nationalist (the national flag and crests of the four provinces) people of Ireland to the republican campaign (the prisoner and armed volunteer): "Their hunger their pain our struggle". Later, the dual strategy of armed struggle and political campaigning was reflected in two murals on the Whiterock and Springhill from 1988. In one, a cartoon captures the process by which an indifferent by-stander becomes politicised and joins Sinn Féin (figure 35); in the other, armed IRA volunteers stand behind the Irish Tricolour and

under the republican slogan "Our day will come" (a translation of the Irish "Tiocfaidh ár lá") (figure 36). Republican history past and present was venerated in two other murals in the same locations: the IRA volunteers killed in an SAS ambush at Loughall were commemorated in a neo-Celtic mural on Springhill (figure 37), while the 75th anniversary of the key republican event of the 1916 Rising featured in another image on Whiterock (figure 38). The shift in republican thinking in the early 1990s, as the movement engaged with electoral politics, was revealed in a Springhill mural: if the gag imposed by British censorship were removed (Sinn Féin representatives were not permitted to speak in their own voices in the British media), re-publicans would speak peace (figure 39). And when, in 1994, the first IRA ceasefire was called, a Whiterock mural set out republican demands: an end to collusion between state forces and loyalism; the release of republican prisoners; the disbanding of the Royal Irish Regiment (the locally-recruited regiment of the British army) and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (the police force); an end to the unionist veto; and most importantly, the removal of British troops – "Fag ár sraideanna" ("Leave our streets"; figure 40). By the 1990s then, reflecting its centrality to the Belfast republican struggle, Ballymurphy had become an important gallery whose murals indicated the developing politics of mainstream republicanism.

Figure 34 – Hunger for justice, Westrock Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1981

Figure 35 – I looked the other way, Whiterock Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1988

Figure 36 – Springhill Drive Springhill Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1988

Figure 37 – Loch gCál, Springhill Avenue Springhill Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1987

Figure 38 – Cáisc, Whiterock Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1991

Figure 39 – Oppose censorship, Springhill Drive Springhill Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1989

Figure 40 – Whiterock Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 1994

Yet as a key republican area, the reaction of Ballymurphy to the IRA ceasefires, *The Belfast Agreement*, and the Peace Process that followed, was monitored closely, not least because there was considerable concern in the district among mainstream republican activists, members of older republican groupings such as the Irish National Liberation Army, and those affiliated with newer "dissident" organisations such as the Real IRA. And it is within this context that the appearance of the eight Ballymurphy murals in 2001-2002 has to be set. The series began with a commemorative mural to IRA volunteers Jim Bryson and Patrick Mulvenna on Bally-murphy Road (close to where they were both shot by the British Army in August 1973; figure 41). Unveiled on 3rd June 2001 by Gerry Adams (President of Sinn Féin, M.P for Belfast West, native of Ballymurphy, and brother-in-law of Patrick Mulvenna), the mural depicts Ballymurphy Road in the early 1970s. The image is dominated by a representation of the two volunteers on active service, Bryson with his trademark Lewis gun, Mulvenna with a rifle; to the side there are picture portraits of the two men, while in the foreground sits the jeep, emblazoned with

"Óglaigh na hÉireann", used by the Ballymurphy IRA (de Baróid 2000, 122). The image is remarkable for the verisimilitude of its depiction of the bend in Ballymurphy Road, a child playing on a barricade, the ubiquitous dogs, and, significantly, the volunteers – represented in relaxed, civilian mode in the portraits, and engaged in armed activity in the larger picture. These are not masked gunmen but recognisable individuals (the representations are based on a photograph of the two volunteers; de Baróid 2000, 173), at home in the streets in which they fought. This use of realism was an important shift in republican muralism (only the Hunger Strikers had been portrayed in this way previously), in that it "humanised" IRA volunteers as "ordinary" men and women.

Figure 41 – Ballymurphy Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2001

A similar style was adopted in the seven murals unveiled a year later in Ballymurphy (on the 26th May 2002; figures 42-47), and the eight images bear significant common features[6]. In all of the representations armed IRA volunteers figure centrally, and in some the locations are recognisably in Greater Ballymurphy – Ballymurphy shops, Springhill Avenue, Ballymurphy Road. In six of the seven 2002 murals, local republican activists are also represented and named, including, in the words of Gerry Adams, "the largely unsung heroes – mostly women who remained unbroken and unbowed through decades of conflict. They are all there – along with the [volunteers] who they fed and sheltered, chastised and comforted, through a remarkable and unprecedented period of communal conflict" (Greater Ballymurphy Murals Project Committee 2002). This form of commemoration is important in its explicit rendering of the relationship between people, place and memory in this tightly-knit, working-class, republican community. Implicit in this entire set of murals is the belief that the faces of IRA volunteers, as neighbours, schoolfriends, and workmates – "ordinary people in extraordinary roles" – belonged on the streets in which they were born, grew up, and sometimes died[7].

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[6] All of the murals were painted by Danny Devenny, Marty Lyons and Seany McVeigh.

[7] In a report on their deaths, a fellow republican later described Bryson and Mulvenna as "ordinary young men in an extraordinary situation" (Relatives for Justice 2018, 25).

Figure 42 – Ballymurphy Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Figure 43 – Glenalina Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Figure 44 – Glenalina Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Figure 45 – Divismore Way Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Figure 46 – Glenalina Road Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Figure 47 – Springhill Drive Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Yet the appearance of these murals in 2002 begs the question as to why they were painted in this way in this place at just this moment. One answer is simply that local republicans wanted to remember their dead in a public, durable form. But then why murals (rather than memorials), and why in this particular form – with armed volunteers front and centre? This last question is particularly significant, given that mainstream republicanism had renounced the armed struggle when it signed up to *The Belfast Agreement* four years previously. The answer to this paradox (if peace, why guns?) lies with the problematic issue of IRA decommissioning, which repeatedly brought the Peace Process to the brink of collapse before the republican leadership agreed to begin to put its arsenal beyond use in late 2001 (a task that was completed in 2005). For if arms were to be decommissioned, the confident and emphatic message from the Ballymurphy murals was that the armed struggle had been justified, its proponents had been heroic, and it had been supported by the "ordinary" men and women of the area. In addition, the implicit message was that although the war had been necessary, it was time to put it securely in the past in order to move on. Nowhere is that clearer than in the mural that originally depicted IRA volunteers "Toddler" Tolan, Michael Kane, James McGillen, and John Stone, in a local safe house with two older women (named on a plaque as Kathleen McCullough and Elizabeth McGivern), drinking tea and eating sandwiches, rocket and launcher and rifles resting against the wall along with the utensils (figure 48). Within eighteen months, however, the image had been revised: Toner's combat jacket was replaced by a suit and tie and his rifle had disappeared (though the rocket launcher and rifles remained in the kitchen; figure 49). And when the mural was re-worked in 2014, although Toner and the other volunteers still featured centrally, the image had become a celebration of republican activists as a Tricolour-waving band of "working class heroes" (figure 50). The only weapons in the image – pike and six-gun – belong to the past; the Republican phoenix now stands for peace – as represented by the twelve doves that constitute the political legacy of the twelve IRA volunteers who died on Hunger Strike in the 1970s and 80s.
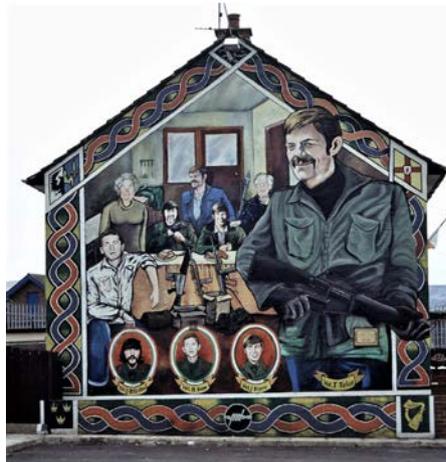
Figure 48 – Ballymurphy Crescent Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2002

Figure 49 – Ballymurphy Crescent Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2004

Figure 50 – Ballymurphy Crescent Ballymurphy, West Belfast 2014

6. Conclusion: Archiving and Meaning-Making

The *Murals of Northern Ireland* archive is a rich resource which takes advantage of digital technology to present a set of complex materials in accessible and fully downloadable form. Anyone with an internet connection can summon up a collection of around 15,000 images that stretch across forty years, painted by people engaged in one way and another with the conflict in Northern Ireland as it moved from bitter war to the Peace Process that continues to the present day. It is a remarkable testament to the way in which digitization offers the opportunity to view texts that would otherwise exist only in limited form (if at all). In that sense, the archive can stand as representative of the transformation that the digital world affords us

as activists, scholars, and citizens, to record, store and access materials that might once have been the preserve of a few. We are fortunate to live in a period when so much of the past and present is available to us with such rapidity and ease. And yet, as I hope to have shown in the historical readings of republican murals rendered above, having the materials available to us and interpreting them are two different, though evidently related, issues. Without contextualization the murals may appear to be no more than ephemeral wall art; placed in political and social context, they become meaningful historical texts.

An archive is an archive; it is a repository of materials, shaped and forms in particular ways, whose meanings are not necessarily easily available. In order to make sense of those materials, murals in the case of *Murals of Northern Ireland* archive, it is necessary to apply the traditional skills of the humanities in an inter-disciplinary way. That is, to read the signs carefully, patiently, contextually, historically; to pay attention to detail and form; to grasp the significance of a single item in relation to a tradition; to grasp complexity and nuance. These are difficult matters and they require skilled practice in the arts of interpretation, for whatever it means to get a reading "right", I know from my own research (and indeed teaching), that it is very easy to get things wrong when trying to understand Northern Ireland. As I have found on a number of occasions, sometimes an apparently complicated image can be understood in a relatively simple way, whereas a seemingly straightforward image requires sustained historical analysis. But in the end, given that we are the meaning-makers, the onus is on us to provide readings that do historical and political justice to the materials that we have at our disposal. I use the word "justice" deliberately, for the murals of Northern Ireland were produced in a war in which justice itself was at stake. It is appropriate therefore that when interpreting the materials pertinent to that war, we endeavour to produce interpretations that add to an accurate and responsible account. Archives furnish us with the goods; we have to do good with the materials to which they give us access.

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