

Historical Legacies and the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Issues of Commemoration and Memorialisation

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A shared and reconciled future has been at the heart of the Northern Ireland peace process, which has, by any standard, been one of the most remarkable on record. While violence subsists, and society remains divided, the situation is dramatically different to 1993, when each day seemed marked by atrocity and counter-atrocity. The Agreement of 1998 set a template for political advance, which, although admittedly experiencing varying fortunes, has now been followed for over a decade. The St Andrews Agreement of 13 October 2006 ushered in a new executive the following May, which enabled two political parties with very different allegiances, the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Fein, to share power, together with the Alliance Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Ulster Unionist Party. The contrasting political aims of Northern Ireland's two largest parties though, reflects the continuing divided nature of its society. Society is still coming to terms with the legacies of conflict, and the linked issues of commemoration and memorialisation are an integral part of the discourse.

Between 2006 and 2009, funded by an award under the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Resource Enhancement Scheme, INCORE at the University of Ulster's Magee campus conducted a major project entitled "'Remembering": Victims, Survivors and Commemoration in post-conflict Northern Ireland', based on its CAIN website (www.cain.ulst.ac.uk). The project, which was launched on 16 June 2009, provides a comprehensive resource, including a chronology, information and materials relating to victims' groups, copies of policy documents, a database of those who died in the conflict, and a photographic record and database of physical memorials. There was, in addition, a series of seminars in which varieties of perspectives were voiced. The discussion that follows reflects some, although not all, of the issues which emerged in the course of this project.¹

The context

The cold statistics of the Northern Ireland conflict are that between 1968 and 2001, 3,523 people were killed and some 47,000 injured, although there have been other victims since then. Those imprisoned for what were termed scheduled offences numbered some 19,600.² Less easy to quantify is the fact that many people had to live with various forms of threat, or had homes or businesses destroyed. Nor should it be overlooked that as a result of the conflict thousands of people moved their homes, and Northern Ireland became increasingly segregated in terms of housing. In fact, Northern Ireland experienced one of the largest population movements in western Europe since the Second World War. It is important to emphasize that this was a conflict which lasted for over three decades, with all that this implies for the duration and extent of suffering, and that in the year before the ceasefires it was as intense as ever. While not all parts of Northern Ireland were equally affected, in an area with such a relatively small and close-knit population, it was hard to find someone who had not been touched by, or had experience of, violence in some way.³ It was also inevitable that many of the victims were young people, some with young families. The emotional and physical needs of victims and survivors will have to be met for decades to come. Society in Northern Ireland will remain confronted with the legacies of this conflict, and with how it should be commemorated in ways which are acceptable to those affected. It is not a comfortable issue, as we will see, but it cannot be avoided. Commemoration has a long-established pedigree in the history of Ireland, and it is only to be expected that this will form part of any analysis of the legacies of the conflict. Moreover, there are over six hundred physical memorials relating to the conflict across Northern Ireland, some on public view, others less so.

Commemoration: the continuing historical legacy

Parading is an obvious form of commemoration. The first Orange parades were held in 1796, the year after the order's formation, and continue to be an established element of Northern Ireland's annual calendar, with large demonstrations being held in Belfast and other centres every 12th July to commemorate King William III's victory over King James II's army at the Battle of the Boyne. But the defeat of the Jacobite army was not a cause for celebration for the Catholic community. In the mid-1990s, divisive confrontations took place in a number of locations, most obviously so in the events connected with the Drumcree church parade in Portadown.⁴ The Ancient Order of Hibernians also organises annual parades, its banners

depicting Patrick Sarsfield at the defence of Limerick mirroring those of the Orange Lodges portraying King William at the Boyne.⁵ The Unionist community has taken no part in the Republican parades which commemorate the proclamation of the Irish Republic by Pádraig Pearse in Dublin at Easter 1916.

In August each year, the clubs of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, led by over a hundred bands, parade to celebrate the city's relief from the siege in 1689. They see this as the commemoration of one of the defining moments in their history. But this is now a city which has long had a substantial Catholic majority, for whom the outcome of the siege has since the mid-19th century not been seen as a cause for celebration.⁶ Even although the events of the siege took place over three hundred years ago, their contemporary sensitivity may be judged by the fact that the parade takes over two hours to pass a given point. In 1969, the parade triggered the 'Battle of the Bogside', which led to the deployment of the British army on the city's streets, ushering in a new phase in Northern Ireland's affairs. The period from 1995 also saw bitter disputes over the nature of these parades, which sparked extensive communal tension and threatened to polarise the city even further. In recent years, these tensions have eased, however.⁷

It is, moreover, a city where the two communities have come to differ on its name, Catholics using Derry, derived from the Irish 'Doire', or 'Oak Grove', while Protestants mostly prefer Londonderry, recognizing the role of the City of London in settling a new city in the early 17th century. This is an issue not unfamiliar in other parts of Europe, as witnessed, for example, by the use of the terms Bratislava, Pressburg and Poszony over the years for the same city, depending on whether one was Slovak, Austrian or Hungarian. What is Strasbourg in Alsace to the French was once Strassburg in Elsass to the Germans. The city is not just physically divided by the river Foyle, since Catholics are massively in the majority on the west bank, or Cityside, which contains the historic walled city where the siege took place. Protestants mostly live in the Waterside, although here, too, there is a substantial Catholic population. The main sites associated with the traditions of the siege, notably St Columb's Cathedral, the Apprentice Boys Memorial Hall, and the walls, are located on the Cityside. But the Cityside's Protestant population is now largely concentrated in the small Fountain estate, just outside the walls close to the Cathedral.

In addition to the places just outlined, the Cityside takes in sites identified with 'Free Derry' and the Civil Rights movement which galvanised the Catholic community from the late 1960s, including those streets associated

with the events of 30 January 1972, 'Bloody Sunday'. The memorials to these events serve as a counterpoint to the symbols of the city's Protestant heritage which are close by, but are mostly within the walls. These sites are much visited and photographed by tourists, though rarely, one suspects, by members of the city's 'other' community. The main shopping centres are 'neutral spaces' where people go about their daily concerns much as they do elsewhere in Europe. A similar picture could be drawn of Belfast, as of smaller communities. Large areas of north and west Belfast remain rigidly separated by a substantial barrier known somewhat euphemistically as the 'peace line'. On either side of this barrier, wall murals represent contrasting memorials to aspects of the conflict.

From 2012 onwards, commemorations will be very much in the public eye. Many of these will relate to the one hundredth anniversaries of the events of the First World War. The Battle of the Somme, which began on 1 July 1916, has long had a particular relevance for Unionists, understandably so given the scale of casualties suffered by the close-knit 36th Ulster Division. The events of 1 July 1916 are depicted on many Orange Lodge banners, and the date is commemorated in Orange Order parades in various locations.⁸ In recent years, members of the Nationalist community have increasingly acknowledged the sacrifices made by their community in the conflict. This new spirit was exemplified on 11 November 1998 when Queen Elizabeth II, President Mary McAleese and King Albert II dedicated the Island of Ireland Peace Tower at Mesen, or Messines, in Belgium, where the men of the 36th Ulster Division and the Nationalist 16th Irish Division had fought side by side.

Two highly significant centenary anniversaries will be marked in 2012 and 2016. These are, of course, the signing of the Ulster Covenant and the Easter Rising. In 1962 and 1966 the fiftieth anniversaries of these events were marked with large-scale commemorations. Since many of those involved had been young, these parades and ceremonies were attended by those who had personal memories of the events. That dimension will now be missing. The ways in which the two communities respond to these, and other, commemorations will be a test of the new political dispensation. In Dublin in May 2011, President McAleese and Queen Elizabeth attended ceremonies at the Garden of Remembrance in Parnell Square and at the Irish National War Memorial at Islandbridge. The issue is by no means unique to our society. How will post-Soviet Russia commemorate the centenary of the 1917 Revolution, once marked by massive parades through Moscow's Red Square? One of the most visited sites in St Petersburg, formerly Petrograd and Leningrad, is the carefully-preserved cruiser *Aurora*, which fired the shot in 1917 triggering the attack on the Winter Palace and the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Victims and commemoration

As the people of Northern Ireland work to make their peace process a continuing reality, they are doing so in the context of historical legacies which have shaped the nature of its society. At the heart of the political process, however, is the principle of equality and mutual respect; in other words that the political aspirations, institutions and traditions of each community are recognised as legitimate, and are entitled to be expressed in a democratic manner.⁹ The Unionist desire to remain British and the Nationalist aspiration to a united Ireland are held to be equally valid, both politically and culturally. The political process, then, rests upon the apparent paradox of recognizing, and some would say institutionalising, division, while at the same time demanding equal respect to the two legs upon which it stands.

In attempting to reconcile this dilemma few issues are more seemingly intractable than those surrounding victims and survivors, as well as how the conflict is commemorated. The two main agreements which have driven the political process had little to say on the issue. In its initial 'Declaration of Support', the Agreement of 1998 acknowledged the legacy of suffering left by the past. A peaceful and just society was held to be the true memorial to the suffering of the victims.¹⁰ The 2006 St Andrews Agreement merely referred to the establishment of a Victims' Commission. This led, in May 2008, to the creation of the Commission for Victims and Survivors, followed by the appointment of four Commissioners. They were charged with six statutory duties with respect to victims and survivors; namely to promote awareness of their interests; to review the adequacy and effectiveness of the law affecting them; to review the adequacy and effectiveness of services provided for them; to provide advice to government on matters affecting them; to ensure that their views were sought by the Commission; and to make arrangements for a forum for consultation.¹¹

But while the two key political documents did not greatly expand on the issue of victims and survivors, it would not be true to say that it was ignored or brushed aside. In fact, soon after the coming into office of the Labour government in Britain in 1997, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Dr Marjorie Mowlam, appointed as Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner the former head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, himself the survivor of an attack on his home in 1988. Bloomfield's brief was to explore how greater recognition could be provided for those who had become victims as a result of events in Northern Ireland, recognising the consequences for many people who did not live there. His Report, 'We Will Remember Them', published on 29 April 1998, was a pioneering analysis of

the question. Bloomfield set out a wide range of recommendations, including the need for a Standing Commission for the Protection of Victims or a Protector or Ombudsman for Victims. Of particular interest was his suggestion that the churches should consider a 'Memorial and Reconciliation Day', and that at an appropriate time there could be a 'Northern Ireland Memorial' in the form of a building set within a garden. Neither of these has yet to be realised, although a first step has been in the direction of the former.¹²

The Consultative Group on the Past

On 22 June 2007, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Hain, set up a new body, the Consultative Group on the Past, co-chaired by Lord Eames and Denis Bradley. Having consulted extensively across Northern Ireland, the Group published its Report on 23 January 2009. It was a wide-ranging document which ran to 190 pages, but its appearance provoked controversy, most publicly at its launch in Belfast's Europa Hotel. What attracted the headlines was the recommendation that a one-off payment of £12,000 should be made to the nearest relative of someone who had died in the conflict. This payment would include anyone who had died directly or accidentally as a result of paramilitary or security force action. Underlying this proposal was the belief that society had to recognise the suffering of families, and that the issue of compensation had to be confronted.¹³ While public debate focussed on this particular recommendation, which was almost immediately ruled out by the government, the authors of the Report also addressed the issue of commemoration.¹⁴

Echoing Bloomfield's earlier Report, the Consultative Group supported the idea of a Day of Reflection and Reconciliation, building on an initiative of the organization Healing Through Remembering in 2007. Memorials were recognized to be contentious, not to say divisive, and it was felt that the time was not ripe for a shared memorial. A principal recommendation was for the creation of a Legacy Commission with a four-fold brief, focussed on helping society towards a shared and reconciled future, the investigation of historical cases, the conduct of information recovery, and the examination of linked or thematic cases.¹⁵ The Chair of this Commission would have a particular brief with respect to the tackling of sectarianism, and would also play a prominent part in the work of another proposed body, the Reconciliation Forum.¹⁶

The Victims

The reception given to the Consultative Group's £12,000 payment proposal brought into sharp focus yet again the whole issue of victimhood and how it might be acknowledged. The Group had been well aware of the nature and depth of this debate, concluding that it would be fruitless to rehearse it. Instead, it was decided to use the definition used in the Victims and Survivors (Northern Ireland) Order of 2006.¹⁷ The definition set out in the 2006 Order, and its endorsement by the Consultative Group, was rejected by many on both sides of the political divide, albeit for different reasons. The question of whether there was, or should be, a 'hierarchy of victims' was never long in surfacing in any discussion of the issue, and was, as the Consultative Group on the Past noted, conducted with passion on both sides.¹⁸ The definition was concerned with surviving victims of the conflict. Whilst no one should seek to diminish the physical and psychological needs of those defined in the 2006 Order, equally no examination of the historical legacy of the conflict can exclude the dead of the conflict. To understand just how important this is, we need to turn to the issue of memorials.

Memorials to the dead of the conflict

The memorials to the dead of the conflict are spread widely, if not evenly, across Northern Ireland. It was a conflict in which certain areas and social groups suffered disproportionately, whilst others remained relatively untouched. The conflict was at its most intense in north and west Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, south Armagh, south Down, mid Ulster, and the border areas of counties Fermanagh and Tyrone. Although violent incidents could happen anywhere, there were large areas of high population density, especially in the east of Northern Ireland, where they were comparatively rare. It is broadly true to say that working class and certain rural areas were most affected. The implication of this is that the conflict is remembered, and commemorated, somewhat differently depending upon the locality.

It is inevitable that the majority of the memorials are located in the areas where violence was at its most intense, but not always where an incident actually occurred. Members of the security forces, for example, who were killed in strongly Republican areas are not physically commemorated there. When the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland chaired by Chris Patten reported in 1999, it specifically recommended that existing memorials in police stations should remain.¹⁹

Certain key events in the conflict have memorials associated with them, although the physical form of memorials varies widely. There are Republican Plots in certain cemeteries where their members are buried, and which often form the focus for commemorations. The concept of memorial gardens is not confined to the security forces, and a number have been created around Northern Ireland. Wall murals, as might be expected, feature extensively, although sometimes these can be ephemeral, since they need to be maintained. Individual deaths are often marked by wall plaques or free standing memorials. As we have seen, society has not been considered ready for an overall memorial which would embrace all the victims of the conflict, whatever their background or how they were killed. In short, there is no common vocabulary to describe those who died in the conflict. Several things are clear. What the memorials confirm is the division and mistrust identified in the Consultative Group Report, and the continuing fault lines across the community. Moreover, with over six hundred memorials in public spaces across Northern Ireland, clearly these are issues which are deeply felt. After over thirty years of conflict, could it be otherwise?²⁰

The way forward?

Northern Ireland is a society in transition, and no one can with confidence predict the future, since a peace process demands a continuing commitment at many levels to sustain it. If there is some way to go before each community can be fully confident in the *bona fides* of the other, society is far removed from the violence it experienced in the years before the ceasefires of 1994. This paper has looked in particular at the issues of memorialisation and commemoration, which are inseparable from victimhood, in the knowledge that there are many other legacies of the conflict which are deeply felt in sections of society. If there is to be a shared and reconciled future, recognising different political traditions and aspirations, then there are aspects of the past, however tragic and painful, which all sections of society need to recognise and confront. The memorials to those killed are testimony to what has been endured, whilst the physical, psychological and emotional needs of the survivors will be with our society for years to come. Commemoration and memorialisation in a contested society can never be comfortable issues.

Notes

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compiled during the first project, and involved GIS mapping, Google
maps, and the creation of a Virtual Education Space in Second Life. The
Principal Investigator on this project was Dr. Martin Melaugh.
- 2 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, 23 January 2009, pp 60-2.
- 3 T.G. Fraser, *Ireland in Conflict 1922-1998*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp
58-9.
- 4 For the events of 1995, see Neil Jarman and Dominic Bryan, *Parade
and Protest. A discussion of Parading Disputes in Northern Ireland*,
Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, 1996.
- 5 Neil Jarman, *Displaying Faith. Orange, Green and Trade Union
Banners in Northern Ireland*, The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen’s
University of Belfast, 1999, p 57.
- 6 For a discussion see T.G. Fraser, ‘The Siege: Its History and Legacy
1688-1889’, in Gerard O’Brien, editor, *Derry and Londonderry. History
and Society*, Geography Publications, Dublin, 1999, pp 379-403.

- 7 T.G. Fraser, 'The Apprentice Boys and the Relief of Derry Parades', in Fraser, *The Irish Parading Tradition*, pp. 173-90.
- 8 See Neil Jarman, *Displaying Faith.*, pp 45-6.
- 9 The Agreement, 'Declaration of Support', Crown copyright, 1998, p. 1, URL=<http://www.nio.gov.uk/agreement.pdf>.
- 10 The Agreement, 'Reconciliation and Victims of Violence', p. 18.
- 11 Agreement at St Andrews, Crown copyright, 13 October 2006, Annex B, 'Human Equality, Victims and other issues', URL=<http://www.gov/st-andrews-agreement.pdf>; The Commission for Victims and Survivors, URL=<http://www.cvsni.org/Default.aspx>.
- 12 *We Will Remember Them*, Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield KCB, April 1998, The Stationery Office, Northern Ireland, Crown copyright, URL=<http://www.nio.gov.uk/bloomfield.report.pdf>; *passim*, but especially pp. 5-6, 8, 34, 43, 47-8.
- 13 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, pp 90-4.
- 14 Northern Ireland Office. Media Centre, 'Woodward rules out £12,000 recognition payment', 25 February 2009, Crown copyright, URL=<http://www.nio.org.gov.uk/woodward-rules-out-12-000-recognition-payment/media-detail.htm>
- 15 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, pp. 134-58.
- 16 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, pp 139-40.
- 17 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, p 68.
- 18 Report of the Consultative Group on the Past, pp 66-70.
- 19 A New Beginning: Policing in Northern Ireland. The Report of the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland, Crown copyright, 1999, p. 100, URL=<http://www.nio.gov.uk/a-new-beginning-in-policing-in-northern-ireland.pdf>.
- 20 The issue of memorials, their location, and the message they convey, may be studied *in extenso* on the section of the University of Ulster's CAIN website which houses the material produced in the course of the project.