

# Painting Politics and History in the North of Ireland

**Alison Fletcher**

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I would like to thank everyone for coming this afternoon. As I hope all of you know, after my talk there is an opening reception at the Museum of Art for the new exhibition called *Renewal: Printmakers from the New Northern Ireland*. The exhibition showcases work by significant contemporary artists from two printmaking workshops in Northern Ireland: the Belfast Print Workshop and the Seacourt Print Workshop. The title of the exhibition highlights the “renewal” that is taking place in the north of Ireland and the role that contemporary art is playing in this renaissance.

I have been asked to give a talk before the exhibition on the recent history in Northern Ireland since the signing of the peace agreement in 1998—variously called the Belfast Agreement, the Good Friday Agreement, or sometimes the Easter Agreement. I want to pick up on the theme of the exhibition to think about how the north, specifically the capital Belfast, has changed in the eleven years since the Agreement was signed. Specifically, I want to look at the murals on the streets of Belfast and consider how they reflect this renewal.<sup>1</sup>

To begin, I want to look a little further back in history to give us an idea of how much has been achieved in the short space of time since the Belfast Agreement. The history of Ireland has been shaped by a deeply conflicted relationship with its closest neighbor, England or Britain, depending on the time period under discussion. This geographical closeness and the fear that Ireland provided a “backdoor” for English enemies led to brutal conquest, armed resistance, and the subjugation of the Irish people. It also led to an exchange of people, ideas, commodities, and perhaps most importantly of all, language. This exchange, while inherently unequal, has moved both ways across the Irish Sea and has at times been remarkably productive. Obviously a brief talk is not the moment to untangle this complex history, but I think there are several specific moments that are important for us to understand before we move into the more recent past.

An Act of Union was passed in 1800 uniting Ireland with the other three nations in the British Isles, creating the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Although the union gave the Irish political representation in the British parliament, in practice the union left Ireland

economically impoverished and politically marginalized. Irish nationalists, fueled by anger after the famine years, used both constitutional and revolutionary methods in an unsuccessful campaign to increase Irish autonomy. After the First World War, efforts to secure an independent Ireland culminated in a bitter and sustained armed conflict. Initially, the Irish fought a two-year war of independence against the British. After the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921 this became a civil war. The treaty was a compromise that partitioned Ireland into two countries. In the south, the Irish Free State was created, consisting of twenty-six counties. In 1949 this became the totally independent nation of the Republic of Ireland. In the north, six counties remained part of the United Kingdom, governed by the British parliament in Westminster.

Crucial to our understanding of the recent past, this compromise was controversial at the time and has remained so. Not only were the most important sectors of Irish industry in the north, notably ship building and the linen industry, but the majority of the Irish in the north were, and still are, Protestants. This is a legacy of the policy practiced by the British for centuries of encouraging English and Scottish settlers to move to Ireland. From 1921, Protestants dominated life in the north—marginalizing the minority Catholic population—politically, economically, and socially. Towards the end of the 1960s, the tensions between the two communities exploded into violence in what is euphemistically called “The Troubles.” This is the name given to the thirty years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland when over 3000 people were killed and many others injured. The violence began with a civil rights movement by Catholics who argued that they had been excluded by Protestants from full participation in the life of the country. Their demands met with resistance and division within the Protestant community. Politics spilled onto the streets. In 1969, the British government sent in the army. What was meant to be a limited action to restore order bogged down into a three-way war between the British army, Republican paramilitary groups, and Loyalist paramilitary groups. After thirty years of violence, the Belfast Agreement was signed. Importantly, although major parties on all sides signed the Agreement, there was dissension from dissident groups among both Republicans and Loyalists. So the peace was signed, but it was an uneasy peace. It was a hopeful beginning but there was still a long way to go.

So we have set the scene for the more recent past and the talk today. I want to pick up the theme of the art exhibition—renewal—and talk about how murals have reflected and shaped the new political landscape in Belfast since the peace agreement. Historically in Northern Ireland, especially in the working-class districts of Belfast and Derry, a sense of belonging and identity has been created using visual imagery and spectacle. In addition to murals, this includes banners, posters, and parades—the latter most noticeable during the summer marching season by the

Protestant Orange Order. In my talk, I am concentrating on murals because I think that in the last ten years they have become an important part of the sense of renewal that the exhibition reflects.<sup>2</sup>

Today, visitors to Belfast find a city with a bustling shopping center, a lively night scene, and excellent restaurants. Cranes outlined against the skyline are testimony to the recovery of the city. Business is improving, and tourism is important to the growth of the economy. For many, this change does seem a miracle—but if it was a miracle, it was created not just by big-name politicians who tend to be given the credit in the media. Peace, lasting peace, needs to be built slowly, brick by brick, and handshake by handshake. It is the work of brave and determined individuals working at the grass roots who remain largely unsung heroes. Their efforts are reflected in the changing face of Belfast, as murals of masked gunmen are slowly being replaced by positive images that are designed to inspire hope in a better future. All the murals you are going to see are still in place today.



**Figure 1**

This mural, completed in 2009, illustrates the hope very directly. It is part of the “Re-Imaging Communities” program to change the face of Belfast that is funded by the City Council in partnership with the Arts Council. The mural is situated in the predominantly Protestant working-class district called the Lower Shankill (named for the prominent Shankill Road), and it replaced a mural that remembered the violence in 1969. Several generations of children grew up affected by the violence, either because they had lost a family member, saw violence on the streets, or were themselves injured. This newly-painted mural dramatically represents the recent focus on children as the future of Northern Ireland. Here, children literally spell out with their bodies their right to play in peace on the street, or even paint murals themselves.

Murals were, and still are, largely confined to working-class areas in the city, the same places where most of the violence occurred. In middle-class areas of the city, people lived in

mixed communities, that is Catholics and Protestants lived in the same neighborhoods. In working-class districts, there was a strong tendency, especially after 1969, for people to live divided along sectarian lines. Some areas were especially volatile, the Shankill and the Falls for example. The former is a Protestant stronghold and the latter a Catholic one. Catholics are frequently labeled Nationalist or Republican, highlighting a desire to unite the north with the Republic of Ireland. Protestants are termed Loyalists or Unionists, suggesting they wish to remain loyal to the union with the United Kingdom. I should stress that most people in Northern Ireland do not identify simplistically according to religion. Probably the majority of people would describe themselves as politically moderate, and do not want to be automatically identified with groups that espoused violent means to gain political ends. However, during the thirty years of violence, both Republicans and Loyalists developed paramilitary groups that used violence to discipline and intimidate their own communities, while fighting to gain political and military advantage over the opposing side. The principal paramilitary group for Republicans was the Irish Republican Army (IRA), although for a period the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) was very active. For Loyalists there were several groups, principally the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). None of these paramilitary groups were monolithic, and Loyalist groups frequently disagreed with each other, sometimes to the point of murder.

What interests me as a historian is the way that murals in Belfast reflected community understandings of their history, and how they helped to construct community identity in historical opposition to the other community.



**Figure 2**

This is perhaps the most photographed mural in Belfast. It is situated on the Falls Road on the wall of the Sinn Fein office. This iconic image is of Bobby Sands who was an IRA

Volunteer who died in 1981 while on a hunger strike in prison. He was the first of ten men to die, and his death led to international criticism of the British government and Margaret Thatcher who was the prime minister. Sands is surrounded by breaking chains, the phoenix above him symbolizes rebirth, and the lark below symbolizes freedom. The mural includes a quote from Sands: “Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.” Sands remains a hero to many, so this mural remembers, commemorates, and inspires.

This mural in west Belfast commemorates six men in “D” Company of the Ulster Volunteer Force.



**Figure 3**

In the center is a cenotaph inscribed with their names; it is guarded by four gunmen wearing black balaclavas, two kneeling as if on guard. The red hand of Ulster at the top is a symbol with deep roots in Irish history. However, in more recent times it has been appropriated by Loyalist paramilitary groups and is commonly seen on the walls in Protestant areas. This mural honors the fallen in an armed struggle that is legitimized by the symbols connecting the Ulster Volunteer Force with Loyalist tradition.

These two murals, and the many others in Belfast, have mapped a sectarian divide onto the geography of the city. For years, you would not have needed a map when driving around working-class districts of the city to know the sectarian affiliation of the areas you were passing through. You just needed to look at the murals. I would also like to suggest that, as well as identifying a community, over time the murals have helped to further shape, focus, and polarize that identity. After all, several generations of children grew up walking past images—like the two

we have just looked at—every day of their lives. Commemoration and remembrance of the dead sought to shape action and belief in the present. Recurrent and sustained celebration of armed struggle, military heroes, and victories—military and moral—legitimized and sustained faith in a violent solution, rather than a negotiated resolution. In this way, fixed visual displays have helped to define and further polarize Protestant and Catholic communities, in terms of opposing national identities.

Murals remember and celebrate moments in the past that carry symbolic historical resonance and that legitimized the continuing struggle.



Figure 4

This brightly-colored mural foregrounds a Volunteer in front of the post office during the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. This is the moment that many in the Republican community think of as the beginning of the war of independence against the British. The three colors of the national flag of the Republic provide the background and, together with the heraldic symbols of the four ancient provinces of Ireland, suggest an Ireland that is united, not partitioned. The words across the top of the mural are Irish for Easter Rising. The mural also contains a plaque with the names of Volunteers who died in the 1970s.

This Loyalist mural situated in the Lower Shankill commemorates Oliver Cromwell: “Lord Protector of the Protestant Faith.”



**Figure 5**

Below the bust of Cromwell, two of his soldiers (Roundheads) have unhorsed a cavalier. Pictorially this image re-creates the seventeenth-century defeat by Cromwell, who was a Puritan, of the Catholic forces supporting King Charles I. For anyone having difficulty interpreting the meaning of the mural, there are quotes from Cromwell that include the words: “There will be no peace in Ireland until the Catholic Church is crushed.” This language continues to justify an armed resistance against Catholics, and it erases from historical memory the injustice done by Cromwell, who brutally suppressed the Irish Catholics who opposed his rule.

Newly placed wreaths at the base of murals are testament to the fact that remembering and commemorating remains very important to both communities. This is especially true of murals painted on the gabled ends of terraced rows, often homes of family who wish the murals to remain as testament to sacrifice and loss.



**Figure 6**

This memorial is painted on the family home of William Bucky McCullough who died in 1981, shot by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) as he was leaving the house to take his daughter to school.

The pillars on either side of the central figure list the names of other UDA/UFF Volunteers who died during the conflict, and underneath in the text are the words “Murdered by the enemies of Ulster.” The mural has wreaths attached either side and flowers underneath.

This Republican mural shows four armed IRA Volunteers eating sandwiches at a safe house. The small plaque gives their names and states that they “gave their lives for Ireland’s freedom.”



**Figure 7**

Two older women described as Republican activists on the plaque are portrayed as providing the food, support, and a secure place to hide. There are rifles and a rocket launcher in the centre of the image, the men look relaxed and comfortable, and one of the women has a hand on the shoulder of one of the Volunteers. It is highly unusual for women to be depicted this way in murals, but in this case it creates a sense of strong community support for the armed struggle.

Although murals can be found along the main thoroughfares in working-class districts, visible to people driving past, many are tucked away in back streets. This raises the question, who is the intended audience? In many cases, it can be argued that murals are not painted as provocative political statements intended to send a message to the other community, but rather they are designed to speak to the community in which they are situated. In this way, they represent an internal discourse designed to inform, to reinforce, and in certain cases to discipline.

This mural in the Lower Shankill suggests an alliance across time between different Loyalist paramilitary groups, an alliance that in practice rarely existed. The Union Jack and the

crown symbolize loyalty to the British crown. The most striking aspect of this mural is the masked gunman in the center taking careful aim down his rifle sights at the viewer.



**Figure 8**

At the same time as flattening the violent disagreements between Loyalist paramilitary groups, it is a menacing reminder to those living in the community that they need to comply with the imperative implied in the motto inscribed twice on the mural: “Quis Separabit,” or who shall separate us.

Let’s turn and think more specifically about the peace treaty and how murals have changed since 1998. The Belfast Agreement tried to settle the constitutional status of Northern Ireland—in a way that would end the violence. All parties came to the table, including the Republic of Ireland and the British Government. In many ways the Agreement is best seen as a beginning, as there were contentious issues left unresolved. Perhaps most notably, disarming of the paramilitary groups was an issue only just resolved when loyalist groups finally decommissioned this last summer. At Stormont, on the outskirts of Belfast, a peaceful devolved government called the Northern Ireland Assembly represents all citizens. A sustained move has been made to include Catholics at all levels of government, and importantly also in the police force, previously seen by Catholics as a Loyalist tool. Furthermore, the border between the Republic and Northern Ireland is now barely noticeable as you drive across it—all the checkpoints of the past have been removed. Indisputably, the quality of life has improved enormously for many, but the violence has left a legacy in terms of victims and community relations. Furthermore, in the eleven years since the Agreement, there has been continuing violence from dissident factions at extreme ends of both communities seeking to disrupt the steady progress towards peace.

The wall painters of Belfast are playing their part in the building of this new Northern Ireland. Until ten years ago, interfering with Belfast’s murals was dangerous and any attempt to deface them would have needed to be done at night. Today, cleaning up murals is an everyday thing, as images of hooded paramilitary men holding rifles are slowly being replaced. The “Re-imagining Communities” program has been an important part of this process.

Some new murals are designed for the growing tourist trade. This mural replaced a C Company Loyalist mural. As you can see it is an A to Z of the Lower Shankill, not something local residents would need.



**Figure 9**

The gables of Belfast provide one of the major tourist attractions of the city, and there are many companies that provide tours, including one that advertises a “Bombs and Bullets” tour. If you are interested, there is a website with an interactive map of all the most celebrated murals to be found at <http://www.belfast-murals.co.uk>.

Today it is safe to walk around Belfast from one community to another, but a legacy from the period of violence is obvious.



**Figure 10**

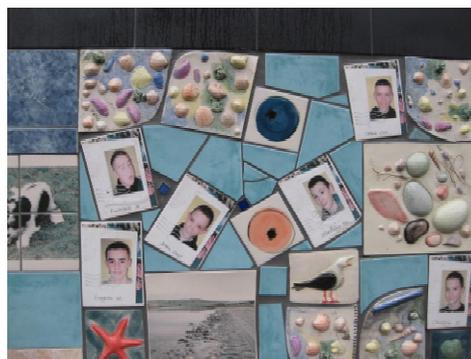
This is what was called a peace wall. These walls were built to keep communities apart, and they are high, unsightly, and often have barbed wire along the top. One of the questions that communities have needed to face is what to do with them today. For many it is too soon to pull them down, so the answer has been to begin to turn them into outdoor art galleries shaped by the community.

This is a series of eight ceramic mosaic panels on one of the city's first peace walls in the Short Strand, near the center of the city and close to the river Lagan. The area has seen a great deal of violence, and the wall was built to divide the Republican community from neighboring Loyalist areas. With the help of the Re-imagining team, local residents of all ages helped the artist, Tom Agnew, to create marine images that reflect the historical association with the river and the ocean.



**Figure 11**

Some of the panels are intensely personal to the residents. This one contains pebbles and shells collected by children, photographs of members of the youth group, and even one of a local dog.



**Figure 12**

Across Belfast, the Re-imaging program funded by the city council has sponsored a range of public art like these panels. The changing face of the city has been welcomed, but it has also raised questions. Importantly, the murals have become the site of contest between local authorities who want to clean up all the murals and focus on the future and others who want the old murals to remain—for many they are still an important visual symbol of their history and identity. Furthermore, because of the growing tourist trade there is resistance to removing the militaristic murals of hooded paramilitaries—they are major tourist attractions and bring money into working-class areas. These next few images highlight the ongoing struggle over ownership of the urban landscape.

This human rights mural in the Lower Shankill replaced a mural that depicted a violent scene from 1600 with the words: “The persecution of the Protestant people by the Church of Rome—the ethnic cleansing still goes onto day.” Although the new mural has been criticized for being bland and uninspiring because it endorses a laundry list of issues such as “everybody has the right to participate,” it is important to stress that the mural had the support of a substantial section of the community.



**Figure 13**

The artist Ed Reynolds worked with local youths in workshops, developing painting skills and forging a sense of community relationship. In recognition of the sensitivity of painting over local history, all new murals sponsored by the Re-imaging program have an information plaque by them depicting the former mural.

This photograph highlights the ongoing tensions and difficulties within neighborhoods about how to represent who they are, what they believe, and what they hope for the future. It also

suggests that murals should not be seen as self-contained images but rather as a part of a wider visual geography that can carry multiple messages and that reflects the ongoing struggle to build anew.



**Figure 14**

Here you can see on the left the human rights mural, and then two gable ends to the right the masked gunman with the gun pointing at the viewer.

In a different way, this last image at Mount Vernon in North Belfast highlights this point again. As you arrive at the Loyalist housing estate, it is impossible to miss the sinister mural of masked paramilitaries surrounded by the words “Prepared For Peace Ready For War”. The mural was painted after the Agreement was signed, and it makes clear that there is reservation and resistance among the Loyalist community. For years, the area was known as a hotbed of paramilitary activity and violence, and the community suffered economically. If you look to the left of the mural, you will see a building with a sign that says “Mount Vernon Community House.” Inside there is a vibrant, welcoming, and supportive community center built by residents, determined that the future should be different from the past.



**Figure 15**

Today, the people of Northern Ireland are engaged in a process of rebuilding that includes a selective remembering and forgetting, and murals are a very important part of that process. As I am sure you all know, the Northern Ireland peace process is now cited around the world as a model of conflict resolution, and the contribution of artists to that process deserves credit and support. However, the question does remain. Will the people of Northern Ireland continue to have competing visions of the past, or can the process of remembering become one that builds rather than divides? I want to conclude with the words of Seamus Heaney—the Irish poet and writer who was awarded the Nobel prize in literature in 1995. He was born in Northern Ireland, but today lives in Dublin.

*History says, don't hope  
On this side of the grave.  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.<sup>3</sup>*

## FIGURES

Figure 1. Hopewell Crescent, Lower Shankill, Belfast. Artist Ed Reynolds, 2009.

Figure 2. Falls Road, Belfast. Artist Danny Devanny.

Image 3. Ballysillan Road, Ballysillan, Belfast. Artist unknown.

Image 4. Falls Road and Beechmount Avenue. Artist unknown.

Figure 5. Shankill Parade, Lower Shankill, Belfast. Artist unknown.

Figure 6: Hopewell Crescent, Lower Shankill, Belfast. Artist unknown.

Figure 7. Divismore Way, Ballymurphy, Belfast. Artist unknown.

Figure 8. Hopewell Crescent, Lower Shankill, Belfast. Artist unknown.

Figure 9. Shankill Road, Lower Shankill, Belfast. Artist Lesley Cherry, 2009.

Figure 10. Conway Street, Lower Falls, Belfast.

Figure 11. Bryson Street, Short Strand, Belfast. Artist Tom Agnew, 2009

Figure 12. Bryson Street, Short Strand, Belfast. Artist Tom Agnew, 2009

Figure 13. Shankill Parade, Lower Shankill, Belfast. Artist Ed Reynolds, 2009

Figure 14. Lower Shankill, Belfast.

Figure 15. Mount Vernon, Belfast. Artist unknown.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> All photographs taken by the author.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent source of information on murals in Belfast and Derry, see Bill Royston, *Politics and Painting: Murals and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (London: Associated University Press, 1989). See also, Neil Jarmen, *Material Conflicts* (Oxford: Berg, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*.