

## **Painting over the Past: Political Palimpsests in Northern Ireland and the Complexities of the ‘Whitewash’ Initiative**

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### **Abstract**

There are more than 300 political murals in Belfast, and a further 200 in Derry. Though nearly all images remain vehemently partisan, numerous multi-storey paintings now cover previous evocations of The Troubles that once reflected the climate of their respective times. The mural has, then, by its nature, always been highly visible, accessible and impermanent, likely to be replaced by new commemorations; with images that express collective suffering, communal pride, or a sense of defiance, that often correspond to developments in the country.

Murals have always functioned as internal dialogues within two disparate communities, whilst also operating as memorials to ‘volunteers’, celebrations of heritage and affirmations of identity. Murals are also territorial markers, often aggressive in their nature, depicting handguns, masked gunmen and paramilitary emblems. These political murals are the subject of much debate. Authorities have been trying to replace unwelcome reminders of violence for a number of years. Community groups, residents, artists and local politicians have been involved in consultations and some of the more bellicose images have been replaced with depictions of neutral local history, such as international footballers, or the Titanic, which was built in Belfast. The replacement of murals – carried out under the ‘Re-imagining Communities’ scheme – has, though, caused a division within loyalist and republican communities, including historians who consider the paintings to be part of their history, their identity, and the collective and individual trauma of the past; whilst some residents, journalists and politicians regard the old wall paintings as intimidating and therefore approve of the new ones.

This war over memory offers particularly rich scope for analysis. It raises several questions, including the concern, shared by many, that the ‘Re-imagining Communities’ scheme could be the beginning of a ‘whitewash’ where all political

murals are expunged, and whether a process designed to facilitate individual and societal healing has, in some cases, resulted in the opposite. This paper will pay attention to these issues as it focuses on the central questions of what it means to censor and sanitize the history of Northern Ireland's trauma. Is there a case for maintaining strident images of trauma? Do such changes reflect a transitional society and a post-conflict culture, or do the new murals represent the social truth of irreconcilable differences despite their apparent lack of belligerence?

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In Northern Ireland, there are some five hundred murals. They adorn the gable walls of working class areas; nearly all are political, and most can be identified to one of two sides – the Republican, Nationalist community, who are generally of a Catholic heritage, or the Loyalist, Unionist Community, who are generally of a Protestant heritage. Though the Irish mural has origins dating back to 1908, its significance increased during The Troubles, a thirty-year period of conflict, that began in 1969, and resulted in the deaths of more than 3,700 people. During this time, murals became more bellicose, more sectarian, and served increasingly as territorial markers in divided Belfast and Derry. As the death-toll rose, murals also became memorials to paramilitary 'volunteers', and victims of terrorism.<sup>1</sup> This includes what Anthony Buckley defines as the 'soldier hero' and 'the terrorist', representations of combatants that came to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, and remain common today – the 'soldier hero' being the proud, smiling freedom fighter, now more familiar to Republican, Nationalist areas (image 1), and the 'terrorist' being the hyper-masculinised balaclava-wearing figure, that one can expect to see in Loyalist, Unionist parts of Belfast (image 2.)<sup>2</sup>

Now, since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which brought relative peace, there is officially, a post conflict, Northern Ireland.<sup>3</sup> Murals, though, are still easily assigned to different communities, be it through religious emblems, and strident declarations of pride in their respective culture, or in some cases, continued animosity and belligerence toward the other community. Large council estates across Belfast and Derry remain punctuated with murals in many forms – from portraits of Republicans who died of hunger strike, to declarations of loyalty to the British Crown. Urban areas include dedications to those who suffered under British rule, and, conversely, those killed by the Irish Republican Army, the IRA. These streets are, as Maria Turmakin coins the term, 'traumascapes', places across the world marked by traumatic legacies of violence, suffering and loss' in which 'the past is never quite over.'<sup>4</sup>



*(Image 1:)* A ‘soldier hero’ mural. Ballymurphy, Belfast. June, 2010. © 2016 Inter-Disciplinary Press. Image courtesy of Mark Callaghan.

Beyond the binary of identifying the respective community being represented, are many unknowns, a story far less immediate than the image one sees. It is often unknown, for instance, who the painter was, who endorsed the mural, and to what extent the image remains germane.<sup>5</sup> Though their social power cannot be measured, the importance of the mural is evidenced by their sheer number, their strategic positioning, the way in which murals often change to reflect the political climate, and also, more recently, resistance to the notion of replacing traumatic images with less contentious ones. This comes by way of the Re-Imaging Communities scheme, which has, so far, replaced eighty-four aggressive murals with less confrontational ones. What is, in many respects, a positive initiative, has, though, raised issues concerning the replacement of paintings, which some regard as being part of Northern Ireland’s history and identity, and also the collective and individual trauma of the past. Ironically, the Re-Imaging Scheme has revealed similar views in what are otherwise disparate communities – with a process that is meticulous in gaining approval from residents for the replacement of murals, but which also, in some cases, exposes less formal objections, including the satirical epithet given to the scheme: the ‘whitewash campaign’, a refrain since used by the Northern Irish media.<sup>6</sup> Opposition is sometimes discordant, with one Republican muralist, Danny Devenny, declaring that replacing murals is ‘akin to Bulldozing Auschwitz’. What I endeavour to do here is to look behind such comments and consider the case for maintaining hostile images, and in tandem, the argument for the Re-Imaging Scheme’s continuation.<sup>7</sup>



**(Image 2:** A ‘terrorist’ mural. East Belfast. March, 2016. © 2016 Inter-Disciplinary Press. Image courtesy of Mark Callaghan.

The Scheme commenced in 2006, and through consultation with local residents, has replaced sixty-one murals in Loyalist, Unionist districts, and twenty-three in Republican, Nationalist areas.<sup>8</sup> This ratio of nearly 3:1 is best explained by the aforementioned prevalence of the ‘terrorist’ figure in Loyalist estates, some of which have been expunged as part of the scheme. Both communities have expressed an interest in changing the appearance of their respective neighbourhoods. Indeed, as a Director of the initiative argues, one of the main strengths of the programme is the empowering of communities vis-à-vis decisions about their own shared common spaces – that is, to decide if they wished to live with the history of a very troubled past, or to change the space occupied by long-standing murals into representations more relevant and meaningful to their contemporary realities.<sup>9</sup>

A most significant example is the replacement of the ‘Grim Reaper’ mural in a Loyalist, Unionist stronghold of Belfast with an equestrian painting of William III, a seventeenth-century monarch, referred to by this community as ‘King Billy’. A skeletal, masked, and clearly armed figure, has been substituted with a regal presence – a sign of cultural origins instead of an axiomatic warning of death to enemies of this sect. Of further significance is the change from a seemingly contemporary character to one from an entirely different era. A machine gun has been replaced by a weapon of a bygone time – a sword. Of equal importance is the replacement of the Ulster Freedom Fighters mural in central Belfast (image 3), with a further rendering of William III (image 4).

Whilst these contrasts result in less intimidating streets, they are still, arguably, provocative. King Billy’ is, after all, the Protestant King who defeated the Catholic

King James II in 1690, a victory that consolidated British rule over the whole of Ireland.<sup>10</sup>



*(Image 3: The paramilitary mural, Sandy Row, Belfast. June, 2010. © 2016 Inter-Disciplinary Press. Image courtesy of Mark Callaghan.*

Even the replacement of sectarian murals with the ostensibly apolitical Titanic is not without its potential to be odious. The Titanic was built in Belfast and while the ship is promoted as a symbol of Northern Irish craftsmanship, many Catholics, knowing that some of their forebears were excluded from the famous project, see it instead as a symbol of the socioeconomic deprivation they lived through during the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> So despite the constructive aims and achievements of the Re-Imaging Scheme, there is no guarantee that new murals will show pictures of trust and shared understanding. Whilst paramilitary culture is unwelcome to those who petitioned the erasure of the ‘Grim Reaper’, and also the mural on Sandy Row, it is not possible to ascertain whether murals dating back to the 1970s and 1980s reflect community consensus more than the new, less belligerent ones. Not everyone is prepared to formally speak in favour of maintaining the old murals, usually concerned that such opinions could be misunderstood as wishing for a return to violence and support for the paramilitaries.<sup>12</sup>



**(Image 4):** The replacement mural, Sandy Row, Belfast. March, 2016. © 2016 Inter-Disciplinary Press. Image courtesy of Mark Callaghan.

Painting over the scars of the Troubles is not accepted by all. Some muralists object to the Re-Imaging programme on the grounds that it is, in effect, the thin end of the wedge.<sup>13</sup> This concern has some validity if one considers the Re-Imaging Scheme's interest in replacing the so-called family murals, which depict paramilitary 'volunteers' and their families, such as those seen in (image 1). These are painted memorials where the faces of combatants are visible, not hooded.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the Re-Imaging Scheme would only replace such pictures with approval from residents, the long-term intent appears to be the cause of some unease.

Additionally, just as the Re-Imaging scheme was painting over images of men in balaclavas, new murals depicting near-identical terrorists were being created. One such example is the 2011 militant Loyalist mural in East Belfast that revealed how sectarian issues are still at the forefront of the city's consciousness, that some continue to struggle to come to terms with the peace process. This mural prompts the question of whether it is a closer reflection of today's climate than the Re-Imaging productions – or at least as relevant. Do the less menacing replacements convey the reality of what is supposed to be a post-conflict country?

Though far less frequent than during The Troubles, political violence continues, including the March 2016 car bomb, detonated in a Loyalist, Unionist area of Belfast.<sup>15</sup> Are the replacements, as some fear, sanitised representations of today's Northern Ireland?<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, given the long history of violence between these communities, one has to wonder whether newly painted, more passive murals, connect to one of their original functions – this being territorial markers that caused people to feel protected rather than fearful.<sup>17</sup>

As an outsider, I also raise queries concerning the consequences of painting over the past. The sectarian, aggressive murals, could, for instance, act as a visible

reminder of how relative peace in Northern Ireland could easily return to a time of reprisal killings. As part of this, one should be mindful that some victims do not wish for peace and remain embittered by a perceived lack of justice. During the Troubles, the bereaved would sometimes wish for paramilitaries to take action, openly expressing their hope that terrorists would alleviate their suffering through revenge. Whilst some victims are given relief by talking of their bitter feelings, others do not cope with their past in this way and instead articulate concerns about state-organised forgetting, of which the changes to murals could be included.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, as there is evidence that violent imagery can cause violent behaviour, and in other examples, induce trauma, we might reflect on whether some murals serve to influence continued hatred between communities. It is surely arguable that such a martial environment will perpetuate what so many of the murals depict. They are also reminders of a three decade period that many would prefer to forget, which might explain the endorsement of less provocative murals, and more recently, proposals that, if approved of, would mean images that only hint at past conflict, such as children shaking hands. As Cathy Caruth writes of the comforting “cure” of mainstream melodramas, ‘such works posit trauma against its reality as a discrete past event, locatable, representable and curable, a symptom of a culture’s need to ‘forget’ traumatic events while representing them in oblique form.’<sup>19</sup>

Either way, the mural serves as social memory, helping us to stifle through the confusion of the past for evidence that might serve to substantiate existing beliefs, including changes in attitude since The Troubles officially came to an end as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. They are visual responses to political change that could reflect that peace accord or contradict it. The reinforcement of cultural identity, evident in many murals, might arguably be caused by insecurities as a result of The Good Friday Agreement. In this sense, even the most sinister of murals arguably has the function of expressing disdain.<sup>20</sup>

As Bill Rolston warns with regard to the Re-Imaging Scheme, what is potentially lost is politics, because even the most offensive mural is undeniably political. A political position is being stated on the wall. But now there is a fear of politics, a fear of mentioning The Troubles.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the replacement murals point to a form of censorship, even self-censorship. There are those who suspect that the logical outcome, if not the intention, of the state-down intervention is to remove the politics from the mural tradition to provide pleasant pictures which, even if artistically sound, say little of the identity and beliefs of the communities in which they appear.<sup>22</sup> Their concerns are echoed by leading art expert, Martin Kemp, who questions the murals' destruction. Kemp argues that the murals represent some of the most important public images of our time and that they should be preserved.<sup>23</sup> They are, I would argue, cultural relics, whereby the suffering and the response to it are part of the historical record. This includes both the need to paint over the past and also those who feel the need to paint new

memorial depicting ‘the terrorist’. But we should be mindful that their nature is one of change; beneath nearly every mural is at least one other, different image.

As the scheme developed, the Re-Imaging programme approached a trio of muralists in Derry, known as the Bogside Artists, though the group did not wish to participate in the programme, as they argued it was burying the past.<sup>24</sup> The Bogside Artists, are responsible for more than a dozen murals, including one of the most famous murals in the world, *The Petrol Bomber*, which was painted in 1994 (image 5), and uses a photograph of an event from 1969, known as the Battle of the Bogside.<sup>25</sup> The mural, then, is a photorealist work of a young boy in a gas mask, thus illustrating the range of mural paintings, moving from the previously cited, arguably crude renderings, to this more accomplished work that makes permanent a scene from a real event.<sup>26</sup> Although the mural depicts an act of violence, the boy is defending himself from CS gas, which was used by the RUC, the Northern Irish police. The image is made more complex when one considers this different kind of masked face. This provides anonymity that means the child can be a stand-in for any child, just as he is also a stand-in for Ireland, as denoted by the badge on his shirt, which makes him representative of every Irish citizen and, in turn, Ireland as a whole. Though previous examples might cause one to oscillate between the issues, the prospect of replacing this mural is less complicated.



**(Image 5):** *The Petrol Bomber* mural, Bogside, Derry. March, 2016. © 2016 Inter-Disciplinary Press.

Image courtesy of Mark Callaghan.

As one of its painters argues, the work is purely historical and commemorative and strives to communicate something of our own understanding and experience. Its focus on the individual signals to the importance of every single person, no matter their role in the Troubles, or any conflict.<sup>27</sup> This mural, unlike others cited here, does not transform horrors into clichés with a limited range of symbolism. It causes one to wonder whether paramilitary murals would lose their impact, not by being painted over, but by being juxtaposed to more inventive, meaningful examples, such as *The Petrol Bomber* – a mural that does not expurgate the past, nor celebrate it.

Though the Bogside murals are, it would seem, ironically permanent, the Re-Imaging Scheme continues to support the replacement of murals, should a consensus be established, thus promulgating significant changes in the post-Troubles landscape of Northern Ireland. Whether one fully endorses the initiative or not, the programme has made the political mural increasingly complex, prompting new questions about what is often a one-dimensional art-form. The Re-Imaging Scheme causes a re-appraisal of the purpose of the political mural, be it the consequences of leaving them untouched, or the effects and principles of painting over the past. As narratives change, these *aides-memoires* relate to multiple issues concerning power relations in communities, vicarious memory, generational disagreements, the role of the mural in terms of political, popular and collective memory, and perhaps the social truth of irreconcilable differences that are still represented on hundreds of walls despite the apparent success of the Good Friday accord. The legitimate concerns outlined in this paper – be it the sanitization of history, the question of whether murals convey the on-going reality of a post-Troubles society – or the need to move away from the conflict by removing images of it – illustrate the subjective dimensions of conflict transformation in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The mural's role has always been to express a range of feelings, which includes to celebrate, to complain, and to convince; to express aspirations and fears, too. There is usually a topicality to murals, reflecting the period in question. In this respect, the Re-Imaging Scheme has caused ambivalence where there used to be clarity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> It was not until the early 1980s that murals became a prominent form of street display in nationalist areas and the brush joined the armalite and the ballot box as a facet of political strategy. Republican strategy changed after the hunger strikes: the military campaign continued, but at the same time a more open political movement began, culminating in the success of Sinn Féin at the polls. This movement tried to

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emphasise the distinctive cultural base of nationalism, which was deemed to provide the secure foundations for the political movement. Numerous murals and political slogans appeared across nationalist Belfast, kerbstones and lamp-posts were painted, streets were renamed in Irish, and the tricolour flew freely to assert a permanent and visible, political and cultural dominance over the area. Neil Jarman. "Painting Landscapes: The Place of Murals in the Symbolic Construction of Urban Space," in *Symbols in Northern Ireland*, ed. Anthony D. Buckley (Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast. Belfast. 1998.) 4.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Buckley. *Symbols in Northern Ireland* (Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast. Belfast. 1998). 158.

<sup>3</sup> The Good Friday Agreement is a bilateral treaty, which became effective on 2 December 1999, though agreed on 10 April 1998. It is a multi-party agreement by most of Northern Ireland's political parties, and an international agreement between Britain and Ireland. The agreement sets out the status of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom, stating that Northern Ireland can only become part of the Republic of Ireland if a consensus is met in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The agreement committed all parties to peaceful means of solving political differences. The agreement led to the eventual disarming of paramilitary forces. Paul Bew. *The Making and Re-Making of the Good Friday Agreement*. (The Liffey Press). Dublin. 2007. 16-18.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Turmakin. *Traumascapes*. (Melbourne University Press. 2005.) 9.

<sup>5</sup> Although they have become an internationally recognised signifier of Belfast and Derry, it is not true to say that these paintings are loved by all those who live locally. In fact murals attract opposition from two quarters: from within and from without. The opposition from without has been well documented: murals have often become prominent targets for destruction from paint bombs and graffiti. The defacing of Republican paintings has, on occasion, been carried out by members of the security forces (Rolston 1991), and paintings in both communities which express support for paramilitaries have been the target of graffiti from the other side (Jarman, 17). The damage caused by the security forces has usually been a deliberate, extensive destruction sometimes necessitating the complete repainting of a mural. In contrast, scrawling the letters UVF on the Bobby Sands mural on the Falls Road or the initials INLA on a UFF mural on Sandy Row is necessarily an elusive act. Whether in response to a challenge, a dare, and just an act of bravado, there is a obviously a distinct attraction in such symbolic assaults. But the thrill of entering the enemy territory and leaving your calling card continues to lead to recurrent incursions. Neil Jarman. "Commemorating 1916, Celebrating Difference: Parading and Painting in Belfast" in *The Art of Forgetting* (ed.) Forty, Adrian. Berg. (Oxford. New York. 1999.) 18-27.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/is-it-time-to-whitewash-northern-irelands-paramilitary-murals-28530284.html>

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<sup>7</sup> The first Re-imaging Communities Programme ran from 2006-2008 with a budget of £3.8 million. The Building Peace Through the Arts: Re- Imaging Communities Programme ran from 2012- to October 2015 with a budget of £1.5m which supported 32 projects, and is due to evaluate this phase during 2016 .The programme is currently closed; the Arts Council with its key partners will be exploring alternative funding schemes, partnerships and opportunities to continue the programme. Information provided by Noirin McKinney, Director of Arts Development. 16 February, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Noirin McKinney, Director of Arts Development, 16 February, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Noirin McKinney, Director of Arts Development, 16 February, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Bartlett. *Ireland*. (Cambridge University Press. 2011). 19.

<sup>11</sup> Charles River Editors. *Building the RMS Titanic. The Construction of the World's Most Famous Ship*. (Create Space Publishing. London. 2014). 119.

<sup>12</sup> Many of the people I have spoken to, from both communities, would prefer not to be named, whilst in other cases, have requested that I do not quote them on certain issues.

<sup>13</sup> This view was expressed in interviews with William Kelly, one of the Bogside Artists (conducted by Mark Callaghan. 12 January 2016.), and with Danny Collins. Muralist. (conducted by Mark Callaghan. 22 January 2016).

<sup>14</sup> The so-called 'family murals', however, those in memory of particular individuals who died in the troubles, remain a sensitive issue. "We won't be able to replace those for a number of years", a quote from this article, expresses a long-term interest in removing these murals too. <http://observers.france24.com/en/20100722-whitewashing-northern-ireland-notorious-murals-troubles-belfast-derry>

<sup>15</sup> On 4 March 2016, the car bomb was detonated by Republican dissidents, killing a prison officer. It was believed to be in connection to the cemetery of the 'Easter Risings', an insurrection by Irish republicans against the British, in Dublin, in 1916. <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/mar/15/belfast-prison-officer-dies-targeted-new-ira-car-bomb-attack-adrian-ismay>

<sup>16</sup> In December 2012, violence erupted in Belfast after the Union Flag, the flag of the United Kingdom, was removed from Belfast City Hall for the first time since the building was opened in 1906. Councillors had voted to remove the flag to make the building in line with other official buildings in Northern Ireland. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/violence-flares-after-controversial-belfast-vote-over-union-flag-8381048.html>

<sup>17</sup> Belfast's walls have also played a role as mediums for criticism within the community, including messages that are explicit in their demand for protection

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from paramilitaries. A famous example of this is the 1969 slogan that referred to the IRA's initials with a painting that read, "I Ran Away" due to a perceived lack of response by the paramilitaries in the face of attack. Tim Pat Coogan. *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal 1996-1996 and the Search for Peace*. (Natl Books. London. 1997). 68.

<sup>18</sup> Graham Dawson. *Making Peace With The Past? Memory, Trauma, and the Irish Troubles*. (Manchester University Press. Manchester. 2007). 73.

<sup>19</sup> Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. (Johns Hopkins University Press. New York. London. 1996). 3.

<sup>20</sup> The notion that art can reflect reality is no longer limited to the field of academic criticism. Media portrayals of the conflict in Northern Ireland have consistently used murals as indicators of the political climate at a given time. Murals are an art form as well as a public expression of feeling and identity. They are more dynamic than political commentary and, to a larger extent, freer from the constraints of censorship and control. Oona Woods. *Seeing is Believing: Murals in Derry*. (Guildhall Press. Derry. 1995) 16.

<sup>21</sup> Bill Rolston. *Drawing Support: Murals and Transition in the North of Ireland*. (Beyond the Pale Publications. Belfast. 2003). 23.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Rolston. 'Reimagining: Mural Painting and the State in Northern Ireland', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15(5) 2012: 447-466, 460.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Kemp. *From Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon*. (Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2011). 58.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with William Kelly, one of the Bogside Artists. Conducted by Mark Callaghan. 12 January 2016.

<sup>25</sup> The Battle of the Bogside is the name given to a communal riot that took place in Derry, in August 1969. The fighting took place between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and local unionist on the one side and Catholics of the Bogside district of Derry on the other. David McKittrick, and David McVea. *Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict*. (Penguin. London. 2001). 16.

<sup>26</sup> The mural was painted with permission by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

<sup>27</sup> A similar view from expressed by William Kelly during the interview. Interview with William Kelly, one of the Bogside Artists. Conducted by Mark Callaghan. 12 January 2016.

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