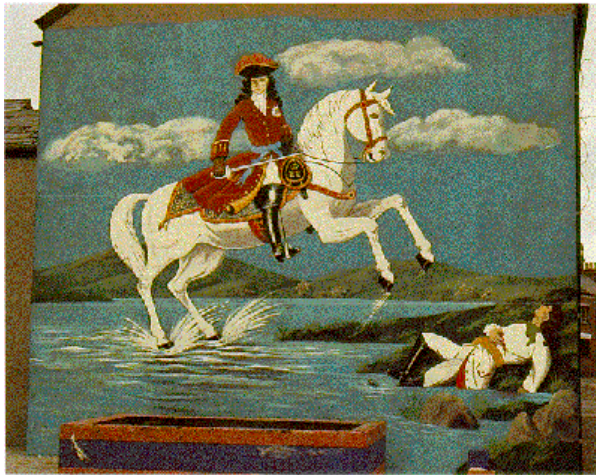


Belfast & Derry Murals

We often hear that art is in the eye of the beholder. In art museums, visitors stare in awe at an Andy Warhol Campbell soup can while other viewers scratch their heads. Some of us shake our heads at a painted wall and say, "Vandalism!" while others call the work, "Murals." In the historic Northern Ireland cities of Belfast and Derry, wall paintings that depict the many clashes of a region deeply divided by religion and cultural identity have taken on a status that labels the work as historic artifact and, indeed, art.



Images of Bobby Sands and "King Billy" on the sides of buildings in Derry and Belfast were commonly seen in the background of photographs of clashes between the Loyalists (Protestants) and Republicans (Catholics) during the "Troubles" of the 1970s. Although the Troubles generated the largest number of murals that are on view in the North today, wall art goes back many years. The first wall image in Belfast was painted in 1908 depicting

the Battle of the Boyne (1690) where Protestant "King Billy" (King William III, William of Orange) defeated the forces of Catholic King James II. The first Derry mural was done in 1920 depicting the Battle of the Boyne and also the lifting of the Siege of Derry in 1689. Both of these historic events are kept alive today in Orange Order parades that often turn violent. The Siege of Derry elevated the **Apprentice Boys** as icons of Loyalist determination.

As to be expected, the wall images in the Catholic and Protestant ghettos, the Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill Road, celebrate different heroes and different themes. The reader may note the use of the present tense in reference to the murals of Belfast and Derry. Many of the murals which were painted in the heat of battle, and which presumably would be removed after the Good Friday Agreement, are now objects of study by sociologists and are destinations for guided tours of Belfast and Derry. The murals are as accessible as the works at MOMA and the Louvre.

In his book *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland*, Bill Rolston proposes six categories for Loyalist murals. The "King Billy" murals, as we know, memorialize the Battle of the Boyne, a battle with a lore and legend

that ranks it with the Rubicon and Thermopolis and other signature national struggles. The Battle of Boyne is commemorated each year on the twelfth of July in a march organized by the Apprentice Boys members of the Orange Lodge. Mr. Rolston writes in his book: "this event is frequently depicted as merely cultural, a sort of a unionist Mardi Gras, but it is limited to members of the Orange Order Lodge which Nationalist cannot join." Interestingly, another battle, the Battle of the Somme, appears in murals to honor the Ulster Division which suffered devastating losses in the bloodletting at the Somme in World War I. Many Irish born soldiers fought in the English army on the continent in WWI, the story told movingly in Tom Phelan's novel *The Canal Bridge*. Other historical themes, such as the founding of the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Orange Order, are commonly seen in Protestant sections of Belfast and Derry.

Flags of all kinds are a category in Rolston's book. Popular are the Union Jack, the Scottish flag, the flag of St. Andrew and the Red Hand. The Red Hand is an image in the flag of the province of Ulster. It is associated with Hugh O'Neill and even earlier is found in Gaelic myth. However, most recently, owing to its place in the Ulster flag, the Red Hand has become a Loyalist symbol. Oona Woods, in her book *Seeing Is Believing: Murals in Derry*, says about the Red Hand, "The Red Hand is a traditional symbol of both the nationalists and unionists in the North. It can be viewed as a hand to say Stop. This would tie in with the Not an Inch and No Surrender ethos of loyalist unionism."



Memorials have a place in Loyalist murals, too. Soldiers killed during the Troubles and admired politicians, like Edward Carson and George Seawright, can be found honored on Northern Ireland walls. Paramilitary murals dominated the walls of Derry and Belfast during the Troubles. They depict killings by the Republicans or repeat the determination of No Surrender or celebrate successful Loyalist actions against the Republicans.

There are non-political cartoons, too, which are humorous or which celebrate the heroes of the soccer pitch.

Republican murals grew directly from the Troubles. The Catholics had no Battle of the Boyne or King Billy but the era of the '70s gave them Bobby Sands and Bernadette Devlin and images of armed struggle to paint on the walls of the Catholic ghettos.

Republican murals started with the "Blanket Protests" which were provoked by the change in 1976 of the Republican prisoners' Special Category Status. The Republican prisoners refused to wear the clothing given to common criminals. A direct result of the Blanket Protest was the hunger strikes of 1981 which led to the death by starvation of ten prisoners. The prison protests led to colorful wall paintings of blanket protestors with



embellishments of flags, coffins and "H" for H Block, a reference to the "H" shaped buildings at Long Kesh also called the Maze, the notorious prison located in Lisburn, Co. Antrim and the site of the hunger strikes. The images in this group of murals were full of the Irish tricolor flag and James Connolly's Starry Plough of the Easter Rising. The painters proclaimed injustice in images of non-jury trials and

beatings during interrogation. The face of Bobby Sands, the most well known of the hunger strikers, can be found almost everywhere on the sides of buildings in Catholic neighborhoods in Belfast and Derry.

A popular theme among Republican murals is the many sectarian clashes during the Troubles. One dramatic protest that is remembered in wall paintings is the Battle of the Bogside. On August 12-14, 1969 in Derry the residents of the Bogside, a Catholic area, protested against a Loyalist Apprentice Boys Parade along the city walls past their area. The protest turned into a riot which the local Royal Ulster Constabulary could not contain, so the British Army was called in to restore order. The presence of the British Army in the North then became a subject of paintings along with images of armed IRA men, frequently with balaclavas hiding their faces, and a memorial to the death of eighteen IRA paramilitaries gave the world the image of Belfast and Derry as cities in the hands of the gunmen.

Although direct references to the Troubles are the most common subjects of the Republican murals in Belfast and Derry, the wall paintings in the Catholic areas also advertise Sinn Féin candidates for election, such as Gerry Adams, and remind Catholic residents of their heroes, like Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, both signers of the Proclamation of Independence in 1916. Tourists visiting the murals must be surprised to see images of Che Guevara, Lenin, the Palestine Liberation Organization and scenes from the Russian Revolution of 1917 on walls in Northern Ireland. Many in the IRA at

the time of the Troubles identified with revolutionary organizations and their leaders.

The murals painted on the walls of buildings in the working classes of Belfast and Derry have become a major tourist attraction. Almost 2,000 murals have been documented in Northern Ireland since 1970. We can all make our own judgments as to their status as art or vandalism/graffiti. The eye of the beholder might be influenced by the fact that in the summer of 2007 the Smithsonian's Folk Life Festival showcased the Northern Ireland mural artists. One-hundred sixty Northern Ireland artists were invited to Washington, DC to paint on walls. No hooded gunmen or hunger strikers would be portrayed on the walls of Washington, DC. Instead, artist would display industrial scenes and project the peaceful North in the recreation by Tom Kelly of the Bogside Murals of a popular peace mural found on a wall in Derry.



The history of North Ireland is well documented by the murals of Belfast and Derry. Any consideration of the use of color and the design of the Belfast and Derry murals suggest a quality much above graffiti and are really art expressing the unwritten words of the working class communities that were affected by the violence of the "Troubles." One can only hope and pray that the agreements signed by Loyalists and Republicans will last.

(Written by Joseph McCormack)

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