A unique artistic development that arose out of the ethno-political conflict that afflicted Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998, known as “the Troubles”, was the production of political wall murals. These murals, painted on walls, gable ends, and other conspicuous spaces in communities functioned as much more than graffiti. Rather, they engaged with communal conceptions of past, present, and future in Northern Ireland to create narratives of history that were relative to the experiences and points of view of the communities in which they were painted. In this way, current experiences from both sides of the conflict could be archived visually and placed in a continuum with other defining historical events of the community. Through the examination of these murals using methodologies developed for the interpretation of visual sources, this paper seeks to explore these narratives and the connections to the past that they rely on to convey their messages. By exploring the social, economic, and political backgrounds to these images, the reader will explore the deeper meanings behind the murals and their connections to the surrounding communities.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the teachers, professors, and other educators who supported my love of history. To Dr. Steven Norris, Dr. Amy Livingstone, Dr. Darlene Brooks-Hedstrom, Dr. Christian Raffensperger, and Dr. Tina Kominsky.
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“Then came the Great War. Every institution, almost, in the world was strained. Great empires had been overturned. The whole map of Europe had changed...The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous change in the deluge of the world. But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that have been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.”

- Winston Churchill, House of Commons, 16 February 1922

“Where would the Irish be without someone to be Irish at?”

In 1969, the idea of open war in a major city would have conjured images of conflict going on around the world. The United States was embroiled in a proxy war in Vietnam, communist and anti-communist insurgencies were taking place across Africa and South America, and the global Cold War had pitted two nuclear armed world powers against each other in the shape of the Soviet Union and the United States. Yet in this contentious period in world history another war front broke out, although outside the scope of Cold War tensions. Car bombs, assassinations, and the imposition of military order were invoked not in some distant, civil war ravaged country, but in cities that were part of a first world industrial democracy. The seeming oddity of the Irish conflict that came to be known as the Troubles was just that, a low-level military conflagration taking place in the United Kingdom. The product of this conflict that most people are familiar with were the news images of mangled cars, bodies, and buildings in cities spread across Britain and Ireland; however, those images were not the only product. Unique within the chronology of the Troubles was the production of murals painted on buildings across the whole of Northern Ireland which spoke directly and explicitly about the nature of the conflict. Both Irish nationalist/republicans and Unionist engaged in what appeared to be a proxy war of paint, sprawling the image of the goals, heroes, and actions across the gable walls of Belfast and Derry. But from where did these murals come and what did they mean? The question this project seeks to answer is thus: what role did the murals play in the way the combatants saw themselves and their loyalties? The answer to this question is intricate and subtle, reflecting the myriad of ethnic and political loyalties which overlapped and continue to overlap in Northern Ireland. Necessary to understanding the murals, however, is an understanding of the economic, social, and political contexts that gave rise to the conflict that produced them.

Sectarian History of Ireland

Northern Ireland’s population immediately prior to the beginning of the Troubles reflected Ireland’s long history as a subject nation to the colonial enterprises of successive English and British governments. Ireland’s nature as a bastion of Celtic culture and Roman Catholicism in an otherwise heavily Germanic and Protestant North Sea region made the island and its people the frequent target of colonial enterprises. These enterprises ranged in goals and level of success but from the arrival of the first Anglo-Norman lords in the early years of the twelfth-century to the modern day, there have been concerted efforts at shaping the landscape and people of Ireland to suite the tastes and ideals of their continental or British neighbors.

The primarily Catholic nature of the Irish people’s religion remained a relative non-issue as long as the Roman Catholic Church remained the universal source of salvation within Europe. The arrival of the Protestant reformation on the shores of Britain in the early decades of the sixteenth-century caused deep conflict with the Irish people’s staunch loyalty to the Catholic Church and retention of Celtic culture. The most significant effort made to undermine the twin Celtic and Catholic identities of the population of Ireland came during the opening years of the seventeenth-century when James I, king of England and Scotland, and his ministers launched a colonial effort to displace the natives with citizens of England and Scotland. This scheme, termed the “Plantation of Ulster” was an organized, concerted effort to effect ethnic and social change within Ireland through the transplantation of population. Through processes of surveying and redistribution combined with anti-Catholic and anti-Irish policies, the plantation was intended to first alter the ruling class of Ireland and then ethnic and religious makeup of the population. The goal was thus at first the removal of the hard-to-control nobility of Ireland in
favor of rulers more likely to cooperate with long term goals aimed at the conversion or replacement of the island’s population.

It was during and immediately after the anarchic period of the English Civil Wars and the Commonwealth that the efforts to import protestant settlers to Ireland on a mass scale were laid down and executed by Parliament and Cromwell.\(^1\) The resultant influx of Protestant Scotch-English settlers who actively bought and developed land permanently changed the dynamic of land ownership across Ireland, but most heavily in the north of the country.\(^2\) The first serious challenge to this order came in the wake of the Glorious Revolution, a movement by Parliament which replaced the now officially Catholic King James II with his protestant son in law, the future William III. In response, James II and those loyal to him fled to Ireland where, with the help of his mentor Louis XIV, he succeeded in raising an army of Catholics and others unhappy with the previous centuries of English rule. The Williamite Wars which followed pitted the ranging armies of James II and William III against one another across the rolling landscape of Ireland. The pivotal battle of this conflict came in July of 1690 where William’s army of Dutch and English protestant veterans smashed the main force of James’ army at the River Boyne. The Battle of the Boyne, as it came to be called, became the defining moment of protestant power in Ireland, cementing the status, power, and legitimacy of the English system in Ireland. From that moment on July 12th became the anniversary of this system, for good or ill. This was, in effect, the social and political structure that was to govern Ireland until independence: “a landowning Protestant ascendancy class comparatively small in numbers, differing in national identity and aspirations from the masses of the population, who were Catholic in religion and had a sense, however vague and confusing at times it may have been, of Irish nationality.”\(^3\) This structure of power would only really be altered by the social and economic changes wrought on Ireland by the industrial revolution.

The industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries brought jobs and money to the ports and towns across Ireland. Industrial development was centered in Belfast and extended along lines of population and materiel supply into the surrounding agricultural hinterlands. The bays and islands of Belfast’s harbor influenced the development of shipbuilding and its subservient industries as well as the production of linen goods to drive the development of the industry and contribute to the build-up of wealth in the area. With the improvements in wealth and education that came with these economic processes Irish society began to produce a class of native Irish nationalists committed to the language and culture of their homes. Gaining steam throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, these movements came to be known as the Gaelic Revival, taking their nom de guerre from the resurgence in interests in the native language of Ireland, Gaelic Irish. Ireland was not left untouched by the growth of militant nationalist movements across Europe in the years before the First World War. This period saw the foundation, resurgence, and wider activity of a variety of movements dedicated to an armed struggle to free Ireland from the rule of the British Empire. The work of these movements culminated in an armed rebellion led by the Irish Republican Brotherhood which was launched in Dublin on April 24th, 1916. The Easter Uprising, as it came

---

\(^1\) England had seen about two decades between 1640 and 1660 marked by increasing tension between Charles I and Parliament, followed by a series of Civil Wars that saw Parliament triumph, Charles Beheaded, and the establishment of a republican Commonwealth of England in 1649. Oliver Cromwell, who had led the victorious New Model Army during the civil wars installed himself as a dictator by the mid 1650’s and ruled England and Ireland with an iron fist.


to become known, launched a generation of Irish nationalist revolutionaries into the cultural milieu of Ireland upon the failure of the rebellion and the execution of its leaders. Although the British dealt with the rebellion in relative short order, their hard handed tactics (the result of a correct suspicion of German involvement in fomenting the rebellion) turned public opinion against British policy in Ireland across the country and in the United States. The men who had led the uprising including Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, Michael Collins, and Eamon de Valera would become the folk heroes of modern Ireland and martyrs to the cause of Irish nationalism. Ultimately another armed rebellion begun in 1919 would gain Ireland her independence as well as formally establish Northern Ireland as a polity on the island.

While the Republic of Ireland remained a largely agrarian nation after independence, Northern Ireland retained the industrial base it had developed over the previous century. However by the middle of the twentieth-century, the decline of the economic and political power of the British Empire meant that the industries of Northern Ireland faced the same challenges as those located within England and Scotland. Namely declining profits, followed by nationalization, and reductions in work force. While certainly not preventing or disguising the second-class status of the many Catholics and Irish in Northern Ireland, the economic benefits of these industries kept the sectarian strife within Northern Ireland to a relatively low-lull between the partition of Ireland in 1921 and the mid-1960’s. This process of gradual de-industrialization within the major population centers of Northern Ireland laid bare and often inflamed the underlying and unresolved social, economic, and political issues that had plagued the area since the mid seventeenth-century.

In response to the blatantly discriminatory policies of the devolved Northern Ireland parliament, located in Stormont, and the worsening realities of life in Northern Ireland, the later years of the 1960’s saw the loose organization of Pro-Catholic civil rights groups modeled after those of the United States Civil Rights movement. The demands of these groups were often the establishment of fair voting practices, the elimination of widespread discrimination in housing, employment, and the distribution of benefits, and the inclusion of their representatives in the government of the country. The immediate response by the government was to label these organizations as political agitators and IRA members bent on the destruction of a peaceful society. In the words of the journalists and historians David McKittrick and David McVea, the violent response by Stormont officials “caused an explosion of anger within the wider Catholic community. It guaranteed the civil rights community a level of support in Northern Ireland and far beyond that was to prove irresistible. In the days and weeks afterwards marches, sit-ins, demonstrations, protests, and court appearances became an almost daily occurrence.” At the same time that the Civil Rights groups began to form, Unionists and unionists began to form armed groups for the defense of their interests. These groups were often

4 After the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) Irish counties had been allowed to vote on whether they wanted to remain a part of the U.K. or join the Irish Free State. Through duplicitous election tactics local unionists had managed to hold a majority (real or imagined) in six counties which voted to remain and formed Northern Ireland.

5 David McKittirick and David McVea, Making Sense of the Troubles (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2000), 38.

6 The Irish Republican Army of the mid-1960’s was the withered remainder of the rebel force which sought a united Ireland free of any British rule following the end of the War of Independence in 1921. Splitting from what would become the Irish Army, the IRA fought against those they considered to have sold out the cause of Irish independence as well as the British in Northern Ireland. Their campaigns against the British in Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State (followed by the Republic of Ireland) were sporadic and ineffective although they found their numbers began to swell following the violence of the mid-1960’s.

7 David McKittirick and David McVea, Making Sense of the Troubles (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2000), 42.
spurred by government statements on the nature and purpose of the Civil Rights groups as well as from traditional hostility to the equality with both the Irish and Catholics. The cycle of perceived over reaction, increasingly violent protest, and responsive violence by the government and armed groups led to a brutal cycle of action and response that continued through the turbulent years of the mid 1960’s. The violent response of the RUC to a Civil Rights march in the city of Derry turned the peaceful protest into a running street battle between the police and protesters who threw debris and Molotov cocktails; the violence in Derry quickly devolved into widespread rioting across all of Northern Ireland. Many historians and politicians place the official beginning of the conflict here, between the 12th and 17th of August of 1969 when the Battle of the Bogside erupted in Derry. In response to the actions of the violence of August of 1969, both the IRA and their Protestant Unionist counterparts began formulating armed responses in order to protect their interest and populations from both governmental and sectarian violence and reprisals.

The Troubles, 1969-2000

The most violent and deadly period of the Troubles immediately followed the events of August, 1969. The 1970’s saw the expansion of paramilitary groups and their activities to a hitherto unheard of level. This activity would first be characterized by the split between the traditional IRA and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, which came to be the primary nationalist/republican actor in the conflict. At the same time, Unionists armed and organized themselves within the Ulster Volunteer Force, a paramilitary group ordered around preserving the Unionist and protestant nature of Northern Ireland and modeled after a group of the same name active in the Home Rule years around 1912. The Ulster Defense Association, the larger and more famous of the Unionist paramilitaries, would enter the conflict upon their formation in 1971. The Battle of the Bogside and the rioting and violence that followed channeled thousands of recruits into the arms of paramilitaries across Northern Ireland in the early months of 1970. In the weeks and months that followed a vicious cycle of paramilitary attacks, RUC and British Army raids against suspected paramilitaries (mostly in republican/nationalist territories), and reprisals against both flowed into one another. The bloodiest year of the conflict would be

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8 This is the period that saw the formal foundation of the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1966. The group was formed in response to growing tensions with nationalists, republicans, and Catholics. The UVF would wind up being one of the largest, best organized, and virulent paramilitary groups of the conflict. CAIN University of Ulster.
9 The Battle of the Bogside is the term applied to the two-day riot that occurred in the Bogside neighborhood of Derry between civil rights protesters, nationalists, and the Royal Ulster Constabulary.
10 Originating in difference of political views and opinion on how best to respond to the British Government and Unionist groups, the “IRA Split” as this period came to be known ushered in the era of the modern Provisional Irish Republican Army and saw the demise of the traditional structure and methods of the pre-split IRA.
11 Referring to the Home Rule Bills which became more common in parliament as Irish MP’s gained a less aristocratic tradition. The first UVF was founded in order to fight to preserve Ulster’s position as a part of the United Kingdom.
12 The British government stepped into the fray in late 1969 when elements of the British Army were sent into Northern Ireland in an attempt to establish and maintain peace between the competing groups and their representative ethnicities. This addition of government forces, while initially bringing a welcomed respite to besieged Catholics, nationalists, and republicans, became a major point of contention as the troops were mainly used to assist and protect the hated RUC. Later accusations against both Westminster and the British Army would accuse them of not only overlooking the activities of Unionist paramilitaries, but of actively colluding with them in order to fight the PIRA and other nationalist and republican organizations.
1972, when about 500 people were killed across Northern Ireland. On January 30th of that year, British paratroopers would open fire on an illegal civil rights demonstration in the city of Derry, ultimately killing fourteen people. “Bloody Sunday,” as it became known, would be the first of many such days to which the word “Bloody” would be affixed. The response organized by local nationalists was instant and brutal with protests resounding across Britain and Ireland. To combat the rising tide of violence, the British government re-introduced internment without trial into Northern Ireland, a policy that had been used previously against suspected IRA activists. The government claimed that this action was taken in order to combat violent paramilitaries from both sides of the conflict, but the overwhelming majority of those arrested and interned were Catholics who had no known connections to the IRA or any armed nationalist or republican group. The effect of this policy was an upsurge in radicalization among youths and ordinary Catholic and Irish citizen. The local and international pressures that resulted from these policies convinced Westminster that the devolved Northern Ireland parliament based in Stormont would not and could not retain order. In 1972 the Stormont government collapsed under the strain of the Troubles and direct rule from London was implemented across the whole of Northern Ireland.

In addition to actions taken against the devolved parliament, the government expanded the capacity of the nation’s prisons in order to cope with the influx of detainees resulting from the Troubles. These new and expanded prisons included the infamous prison at Maze, more commonly known as “Long Kesh”. The prison had been established in order to deal with individuals detained during Operation Demitrius, an effort by the British Army and the RUC to round up suspected paramilitaries. The former airfield of the Royal Air Force would come to be known as a hotbed of Irish nationalist activity as well as ground zero for the internment of many individuals convicted of participating in paramilitary activities. The prison and the actions of the government and the guards in relation to the prisoners would become a critical rallying point for the nationalist communities and recruitment grounds for the PIRA. From the foundation of the prison in 1971 until the end of the conflict and the release of prisoners related to the Troubles, Long Kesh would become a rallying cry for the disaffected republican, nationalist, and Catholic communities. At the same time, the British Government introduced detention without trial to Northern Ireland in an effort to ensure they could hold on to their suspected militants as long as possible.

This same period saw the expansion of the UVF campaign against perceived nationalist/republican and PIRA targets. Attacks, killings, foot patrols, barricades and checkpoints became increasingly common within neighborhoods with a majority Protestant population. At the same time, the UVF expanded their campaign to bomb attacks meant to strike fear into the hearts of the nationalist/republican and Catholic communities as well as take out targets ostensibly tied to the PIRA. During this same period, another Unionist paramilitary group, the Ulster Defense Association, was formed with the same mission as that of the UVF: the protection of Protestants, Unionists, and unionists and the preservation of their status within the United Kingdom.

By the late 1970’s, war weariness had set in among the population in Northern Ireland as killings and bombing continued across the country. The British Army embarked on a number of operations meant to curtail the ability of paramilitaries, mainly the PIRA, to operate. In addition, a more hardened Conservative government, led by Margaret Thatcher, took power in London, ratcheting up rhetoric against the violence of the Troubles and the PIRA in particular. The result

13 David McKittirick and David McVea, Making Sense of the Troubles (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2000), 76.
was a hardening of official attitudes towards all prisoners held on charges related to paramilitary activity or terrorism and the revocation of political status for these prisoners, effectively making them criminals in the eyes of the law. The period also saw two major attacks by the PIRA that would make headlines across the world. In August of 1979 an IRA bomber succeeded in assassinating Lord Mountbatten while he was on vacation in Ireland where a PIRA operator had placed a bomb on Mountbatten’s fishing vessel which detonated while out to sea.\(^\text{14}\) That same month saw a successful PIRA ambush of British soldiers outside the town of Warrenpoint. There, two PIRA bombs exploded while a convoy drove past, killing eighteen servicemen and wounding six more. Despite the apparent successes however, the PIRA was seeing declines in the number of recruits as the cycle of attack and revenge perpetrated by the PIRA, the UVF, and the UDA produced a seemingly never-ending cycle of casualties, often civilian.

The 1980’s opened with two hunger strikes undertaken by nationalist held in Long Kesh. Both strikes were staged in order to convince the British government to return political status to the prisoners held as a result of their actions during the Troubles. Political status had given the prisoners certain rights and privileges not granted to criminal prisoners. The second hunger strike, led by Bobby Sands, however was the more famous of the two. The state of the conflict, the hunger strikes, and Bobby Sand’s eventual victory in a parliamentary election convinced the PIRA leadership that a change in strategy was necessary. This new policy, termed “the Armalite and the ballot box” strategy, marked a major shift in how the PIRA and their enemies acted and reacted within the context of the conflict. The leadership decided to end their policy of political abstentionism in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, recognize the government of the Republic, and include Sinn Fein as the political wing of the organization.\(^\text{15}\) At the same time, the PIRA continued their campaigns of violence against the British government, the Army, and Unionist paramilitaries. The goal of the PIRA campaign was to make the further occupation of Northern Ireland by British troops costly and unpopular as well as dangerous and to spread their activities to the rest of the U.K. to underscore that point. One of the notable attacks of this period included the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton, England in 1984, which was intended to eliminate Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet during a convention of the Conservative Party.

The late 1980’s saw a renewed effort by the British government, in secret, at brokering some kind of peace between the warring factions of Northern Ireland. The leaders of many political parties, paramilitaries and churches were all included in a huge web of secret meetings, talks, and communications bent on brokering some semblance of peace in the land.\(^\text{16}\) The first success of the process was the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 which laid out the British government’s commitment to upholding the right of residents in the whole of Ireland to freely vote on the status of Northern Ireland.\(^\text{17}\) More talks over the course of 1993 and 1994 resulted in the August, 1994 announcement by the PIRA of a cessation of all military activity. The period

\(^{14}\) Lord Mountbatten had been the last British Viceroy of India and guided the country through its process of decolonization, as well as having guided the British defense forces through the end of the empire. He was also widely known to have been a mentor to the young Prince of Wales, Prince Charles.

\(^{15}\) Originating in an Irish republican worker’s party in the early years of the 20th century, Sinn Fein had, by the 1980’s, become a leftest republican party. The party and its leader, Gerry Adams, would come to play a major role in politics during the Troubles, the peace process, and the decades following the end of the conflict.


\(^{17}\) The text read: “The British government agree that it is for the people of the island of Ireland alone, by agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish” *Ibid.*, 196.
between 1994 and 1998 included much more violence perpetrated by paramilitaries of both sides of the conflict, but the peace process moved forward as well. By 1998 an agreement between the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, Sinn Fein, the Democratic Unionist Party, and the leaders of various paramilitaries at a final and lasting process of peace. Signed in the spring of 1998, the Good Friday Agreement laid out plans for the decommissioning of weapons by paramilitaries, changes to the structure of government in Northern Ireland, the U.K., and Ireland. With the exception of some scattered violence in the years since, the Troubles had come to a peaceful end.

**History of the Murals**

The phenomena of the murals within the context of the Troubles begins, like the conflict itself, far before the outbreak of violence in the late 1960’s. Originating in artistic decorations for cultural celebration, the act of painting political murals in Northern Ireland is barely older than the state itself. From the beginning though, they have had a distinct relationship to the culturally relative views of the area’s history held by the different ethno-political groups present in the country. As a result, the individual histories of the two mural traditions, Unionist and nationalist, are divergent in their origins and purposes relative to their specific groups.

The first recorded mural created in Northern Ireland was reportedly painted by a Mr. John McClean in the summer of 1908. McClean, a protestant, painted an image celebrating the triumph of William III over the Catholic James II in the Williamite Wars of the late seventeenth-century. Located on Beersbridge Road in Belfast, the mural was painted as part of the traditional neighborhood decorations undertaken by local Protestants in anticipation of the annual state holiday around the 12th of July. The holiday, celebrating William’s triumphs over the Catholic Jacobites, was an occasion for painted curbs, decorative bunting, parties and bonfires. In this context, McClean’s mural was simply an extension of the traditional arts and crafts decorations used during this period to celebrate the holiday. Although having both implicit and explicit anti-Catholic and ant-Irish meaning, it was not an explicitly political image outside of that context. McClean’s work would, however, spark a new trend among celebrants of the 12th in the future the resulted in the annual painting or re-touching of Unionist murals in preparation for the holiday. These murals, often points of pride and displays of loyalty in the face of rising Irish nationalism, became the focal points for local celebrations of protestant identity in Northern Ireland. They were often painted by local artisans utilizing materials either taken from their jobs in shipbuilding or coachwork, or crowd funded by local collections. The result from this input of time, money, and effort by local groups and organizations turned the murals into points of artistic and political pride amongst the communities that had them created and served to underline their identity within the still-ascendant Protestant ruling class of the country.

These murals, and their roles as cultural identifiers, gained added significance in the years following the establishment of the Northern Irish state in 1921. Bill Rolston, a sociologist from the University of Ulster, writes that:

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The ritual became not merely a re-affirmation of unionist identity, but of a new variant in the protestant ascendancy, a state ruled by one party and founded on the exclusion of a large minority of the population, the nationalists. Where the state’s first prime minister could boast of having a ‘protestant parliament and a protestant state,’ marching, flying flags, and painting murals took on an extra significance. They became in effect a civic duty, recognized and legitimized by the state and its growing party.  

This was the visual tradition that existed within the protestant and Unionist communities of Northern Ireland into the period of the Troubles. It’s clear to see then why the Unionist examples of murals often followed these traditional themes and structures to emphasize the position and ideology of Unionist Protestants during the conflict. It also explains the almost religious devotion to historical motifs and military imagery that is displayed within these examples.

The traditions of mural painting within nationalist, republican, and Catholic communities lacked the historical antecedents that the protestant and Unionist communities had. Structural and societal discrimination meant that these groups often lacked the jobs to provide materials or income necessary to fund the creation of murals. One of the primary causes of the lack of a pre-1980’s public culture of nationalist imagery was the infamous 1954 Flags and Emblem’s Act. This act, passed by the devolved parliament of Northern Ireland, “obliged the police to protect the display of the Union flag anywhere in Northern Ireland and empowered them to remove any other flag or emblem whose display threatened a breach of the peace.”  

This imprimitur gave the forces of the government the justification of strictly policing any imagery they felt threatened the “peace” of the area. In practice, this legal grounding was used almost exclusively against any imagery perceived to be nationalist, republican or otherwise anti-status quo. Even the display or creation of an Irish tricolor could run afoul of act. As a result of these processes, there are almost no known examples, with the exception of the “Free Derry” murals, of nationalist murals before the early 1980’s. That combined with the seventy-year tradition of protestant and Unionist murals initially identified the medium as a protestant or Unionist mode of expression.

The realities of life in Northern Ireland that combined to stymie a nationalist mural tradition are varied within the culture of the area. The most obvious hindrance to the initial development of such a tradition was the lack of state-sponsored, identified, or celebrated cultural holidays for those groups to celebrate. Widespread and recognized holidays such as the 12th allow for the annual re-affirmation of social and political identities for groups within the official calendar organized by the state. Cultural celebration as holidays of nationalists, republicans, and Catholics were thus forced underground or into the private sphere as a result of their status as second-class citizens, never gaining the widespread recognition and group-benefits of the protestant and Unionist holidays.  

In addition to cultural discrimination against these Irish groups, the official and unofficial policies of employment discrimination against Catholics, republicans, and nationalists meant that these groups lacked the financial ability to fund cultural works such as murals. Even semi-skilled trade jobs that would have offered the materials often used by working-class Protestants of murals were often reserved for those same Protestants.  

20 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), i.  
22 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), iii.  
The combined result of these factors was the almost complete absence of nationalist murals in Northern Ireland before 1980.

The tradition that did eventually emerge in this period of nationalist/republican works evolved from graffiti made in support of the PIRA and INLA members involved in the blanket protests of the late 1970’s.24 Scrawled on walls across Northern Ireland in various shades of paint, these messages these messages often offered general support for one or more paramilitary organization, individual or policy position. Over time, simple images such as flags were often added by the artists in order to visually underscore the position or aim of the graffiti. The widespread knowledge and support of the IRA hunger strikes in the early 1980’s provided these artists with more identifiable messages, figures, and imagery by which to make their point known. The result was the final full-blown phase transition of these messages from graffiti to political murals of varying complexity. The initial themes of support for the hunger strikers, the PIRA’s armed campaign, and those imprisoned would remain popular themes for the murals for the remainder of the conflict and on into the new millennium. Added scope and legitimacy were gained by decision by Sinn Fein to fund and direct the creation of political murals across Northern Ireland as well. These murals became an important, officially recognized part of the PIRA and Sinn Fein’s new “Armalite and Ballotbox” strategy of the 1980’s. Together these messages of cultural identity and support as well as political positions served to underline the group identity of nationalists and republicans in the same way that the murals of their Unionist counterparts served to underscore their desire cultural traits.

Almost as soon as the conflict in Northern Ireland began, studies of the many conflicting sides, their histories, and the various aspects of life in the area began to be produced. During the conflict, most studies focused on the why’s behind the violence, ideas on how to end it, and how to bring the feuding parties to the peace table. Following the end to the conflict, many focused on the experiences of those involved like the Boston College project which produced the book *Voices From the Grave* (by Ed Moloney) and its surrounding controversy.25 In comparison, the study of the political murals in Ireland is a relatively recent development within the study of the Troubles. Led initially by Bill Rolston who pioneered recording the murals with photographs, the study has since evolved and now encompasses many different specializations and methodological traditions; the dominant studies of the murals so far have been performed by sociologist seeking to understand their role in the dynamic of group formation in Northern Ireland. Their anthropological, psychological, and sociological background provides a good

24 The Blanket Protest had originated in late 1976 as a reaction by Irish prisoners in Long Kesh against their re-designation as criminals within the British legal system. Their former political status had given them certain rights akin to a Prisoner of War including the right to wear their own clothes. Instead, they clothed themselves in their prison issued blankets. Their protest against being forced to wear prison uniforms evolved to the “Dirty Protest” where they refused to bath or empty the sanitary equipment in their cells.

25 The oral interviews that eventually formed the basis for *Voices From the Grave* were part of a large project started by Boston College in the early 2000’s to record and preserve the memories of those who participated in theTroubles. These interviews were done by representatives of the university in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland with the understanding that the contents of those interviews would not be released or utilized by researchers until the passing of those interviewed. Upon the publishing of the book in 2010 and the revelation of this project to the wider public, the Police Service of Northern Ireland attempted to have the tapes subpoenaed through the U.S. legal system in connection with ongoing investigates on crimes committed during the conflict. The resultant legal battle between Boston College, The U.S. Justice Department and the PSNI resulted in the handing over of transcripts made by the two men whose experiences formed the basis for *Voices from the Grave* and the destruction of many of the remaining tapes by interviewees who feared further subpoenas and legal action.
exploration of the how and why questions surrounding the murals, but fail to adequately explore the historical forces at work and the historical implication of the murals.

Bill Rolston, a sociologist from the University of Ulster in Belfast, attempts to establish the chronological history of the murals in his work “Re-Imagining: Mural Painting and the State in Northern Ireland.” He argues that the tradition of painting murals to support ideological causes goes much further back than the early 1970’s, instead originating in the early 20th century when the “Irish question” came to a head in the United Kingdom: “each July working class unionists painted murals, just as they painted kerbstones, erected bunting, and dressed in their finery to march to ‘the Field’ to hear speeches condemning republicanism, nationalism, and Catholicism.”

Thus Rolston links the origins of the murals not to dissident nationalists, but the long tradition of Protestant pride and demonstration which takes center stage every year in July. Murals were, from the very beginning, a mark of class and religious division between the ethnicities of Northern Ireland.

Ray Cashman expands on Rolston’s work in “Visions of Irish Nationalism” where he argues, through comparative methodology, that the murals served as “vernacular forms of custom and materiel culture [used to] reiterate...differential identities in terms of ethnicity, denomination and politics.”

Cashman contrasts the urban murals with less visual and less well known form of vernacular identity: oral and legendary narratives found in the more rural communities of Northern Ireland. Cashman’s thesis is a combination of Rolston’s theory on the origins of murals and Mulholland’s argument over the impetus of ethnic struggle in Northern Ireland: The murals served as mediums by which visually and culturally similar residents of urban areas in Northern Ireland could differentiate themselves from their perceived opponents. Together these works establish not only the historical origins of the murals themselves, but also some of their roles within the communities that painted them.

Beyond the imagery and consumption of the murals and their social contexts, the physical locations of the murals often played a big role in their impact. The location of the structure on which they were painted could hold just as much meaning as the actual mural itself, often signaling boundaries or separations. To this end, the combination of winding antique streets with victorian attempts at city planning gave the neighborhoods and the artists ready boundaries to work within. Within these spaces the locations of the murals were often carefully chosen for a variety of reasons, some of which are highlighted by the anthropologist Neil Jarman in his book, Materiel Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland. He writes that artists often chose the locations they did in order “to avoid the dangers of painting political statements in areas where one might be exposed to either the security forces or one’s political enemies, but it also exerts a degree of control over the image and its meaning. It targets the images at the people who will more readily understand the nuances and allusions. Just as the marching orders control access to their images through restricted temporal display, so access to the murals is of a restricted spatial nature. The messages on the murals are not intended to convert the unbelievers.”

Thus the message sent by a mural could be just as heavily affected by where an artist placed his work as the specific imagery they chose to reproduce. The overall impact of the works could be affected by where the images were represented as much by what was represented.

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Sometimes, the areas in which the murals were painted were shaped by their artwork just as much as the murals were shaped by the geography. Sara McDowell and Catherine Switzer explore this theme in their article “Violence and Vernacular: Conflict, Commemoration, and Rebuilding in the Urban Context.” In order to achieve as comprehensive a study as possible, the authors narrowed their field to the murals of the Bogside neighborhood in the city of Derry/Londonderry. The authors examine the geography of the Bogside, the events of the Troubles within the neighborhood, and how the locations of memorials, including murals, were part of the communities experience of the conflict. The authors use a series of murals painted in the early 1990’s by a group of artists known as the “Bogside Artists” extensively in their work. The murals were intended to “chronicle the community’s memory of the Troubles.”29 The author’s goal is to trace the impact of the murals as geographic and physical memorials, along with more traditional monuments and plaques, as memorials to the activities within the Bogside. In this same vein of exploring the roles of geography and imagery in the Troubles, Dominic Bryan and Gordon Gillespie in their article “Belfast Flags, Boundaries, and Bunting: The Landscape of Territory” explore how images and imagery defined and still define the geographical spaces of the city of Belfast as a whole. During and after the troubles, murals, as well as other forms of imagery such as flags, served not only as propaganda for a particular viewpoint, but also a physical markers of space, outlining one group’s “territory” from another’s. They write that “Public space, the use of symbols, the enactment of rituals are not epiphenomena in the conflict, they are central to the way people experience life in the city.”30 Thus the physical space surrounding the murals themselves, along with other political imagery, did just as much to inform and shape the experiences of the Northern Irish people as their works. Together these articles explore how the spaces around the murals themselves helped define the murals and their neighborhoods. Combined with the history of murals put forward by Rolston and their roles as vernacular cultural identifiers, these works allow the reader to expand the understanding of this cultural identification and demarcation to the physical spaces and geographical layout of cities in Northern Ireland.

Moving further out in scope, Bill Rolston returns to the subject of the political murals in Northern Ireland in “The Brothers on the Walls: International Solidarity an Irish Political Murals.” Here he seeks to historicize the Irish murals within the larger context of revolutionary political murals across the world. He notes that many murals in Northern Ireland which espoused nationalist revolutionary sentiment also explicitly connected themselves to wider revolutionary struggles abroad, often violent “freedom” movements. He writes that “These murals are seen as an instance of solidarity with people in struggle everywhere - against imperialism and state oppression - and thus represent recognition by Irish mural painters of their affinity to liberation movements everywhere.”31 These acts of revolutionary solidarity position themselves in opposition to the struggles which Unionist murals had in finding equally suitable supporters around the world.

In her article “Local Symbols, Global Networks: Rereading the Murals of Belfast” Debby Lisle seeks to shift the overall paradigm through which the murals are viewed. To her it is critical

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to move away from seeing these works simply as the result of a conflict between two groups, the so-called “two communities thesis.” She argues that the murals must be understood through the wider, international contexts of murals, political painting, psychology of advertising, and within the burgeoning business of “political tourism. These murals then allow for an investigation of the larger framework of relationships between actors in Northern Ireland with other groups within and without the Island. When combined with Bill Rolston’s work on the same subject, international connections evidenced in the murals, a wider web of involvement becomes apparent within the framework of the Troubles. In this sense, Lisle writes that “the murals are far from straightforward; they invest the urban landscape with ‘contentious ideological messages’ that disrupt and exceed any notion of two bounded communities in perpetual conflict.”

Most critical to my project is the work of a University of California Santa Barbra sociologist, Gregory Goalwin. In his 2013 article “The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland’s Political Murals, 1979-1998” Goalwin seeks to examine the complex historical and sociological contexts of the imagery contained within the murals of Northern Ireland. However, he endeavors to view the murals as more than just champions of ideology in a fractured cityscape. Rather than acting as billboards for the views of established, organized, and entrenched groups, he argues that “the Unionist and republican mural traditions...both helped create and express the self-identity of the two sides of the conflict; they created groups that emphasized the legitimacy of their movement and the righteousness of their causes. Murals did this by creating and disseminating cultural myths that served as the foundation of invented traditions.” This argument places Goalwin’s work within the same sociological framework for the choice and use of his sources as Rolston, however he distances himself from Rolston’s previous work in one specific manner: he argues that previous scholarship had assumed that the paramilitary organizations and the sectarian groups they claimed to represent overlapped completely. Rather, Goalwin is arguing that the murals served to legitimize these groups within their wider cultural contexts, thus garnering support for their ends and their means.

Together these works form the historiographical basis from which my project will emerge. Drawing upon the various economic, political, and social histories of Northern Ireland and the Troubles, I will be able to form a detailed understanding of the contexts of the Troubles and their actors. The historiography of the murals themselves focuses mainly on the sociological roles of the murals within Northern Ireland. My work will bridge the gap between history and sociology and establish the historical role of the murals as visual repositories of the thoughts, actions, and feelings of the nationalist and Unionist communities in Northern Ireland. In other words, their function as archives for their creators.

**Eyewitnessing and the Period Eye**

Ultimately what sets apart this study of the murals of Northern Ireland is the methodology utilized to place the murals and their contents into a more specific context within the conflict and the groups that painted them. The meat of this process comes in the form of processing the murals and the contextual meanings as well as the culturally significant meanings.

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of their component images. Thus, an exploration of the contexts of these murals as well as their images is necessary in order to grasp the murals as fully as possible. Breaking the murals apart into their component images, examining their placement, and their stories helps our understanding of how the people involved in the Troubles processed the events of the past and the present and channeled them into street art. More importantly, it shows how the messages of these works fit into constructed historical narratives which were relative in the heroes, positions, and goals of the groups which painted them.

The process of interpreting these murals as a whole as well as their component pieces as well as treating them as primary sources is, of course, fraught with all of the risks typically associated with dealing with primary sources. In addition, the use of images as primary sources introduces unique and relatively new challenges and constraints into the traditional historical methodology. In order to avoid these pitfalls and ensure a sound analysis of the murals, I will utilize the methods and theories on historical images put forward by two academics in the fields of art and history: Michael Baxandall and Peter Burke. Each man produced a book on the interpretation and use of images and contextual information as sources from which to draw. Importantly, they each set our relatively stable and sound methods for utilizing visual sources, much as van Ranke and the early professional historians did for the use of textual sources. The works of these two men form the essential foundation from which the analyses of these murals will spring.

In his 1972 book *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy*, Michael Baxandall laid out a revolutionary approach to interpreting and understanding images from the past more comprehensively. Taking the production, interpretation, and cultural contexts of painting in renaissance Italy, the author explores how all three of these subjects interact to inform how images are interpreted. He argues that an image, beyond the biological capacity for human sight, is a highly variable phenomena dependent on and sensitive to interpretive contexts relative to each individual viewer. These interpretive contexts spring from both the individual and the cultural contexts that produced the viewer, in essence, depending on the shared cultural experiences of the audience to confer understanding. Baxandall describes this process as thus:

To sum up: some of the mental equipment a man orders his visual experiences with is highly variable, and much of this variable equipment is culturally relative in the sense of being determined by society which has influenced his experiences. Among these variables are categories with which he classifies his visual stimuli, the knowledge he will use to supplement what his immediate vision gives him, and the attitude he will adopt to the kind of artificial object seen.

In this way then, the artist in question for a particular piece is limited to using images, compositions, and forms that convey the intended meaning to the audience just as the audience uses their own personal and cultural contextual experiences to derive meaning from the image. Thus if a modern viewer can place themselves as firmly as possible within the cultural context

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34 Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34.
36 Ibid., 40.
within which the work was produced, they can experience and interpret far more about the work, its artist, and its audience.

Utilizing this process then, by placing myself as deeply as possible within the shared cultural context of Northern Ireland immediately before and during the period of the Troubles, I can analyze the murals far more deeply than previously shown. The murals of the period can be interpreted beyond their roles as graffiti, blatant political messages, or images of intimidation. Instead, they might be investigated and interpreted for their cultural relevance to the communities which produced and viewed them. This, in turn, can lead to the examination of broader trends of interpretation and meaning of the phenomena of the murals as a whole, drawing connections and making inferences about them as a whole.

How then am I to open the period eye within my role as a historian? Baxandall promotes reading as deeply as possible into the specific and cultural contexts which produced the work in question. Reading about the process behind the creation of an image, how that transaction between artist and patron was handled, as well as the typical conventions of such a relationship reveals why certain stylistic choices were made or ignored. Understanding the culture which produced the work, in Baxandall’s case Renaissance Italy and the industry of producing religious works, explains much about the layout and subject of many of these works. Mirroring this process in Northern Ireland will be done by establishing the general cultural contexts for a person in each of the specific mural traditions. Reading personal recollections of period as well as newspaper and other popular media reports on the conflict will give a good general primer on the culture at hand. The reactions of these sources of print media to the murals as they became wildly popular in the 1980’s will also allow me to see how the different periodicals, and presumably their readership, interpreted the same works.

Central to the process of interpreting the murals and their wider historical contexts within the constructed narratives is treating them as historical sources. While historians have relied heavily on written texts within the study for generations, it is only recently that the use of images as historical sources has begun to be widely accepted by the profession. The primary objection by many to the use of visual sources is the issue of interpretation itself. Namely the question, can the interpretation of images be standardized to some degree? There is some semblance on a standard for interpreting textual evidence for use in historical works, but the issue remained for many years of establishing one for the use of images. One of the pioneers in this process of interpretation is the British cultural historian Peter Burke. His 2000 book *Eyewitnessing: the Use of Images as Historical Evidence* laid out some strict processes and guidelines for utilizing images as primary sources. Parts of the process required a re-imagining of the realities of textual interpretation that historians rely upon, but much of the methods described mirror those used on texts.

Central to Burke’s presentation of images as valid historical sources is his interpretation of the word “source” and its relative value within the historical method. He argues, echoing Dutch historian Gustaf Renier, that the word “source” is unintentionally misleading and confining relative to the work that historians are actually engaged in. The word “source” implies a font of truth from which the historian draws his or her conclusions about the past rather than interpretations based on the remaining scraps of information from a particular historical period. Instead, both Burke and Renier, suggest the use of the word “trace” to describe the contextually relevant pieces of information historians use to draw their conclusions.37 This vocabulary more

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accurately reflects the actions that a historian is engaged in when making an argument or drawing a conclusion from their “traces.” They are engaged in piecing together a broader picture of the period from its piecemeal remains.

In that sense, then, the use of an image as a “trace” of a period is no different from using a piece of writing from the same period. A historian could use almost any piece or trace of the period in question, if properly analyzed, in their work. Images used as historical traces then allow the historian and their audience a potential glimpse into the wider cultural and personal contexts which produced the piece, much as Michael Baxandall argued. To this point, Burke argues, the work of whoever created an image gives a modern viewer snapshot of the creator’s personal context within their broader cultural context recording an act of eyewitnessing. The result of this re-phrasing positions the historian to utilize images sources in much the same way the historians have traditionally used textual sources to propel their exposition and inferences.

Burke also demonstrates his process of utilizing images as traces in the subsequent chapters. Breaking images into a series of common categories and sub-categories, the author shows the reader how one might approach the reading of an image in much the same way as the approach to a written source. This includes looking for personal and cultural bias and other potential limitations as well as bearing in mind the specific realities of the creation of the trace.

These processes mean much for the examination of the murals of the Troubles as traces or sources. Utilizing the period eye as established by Baxandall and the idea of eyewitnessing put forth by Burke, we can begin to assemble relative cultural narratives of the murals and their meanings to those who viewed them in situ. It also allows for the creation of overarching principles which guide the interpretation of the murals as a culturally relevant expressive piece. Ultimately this means that we can delve into the murals as sources and see what their purpose was far beyond their role as wall decorations and political posturing. Instead, they can be placed within the culturally relative historical narratives which produced and relied on them to justify the actions of the Troubles.

**Northern Ireland’s Period Eye**

Creating the period eye in Northern Ireland is dependent on reconstructing the cultural contexts which would have influenced those creating and viewing the murals. Exploring the commonalities of life in this period in all their intricacies and idiosyncrasies will allow the reader to gain a more nuanced understanding of the murals and their missions. In order to balance these localized experiences, often concentrated in the small localities of Northern Ireland, it is also necessary to gauge wider reactions towards the works. Reports such as newspaper articles that mention the murals will play a vital role in process. These wider reports will serve to contextualize the reaction of the nationalists and the Unionists within wider responses to street art from across the United Kingdom and Ireland.

In Northern Ireland cultural experiences were often concentrated around specific geographies which reflected the economic, social, and political realities of life in the country. For the most part, this meant that the Celtic-Irish (mainly Catholic) population and the Anglo/Scots-Irish (mainly protestant) rarely lived in mixed neighborhoods, especially in urban areas. These neighborhoods were legacies not only of the social structures put in place during the ascendency of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries but also the realities of first industrialization and then

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post-industrialization. It must be noted then that it is recognized that the working classes of Northern Ireland were the primary actors on both sides of the conflict during the majority of its duration as well as the planning and creation of the murals. Middle and upper class residents of these areas were less likely to engage in these issues due to the effects of better education, family life, wealth, and a lack of contact with the disaffected of either side of the conflict. The ethnic nature of the middle class as well, mainly Anglo-Scots protestants, also meant that they often had relatively little contact with many Celtic-Irish Catholics.

This survey of experience is mainly focused on the urban working classes that one would typically find in cities such as Belfast and Derry in the 1960’s and 1970’s. These urban areas, typified in the 1970’s by aging Victorian and Edwardian infrastructure and industry displayed much of the same qualities that are associated with those city plans. These areas were characterized by small, dense urban living spaces for working populations with close proximity to the industrial employment that defined Britain in these periods. Rarely were these spaces broken up by green spaces or other breaks in the brick, mortar, and cobblestone environs of these rapidly deteriorating cityscapes. Housing in these areas (for both Catholic and protestant working classes) typically composed of turn-of-the-century terraced or row houses and tenement buildings. These spaces, initially designed for the small urban families of industrial Britain’s heyday, now found themselves increasingly cramped and dilapidated as the needs of the modern world encroached on their antiquated structures. By the 1970’s the state of these buildings was generally poor in both appearance and practicality and they were repeatedly referred to as slums by reports from around the world. However the lack of money in the communities following the post-war decline of British industry meant that there was little capital within the communities with which to care for these aging buildings. Furthermore, the dearth of urban money was exacerbated by the flight of the middle and upper classes to the suburbs of the cities as their incomes allowed these families and individuals to escape the cramped city-center for the increased space, comfort, and convenience of the driving suburbs. These twin processes of aging infrastructure and urban flight were the scourges of urban areas that many cities and towns across the western world experienced in the post-war years. Deteriorating infrastructure, lack of income from taxable residents and lowered property values caused general economic depression in and around city centers. The resultant low housing costs attracted increasing numbers of low-income families from across Northern Ireland who rapidly separated into the ethnically segregated communities which would become world famous in the years to come. These resultant mono-ethnic neighborhoods came to define cities like Derry and Belfast where neighborhoods like the Bogside, the Shankill, the Falls Road, and the Divis would come to define much larger urban areas by their poverty and violence. Compounding these issues of politco-ethnic trouble in these areas was the fact that they were often only physically separated by the width of a city street. This closing of ethnic and religious ranks around geographic areas were one of the rigidities of local life that helped define the communal experiences of those raised within them. The combination of all of these factors meant that these areas were also popular focuses for welfare benefits, state housing redevelopments, and other exports of the British welfare state. While the immediate result of the ethnic constitution of these neighborhoods was the emergence of urban centers that seemed to be rigidly segregated along religious lines, they also produced vibrant, lively communities that proudly displayed and celebrated their communal identities. This balance of rigid segregation and vibrant community life produced individuals who were fiercely loyal to the communities which helped to form them and their outlooks.
Working class neighborhoods defined by their Catholic and/or Irish residents tended to produce strong cultural experiences associated with the Catholic Church, left-wing politics, and Celtic cultural expression. Often these three identities were blended into a potent combination of left-leaning Irish nationalism that was to prove to be a great boon in recruiting for the Provisional IRA. Brendan Hughes, a former member of the PIRA and a one-time friend of Gerry Adams, recalled the effect that his own father’s fervent Catholic faith and socialist views had on him as a child in the Lower Falls Road, Belfast. He writes that his father’s relegation to manual labor and crushing poverty by virtue of the lack of opportunity provided by his ethnicity and religion helped harden him into a leftist and informed his affection for socialist politics.39 These influences produced in Hughes a personal appreciation for his nationality as an Irishman, his views as a socialist, and his world view as a Catholic. In comparison, the experiences of William Kelly, a native of Derry and a member of the nationalist mural-painting group The Bogside Artists, spoke of how his views of a socialist affected his life across Ireland. His attempts to get a job as an art teacher in the Republic of Ireland were often stymied by his vocal commitment to his politics and his less-than-ideal view of the Catholic Church. He writes that

I had tried to get in the teacher-training course, but the interviewers...knew well enough that I was both a socialist and able to think for myself, and so the drawbridge was quickly hoisted...I was to have a similar experience when I applied in Cork, except the lady there...was even more freaked-out at the prospect of me at large on the premises misleading the church-going youth of Ireland.40

The experiences and influences of both Brendan Hughes and William Kelly are such that, by and large, they were representative of many youths raised in the urban ghettos of Irish Catholics with varying degrees of emphasis placed on each one. Their words also show how a variety of different experiences backgrounds could alter the outlooks of the youth of Northern Ireland despite both men identifying as “nationalists.”

Many of these experiences were also reported by rural Catholics in the agricultural hinterlands that surrounded the cities of Belfast and Derry. Eamon Collins, also a former member of the PIRA, recounted many of these experiences in his memoirs titled Killing Rage, a work which tracks his life and personal development through his involvement and eventual renunciation of the PIRA. Collins was raised in a fervently Celtic and Catholic family in the village of Camlough. His mother, a devout woman who was also conversant in Irish, instilled in him a healthy knowledge of both his faith and his culture which stuck with him during his formational years.41 What his childhood lacked however, was a dose of political activity common in the cities, his family wasn’t particularly political.

These familial and cultural contexts often produced individuals who were intimately familiar with the histories of politics for the Catholics of Northern Ireland, their faith under British Rule, and the Celtic culture and language which helped to define many of their ancestors in the centuries before. But the histories of their people were not the only experiences that people raised in their contexts were intimately familiar with. As both men report, the fourth factor in the formation of their cultural and personal identity was the effect of rampant discrimination upon them and their families. Much like African-American residents of the American South, Catholics

in Northern Ireland faced frequent incidents of discrimination from all sections of society. Hughes identifies his frequent, and in his eyes undeserving run-ins, with the Royal Ulster Constabulary as part of those formational cultural experiences of his youth. He writes that as a Catholic family in the area, we were constantly singled out for special attention. I mean, I was arrested, God knows how many times, taken to court, and fined five shillings or ten shillings for not having lights on the bike, for playing football in the street...Right through my early years, I had plenty of run-ins with the RUC, over petty little things, but I can’t remember anyone else, any of my other protestant friends being arrested as often as I was.42

While fully representative of the experiences of only one man, this anecdote serves as a stark visual recollection of the treatment many Irish Catholics could expect to receive at the hands of the dreaded RUC. Discrimination did not, however, end with the police. Recollections tell of newspaper ads requesting that no Catholics apply for jobs, a personal name or the name of one’s school leading to a questioning from officials, shop keepers, and others. These as well as a myriad of other experiences helped instill a fear and hatred of the established system in the eyes of many Catholics. These experiences often culminated in a communal view which saw themselves as a persecuted or oppressed group and helped to influence the emergence of the civil rights movements in the 1960’s.

These experiences with discrimination were often matched with stories that told of the successes, tragedies, and strength of Irish nationalists and republicans of bygone eras. These stories served, like the traditional tales of Celtic and Irish heroes, to emphasize and underline the shared ethnic and political values of the community. In the period leading up to the Troubles in the 1950’s and 1960’s these stories often involved operatives of the IRA during and after the war of independence. Men like Billy McKee, a Belfast commander of an IRA unit and perennial resident of the country’s jails, served as icons of Irish, Catholic, and republican resistance to the oppression of the state apparatus in Northern Ireland.43 Stories such as theirs served to reinforce the idea of traditional resistance to the forces of the British Crown or their local representatives. Often these stories of communal resistance were packaged with lessons which reinforced communal solidarity and an unwillingness to cooperate with local authorities. To this end Hughes recounted a story in which he was caught playing cards in the street by the police and turned in the names of those playing with him. When he was returned to his father by the police, Hughes was punished not for gambling in the streets but for giving the police the names of those he was playing with.44 These forms of communal resistance, hero worship, and community policing helped to cement the ideas and ideals of republicanism and communal support within the psyches of those growing up in these areas. These themes would be touched upon in the decades to come not only by the recruiters and operatives of the PIRA and other republican paramilitaries, but also by the murals painters that would follow in their wake. Kevin Hasson

42 Ed Moloney, *Voices From the Grave: Two Men’s War in Ireland* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 38.
43 Hughes recounts his father’s, and in turn his own, admiration of Billy McKee as an example of the hero worship that many young Catholics displayed towards well known members of the IRA. Hughes recounts how “later on, in years to come, I saw Billy with more than a .45 in his hand. I was so enchanted by him, and admired him so much, and my father was there as well. I was so sort of romantically involved with the IRA, even before I joined it. It was just something I believed I was destined to be...” Ed Moloney, *Voices From the Grave: Two Men’s War in Ireland* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 36.
grew up in the Derry ghetto of the Creggan during the 1960’s. Through his father he was introduced to the arts and spent his time as a child making sketches and drawings of his surroundings. These childhood images echoed many of the same themes that Hasson’s later work as one of the Bogside Artists, a local collective of nationalist muralists would, would show. Young Hasson drew many images including one of British soldiers conversing on the street corner, clad in fatigues and flak-jackets. Others show children throwing rocks and bottles at the armored vans of the RUC and soldiers surrounding homes in preparation for a raid, backed up by a machine-gun wielding armored car. All record the sights of a nationalist enclave through the eyes of a young boy. The artist also recalled the sounds that helped influence his politics and point of view as a Catholic. He writes that

Living in the Creggan, I was used to the sounds of gunfire. Usually it would last a few minutes and then stop. During the march on Bloody Sunday, shooting erupted around the Rossville Flats. It didn’t stop. All my instincts told me ‘this is different’, and I ran all the way home and only when I reached the house did I feel safe. But I will never forget that, nor the horror I felt too, when next day I learned the truth.45

The acts of the RUC and the British army influenced the points of view of these local Catholics as did the sights and sounds they made by carrying out their actions. So much so that the images of housing raids, anti-riot actions, and the weapons used by both forces would come to be some of the most recognizable images of the whole conflict thanks to the murals Hasson and his colleagues painted in the 1990’s.

Taken together then, these combined cultural and social influences served to produce individuals that were acutely and intimately aware of the long and intricate histories of their ethnicity, culture, and faith on the island of Ireland. These were all themes that would be drawn upon repeatedly in the creation of murals which were directed towards and spoke to the Irish, Catholic, nationalist, and republican communities of Northern Ireland. It was these shared cultural experiences of these groups, demonstrated through the descriptions of men like Brendan Hughes, Eamon Collins, William Kelly, and Kevin Hasson that allowed for a common understanding of the messages of the murals.

In many general ways, the experience of unionists and Unionists in Northern Ireland was concentrated in the working class neighborhoods of cities and towns just as the comparative experience of Catholics and nationalist/republicans were. Middle and upper class protestants aided in the Unionist causes and certainly participated in the cultural celebrations put on by these communities, but as a whole participated less in the conflict of the Troubles than their working-class peers. Thus the primary actors for the Protestant Unionist side of the conflict were working class Protestants who lived and worked in and around the urban centers of Northern Ireland. The economic, social and political processes that had brought working class Catholics together in the cramped, dilapidated housing of these urban center was much the same for working class protestants. The attraction of relatively cheap housing and the preferential treatment many Protestants received in the remaining industrial centers of the country meant that while these families and individuals were not among the richest in the county they were not the poorest either. Often their housing was slightly better than that available to local Catholic communities due to the better work and pay available to Protestants. However, Protestant families and groups still congregated in strictly defined ethnic ghettos in these cities and urban areas.


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The (relative) wealth of these groups and their freedom to move un-harassed through much of Northern Ireland meant that they had many more opportunities for leisure and communal interaction. Sporting, school, and church events allowed for a high degree of interaction between the people of these neighborhoods in ways that built strong communal bonds as well as strengthened those already in place. Local churches and fraternal organizations also provided the needed structure across streets, neighborhoods, and cities necessary to propagate these relationships within and without all of the areas of Northern Ireland. While comparable organizations for Catholics were often frowned upon or harassed by the government in Stormont and their representatives, protestant organizations were often given the explicit support of the legislature. Marches by the Orange Order and the Apprentice Boys of Derry were given a degree of autonomy and civil protection unheard of in Catholic communities. As a result, organizations such as these became important symbols of protestant pride, community relations, and state sanctioned power.

However sinister these motives may seem from the outside, the reality of life for Protestants and unionists under the system was relatively peaceful. Families interacted with one another, neighborhoods came together and apart, and life was relatively peaceful in the immediate vicinity of their homes. David Ervine, a former member of the Ulster Volunteer Force, described the context in which he was raised in the years prior to the beginning of the Troubles. He writes that

I [had] a happy upbringing, I think, in that I don’t ever remember being brutalized; I remember things in a very naive and genteel way, about playing in the street and my first experiences at school...I supposed up until about the age of fourteen, [I had] a fairly basic little existence, you know, ran the streets, played football, get fed, get clothed and happy enough.\(^{46}\)

In Ervine’s mind then, he lived an idyllic life as a working class protestant, despite the relatively low level of employment available to his parents and immediate family. These experiences stand in stark contrast to the anecdotes recalled by Brendan Hughes of the same period in Northern Ireland. Where Hughes’ childhood was defined by the scrape for survival, harassment by the police, and strong communal connections through church and politics, Ervine’s was defined by a problem-free childhood that shared only the strong communal connections.

Within these organizations, neighborhoods, and families much emphasis was placed upon the roles that Protestants had served in Ireland, Britain, and the British Empire. As the politically powerful group of the area and the self-titled arbiters of success, much cultural pride was placed on these roles and their historical significance. David Craig, a muralist from Belfast said that “Our forefathers, our ancestors fought and gave up their lives and even recently I mean, friends, friends of mine, friends of my neighborhood have given up their lives to defend community and remain a part of Ulster, we don’t want to be Irish.”\(^{47}\) The successes and sacrifices of armies and leaders as well as individuals were all part of the cultural commemorations, celebrations, and community events which helped define membership in the protestant ruling classes. Organizations like the Orang Order or the Apprentice Boys of Derry served as visual and temporal guardians of this communal view of history. These groups would remind the community of the events of the past, the Battle of the Boyne or the closing the gates of Derry, and through their celebrations emphasize the meaning that these events had to the protestant people. Thus marches on the Twelfth, for example, served to reinforce in the mind of the

\(^{46}\) Ed Moloney, *Voices From the Grave* (New York: PublicAffairs), 310.

community why they were in power, who put them there, and what Catholic or Irish ascendency threatened. Ervine demonstrates this through his recollections of these events and the roles of groups like the Orange Order. He recalls that through the efforts of community and official education he was completely unaware of the contributions that local Catholics had made to Britain and her Empire. It was, he asserts, only the efforts of his more tolerant father than he became aware of many of the sacrifices Catholics had made to Britain in the face of the information coming from his school and community. His lack of contact outside of the community with individuals who could re-enforce the ideas of his father, at his own assertion, compelled him to believe in the message of his protestant community.48

Ervine’s story also serves to underscore the power of the community itself in reaffirming, commonly held views. If an individual protestant Unionist had been raised in an environment that valued tolerance or was more sympathetic to the life of Catholics in Northern Ireland, like David Ervine, the pressure of the local unionist community could very well overwhelm those sentiments. In point of face, the tolerance that Ervine’s father had taken time and effort to demonstrate and instill in his son was, ultimately, drowned out by the voice of his community. He writes that

the broader community view [of the civil rights campaign] seemed to be one of ‘this is an enemy.’ My da’s words were harping in the back of your head but I think that probably I was siding with the community view...that civil rights was a sinister plot. My da was saying ‘well, hold on a minute,’ but certainly I would have fallen to the community view.49

Thus it is easy to see how the best intentions of parents or tolerant minorities within the communities at large could be drowned out by the power of the wider community’s views, values, and ideas. In a way then, the ideas transmitted by the community forces of school, social structure, and politics were in turn reinforced by the common people one came in contact with regularly in unionist neighborhoods. Another Unionist muralist, John Keery, has put this process into words. He said: “We can’t help what we’ve been hearin’ for hundreds of years, do you know what I mean? I can’t help it if the British invaded this land so many years ago and left settlers on it. That’s not my problem.”50 To Keery as an Ulster Unionist and Protestant, the facts surrounding his ancestors and his community’s antecedents path to come to Northern Ireland is irrelevant to his understanding of his place in the conflict. Rather, he and his compatriots are out to defend what they see as theirs, their identity as British citizens and Protestants.

The political context that the Protestants of Northern Ireland were raised in could be just as variable as that of their Catholic peers. Often, the primary mode of political interaction and education for young people was through the family and their chosen associated, be it churches or other organizations. In Northern Ireland, Protestants supported many of the mainstream parties that are and were well known across Britain and the world such as the Conservatives or Labor. However the devolved parliament in Stormont meant that local parties catering to local issues were also widespread. Parties such as Ian Paisley’s Protestant Unionist Party/Democratic Unionist Party catered to and attempted to represent the interests of local Protestants, some more explicitly than others. Other more moderate parties also courted protestant opinion as well and

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some even attempted cross-ethnicity support. These parties, however, often had small or fractured bases of support compared to the political giant that was the PUP/DUP. In this way, the political and social privilege of Protestants in the society of Northern Ireland allowed for much wider political views to be expressed. Protestant opinion, even if it was in support of local Catholics and their rights, was treated to less censorship or reprisal from local or state actors.

What these comments and anecdotes reveal about the protestant context in Northern Ireland is the role that the protestant communities had in shaping the views and experiences of those living within them. Just as the Catholic community’s history and shared experiences helped shape Brendan Hughes into someone sympathetic to the ideas and ideals of the PIRA, protestant communities shaped their young in much the same way, as evidenced by David Ervine. People like Ervine, by virtue of being a part of the ruling class and structure of society within Northern Ireland, despite being among the least economically powerful, had the Unionist points of view re-enforced by their own experiences. Their lack of issue with government or police, their (somewhat) comfortable living spaces, and their domination of the government reinforced their own views of Catholics and the nature of their dissent. These cultural values which were transmitted by the structures and institutions then, emphasized the stability and economic successes brought on by protestant rule. These then are the modes through which the average working class protestant Unionist would have viewed the world of Northern Ireland.

Together then, these explorations demonstrate how values, ideas, histories, and communal ties were transmitted and reinforced within the two main communities of Northern Ireland. In addition, it shows how the geographical layout of these communities in cities and towns across Northern Ireland served to reinforce these ideals both positively and negatively. But how then do these cultural contexts relate to the creation and interpretation of murals? The answer lies in the ideas of Michael Baxandall, mentioned earlier: that art relies on common cultural experiences or contexts in order to establish a standard for interpretation shared among the audiences of the work. The murals drew on these shared cultural experiences to display their messages because it was the most efficient way of displaying these messages in a widely understood medium. The existence of the murals was thus couched on the popularity of their message within these local ethnic and political enclaves. For both communities, then, they served as internal as well as external message boards. This was demonstrated in comments made by Gerry Adams for the documentary Art of War where he argued that the murals allowed the repressed local Catholic communities to express their opinions on what was going on. Bill Rolston, in the same film, echoed that sentiment, saying that the murals allowed for the republicans, ostensibly the loser of the previous few centuries, to write their own history. The message of the mural could thus be highly variable, although by virtue of being painted and displayed, they were always important to the community. One of the most famous republican muralists of the era, Danny Devenny, echoed these sentiments. Devenny, a native of Belfast and a well-known former PIRA man, argued that the murals echoed the immediate concerns of the people responsible for them: Unionists were afraid that the PIRA would be able to out-gun them so they focused on their ability to strike back. Republicans, on the other hand, focused on the communal feelings of injustice and the fight for equal rights. A unionist muralist in Belfast by the name of J. McCormack recounted in similar fashion this process in the protestant communities. He recalls that Unionist or unionist neighborhoods would contact muralists like him with an idea of what they wanted on their walls. Often, these images came with an explicit message meant to reassure the community within and warn those without. In the case of murals which contained armed men, the message was simple: “we are capable of defending ourselves
and our own; we can match force with force.” A potent message of internal efficacy and warning to any marauding Irish paramilitaries. The murals of Northern Ireland were thus an extension of communal cultural contexts writ large on the gable walls of local communities. They expressed in image form, by relying on shared experiences, beliefs, and ideology, values held dear by those people responsible for their creation. Far more than symbols of deteriorating public murals, urban decay, or the failure of the British state in Northern Ireland, they were symbols of the vibrancy of belief present in local communities. They were a sign of life and the existence of these ideas as well as local willingness to defend them.

It is clear now that the murals relied not only on the shared communal experiences of the communities in which they were painted, but also their roles as a message to the world at large. But just as perceptions of the murals were couched on the common experiences, outside reporting of the murals within the context of the Troubles helps explain reactions (or lack thereof) to the emergence of the murals as a phenomenon mainly in Belfast and Derry. National and international reporting of the murals was often incidental, mentioned only to give a descriptive mood for a news story that took place in the context of the Troubles. Early reporting often viewed the murals and their precursors as graffiti or other signs of the rapidly deteriorating situation in Northern Ireland. One article from the Times (of London) written in early 1978 described Belfast with a picture of “the graffiti-scarred fences which still make up the unfortunately names ‘peace lines’ in Belfast.” This description, it could be argued, might only be relevant to the state of Northern Ireland in general and Belfast in particular only in 1978. The 1970’s being the high point in the destruction of both property and life. However the language utilized by the Times to describe Belfast three years later hadn’t changed much at all. In reporting on the state of Belfast around the time of the 1981 hunger strike led by Bobby Sands, the Times wrote that “the Roman Catholic enclave [the Falls Road] was daubed with graffiti: support the hunger strikers and until the last prisoner is free we are all imprisoned.” In a period of time when the methods and scope of activity for paramilitaries on both sides of the conflict had shifted dramatically, the Times continued to report on the change in language and substance of these expressions in the same manner as they had during the more anarchic period of the 1970’s. This may, of course, be due to the political leanings of the paper, widely recognized within Britain and the world as having a more conservative agenda than its competitors. The realities of this reporting are brought more starkly into contrast when the language used to describe murals painted by protestant Unionists and unionists is described. An article from early 1982 writes that “the Protestants are the better artists. Their gable-ended representations of crowns, red hands, and king Billy on his charger have a naïve stagger absent from the Catholic’s tortured hagiographic tributes to the hunger strikers.” The same article then recounts a contemporary image found within a Catholic enclave, describing it as “a 30ft graffito declares: God made the Catholics and the armalite will make them equal.” These articles and quotations bely perhaps a general ambivalence towards the murals and graffiti of both sides of the conflict among conservative Britons, but more specifically towards those of the Catholic, nationalist, and republican communities.

A good point of comparison for the reporting of these murals comes from the Irish Times, generally considered to be a center-left publication despite its origins within the Irish Unionist

cause of the 1850’s. For the purpose of this comparison, the paper can be held as an Irish equivalent to the Times. A story from the mid-1990’s which covered the works and comments of muralists active in Belfast took a much more measured and artistic opinion of the murals. Rather than representing a visual reminder of the urban and moral decay of Northern Ireland, the murals represented a mode of artistic expression unique to the conflict in Northern Ireland. They wrote that “But for the moment, murals have three main purposes, as Robinson writes: ‘to provide a visual identity for the community; to comment on particular events, and to warn others away.”

These sentiments, expressed in the print of a major newspaper, matched much more closely the interpretations of the roles of the murals made by Gerry Adams and Danny Devenny than they do the interpretations of the Times. While the coverage provided by the Times focused on the mood that the murals seemed to cast upon the cities of Northern Ireland and a criticism of what they represent, the Irish Times could be said to be only critical in the least damning way. In fact, the Irish Times makes reference to the ways that the imagery contained within the murals was often portrayed by many different news media. They wrote that “it is easy to criticize the aggressively sectarian or clumsy imagery of some of the murals of West Belfast. It is equally difficult to miss the way in which they offer an alternative not only to the sound of guns, but also to that of cash tills.”

This stark contrast in reporting can represent not only how different political background in Britain and Ireland could interpret the murals as a phenomena but also the meaning of their images, giving added emphasis on Baxandall’s assertion regarding the reliance on communal experience in art.

The reader can now draw, therefore, conclusions about the contrast between the way newspapers viewed the murals and their own ideological bases. Conservative newspapers or those unsympathetic to the nationalists or the violence might interpret them as a negative sign of the general state of Northern Ireland or one of the cities in particular. A product more sympathetic to the views of Irish nationalists, Catholics, or republicans might be able to muster an interpretation of the murals much closer to that intended by the muralist, especially for an Irish print newspaper. But the reporting by either side gives voice and definition to Baxandall’s assertion. These papers, unaware of the deep communal contexts that these murals relied upon in order to make their message heard, reported them as art or blight, but never both. Rather, as the sections describing the social conditions of Northern Ireland demonstrate, these messages relied on many years of shared experiences in order to make sense. Thus, while the world looked on in horror at the events taking place in Northern Ireland and viewed the murals solely as an outcropping of these decades of violence, the reality was that they were seated much more firmly in the communal past of these areas. With an understanding of these shared community contexts then, the reader is prepared to dissect the murals themselves and explore the specific connections or contexts that these works relied on to make their message.

**Signs and Symbols in the Murals of Northern Ireland**

Were the reader to walk through the town of Derry in Northern Ireland, they would walk through an area that has moved hard and fast away from its roots as ground zero of the conflict that would come to be known as “The Troubles.” The wide swaths of the city that had previously been defined by run-down victorian row houses have since been cleared and replaced with council housing estates of the kind that are recognizable across Britain. However, the neighborhood of the Bogside, located outside the old city walls, is still dominated by one lonely

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gable end, preserved on a street corner before a roundabout. Painted stark white with black letters several feet tall the wall reads “You are now entering Free Derry.” This mural, painted in the early days of the conflict is both the most well known of all the murals produced between 1968 and 1998 as well as one of the few to survive the entirety of the conflict. Its presentation in two colors and block printing conveys a message that welcomes those sympathetic to the cause of the residents of the Bogside as well as warning away those who disagree. This mural is emblematic of the form and function of many of the murals that were painted during the conflict and their purposes of marking loyalties, histories, and boundaries.

The examples that followed in the wake of the “Free Derry” mural served much more varied and nuanced purposes than just decoration or expression. Rather, the muralists on both sides of the conflict sought to tap into broad conceptions of the past, present, and future of Northern Ireland. The murals and the images contained within them relied on these conceptions in order to present a narrative of the past relative to the experiences of each community. By embedding the present and future struggle within the long historical traditions of the country the muralists sought to legitimize the actions and ideologies of their chosen sectarian groups. In addition, they sought to strengthen the common identity of the surrounding communities by defining and emphasizing common ideals, goals, and purposes. By placing themselves and their actions within various traditions, the artists sought to establish the ideological legitimacy of their position and social status in Northern Ireland. Their ultimate goal was to demonstrate that the ideals for which they were fighting and painting were the only ones that are supported by the past and present of Northern Ireland. The murals that became famous across Northern Ireland displayed a high degree of variability both between unionist and nationalist traditions, but also between artists active in each respective camp. However the majority of these murals can be broken down into four themes which will be used to guide this analysis.57

The first theme examines murals painted as memorials for those killed or imprisoned during the Troubles. This type of mural is very common across both sides of the conflict and their subjects can range between a variety of citizens and members of feuding groups. Both Unionists and nationalists emblazoned the names or images of those they wanted to remember across the walls of buildings all across Northern Ireland. Often they served to emphasize the sacrifice of a particular group, locale, or ideology. In addition, these murals could serve simply to emphasize the sacrifices of individuals and groups within Northern Ireland to their respective causes. Individuals, in particular, could easily be forgotten in the conflict so murals might also have served to remind locales of their native dead as well as inspiring them with stories of heroic sacrifice. In the tense and dangerous environment of the Troubles, this was often the most efficient and evocative method of achieving that goal.

The second grouping examines the role that historical events or personages played in the mural traditions of Northern Ireland. Decades, and in some cases centuries, of real or perceived abuse and discrimination fueled a conflict that rested almost entirely on interpretations of historical action, intent, and legitimacy. In this conflict, however, images of history also played an important role in crafting the ideologies of those involved in the conflict. From the beginning of the twentieth century, Northern Ireland’s past was painted on the walls of homes, shops, and other various buildings, creating a visual narrative of history that is almost unrivaled anywhere else across the word. The murals that helped define the Troubles were part of a tradition many

57 This analysis was accomplished by examining 193 murals taken from a variety of locations of ideological background from around Northern Ireland. Most come from the cities of Derry and Belfast or their surrounding suburbs.
decades old by the time they became ubiquitous with the conflict. As such, many of the historical murals that dot the urban landscape of Northern Ireland to this day exist in a kind of superposition: both depicting history and existing as a historical relic. While the tradition of historical murals, and mural making in general, is much older within the Unionist community, nationalist groups within Northern Ireland adopted the art form with gusto. As such, while there are many overlapping subjects between the two sides of the conflict, themes and ideology supported by the murals of each side diverge fairly heavily between the two. It is here that the idea of the murals as a form of visual narrative history is most easily demonstrated. The murals of both sides of the conflict contained images and stories from the past, present and future of the conflict that formed localized historical narratives. These narratives could be adapted to their specific locales by including individuals or groups from the area that took part in events of note and could thus be connected to larger historical events. These neighborhoods were displaying their own narratives of history, writ large, on the walls of their homes and businesses. In other words, the past was visually mobilized and connected to the present realities and future hope and dreams for Northern Ireland.

Along with memorials to individual combatants and historical events, militaristic images were also quite popular in articulating the surrounding locale’s allegiances. Images of uniforms, badges, weapons, and slogans marked boundaries, and identified loyalties. While many of the general images of these militaristic murals, such as guns, uniforms, and masks, overlap between the nationalist and Unionist traditions, there are many more specific images that are critically important to understanding the murals and their makers. Unionist paramilitary murals, like their memorial brethren, contain an abundance of imagery connecting them to the actions and traditions of the British Army. In a similar fashion, nationalist murals contained imagery that connected them to larger traditions of leftist and revolutionary movements within Ireland and abroad. Through these murals then, each group sought to present itself in the common image of what a legitimate army ought to be: uniform, well-armed, and capable. To that end, the militants depicted were often shown in uniform military fatigues, masks, and boots to show their dedication to their cause. These murals also played on the historical and mythical warrior ethos often attributed to Gaelic Irish resistance heroes. By connecting modern warriors for a Gaelic Ireland to historical and mythological ones, the artists and communities hoped to emphasize the continuity of these traditions. Together then these symbols were representative of the real abilities of these groups as well as the way that they saw themselves and wished themselves to be seen. These images played a critical role in the “public relations” campaign of the Troubles in order to reassure the groups each paramilitary claimed to protect and threaten those who sought to do them harm with military grade damage.

The final group of murals to be examined will be those that might best be termed “nationalistic” murals. This description applies to the motivations of artists on both sides of the conflict to underscore their national allegiances within the murals. Of these images, flags serve as one of the most popular visual signs of identity in the conflict areas of Northern Ireland. Their nature as official visual symbols of a state or organization gives them potent meaning that is immediate to the viewer regardless of their own identity. Since flags are relatively simple and emotive symbols they were among the most popular representations of nationality and national identity used in the murals. Flags can reference intense, dramatic, and relevant histories just by virtue of their presence and in doing so contribute to efforts to create historical narratives by both sides of the conflict. As such they are one of the most widely used symbols in and around the sites of the murals. The huge variety of flags represented demonstrates the multitude of
connections that the muralists were trying to highlight both within and without the conflict itself. Most of the murals in this section utilize a representation of a flag in some form. However, there are also examples in this section which utilize less explicit visual traditions of national identity such as mythology, sports, language, and ethnicity. All of these serve to underscore the national allegiances which tore Northern Ireland apart during the Troubles.

The chapters that follow analyze each of these four themes more in-depth and examine the ways that Unionists and nationalists took them up in murals devoted to their respective causes. More specifically, they seek to explore the images used to establish the narrative histories and their relevance to the surrounding communities. Through the methodologies put forward by Baxandall and Burke in the preceding chapter we will break down these images into their requisite parts and examine the way they draw on history to form these locally contextual narratives.

Shades of Nationalism and National Identity

Before exploring the murals themselves, it is important to define and explore the background of one word, or set of words, that is intimately linked to this study of imagery and conflict. The ideas of nationhood, nationalism, and nationality are irrevocably linked to the conflict of Northern Ireland. The goals of the paramilitaries and politicians involved on each side of the conflict almost always invoked the rights of a nation as well as drawing on a sense of national patriotism. The nationalists sought to align themselves with the ideals of self-determination and representation within an Irish nation and state. In contrast, the Unionists often defined themselves by their membership in the British nation and appealed to the cultural traditions of that sociological and political grouping. Both sides however were intimately involved in this idea of the “nation.”

A nation is, unfortunately, one of the most ambiguous terms that anyone covering identity can seek clear parameters for. It is at once both obvious and clear to those that identify with a certain nation and ambiguous to anyone seeking hard boundaries. However, in the case of this project I will rely on the definition put forward by Anthony Smith in his book Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, and History. Smith argues that a nation shares a proper name, common myths, a shared history, distinct public culture, residence in a perceived homeland, and common laws and customs. This definition, like any definition of a nation, automatically invited comparisons with exceptions to these rules. But for the purpose of this project, this definition allows for an accurate examination of the roles of both Irish nationalists and British unionists in Northern Ireland.

It is easy to see how the two main nations that came to play a role in the Troubles, the Irish and the British, fit into these definitions: each manages to check most of the boxes provided by Smith. The nations emerged through the efforts of their own elites and masses during roughly the same period, in this case largely the nineteenth-century. As the native Irish developed a cultural identity around the resurrected study of the Irish language, cultural art, and history, the idea of Ireland as a nation took a more solid form than it had in previous iterations. At the same time British nationalists who shared the same space as the burgeoning Irish nationalists sought to define themselves against this rising tide of Celtic and Gaelic identity. The ultimate manifestation of this process was in the establishment of the original Ulster Volunteer Force in 1912 and the vocal commitment to resistance against Irish home rule by some of the residents of Northern Ireland. Thus by the time that Northern Ireland as a polity had been established in

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1921, the national lines had already been drawn in the society that was to become the Northern Irish. Furthermore, this period also overlaps with the adoption of mural painting on a wide scale within the protestant communities of the period. According to anthropologist Neil Jarman, the combination of the establishment of Northern Ireland with the visual designation of protestant areas with murals served to shift the geographic subdivisions of the north where protestant unionists lived from “areas where protestants lived” to “protestant areas.” This process helped to not only finally split the identities of nationalists and Unionists but also contributed the rigid identification of neighborhoods with the predominant ethnicities which occupied them.\(^{59}\) We see then that the identities that would come to largely define Northern Ireland, far from being inclusive, from the beginning served to define and exclude in the context of Northern Ireland in a quest for legitimacy in action, intent, and belief.

The effort in Northern Ireland to define and display these identities of nation, or national identities, rely on the accumulated shared cultural experiences identified and generally agreed upon by the members of the nation. In every context this process extends into the use of symbols to convey messages about identity and loyalty, a paradigm that becomes vital in understanding the roles of the murals in Northern Ireland. Smith again explores this idea by writing that “The panoply of national symbols only serves to express, represent, and reinforce the boundary definition of the nation and to unite the memories inside through a common imagery of shared memories myths and values.”\(^{60}\) These images then allow for the transmission of these shared ideas without the need to read or converse, in other words, it allows those locals to fly the flag.

II. Signs and Symbols in the Unionist Murals of Northern Ireland

On the gable painted red at the end of red-bricked Belfast lane named Ohio Street, there once appeared the image of a man named Ernie Elliott. Surrounding his portrait were a collection of signs and symbols, like the Red Hand of Ulster and the letters “UFF”, that served to connect him to the Unionist paramilitaries of the surrounding area. To the left of his image could be found a message that read “This mural is dedicated to the officers and volunteers of the WDA-UFF who gave their lives and freedom in defense of Ulster. Quis Speperabit.”\(^{61}\) Many of the themes in this mural were echoed in murals from across Northern Ireland. The imagery of paramilitary associations as well as the use of a motto helped to underscore the loyalties of the person memorialized as well as the artists responsible for painting it.

Memorial murals amongst the Unionist factions of Northern Ireland were primarily made for deceased or imprisoned members of paramilitary groups. While the individual subject matter of each mural is highly variable, usually consisting of individuals or small groups of men, the imagery surrounding these portraits utilized is not. Many of the murals appear nearly indistinguishable from one another due to the imagery used by the paramilitaries painting them. Often these signs and symbols take their cues from the visual tradition of the British Army, emphasizing the Unionists’ desire to be seen as legitimate forces in the Troubles. Flags, flowers, badges, and crests all appear as regular, uniform motifs as if regulated by a governing body.

These images emphasized the legitimate nature of the Unionist paramilitaries in their “war” against the nationalists and the nationalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. By drawing

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comparisons to the traditions and structures of the legitimate armed forces of Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom, the British Army, these organizations in turn sought to draw comparisons of legitimacy to their existence and their acts. The purpose of the flags, emblems, and unit designations was to identify these groups with clearly defined organizational structures, chains of command, and heraldic traditions, much as the units of the British Army do. Many units of the armed forces of the United Kingdom have regimental flags, regimental badges or seals, mottos, and heraldic symbols which served to identify the history of both their members and the unit. By utilizing these images within murals painted across Northern Ireland, Unionist paramilitaries intended to draw comparison between the two organizations, connecting themselves, their actions, and their ideologies with those of the British Army.

One of the best examples of this process comes from the seals or signs that are very often present in Unionist murals. These seals frequently model themselves on the traditional seals, signets, and badges created for military units in the United Kingdom. The imagery used within these badges and crests often denoted points of merit in the unit’s history, its place of origin, or other cultural relevancies to the history of the unit. The cap badge and crest of the Royal Ulster Rifles depicts a celtic harp surmounted by a crown with the phrase “quis separabit” on a ribbon beneath it. The symbolism of the crest is quite clear: the harp, a traditional symbol of Ireland and other Celtic peoples, is placed underneath a crown, symbolizing British suzerainty over the Irish; the Latin motto means “who will separate us.”63 In addition, it should be noted that the form and use of the unit crests and badges is regulated by both the British Army and government.

The most common image used within the homegrown Unionist badges was that of the Red Hand of Ulster, the traditional heraldic symbol of the Irish kingdom of Ulster. For example, the seal of the Ulster Volunteer Force, as seen on a memorial to a man identified as Trevor King on Disraeli Street in Belfast, is formed of the red hand surrounded, in a seal, by the words “UVF” and “For God and Ulster”, a saying traditionally ascribed to Protestant volunteer organizations from across Northern Ireland.64 In comparison, the seal of the Ulster Defense Association is the red hand centered on a heraldic shield with “Quis Separabit” beneath it and a crown above. Both of these crests demonstrate a heavy reliance on traditions of imagery related to British military units for their geography, construction and presentation.

Figure 1. Memorial to Trevor King with poppies and UVF seal
(Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace, 14.)

63 Taken from latin version of Romans 8:35 (New International Version) “quis nos separabit a caritate Christi...” or, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ...”
64 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 14.
While a heavy emphasis was placed on the official imagery of the paramilitary units within the murals, named members of the paramilitaries were often also identified with a full or abbreviated title of rank, often analogous to one in the British Army. Two memorials to a deceased member of the Ulster Defense Association, John Michaels, name him as “Brig. John Michaels”, identifying him as a Brigadier within the organization. Portrait memorials to Trevor King and a man identified as William McCullough of the Ulster Fighting Force, identify each man as a “Lieutenant Colonel.” Each man’s memorial also included a number of other images relevant to the military nature of their actions as well as with military traditions within the United Kingdom. King’s portrait is surrounded by poppies and surmounts two flags, the Ulster Banner and that of the Ulster Volunteer Force, as well as the seal of the UVF. Included was an identifier of his unit (1st Belfast Battalion, ‘B’ Company) as well as the silhouette of a masked gunman wielding an AK-47 in a stance of memorial and the sign of the Protestant Action Force. McCullough’s memorializers also made sure to identify the units under his command as well as other Ulster Fighting Force units which had lost members to violence. All of these being a man of widely recognized authority and command.

Use of popularly recognized images connecting the deceased to military traditions extended beyond the subject’s rank. One of the most popular examples of these images was found in the red poppy. Utilized as a symbol of remembrance for military deceased in the United Kingdom and across the former British Empire, particularly the ANZAC nations, the red poppy gained this associated after the First World War; John McCrae’s poem “In Flanders Fields” forever connected those killed in the war with the poppies of Flanders. In some Unionist murals, this connection with the Empire’s war dead was extended to those killed during the conflict. Often, poppies were displayed in bunches as is the case in a memorial to Unionist dead that was located on Percy Street in Belfast. In fact, the poppies are the only image used in the entire work. The flowers are arranged next to a written message of support and remembrance of the deceased, all painted on a stark white background. The previous memorial to Trevor King shows his bust surrounded by the flowers. The use of the red poppy thus not only aligns the memory, actions, and cause of these Unionist paramilitary members with the war dead of the United Kingdom, but also brings them into the fold of those killed across the world in the service of the British Empire. In this way then, these deceased members of Unionist paramilitaries cease being the victims of sectarian violence, and instead become honored war dead within the Commonwealth.

66 Both King and McCullough were high ranking members of Unionist paramilitaries in and around Belfast. King, a leader of the Ulster Volunteer Force was killed by the Irish National Liberation Army on the Shankill Road in July of 1994. [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1994.html](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1994.html) McCullough, a leader in the Ulster Defense Association was killed outside of his home by an INLA hit-squad in October of 1981. [http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/humanface/alpha/M.html](http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/humanface/alpha/M.html)
67 The Ulster Banner consisting of St. George’s Cross on a white field with the Red Hand in the center, surrounded by a six pointed star, and surmounted by a crown.
71 Ibid., 14.
A theme related to the memorial poppies and unique to Unionist murals, particularly after the Belfast Agreement, was the celebration of the city of Belfast’s role in the First World War. These murals particularly focused on commemorating the service and sacrifice of the city’s 26th Ulster Division, a unit of Kitchner’s New Army formed almost entirely of Belfast Protestants and former members of the original Ulster Volunteer Force. The most common memorials show a stand of soldiers either on patrol or moving across a barren, shell-scarred landscape with words of memorial and/or the unit’s name across the work.⁷² Others, such as those in Mount Vernon Park and Donegall Pass (both in Belfast) are much more elaborate, incorporating the silhouette of a soldier in a pose of mourning with much of the regalia also utilized in other Unionist memorials such as flags, seals, and regimental emblems.⁷³ One particular World War I mural of note comes from Cregagh, south of Belfast. On the wall of an estate complex is a mural commemorating the four members of the 36th Ulster Division awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain’s highest military award, during the First World War. The four portraits are arranged on equal squares, connected in the center by the crest of the UVF, complete with motto. Much like the murals of the Ulster Division as a whole, this mural seeks to connect its subjects and those who live around the work with the martial history of the town as well as the honor of having a state award of such magnitude associated with locals. In a way, this mural seeks to accomplish the same task as the previous works, connecting the locals and their chosen paramilitary alliance to the long military tradition of the United Kingdom and demonstrating both the courage and the blood spilled for their connection with the U.K.

⁷³ Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003), 50; Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 12.
Relying on the period eye, what might be the message received by the audience of these murals within their neighborhoods? For many, the connection between the paramilitaries of the Troubles with the long tradition of military service to the British state would have been paramount. For a people who celebrated and wanted to preserve their status within the British state and the Empire, the glorification on those who served the empire would have been easy. The period of the Troubles would not have been so far removed from the defining British conflicts of the Twentieth-century, the First and Second World War, that veterans and their stories would have been lost from that community. It would be easy to assume that many Protestant youths grew up with the stories of their father’s and grandfather’s services in the British armed forces during each global war. These men would have fought and died for Britain and her Empire the same as any other service member recruited from any other corner of the country. In much the same way that modern generations adore and glorify the “Greatest Generation” in the United States, many children in Northern Ireland would presumably have done the same to these relatives and neighbors. These children and young adults would have then left the houses where these stories are told and encounter the person or the story of a modern warrior battling to preserve the status and prestige of the community that fathers and grandfathers had fought and bled for in two world wars. The connection could have been a very simple one then, equating the service of men like Trevor King in defense of “Britain” in Northern Ireland to the well known tales of military service against external threats to her body. The explicit connection between Protestant support for the British crown and state is supported by comments made by David Ervine talking about his surprise in finding out that Catholics supported the Empire militarily during the First World War; a fact that had been shocking to
him. He writes that “I didn’t know that the 16th and 10th Divisions fought in the Battle of the Somme, or that one of them fought at Gallipoli. I didn’t know that Catholics were...fighting for Britain or [were] fighting in defense of small nations. I didn’t know that because no one told me, and I think it was only through my da that I was starting to get some kind of alternative view of what we’d been told.”

The implication here is that Ervine’s community had pressed the nature of Protestant military defense of the country to the exclusion of the Irish Catholic contributions of the same. Ervine was shocked to learn about this Catholic participation because it flew in the face of the narrative of Ulster’s history he had been shown by the local and national Unionist community. This cultural link between Protestant military service to and defense of Britain also extends to the funerary traditions associated with the war dead of the Empire, as has been previously mentioned, made it quite easy to extend these same rights of remembrance to the modern warriors who fell in battle against Gaelic barbarism and disloyalty. The cultural linkages between the traditions of military service in Northern Ireland for and with Britain would have been quite well known and an easy way to re-enforce the idea of Britishness and British resistance to Gaelic intrusion within the wider Unionist community. Jonathan Stevenson summarized this process of local ethnic and political intransigence in his book We Wrecked the Place: He links the Protestant culture of Northern Ireland to their reliance on stability and industry as the staples of their culture writing that

They are ascetic and orderly, and proud of their vaunted work ethic. They value stability as a backdrop for industry. This characteristic translates into social and political conservatism: Ulster Protestants prefer to keep things the way they’ve been. They emphasize duty and honor to enduring institutions and pay corresponding attention to tradition and ceremony. Thus, they exalt the British monarchy and, almost to the point of caricature, revere those Ulstermen who died in Her Majesty’s service.

The adoration of the community’s military links to the British state is therefore a part of this local culture that celebrates their economic, social and political contributions to the mother country.

Much like the focus on the military aspects of life and culture in Northern Ireland, relative understandings of history played a large role in the mural traditions of the Unionists as well. The most popular historical subject within the Unionist tradition were images of William of Orange, officially known in the United Kingdom as William III and colloquially within Northern Ireland as “King Billy”. This Dutchman cemented his place as king and co-ruler over the British Isles in the late seventeenth-century through a series of battles and sieges against the Jacobite armies of James II which ranged across Ireland. The specific subject of many of these murals were William’s victories over his enemies in Ireland, most often the 1690 Battle of the Boyne.

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74 Ed Moloney, Voices From the Grave (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 316. The 10th and 16th Divisions were raised from Irish Catholics that served the British Empire in some of the most horrific battles in World War I.

75 Jonathan Stevenson, We Wrecked the Place: Contemplating an End to the Northern Irish Troubles (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 152.

76 The last Catholic, and final Stuart, king of England. Deposed by Parliament, his Protestant daughter Mary, and her husband William of Orange in 1688 in the Glorious Revolution. He and his descendants are claimed to be the legitimate monarchs of Britain by supporters known as “Jacobites,” taken from the latin form of the King’s name, Jacobus.

77 The Battle of the Boyne was a battle fought on July 12th of 1690 between the forces of the Jacobite armies under the leadership of the deposed James II and the royal forces of William III. The battlefield, which lay split by the
William’s victories in Ireland served as the historical antecedent to the (then) current regime and thus were the source of political legitimation in Northern Ireland. As such, William was revered as the man who had given the Protestants of the north security and position amongst the papist Irish.

Figure 4. An example of a King Billy mural from the city of Derry. This example was originally painted in the 1920’s (Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland, 1)

With such an exalted position in the mythos of the Protestants and Unionists of Northern Ireland, it is easy to understand why William became a focus for pictorial reference across Northern Ireland. The visual tradition of reverently depicting William within a mural only dates to the early years of the twentieth-century however. The first of these murals in Northern Ireland is credited to a Protestant by the name of John McClean who painted an image of King William on the side of a building on Beersbridge Road in July of 1908 in anticipation of the Twelfth. From there the practice spread and soon images of King Billy were painted, re-painted, or touched up across Northern Ireland for the July celebrations. These original murals of William III set the thematic mold from which the King Billy tradition emerged: the focus of these murals is always upon the King himself, resplendent upon a white horse. Often the horse is shown in water, indicating that the King is in the act of crossing the River Boyne in the decisive move of his decisive battle. Dressed in the battle garments of someone of his status, including curled hair and white stockings, William cuts a dashing figure on his horse. He is often shown gesturing forward towards the enemy either with his hand or a weapon of some sort.

river Boyne, was a field outside the city of Drogheda. William’s victory in the battle smashed the core of the Jacobite forces and turned the tide of the war in favor of the King.


79 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 1.
The appearance of the king in the full splendor of seventeenth-century regalia, sitting upon an expensive horse is not, however, just an effort to show the monarch in historically accurate costume. Rather, the royal nature of his appearance and the adoring nature of these murals serve to emphasize the relationship between the Protestant people of Northern Ireland and the British Crown past and present. Their adoration of the king and commemoration of his victories is also a celebration of the legitimacy granted to their position in society by the King’s victories. As well, they are recognizing their loyalty to the monarchs that followed as legitimate successors of royal power. Thus the murals serve to underline and emphasize past and future loyalty from the Protestants of Northern Ireland.

One noticeable variation of the King Billy mold comes from the city of Derry where the image of King Billy is replaced by that of a black-clad man bearing a modern handgun atop the white horse. Around the image is written the message “You’ve Heard of King William III...Now Meet King Michael Stone.” In place of memorializing the actions of William III, this mural compares his actions to those of Michael Stone, a Unionist paramilitary man convicted of killing three mourners at an IRA funeral in 1988. The image is connecting the celebration of the king’s victories over the Jacobites in the 1690’s with Stones “victorious” attack against nationalist mourners in the 1980’s.

Some murals, however, contain much more than just the images of William. Background scenes are often included that put the image of the king into a clearer context. Most common are images of the soldiers of William’s army arrayed behind him, also arrayed in period dress and weaponry. These images serve to reinforce the finality of William’s victories by right of arms and conquest rather than politics. Some murals also include images of soldiers from other periods of Northern Ireland’s history, such as the First World War, which emphasize the

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81 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 4; Ibid., 1.
continued military efforts of the Unionists of Northern Ireland in support of the descendant government of William. Images of the recipients of the King’s military wrath are also often shown in conjunction with his person and his army: a wounded, dead, or dying Jacobite soldier. These men, unable to offer further resistance to the king and his army, again represent the conquering nature of the monarch’s victories and the affirmation of his suzerainty over the Irish people, his potency over James II, and his legitimacy as the victorious king.

The use of official symbolism also abounds around the image of the king or his victories, serving to link his rule and actions back to the legitimacy of the British state and the monarchy. Much like in the memorial murals, flags were popular symbols to surround the mural with. Flags served as official, visual representations of the state, the government, and of a nation and are often strictly regulated in their appearance and presentation by national law; as such they are often important symbols of state authority. The mural of King Billy in the town of Coleraine, County Derry surrounds his image with six flags, three on each side, mirroring those opposite. The flags shown are the Union Flag, the Ulster Banner, and the flag of Scotland. Each represents a particular connection between Northern Ireland and Britain: the Union flag represents Northern Ireland’s membership in the United Kingdom and their “Britishness”, the Ulster Banner their own visual designation as established by the government, and the Scottish flag which represented the descent of many modern Protestants of Northern Ireland from Scottish settlers brought over during the Plantation of Ulster. Likewise, a mural of King Billy on Donegall Road in Belfast is simply bookended by two shields bearing the pattern and colors of the Union Flag and surmounted by the symbols of the Ulster Banner, the Red Hand of Ulster within a six-pointed star.

The Battle of the Boyne is not, however, the only popular historical subject to come from the Williamite Wars. Another prominent theme shows a key formational moment in the development of the Protestant and Unionist identities within Northern Ireland: the relief of Derry. Besieged by Jacobite forces in late 1688, the city of Derry held out against the siege until the summer of 1689 when they were relieved by war ships of the Royal Navy. The resistance of the Protestant residents of Derry and their loyalty to William III all served as mythological points of reference for those viewing the murals in the same way that the king’s crossing of the Boyne did for the King Billy Murals. The standard form of the mural shows a crowd of townspeople collected on the walls of the City of Derry, often arranged around a cannon pointed towards the town’s harbor in Lough Foyle with the view of ships in the distance. The collected townspeople are made up of both sick and healthy looking individuals, all gesturing towards the relief fleet with joy in their faces.

Often connected thematically and physically with the murals of the Relief of Derry are images of the shutting of the gates of the city. If the previous two examples of events of the Williamite War had become mythologized in the collective memory of the Unionists of Northern Ireland, than this is the defining mythological moment for the Protestant citizens of Derry. The

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82 Blythe St; *Ibid.*, 2.
85 Ibid., 1.
images show a collection of teenage-boys, sometimes armed, closing the gates of the city in defiance of the wishes of the town elders and the request of James II. The event, which signified the beginning of the siege of Derry, is the foundational story of the city’s Protestant and Unionist identity and serves as the coalescing moment for one of the city’s most famous (or infamous) groups: the Orange Order. The event also serves as a formal beginning to the city’s militant resistance to any kind of Irish nationalism or attempt to change their allegiance from that of the British crown.

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The murals and memorials to the events of a war that occurred three-and-a-half centuries ago served the vital roles of creating the historical and mythological seed of loyalism. Protestant Unionists of the Troubles period utilized the victories of past rulers in order to legitimize their own loyalty to the British crown in the face of Gaelic Irish and Catholic “treachery” and rebellion. This theology puts the actions of the Unionists and the nationalists within a wider context of historical struggle between Unionists and nationalists. Murals of the historical violence directed towards Protestants at the hands of Catholics add a historical justification for the ongoing defense of the social position of Unionists and Protestants in Northern Irish society. Furthermore, by identifying themselves with the Protestant British rulers of the past, the Unionists extended the political legitimacy of those rulers to themselves by virtue of each groups’ martial ability and political legitimacy.

Popular themes of historical significance which emphasized the relationship between the Protestant Unionists of Northern Ireland and the monarch also included examples from the modern era. In the years following the end of the Troubles these murals became popular, exploding around 2002; the year of the Queen’s Golden Jubilee. These murals expressed explicit loyalty to the person of the Queen and to the British state as a whole, often affirming their renewed commitment of the localities to being British. These murals serve as another visual commitment to the structure of power in Northern Ireland and to the Protestant rulers of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

Culturally, historical themes such as those presented in the King Billy murals and those of the Siege of Derry and the Shutting of the Gates all form a historical antecedent to the, then, modern identity of Unionists in Northern Ireland. By putting the images of historical events which signaled the initial victories of the group, the muralists relied in the group’s identity with the cultural values attached to those stories and images to legitimize the current resistance to the nationalists. As was presented within the Period Eye section of the previous chapter, the symbolism of King Billy and his victories was deeply wrapped in the identity of the local Unionists and they embraced it as a formational moment within their own history. Much as the American Revolution and references back to the conflict serve to legitimize the government and governors of the country, the conflict and its leader in Northern Ireland used those historical antecedents to legitimize their own views and actions relative to their seemingly old enemies.

88 Rolston, Drawing Support, 14; Rolston, Drawing Support 2, 53.
89 A Fraternal organization of Protestants spread across the anglosphere but based in Northern Ireland. The order is explicitly committed to Protestant dominance and demonstrates in a variety of parades yearly.
90 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 52; a mural depicting attacks on Protestant settlers by Irish Catholics during the 1641 uprising. It says “The persecution of the Protestant People 1600 by the Church of Rome [sic]. The ethnic cleansing still goes on today.”
91 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 59. These murals both depict the Queen in her regalia as Queen of the United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland. One includes the pledge “We the British subjects of Ulster/Pledge our allegiance/To her sovereign majesty/Queen Elizabeth II/Now and forever/The heart of the Empire/Ulster’s loyal citizens”
Newspapers reporting on the conflict in the early 1980’s picked up on this theme as when an article in *The Times* discussed the role of poverty in continuing the conflict. The writes that “On the Protestant Shankill Road, the benefits of being British seem as remote as the Battle of the Boyne its murals celebrate.” Here the reporter is clearly making the connection that the artists of the Battle of the Boyne murals intended to make: the celebration of their Protestant, British history.

The relationship between signs and symbols in Unionist murals continues in other themes. Whatever the minute variations in ideology among the Unionists, many of their mural traditions were trying to establish the same thing: legitimacy in the community, the state, and the world. They sought to accomplish this by utilizing the same or similar symbolic traditions of the legitimate source of martial ability and action within the British state, the British Army. Thus their use of crests, seals, regimental flags, “uniforms”, and military hardware were all meant to present the paramilitaries and their members as legitimate military units that were fighting domestic insurgency alongside their state-sanctioned partners. In this way the paramilitaries may have hoped to legitimize their actions by parallelizing them with the actions of British soldiers and their government. These murals also relied on the collective memory of the surrounding community to draw these comparisons. As argued by Baxandall, many of the possible connections drawn between the official-type symbolism presented by the muralists looks similar to those utilized by the British Army. Locals, who would have been familiarized with these symbolic traditions through movies and newspapers as well as war stories from family and friends would have relied on these shared experiences to draw the intended conclusions.

The most prevalent image across all of the paramilitary murals is that of armed men. Be they in salute, in action, or at rest, the presentation of the armed paramilitary “soldier” is ubiquitous across all of the various groups represented by the Unionist paramilitary tradition. Often the appearance of this “soldier” is regulated to a fairly high degree. (This is true for the images of nationalist paramilitaries as well) Great effort was given over to presenting the paramilitaries as uniformed, regulated fighters. In fact, where more than one fighter is depicted the fighters are almost always depicted in uniform appearance, wearing the same or incredibly similar, clothes.

The appearance of the clothing in these murals is typically heavy and dark, indicating the emphasis placed on utility in the often covert operations of the Unionist paramilitaries. This trend is best exemplified by a Unionist mural that occupied the side of a building in the Woodstock Link area of Belfast. The mural shows four armed members of the UVF kneeling or standing in salute to their crest. Dressed in black fatigues and white dress belts, the fighters cut a uniform figure of menacing martial might. All of this posturing and imagery serves to imply the will and ability of the members of the UVF to carry out their mission. In fact, the military fatigue is of huge importance in underlining this fact. The clothing worked to imply a direct sense of military dress and purpose within the organization. In their line of thought: “soldiers wear uniform fatigues and so do we, thus we are soldiers like them.”

Variations upon this theme exist of course, as in the Rathcoole Drive and Shankill Road murals which depict UVF members in more common street clothes. The Shankill mural depicts four men in matching black jackets, hooded sweatshirts, jeans, and ski masks arrayed under a clenched Red Hand. The men are armed with a variety of military grade small and heavy weapons and a banner identifies them as the “2nd Battalion, C Company of the Ulster Fighting

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“Force.” On Rathcoole Drive four men, again in jackets, jeans, and masks, are shown exiting a four door car (complete with a license plate reading “UFF”) and armed to the teeth. Like the Shankill Road mural the uniformity of the men’s appearance and the military grade of their weapons show the ability to use them and their competence in performing the actions of a military force. While their dress may be less official in appearance, the intent is still the same: to obfuscate identity, project uniformity, legitimize action, and intimidate any that might dare to oppose them in the group’s “territory.”

In the effort of normalizing the appearance and efforts of the paramilitaries within the idea of the British Army, the most important effort was to associate themselves with the British nation and the state. The most popular national images utilized by the Unionists were images of flags, which served to quickly and easily identify local identities and loyalties. In these areas, the most popular flag shown in Unionist murals was that of the United Kingdom, often called the “Union Jack.” A potent symbol of British nationalism, the Union Flag is the most prominent symbol of the Unionists displayed in the murals. The flag’s deep history across Britain and the world, through the British Empire, means that the flag symbolizes the wider Anglophone world as well as the more immediate relationship between Northern Ireland and the U.K. The flag is not usually shown alone however. It is most often displayed paired with other flags or symbols relevant to the Unionists. One of the more common pairings is the former flag of Northern Ireland, known as the Ulster Banner. As charged political symbols the flags present the loyalties, to Ulster and the U.K., while utilizing the shared history of both flags to declare the message of current and continued loyalty to the United Kingdom. A variant image of this theme is the display of the Red Hand by itself. Commonly seen in other mural themes as well, its history and symbolism has already been established within this work. However the Red Hand is sometimes disembodied from the Ulster Banner and utilized as a symbol representing Northern Ireland and its Unionist residents in less traditional ways. One example shows the red hand flexed into the “peace” sign dancing over an Irish tricolor with the letters “IRA” painted on it. The Union Flag and the Ulster Banner are seen fluttering behind the hand. The meaning of this mural, the ultimate victory of Unionists over the IRA, is clear. But the use of these signs outside of the strictly defined traditional roles of the images shows how these images were altered and changed to fit individual and group tastes and ideals. It also shows that the symbols underwent continued visual change while retaining their primary meanings.

Figure 6. Dancing red hand. (Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland, 9.)

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94 The flag of the United Kingdom is composed of the flags of three of the nations that make up the U.K. layered over one another. St. Andrew’s Cross (Scotland) is layered over the Cross of St. George (England) which is layered over St. Patrick’s Saltire (Ireland). The resulting “Union Flag” has been the national flag of the United Kingdom since the inclusion of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1800 by the Act of Union.

95 Of the 102 Unionist murals surveyed for this project 55 displayed a physical flag, the image of one or more flags, or imagery taken directly from a flag (color, form, and structure). Of these 55 examples (53% of the sample) 40 murals had the image of the Union Flag contained within it or had one placed around it.

96 Formerly the state flag of Northern Ireland consisting of St. George’s Cross with the Red Hand in the center surrounded by the six pointed star with the crown superseding both. Replaced by St. Patrick’s Saltire following the Good Friday Agreement.

The utilization of heraldry in the murals is a very popular motif as it demonstrates a number of relationships that are important to the Unionist communities that painted them. The position of heraldic designs, issued by the government or monarch and maintained as public representations of an individual, family, or geography again highlights the history of the Unionists in Northern Ireland. One such mural from the city of Derry combines the image of the city’s coat of arms with two British flags draped over either side. A mural such as this draws explicit connections between the British state, through the flag, with the images of the locality, the city of Derry. Thus by highlighting the city of Derry’s official connection to the British government, through the use of the flag and the coat of arms, the muralists are emphasizing their dual loyalties: to Derry and Britain.

Symbols taken from popular culture were also utilized to emphasize the connection of the Unionists to the common experiences of the people of Britain. One mural from Stroud Street in Belfast shows the image of a gruff bulldog layered over the image of the Union Flag. Upon the dog’s head sits a helmet, recalling the famous Mark I helmet of the First World War, and upon the helmet is painted the Ulster Banner. The bulldog is a popular stereotype of British people and their traits, recalling the ideal of the “stiff upper lip.” In this context the dog conveys the idea of dogged determination and maintenance of British culture in the face of adversity, hence the addition of the Union flag. When combined with helmet and the Ulster Banner, the mural heralds a message of stalwart loyal sentiment among the Unionist population and the maintenance of their British culture in the face of the nationalist onslaught.

But these connections between flags and images draw heavily on more solid foundations than popular culture. Representing historical ties across geographies is also an important role of the flags in the murals. One of the most common forms of this phenomenon comes in the pairing of the Ulster Banner with the Scottish flag, the cross of St. Andrew. By pairing these two flags

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98 Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 7; the coat of arms of the city of Derry consists of a shield with the cross of St. George occupying the upper half. The bottom half shows a stone tower and a skeleton sitting on a stone, both upon a black field.

99 Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 21; Commonly identified as the “Doughboy” helmet in the U.S.
together the muralists draw attention to the explicit historical relationship between the two areas. From the Dál Riata in the middle of the first millennium to the Plantation of Ulster in the seventeenth-century, the peoples of Ulster and Scotland were often linked politically and ethnically. Thus by displaying the two flags together the muralists are emphasizing this historical relationship and adding the modern era to the chronology of the relationship between the two geographies.

Ethnic connections between the residents of Northern Ireland and Scotland were also popular outside of the use of flags in murals. These connections were often demonstrated through imagery relevant to those living there or descendant from earlier settlers. One detailed mural from the Belfast suburb of New Mossey on Ballyearl Drive, the depicts a map of the North Channel of the Irish Sea. In detail are rendered the verdant coasts of Northern Ireland and Western Scotland with the Red Hand blazoned between the two geographies. Banners around the mural read: “Ulster Scots: history and heritage” and “Shared language, shared literature, shared culture.” and contains a message written in Scots which translates to: don’t be silent, stand up for yourself.” This mural makes explicit the connections that the Ulster-Scots residents of Northern Ireland share with the people of Scotland. More importantly, it also emphasizes the depth of the connection between the two geographies and their relationship within the United Kingdom. Other works in this vein relied on more literary or artistic means to link the two. One mural which depicts a peasant woman gazing into a verdant valley which contains a farmhouse and small farm also has a message extolling the viewer to learn more about the culture of the Ulster-Scots and their footprints across the Anglosphere. Thus the ethnic and national connections between the peoples of Northern Ireland could be emphasized in a number of visual manners instead of just the image of their flags. By emphasizing the symbols of their ethnic as well as their political loyalties, the muralists hoped to make the idea of a united Ireland seem even less feasible to those in charge of the country.

Many of the symbols used to identify ethnic and political loyalties in these examples of the murals were those echoed in Anthony Smith’s establishment of national images as “a common imagery of shared memories, myths, and values.” The reader can see how the use of the flags of Great Britain and Scotland draw upon deeper shared cultural memories of wartime service and immigration within the old empire. These shared symbols then help to reinforce a sense of identity on the viewer and links them with the shared values and memories of the artist or community. This is done almost entirely without words, working only with images like the examples just discussed.

The image of Northern Ireland itself, which emphasized both geographic and political loyalties among the Unionists, was often presented with the images of various flags. Showing Northern Ireland as it is seen on a political map, the muralists are connecting the geography of the polity to the flags often displayed around its image. One mural from Martin Street depicts the outline of Northern Ireland with the flag of Northern Ireland painted within its borders and surrounded by British and Scottish flags draped about it. The connection between the various states within the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland is obvious. Some examples were even

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more overt in their connection of Northern Ireland to Britain. One example from Percy Street in Belfast shows the outline of Northern Ireland with the British flag painted within its boundaries. Around it was found the messages “We will never accept a united Ireland” and “Ulster still says no.” This imagery sends a clear message to the viewer through the use of Unionist imagery that Ulster is British. The combination of the flag and the geography was also combined with other images relevant to Northern Ireland as well. A mural from Severn Street in Belfast shows an extremely detailed outline of Northern Ireland, with the Ulster Banner painted within it, gripped by the Red Hand. Written on a ribbon painted above the image is the message “Ulster is British.” The combination of all of these images served the same purpose as those before: to visually underline the relationship between the various states present in the United Kingdom. By combining official emblems of the state, in the form of flags, the muralists emphasize the relationship between the polities shown. By including the geographic outline of Northern Ireland with these images, and sometimes combining the two, the muralists include another form of the state in their comparisons: those of boundaries and borders. By drawing Northern Ireland distinctly, and no representation of the rest of island, they are emphasizing its removal from the Republic of Ireland.

Mural could also draw connections to states outside of Britain with their use of flags. One mural from Bond Street in Derry depicts the Red Hand and six pointed star (complete with crown) flanked on either side by the flags of Canada (left) and Australia (right). Just as other muralists drew connections to the source of many of the ancestors of Unionists in Northern Ireland through the use of flags, this muralist is emphasizing the connection between these former colonies of the British Empire. Both were destinations of significant numbers of immigrants from Northern Ireland during their time as colonial dependencies and thus have a similar relationship to Northern Ireland as the people there do to Scotland and England.

Popular images within murals also included representations of broader cultural significance to the people of Northern Ireland. Surprisingly, images taken from traditional Irish mythology were also found on Unionist murals. Images of heroic warriors from the ancient tales of Ireland are utilized to emphasize the Irish origins of the Unionists as well as tapping into a long historical chronology of resistance to celtic influences in Ireland in general and Ulster in particular. One example of this is a mural which displays the mythological hero Finn McCool standing amongst the hexagonal basalt pillars of the Giant’s Causeway. Surrounded by the emblems of the Ulster Defense Association (UDA), including their badges and mottos, the mural is footnoted by the message “Finn McCool: Defender of Ulster.” Here the members of the UDA are connecting themselves, and their “warrior” exploits, to those of an ancient hero of Irish mythology known for fighting for and defending his ancient homeland around Ulster.

The mythical defense of Ulster serves as a unique theme running throughout many of these murals as well. While Finn McCool is a popular motif, images of another hero abound as

107 Ibid., 7.
108 It is here that it should be noted that the majority of muralists were anonymous artists. The nature of murals as an art form as well as their message and imagery meant that muralists could easily be targeted for their works. Neil Jarman reports that the majority of murals, by the peak period of mural painting, were often the work of untrained and unprofessional locals. Neil Jarman, Materiel Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 211.
109 Finn McCool, or Fionn Mc Cumhail in Irish, is an Irish hero of Ulster whose tales are told in the Fenian Cycle. His exploits, and those of his followers, the Fianna, are well known and identified with across Ireland.
well, that of the hero Cúchulainn. According to legend, the hero (also a native of the ancient kingdom of Ulster) was a ferocious defender of his homeland who fought many a battle against invaders. He is most well-known, however, for his final act. Mortally wounded in battle, Cúchulainn lashed himself upright to a stone so that he could continue fighting off invaders, ultimately fighting to his death. A UDA mural from Highpark Drive shows the image of the dying hero lashed to the stone and surrounded by UDA imagery. A banner reads: “Cuchulainn, ancient defender of Ulster from Gael attacks.” The connection being drawn between the hero and the UDA members responsible for the mural is also clear to the viewer: just as Cúchulainn fought to his last breath against the invaders of Ulster, the members of the UDA will do the same. It’s no coincidence then that both of these Unionist murals that rely on mythological imagery are connected to a warrior past. Just as other murals attempted to make connections between the traditions of the modern British Army and the Unionist paramilitaries, so too were the muralists trying to connect their methods and ideals to stories from the deep history of Ireland.

This analysis also presents an interesting investigation of the warrior ethos contained within the Unionist murals. A great majority of the murals painted in the years immediately before the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 had a military or martial theme to them, emphasizing the ability and will of the locals to resist the onslaught of the Gaelic Irish. The use of the image and tale of CúChulainn suggests an innate sense of Irish-ness in the community but also an adulation for the warrior ethos that the character espoused. Similarly murals focusing on the modern era often had as a locus the martial ability and efficacy of the local paramilitaries and

Figure 7. CúChulainn at Highland Park
(Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in the North of Ireland, 9)

110 Peter Berresford Ellis, A Dictionary of Irish Mythology (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, INC, 1987), 71-73. The most common representation of the image of Cúchulainn’s death (shown in fig. 7) is actually taken from a 1911 sculpture by Oliver Sheppard, an Irish sculptor and participant in the Irish cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. John Turpin, Oliver Sheppard, 1865-1941: Symbolist Sculptor of the Irish Cultural Revival (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 139.

111 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003), 45.
their arms. For example, On Stroud Street, Belfast was a mural that supported the Ulster Freedom Fighters. It depicted the group’s name and a stylized representation of its initials around the image of Red Hand clenched around the receiver of an AR-18 assault rifle. One interpretation of this mural is that the UFF is armed well and willing to utilize these arms to achieve their goals. The meaning of the clenched Red Hand would, according to the idea of the Period Eye, be an obvious message to those in the area: the Unionists of Ulster are armed and capable of fighting off the community’s enemies. In the same way that CúChulainn represents a traditional or mythical warrior ethos, the image of an assault rifle or a uniformed man wielding one informs the viewer of a similar commitment to resistance among the community.

The use of traditional Irish mythology in Unionist murals introduces a dichotomy of national identity. Unionist artists are clearly utilizing many of the same images, colors, and structures that traditionally identify them with the “British” nation. In this way the Unionists are “othering” themselves in a very distinct way by identifying with the historical and cultural traditions of the English and Scots rather than the Irish. At the same time however, they are utilizing the traditional mythology of the very same people the settlers have tried and succeeded in displacing. This process flies in the face of the definitions brought forward by Smith and would suggest, according to his guidelines, some relationship between the two identities. The exact nature of this relationship is difficult to ascertain however since both competing identities appear to be mutually exclusive. An analysis of these images utilizing the methodology of Baxandall might help unravel some of the linkages between the two.

The character of Cuchulainn originates in the mythological stories of Gaelic Ireland. As such his name and story would have been well known to individuals raised in a sufficiently Gaelic environment. His tale would have become more widely known as the academic interest in the Irish language, culture, and history grew in the later half of the nineteenth-century. As a result, it is not outside the realm of possibility that the ancestors of those who would form the unionist paramilitaries in the 1970’s would have been familiar with the tale and pass it along to their descendants. This however seems to be an example of a colonial force, the Anglo-Scotch settlers, appropriating the imagery of a hero of the subjugated people to represent their own ideology. In much the same way King Arthur, a Celtic-Roman king who fought against the invasions of marauding Anglo-Saxons, became a heroic national representation of the Anglo-Saxon state that emerged from his failure. Thus it is not outside of the realm of possibility or experience for the invading force in an area to appropriate a hero of a conquered people. In the case of these Unionist murals, Cuchulainn is also used to represent both the ideal of warrior resistance but also as part of the identity of the region of Ulster itself. While the myth of the warrior takes place in the traditional Gaelic kingdom of Ulster, in these examples the symbol has been appropriated to represent the modern, Anglo-Scotch creation of the region of Ulster. In this way, the hero is separated from his explicitly Irish past and is instead re-appropriated to the British present. This process then introduces the concept of Northern Ireland’s Protestant Unionists being Irish and identifying with the geographic history of the Island rather than culturally Irish. In this way they are differentiating themselves as the “Ulster British Irish” rather than the “Gaelic Irish.” In the words of ex-UVF man Billy Hutchinson, “My political allegiance is to Britain...but I was born in the northeast part of Ireland, which geographically makes my Irish. A Scotsman says he’s Scottish, but he’s British. If somebody asked me what my nationality was, I would say I was Irish, I would say I was British. You can’t say the Giant’s Causway is British - you know, the Giant’s Causway is part of Irish history and Irish culture and Irish

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112 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 12.
mythology, and I accept that.”113 The absorption of CúChulainn is this part of the Unionist absorption of their geographic locating within both Britain and the island of Ireland. They have created a new Irish identity, one that is explicitly British and Protestant and raised from within Ireland.

III. Signs and Symbols in the Nationalist Murals of Northern Ireland

While the muralists of the Unionist tradition spent much time and energy emphasizing their relationship to Britain and the crown, defining their identity as British, and displaying their narratives of Ulster’s past, the nationalist and republican murals chose to focus their emphasis on the Irish nation, its history, and traditions. To do this the artists chose from a wide variety of symbols, signs, and pictorial arrangements that emphasized their difference from the Britannic culture of the Unionists. Structures and images from the Catholic Church, a traditional repository of Irish national identity, provided a great deal of inspiration. The concept of the martyr, so important to the early church, was also mined for inspiration. The military exploits of nationalists and republicans dating to the Irish war of Independence as well as contemporary members of the IRA or its splinter groups also gave the muralists many of the subjects from which they drew. The combination of all of these image traditions formed a potent brew of nationalistic imagery which served to emphasize the native Gaelic and resistant nature of the nationalist populations.

Nationalist memorials often surrounded the memorialized with images relating them to the Irish nation, their work as a paramilitary operative, their place of imprisonment, or the cause of their demise.114 In other words, the images which surrounded them were most often focused on the facts of their lives outside of the structure of their chosen paramilitary organization. The arrangement of the images within these murals often echoed the formal landscaping of traditional icons of martyrs and saints found within the Catholic Church’s visual tradition. Across all of these murals, effort was expounded to connect the memorialized with the wider community for whom they fought and struggled. Modeled after traditional Catholic imagery, framed by images representing Ireland and the Irish people, and placed above the scenes of their mortal sufferings, these men and women were often compared to the saints and martyrs of old.

While the nationalist muralists generally showed an aversion to the use of state imagery, there is one major exception to this trend. Then as now the most potent symbols of the Irish nationalism was the Irish tricolor, a flag formed of three vertical stripes of green, white, and orange. As the flag used by the Irish rebels during the Easter Uprising of 1916, the flag quickly became indicative of the Irish state and the Irish people following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922. The widespread recognition of the flag’s connection to the Irish people is extended to its use as the state flag of the Republic of Ireland. Of the images here discussed and explored, the Irish tricolor is the most common image across all of the nationalist memorials, often being incorporated near or around the memorialized. The flag’s nature as a symbol of both the Irish state and the Irish nation makes it the perfect identifier for both. In the murals the Irish tricolor is usually found paired with the Starry Plough flag, another traditional symbol of Irish nationalism consisting of a series of white stars in the form of the big dipper (referred to as the

113 Jonathan Stevenson, *We Wrecked the Place: Contemplating an End to the Northern Irish Troubles* (New York: The Free Press, 1996),
114 The Irish nation is being used here, and throughout this work, to describe the people, language, and culture of Gaelic/Celtic people of Irish descent. This includes the far-ranging Irish diaspora that is well known in the United States, Canada, and Australia. While the adjective “Irish” can of course be used to describe anyone born and/or raised on the island of Ireland or identifying with connections to the island, for the purposes of this project it refers to the cultural ethno-linguistic group described above.
plough in Britain and Ireland) upon a blue field. The flag, initially adopted by leftists in the Irish republic, came to symbolize Irish nationalism with a leftist bent, often in association with the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA).

An example of these images comes in the form of a memorial from the Brandywell area of Derry to INLA member and hunger-striker Patsy O’Hara, who died in Long Kesh prison in mid 1981. The memorial, painted in the same year, consists of the words “In Memory of Vol. Patsy O’Hara” arranged around a celtic high cross, the Starry Plough, and the Irish tricolor on a white background. Simple and direct in its construction, the mural makes a clear connection between O’Hara’s message in his sacrifice, his nationality, and his ideals in life and death. The Starry Plough and Tricolor connect him to leftist Irish nationalism and the cross to celtic christianity in the form of the Catholic Church.

Figure 8. Memorial to “Vol. Patsy O’Hara” (Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland, 32.)

Taken as a whole however, nationalist memorials demonstrate a much larger amount of variability in subject and presentation than their Unionist counterparts. Whereas Unionist memorials often relied upon a rather ridged set of symbols and signs, nationalist murals used a far greater number of motifs to convey the artist’s feelings or ideologies. For instance, while individual memorials in the nationalist tradition were often festooned with just as much imagery as those of the Unionists, the nature of that imagery is significantly different. Many of these

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115 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 32.
memorials emphasize the nature of the memorialized as a martyr, even evoking connections to Catholic icons of martyrs. One of the best examples of this trend comes in the form of memorials to the hunger strikers. There are many potential reasons for this dynamic difference in what images are used and why between the two mural traditions. The most likely explanation seems to be, however, that the lack of a defined pictorial history to define a nationalist mural allowed the nationalists to experiment and draw upon a much wider image base for their messages. Unionists already had a multi-decade tradition of painting murals that relied on set grouping of images and symbols. This may have discouraged them from more fully developing a wider range of signs and symbols. It is also possible that the end goals of the two differing sides influenced the kinds of images they relied upon in their works. Nationalists works often represented a wide number of, sometimes conflicting, political goals as well as focusing on wide ranging social and national issues. Thus the plethora of subjects might have directly contributed to the spread of the palate of nationalist imagery. In comparison, the relatively narrow political backgrounds and views of the Unionists as well as the hodgepodge ethnic and religious nature of their paramilitary alliances may have combined to restrict the available pool of symbols their muralists could rely upon.

As was the case with their Unionist counterparts, memorials were among the most popular subjects for nationalist murals, particularly those directed towards hunger strikers. When individual hunger strikers were identified they were often posed in ways that evoke the traditions of icons of martyrs in the Catholic Church. The “martyrs” are posed alive and healthy above the earthly signs of their torment or demise. For the hunger strikers, this was often an image of their place of confinement, Her Majesty’s Prison Maze, more commonly known as Long Kesh. Often seen in stylization which focused on the forbidding nature of the prison’s concrete walls and imposing watch towers, the imagery is meant to identify the deceased’s triumph over his torturers and the heavenly realm above their place of imprisonment.

Two Belfast murals exemplify this particular thematic tradition. Both murals have as their subject two deceased hunger strikers: Joe McDonnell and Bobby Sands. Joe McDonnell’s memorial was painted on Rossnareen Avenue in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the 1981 hunger strike. McDonnell is shown in clean, neat civilian clothes, over the barbed wire walls and concrete watch towers of the prison. With a smile painted on his face, the mural suggests McDonnell’s victory over those who kept him imprisoned. The memorial to Sands, from Ardglen Crescent shows a small, very basic portrait of him in the corner of the mural. A stylized Irish tricolor extends from his bust down into the center of the image of Long Kesh reproduced in stark black-and-white profile. The mural’s caption proclaims: “you cannot put a rope around an idea.” Painted immediately in the wake of the hunger strike in 1981, this mural makes an argument about the moral victory of the hunger strikers, that their deaths represented a victory for the ideals of the IRA and the nationalist community rather than an individual triumph. The only analogous phenomena within the Unionist mural traditions were those which memorialized members of paramilitaries killed during the conflict, like Trevor King. However these murals focused, as has been previously mentioned, more on their role as military dead than on their position as martyrs.

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116 Robert Gerard “Bobby” Sands was a native of the Belfast area and a member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army. Imprisoned in Long Kesh for paramilitary activities in the mid 1970’s, Sands participated in the mounting protests by PIRA prisoners against the revocation of their political status in British prisons. Sands ultimately led and was the first casualty of the 1981 PIRA hunger strike, becoming an icon and a martyr for the cause.
117 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 54.
118 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 27.
Other memorials to individual hunger strikers often show them in bust with their names, a brief message of support, or small piece of imagery relevant to their life or ideals arranged about them. For example, a memorial to INLA member Mickey Devine consisted of a plain outline of his face surmounted by a dove, a traditional symbol of peace in western tradition. Underneath his portrait is simply “Vol. Mickey Devine.” In this manner the muralist have memorialized one of the deceased participants in the hunger strikes and identified him with peace as well as the warrior sacrifice. In interpreting memorials like this the viewer is also tasked with exploring the emotions that might be conveyed through the mural. Examples such as the previous might seek to dawn a sense of reverent admiration upon the viewer through the use of cultural context clues. A viewer of this memorial would probably have known about Devine’s loyalties through the news and interaction with locals familiar with him. By placing a simple image and message in remembrance of him, the artist and the surrounding community may have been trying to juxtapose the supposed injustice of his demise with the idealized nature of his life. In much the same way that the image of a saint in passion or a martyr being killed is supposed to invoke within the viewer the sense to emulate, this mural may be intended to convince the viewer to avenge or finish the job in remembrance of Devine.

Figure 9. Memorial to “Vol. Mickey Devine” (Drawing Support 3: Murals and Transition in the North of Ireland, )

A memorial to hunger striker Kieran Doherty utilizes the position of the subject over other images of his political ideals to place him within the context of the nationalist struggle. Doherty’s full body portrait is located in the upper left hand corner of a mural surrounded by celtic decorative work. Arrayed underneath Doherty, on a stair attached to the outer wall of the building upon which the mural is painted, are arrayed protesters in support of the hunger strike, the nationalist Irish, and their aims. This mural, unlike that of McDonnell or Devine but like Sands’, is explicitly connecting the deceased and their actions to the wider cause and movement.

120 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003), 23.
of the republicans of Northern Ireland. Doherty’s memorial also maintains the martyr style by having Dhoerty’s “flock”, the assembled republican protesters, underneath him and in the mortal realm of his suffering. In comparison, another mural in memorial to Joe McDonnell contains only one direct image, a bust of McDonnell, again happy and healthy. Arranged on scrolls on either side of him are the names of the ten hunger strikers who died with him during the 1981 hunger strike. These three images together surmount the quote “Our rulers will stop at nothing to attain their ends. They will continue to rule and rob until confronted by men who will stop at nothing to overthrow them.”

Some pictographic group memorials also echo the traditional themes and setups of images of martyrs. A memorial to deceased groups of IRA members who perished as a result of the hunger strikers arranges the images of those they are memorializing in a ring. Often in group images of martyrs they are arranged around symbols of their faith, mission, or flock. In the case of the IRA mural in Long Kesh, the memorialized are arranged around picture of three IRA men firing salutes with the phrase “The Final Salute” beneath them. The operatives are dressed in fatigues and ski masks and surmount three flags related to the nationalist cause: the tricolor, the starry plough, and the rising sun. The Bloody Sunday mural simply has the busts of the deceased within a circle formed of oak leaves, a traditional symbol of County Derry (where the massacre took place) and of strength and resilience. Group memorials could also echo more traditional forms of pictorial memorial, like that of Doherty. A memorial to Dan McCann, Mariéad Farrell, and Séan Savage shows them arranged in the heavens above the rock of Gibraltar and a group of symbols of Ireland.

An IRA operative in fatigues and armed with an assault rifle raises it in salute to the men while a classical Celtic warrior does the same with this sword. Arrayed before them is a ring of vertical stones, hearkening back to the neolithic rock memorials that dot Britain and Ireland. The mural represents the men arranged in heaven above the site of their martyrdom and those for whom they were martyred. The images of warriors past and present hearken to the long tradition of warrior resistance often evoked by nationalist paramilitaries.

What would these memorials have meant to those locals who viewed them in situ? It is clear than many draw upon the visual and memorial traditions of the Catholic Church. The church had remained, since the arrival of the Protestant Reformation in the early decades of the sixteenth century, a repository and supporter of Gaelic Irish cultural identity. This is even well known across the world as the stereotype of Irish immigrants to the United States and other Anglophone countries is often of the fiercely Catholic “Paddy.” The ubiquitous nature of Catholicism within the nationalist community would have made it an easy connection for muralists to draw from to get their message across. Images of martyrs and their stories are popular decoration of Catholic churches as well and their stories are often the subject of sermons and homilies meant to remind the faithful of their duty to resist sin in their temporal and spiritual lives. These stories of saints and martyrs were often mixed with the histories of the Irish nation in such a way as the two became indistinguishable. Eamon Collins recalled this potent mix of

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121 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003), 23.
123 The three men were killed in Gibraltar by an SAS team in “Operation Flavius”, a sting operation meant to prevent an attack on the Governor of Gibraltar. A resulting European Court of Human Rights investigation found that the men, known IRA operatives, had no weapons or explosives on them at the time of their death. The British state and the SAS were found guilty of conspiracy to murder the men by virtue of inept handling of the operation.
religious, cultural and national mythology that revolved around the mistreatment of the Catholics in Ireland. He writes that upon leaving a trip to Dublin as a teenager, he had

“an exalted new sense of my country’s history and a new-found reverence for everything republican. The image of [James] Connolly’s woollen vest soiled with his blood stayed with me for a long time. In my mind Plunkett, Pearse and Connolly were all linked together. They were all martyrs for our Catholic faith, the true religion: religion and politics fused together by the blood of the martyrs. I was prepared to be a martyr, to dies for this true Catholic faith.”

This level of deep interaction with both the history of Ireland and the teachings of his faith led Collins’ to develop a sense of identity that deeply and irrevocably blended to two identities into one; to be Irish was to be Catholic, and to be a Catholic in Ireland was to be Irish. While this deep of a sense of identity in both Ireland and the Church may not have been typical, it is a good representation of how the history and imagery of the Church could be co-opted for nationalistic means. It would not be outside the realm of possibility then for many of those nationalists who participated in the conflict to be familiar with similar feelings of identity and indignation surrounding the treatment of the Gaelic Irish and the Catholics in Ireland.

Images of children that had been killed in the violence of the Troubles were also used as the subjects of nationalist memorials, serving to highlight the supposed barbarity of the British government in their dealings with the Irish people. They also serve to highlight the difference between the local Irish and the British and Unionist police and military forces. The majority of the children memorialized were killed by plastic bullets, an anti-riot measure implemented by the RUC beginning in the mid-1970’s. Two such memorials involve simple portraits of the children represented in much the same manner as the adult memorials. The bust of the child in full health is shown with some imagery or a message around it. In the case of a memorial to Stephen McConomy painted on Rossvil Street in Derry, it is a message criticizing the handling of the riots by the British government: “They call the killing of Stephen McConomy Civil Order.” A memorial to Brian Stewart from Norglen Road in Belfast follows much the same pattern with a massive portrait of Stewart painted photo-realistically upon the gable of a row-home, surrounded by celtic knot work with a dove surmounting his name, simply “Brian.” However the most visually stimulating memorial to deceased children comes from Twinbrook Road in Belfast. Here an arrangement of children stand behind burial crosses bearing their names. They are surmounted by scenes of rioting with flames, protest lines, a RUC armored van and children being struck by plastic bullets. The focus of the mural is, however, upon an armored RUC man taking aim with a plastic bullet launcher directly over the superimposed head of a young girl. The images of all of these children and the crosses, representing their graves, is imposed over the image of RUC officers armed in riot gear and advancing towards the viewer in front of a wall of flames. Taken together, this mural evokes the chaos, terror, and violence that proceeded the deaths of these children at the hands of the police authorities. When compared to other memorials to children, it is far more violent and emotionally jarring than the preceding examples and may serve to emphasize the ruthlessness of the local police service in their treatment of the

124 Eamon Collins, Killing Rage (London: Granta Books, 1997), 36-37. Joe Plunkett, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly were participants in the Easter Uprising of 1916 and signatories to the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. All three were executed in May of 1916 by the British Government for their role in the uprising and quickly became martyrs for the cause of Irish nationalism and independence.
125 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 45.
127 Ibid., 16.
local Irish and underscore the overreaction of the service as well as the unfairness of their policies.

**Figure 10.** Twinbrook Memorial (*Drawing Support 3: Murals and Transition in the North of Ireland*, 16)

Within the nationalist mural tradition, subjects and set-ups for historical murals are far less regimented by tradition than their Unionist peers. Subjects of these murals are much more widely varied, taking as subjects many individual events which span the full scope of Ireland’s history. Subjects include the Irish Famine of 1840, the Easter Uprising of 1916, and formational events in the chronology of the Troubles. The subjects of these murals often served to emphasize a new aspect of the definition of “Irishness. This is displayed by presenting a visual history of a tradition of Irish suffering and resistance to British power on the island. By bringing a long, historical series of these representations into discussions of the Troubles, the actions of paramilitaries might have seemed justified in context.

An experience that served as one of the foundational moments of the modern Irish nation was the historical memory of the Irish Famine of the 1840’s, often colloquially known as the Irish Potato Famine. This period is well known in the United States as the impetus for the mass migration of Irish people to the shores of the New World. In Ireland “the Great Hunger”, as it is known, continues to hold a particular place within Irish cultural memory. The main focus of these murals is often the emaciated figures of Irish people which serve to emphasize the lack of food evident in Ireland at the time. Mothers with children, starving and often dressed in rags were the focus of the murals. The gaunt, emaciated figure of a mother, her equally malnourished children held tightly around her, was often a central image. Behind these waif-ish figures is often a scene of bucolic desolation which also emphasized the lack of food. A variation of this theme comes from Donegall road where the bedraggled forms of two Irish women, one elderly and one young, surround the nude, emaciated bodies of the dead and dying, including

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128 The mid-to-late 1990’s were also the 150th anniversary of the famine, known as “an Gorta Mór” in Irish

children. This mural appears to emphasize the suffering of the mothers of Ireland during this period with special emphasis being placed on the generational linkages between women. Another mural shows a group of emaciated women gleaning the furrows of a plowed field, looking for dropped grain to eat. Other murals, such as one on Beechmount Avenue in Belfast, which shows the starving masses loading onto a ship bound for elsewhere, shifts the focus to the Irish diaspora which resulted from the hardships experienced in Ireland. By utilizing these themes from the common historical memory of the period, muralists sought to connect their own modern struggle with this seminal moment in the cultural memory of the Irish nation.

This effort to connect the modern context of their struggle to traditional images of definition for the Irish nation is continued in the use of the Easter Uprising of 1916 as a subject for murals. In April of that year, sensing the distraction of the British government with the ongoing First World War, a group of Irish nationalists launched a coordinated revolt in the heart of Dublin with the aim of sparking a unification of the country’s nationalist and republican movements. While a military failure, the events, locations and individuals involved in the uprising became ingrained in the Irish national mythos as the foundational moment of the Irish independence movement. The participants of the Uprising and their headquarters during the uprising, the General Post Office in Dublin, all became potent images of Irish nationalism in the years after the end of the conflict and Ireland’s independence. Since these two scenes were intimately connected in the events of the Uprising, they also became intimately connected when added to the collective nationalist mythology.

The physical center of the uprising and the headquarters of the leaders of this military endeavor was the stately General Post Office, built in the early years of the nineteenth century. For five days the rebels holed up in the building and fought off repeated attacks by police, auxiliaries, and regular infantry of the British Army before being forced to abandon the building to a growing fire. The actions and ideals of the men who had declared the Irish Republic and led the Uprising from the GPO became a rallying point for nationalist sentiment and outrage after their execution by the British authorities for treason. By utilizing the images of both the Martyrs of 1916 and the burning General Post Office in murals, the nationalist muralists are explicitly connecting themselves to the longer chronology of rebellions, wars, and military actions against the British state in Ireland. By connecting themselves to this revered moment in Irish history then, they are equating themselves, their actions, and ideologies to those of the founding fathers of the Irish Republic. One mural in the INLA wing of Long Kesh prison depicts the leaders of the Uprising arrayed in front of a flaming GPO with 1916 painted in large, orange and red flaming letters beneath them. Another mural from Whiterock Road in Belfast depicts the armed, upright figures of the fighters arrayed against the flaming date of 1916 with an intact post office before them. Above their figures is written a line from a poem, reading: “who fears to speak of Easter week.” Above them is the rising sun, the starry plough, and the phoenix rising from the flames; all potent symbols of Irish nationalism and republicanism.

Taken together then, the combination of the two images serves to establish the loyalties of the nationalist murals within the chronology and ideology of the mythical history of the fight

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130 Ibid., 58.
131 Ibid., 59.
132 Ibid., 58.
133 Thomas Clarke, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas Mac Donagh, Patrick Pearse, Éamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, and Joseph Plunkett became known as the Martyrs of 1916
for Irish independence. While many of the early murals that depicted these scenes were rather simple in form and presentation, their evolution (matched with the evolution of the murals as an art form in general) saw the gradual expansion of the complexity of these murals. Many later ones show those in the GPO in stances that connect them to the long and storied tradition of state sponsored paintings of important national events. For example, a mural on Berwick Road in Belfast depicts the inside of the post office during the height of the uprising.\footnote{ibid.} It depicts well over a dozen armed men in green military uniforms posted at windows and firing at British troops. Others are shown gathered around the prone figures of Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, both seriously wounded in the fighting.\footnote{Ibid.} The figures in the mural, perhaps deliberately, echo classical poses of traditional paintings of national significance such as *The Death of General Wolfe* by Benjamin West and traditional depictions of the passion of Christ. Arrayed against the images of a fluttering Irish tricolor and a white lily, the mural makes its message clear: the sacrifice of the men in GPO was an important, foundational moment for the cause of Irish independence.

The reliance on the imagery of the Easter Uprising is not surprising given the foundational role that the event had and continues to have within other nationalist communities in the Republic of Ireland and in nationalist groups within the Irish diaspora. Much like the battles of Lexington and Concord served to highlight in the minds of many Americans the beginning of the fight for...
American independence, the same goes for the Uprising within the minds of Irish nationalists. A person from the neighborhood in which these images were painted would have been intimately familiar with the stories of this period in Irish history. Much as their Unionist peers would have been familiar with the stories of their grandfather’s serving in Flanders many nationalist youth would probably have been very familiar with their own family’s experiences during the Uprising and the following War of Independence. Relying on these images would then have tied their message to the personal and communal recollections of the ideals and events of the period. In this way, the ideology of Irish nationalism could be reinforced by hearkening back to a formational moment in the group’s identity. Brendan Hughes recalled his own experiences with these stories of the period surrounding the Uprising and the War of Independence. He says that:

I mean, we heard all the stories - my grandmother used to tell me stories about the 1920’s and of the shootings and murders and so forth, and I remember being really scared about the B Specials...stories about my Uncle Eoin and of my great-grandfather during the War of Independence, losing his arm, throwing a hand grenade at an armored car somewhere in County Louth. The grenade went off and blew his arm off.137

Youths like Hughes would have been intimately aware of their own family’s experiences during these periods and their own connections to the idealizations and heroics of the men and women involved in this nationalist conflict of the past. Like many young men, therefore, it is not outside the realm of possibility that Hughes and his boyhood compatriots would have idealized the actions of their relatives in the past and their connections to Irish independence. Eamon Collins also recalled his involvement with these stories of the Uprising period and the glorification of those involved in the events of the period. He recalls that

I went to Dundalk in the Republic of Ireland for the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising. I saw lines of marching men carrying banners, tricolours and symbols that spoke of a heroic Ireland, an Ireland of great deeds, courage and self-sacrifice. The ghosts of the great heroes Pearse and Connolly were invoked, their deified spirits provoking reverence. I felt those heroes of 1916 were like the priests who dies for us at Cromwellian hands. I felt my mother must have been right: the struggle for our faith was not yet over.138

Both of these anecdotes demonstrate the level of admiration and hero-worship attached to the actors and the events surrounding the 1916 Uprising and the War of Independence. Both Collins and Hughes grew up seeing and hearing of the reverence that their families and their communities had for these warriors who had fought and died not as only martyrs for Ireland, but for the Church as well. These types of stories pervaded their knowledge of the history of Ireland and her people.

Flowing from this tradition of memorializing the military exploits of previous rebels, resistance was also a popular theme for murals in other settings as well. Some of these murals emphasized the retention of Irish culture during the brutal years of British domination between the end of the Williamite Wars and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. One mural from Ardonyne Avenue depicts an outdoor, secret mass held by a priest in a rock outcropping and attended by the faithful. Sentries are running towards the congregation to warn them of the

137 Ed Moloney, *Voices From the Grave* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 37.
approach of British troops. Another mural from Ardoyne depicts one of the legendary (and also illegal) “hedge” schools where local children were educated in their native faith and language by itinerate teachers.139

Mural also commemorated events that were critical to the development of the Troubles as a whole. Some identified the events that led to the formation of the paramilitaries and tension between Catholics and the British state as a mural on Strabane Old Road in Derry does. It depicts a silhouetted youth throwing a lit petrol bomb with the words “1969” and “Battle of the Bogside” surrounding the image.140 Another depicts a woman holding her child tight to her as their home and those of their neighbors on Bombay Street burn in the night. The mural references anti-Catholic violence that was part of the general rioting that struck Northern Ireland in 1969. Beneath was written “Bombay Street Never Again! No Decommission”, warning against the then ongoing process of the IRA decommissioning in accordance with the Good Friday Agreement.141 Murals referencing Catholic suffering and Irish resistance to the British Army, views against the Downing Street Declaration, and a scene of the successful IRA Warrenpoint Ambush, all reference specific events of the Troubles which sought to rally nationalist support around continued resistance.142

These depictions of historical motifs all serve to highlight the historical nature of the Irish grievances against the actions and policies of the British state as well as active resistance to them by the Irish population. They form a visual means of creating a contextual history which sought to lend legitimacy to their actions and ideologies by placing them in a historical continuum. These murals are most importantly contextualized in light of the ceasefires and the end of the conflict in the late 1990’s as more violent subjects fell out of favor with all involved in the peace process. Together then, nationalists and Unionists were attempting the same goals with their mural traditions - constructing a “legitimate” mythological history of their views within the larger context of the history of Ireland and its relationship with Great Britain. These murals also present the view of these murals as a chronological progression of interpretations of history, or a narrative. These events are portrayed as specified chronological moments that represent specific instances in a span of time between hours and years. To see a series of murals such as these that present a narrative of the events leading to and beginning the Troubles is to see a contextually relative narrative history of these events through the eyes of the locals. In other words, it is an archive of their interpretations of these events and their aftermath. The framework of this narrative, the origins of the Troubles in the late 1960’s, might be different depending on what city or neighborhood a nationalist was in. Unionists who wished to present a chronologically similar timeline may present the same images from their point of view. The artists might also present a completely different series of events that display an alternative narrative or just simply

139 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003), 26; Ibid.; In order to preserve their culture, language and faith in the face of official government efforts to educate children in Ireland according to British standards, Irish parents were often known to send their children to informal schools located outside of their towns and villages, hence the “hedges.” There they would be instructed in their language, culture, and faith.
140 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 35; Battle of the Bogside.
142 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 34; Ibid., 35; Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 34.
wish to avoid unpleasant actions or memories. Either way, chronological narratives of similar periods can display how two different backgrounds interpreted the same events through their own contextual understandings.

Many of the conventions which defined the use of militaristic imagery in Unionist murals are also utilized in the murals of the nationalists and republicans. These conventions included the appearance of armed men, the stances of the figures, and their regulated appearances. For example, the mural on Gardenmoore Road in the town of Twinboke displays two rows of four fighters standing at attention. The eight men and women appear in uniform dress: green military fatigues, black boots, masks and berets for the men and military skirts and jackets for women. All of the assembled are wearing sunglasses. This type of mural accomplished much the same thing as their Unionist contemporaries, emphasizing the military nature of the organization and the anonymity of its members as well as intimidating anyone who wished to enter the neighborhood with ill intent.

The appearance of these armed and dangerous men and women in these murals could also have served to emphasize the modern version of a supposed cultural tradition of militant resistance. By focusing on the weapons of the paramilitaries, muralists could emphasize the warrior ethos of these men and women in the same way that showing an armed mythical or historical warrior emphasized their role in the mythical or historical community. To this end images of the nationalist armory depict a wide variety of weapons in the hands of fighters. In fact, these weapons were so widely identified with the nationalist cause that they could even become stand-alone symbols for their fight. One mural off of Springhill Park in Strabane, County Tyrone depicts the Irish phrase “Tiocfaidh ár lá” stylized in the shape of an AR-16. A mural on Sevastopol Street shows masked and uniformed IRA men armed with assault rifles, an M60 machine gun and an M2 heavy machine gun. These murals seem to emphasize both the quality and the potency of the arms available to local paramilitaries and, by extensions, the warrior ability of the bearers. When viewed in series with the more historical or mythical warriors of Gaelic Ireland, which occurs below, a narrative of effective and noble warrior resistance becomes apparent to the viewer. A conclusion that could only be recognized by having a background in the traditional stories of Gaelic resistance that would have been widespread in those communities. In this way, a mural showing a modern member of the PIRA in a stance or appearance similar to an ancient warrior, CúChulainn perhaps, might draw on the viewers cultural understanding of what it has meant in the past to be a Gaelic or Irish warrior. This idea of the warrior’s nature could then be transposed onto the image, and by extension the person, of a modern paramilitary fighter.

While there is some overlap between the martial mural traditions of the nationalists and the Unionists, there are many more differences which serve to underline the ultimate goals of the nationalist murals. One of these key differences in the appearance of fighters is the nationalist use of ski masks and other face coverings. Images of paramilitaries are just as likely to display them without a mask than they are with one. While it’s not likely that the subjects of these murals are meant to refer to specific members of the organizations, the fact that they are unmasked is a significant difference. For example, murals from both Rockville Street and South Link depict armed, unmasked revolutionaries, although they are displayed in different contexts.

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143 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 37.
144 Ibid., 21; The phrase means “our day will come”
145 The M2 is a belt-fed, heavy machine gun which fires a .50 caliber round capable of punching through light vehicle armor. This American-made gun was intended to be mounted to vehicles.
The point remains however that these are public men, fighters who aren’t afraid to show their faces. The result can be seen then as a kind of assertion of bravery in the face of the violence of the conflict. Doing so may also have placed contemporary Unionist murals into contrast and accused them of cowardice by virtue of the nationalist’s bared faces. Murals of this theme also drew connections between the unmasked and other well-known revolutionaries from around the world. One mural on Ballymurphy Drive in Belfast depicts another unmasked, armed, and uniformed member of the IRA next to images of James Connolly, Emilio Zapata, and a United Farm Workers activist along with the quote “You can kill the revolutionary, but never the revolution.” While the ground level revolutionaries, the IRA man and the UFW member, are unnamed their connections to the two revolutionary leaders is made explicit by their inclusion in the mural, at the very least drawing comparisons between the movements and missions of the two revolutionaries.

Figure 12. International Revolutionaries
(Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace, 31)

One notable variation of subject found within nationalist murals is the inclusion of images of female revolutionaries being directly involved in the movement and organizations. As previously stated, masked women fighters are shown in formation with their male counterparts in the Gardenmoore mural, although they appear in different dress. Other examples specifically highlight the roles played by women in Irish revolutionary movements as well as in revolutionary movements around the world. A mural on the Falls Road in Belfast commemorates the work of women in all aspects of the struggle against the British. Images of three women appear in front of a waving Irish flag. One woman is shown reading aloud from a book held in her hands, another is shown walking with an AR-15 in her hands and wearing a fatigue jacket, and the Rockville Street mural depicts an unmasked revolutionary in camouflage fatigues, armed with an AR-15 rifle and standing in front of a billowing Irish tricolor. Around the image is the quote “They may kill the revolutionary, but never the revolution.” Ibid., 36. This mural depicts three uniformed and armed members of the IRA unmasked and on patrol.

146 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 35; the Rockville Street mural depicts an unmasked revolutionary in camouflage fatigues, armed with an AR-15 rifle and standing in front of a billowing Irish tricolor. Around the image is the quote “They may kill the revolutionary, but never the revolution.” Ibid., 36. This mural depicts three uniformed and armed members of the IRA unmasked and on patrol.

147 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 31; The mural also contains a myriad of traditional symbols for Irish republicans including the tricolor and the phoenix rising from the flames.
while the final image depicts a female prisoner raising her fist in defiance. Surmounting this images is the phrase “We must grow tough but without ever losing our tenderness” and a message urging the viewer to contact Sinn Fein if they’re interesting in helping the cause. This mural explicitly highlights the role of women in all parts of the movement, including showing armed and imprisoned women. The inclusionary message of this mural could be seen as an attempt to expand the definition of the “Irishness” that the paramilitaries sought to defend and promote by including women in their definition. They may be making the visual argument that women are a vital part of our struggle and are capable of operating in the same capacity as our male members.

Connections were also drawn between revolutionary women in Ireland and elsewhere in the world. Painted on the side of a house on the Falls Road, the images of three women are shown surrounded by biological symbol for female. Female members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the Southwest African People’s Organization are depicted behind a-uniformed member of the women’s wing of the IRA; the Palestinian woman and the African women brandish assault rifles. Both of these murals seek to emphasize the inclusive nature of the nationalistic movements within Irish society and their explicit support for the women of other armed resistance groups around the world. These images also connect the Irish struggle with other “just” struggles taking place across the post-colonial world and places not only the suffering, but also the active resistance of women in these other conflict zones into conversation with the women of the Troubles. In his book Murals: The Bogside Artists mural painter William Kelly recounted the reason why he and his colleagues had decided to paint a mural of republican and socialist leader Bernadette Devlin. He writes that “In terms of content, we were painting a mural especially for women. It is a tribute to them. It would accordingly have been unthinkable to paint it in black-and-white, especially as, in terms of equal rights, women everywhere still have a long way to go.” Mural painters in the nationalist tradition sometimes saw themselves as representing not only their own struggle in Northern Ireland, but also the struggles of other oppressed peoples around the world from the fight for gender equality to anti-colonial movements across the world.

Figure 13. Revolutionary armed women of the world (Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland, 49)

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148 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 34.
149 Ibid., 49. The women’s wing of the IRA is known as Cumann na mBan
The imagery that surrounds these murals that is not explicitly militaristic overlaps heavily with that utilized in memorial murals as well. These symbols place emphasis not on the specific units of the paramilitaries or upon the official nature of their actions, organizations, or movements. Rather these symbols often place emphasis on the national identity of those involved in the conflict. Thus, the actions of the paramilitaries and the weapons and tactic that they use represent actions performed not for a particular unit or organization, but for the Irish people. In this capacity the Irish tricolor is the most popular symbol across all of the militaristic murals. Its association with the state of Ireland, the Irish nation and its diaspora abroad is unmatched by any other symbol and has become, in effect, a sacred object imbued with the collective memories ideals of the nation. Anthropologist Emile Durkheim described this phenomenon in many people’s treatment of flags as the creation of a totem, which is a ritual object displayed in order to encourage feelings of social solidarity. The flags of the leftist revolutionary organizations, the starry plough and the rising sun, are also popular images but their occurrence pales in comparison to that of the Irish tricolor. Images paired with these could be drawn from all over Ireland and the world. For example, one mural paired with the image of the tricolor is that of the phoenix rising from the flames. The phoenix is a traditional symbol of rebirth as it is consumed by fire upon its death and reborn from the ashes. The symbolism of this bird is more relevant to the individuals involved in the paramilitaries as well as their organizations. While they, the individuals or the groups they fight with may be killed, Ireland and the Irish people will be

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reborn from their ashes. This sentiment is echoed by the oft-paired phrase “You can kill the revolutionary but never the revolution.”

Thus can be seen some of the simple imagery utilized by the nationalists in order to connect with Irish people. In order to promote their view of Irish nationalism, these muralists chose to focus on the visual identity of the Irish nation at large. By doing this they expanded the borders of their conflict outside of the boundaries of Northern Ireland to wherever sympathetic Irish people reside. This trans-national effort resulted in the influx of money and arms that made the IRA internationally known in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Another of the pictorial themes which allowed them to do that is, surprisingly, shared with the Unionist traditions: Irish mythology. The use of characters from these tales can be split into two main themes: traditional celtic and modern mythology.

The development of mass information and communication immediately before the advent of the Troubles would have helped to make these connections within the minds of many nationalist residents. The global rise of student leftism across the western world and many ongoing leftist revolutions against traditional forms of government would have been well known within the whole of society in Northern Ireland as a result of television news reports. As a result many nationalists were familiar with if not outright participating in leftist politics using the language of revolution, imperialism, and post-colonialism. The links that these murals make to revolutions of the past and present might have served to draw on these links and legitimize the nationalist struggle against Britain by putting the conflict in direct, visual conversation with other leftist movements around the world. Familial traditions of political loyalty would also have been drawn upon as many political affiliations were passed through families. Brendan Hughes, recounted in an earlier section, reflected on the effects that his own father’s commitment to the Labor party and socialism had on his outlooks. He recalls that

my father was a republican, but I think, foremost, he was a socialist. At that period in the 1960’s, up to 1969, Republican socialists did not have a great deal going for them, and so my father was a constant British Labour voter. He was always voting for the Labour Party because there wasn’t any alternative, but, when we talk about socialism and socialists and the ideology of socialism, I think Catholic Nationalist people at the time were largely socialist at heart.¹⁵²

These murals may have been drawing on shared community feelings of solidarity with international leftist movements as well as dissatisfaction with the traditional parties of representing Irish nationalism in Stormont and Westminster. These murals may have encouraged the viewer to view the paramilitaries of the events of the Troubles not a brutal violence, but as the legitimate actions of revolutionaries seeking change in the structures of society and government in Northern Ireland.

The murals that connected themselves to traditional Irish mythology are often focused on heroes representative of the Irish nation in one way or another or to the members of the nationalist organizations responsible for the murals. One of the most popular characters chosen to represent the Irish people is the ancient princess Êire or Ériu. In the tale, Êire is a daughter of gods and one the individuals responsible for bringing the Irish people to the island of Ireland. In return, the people refer to their island home with her name in recognition of her actions.¹⁵³ As a

result, Éire is often shown as the female personification of the Irish nation, much as Columbia is used for the United States or Marianne for the people of France. She is often shown utilizing colors or visual stereotypes representative of the Irish nation at home and abroad. For example, one mural from Flax Street, Belfast shows Éire kneeling next to a pond surrounded by a verdant meadow and ancient rock memorials. She is clad in a green dress and displays wild, unkempt red hair. Beneath her is written an Irish phrase meaning “The people’s spirit is raised through culture.”¹⁵⁴ The image and the message show a commitment to the Irish people and the importance that maintaining their culture has to those who painted the memorial. Éire is then a representative of both the Irish people as well as their culture through which the people can maintain their spirits and achieve their goals. This mural stands in contrast to another example from the Short Strand, Belfast, which shows a stylization of the face of Éire reminiscent of the art deco style. Painted in orange white and green the face is surrounded by the portraits of local republicans as well as text from the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, a poem by Bobby Sands, and a phrase meaning “Their names are among the heroes of the Gaels.”¹⁵⁵ This mural, much more explicitly than the other, connects all of these people to their culture to underscore the interdependence extant between them. By linking the deceased to the wider culture of Ireland and the Irish people, the muralists are drawing the same connections that those in the previous mural are: the importance of culture to the nation and the relationship and the loyalty that the nationalists show even unto death. It also functions to remove the distance of time and memory between the ancient and modern heroes of Ireland. By including a poem by a modern hero, Bobby Sands, the author draws explicit comparison between the words and deeds of Sands and those of the mythological personification of the Irish people thus forming a historical narrative which takes shared cultural experiences and places them in image form on a public wall.

Still more popular than images of Éire however are images of warriors taken from Irish tales. Images of these warriors abound in the murals of both sides of the conflict and some Unionist murals utilize the same heroes as the nationalists. On both sides of the conflict the aim of painting the figures is the desire to connect the modern paramilitaries to the warrior ethos of the mythical heroes. By doing this they not only build into a long tradition of warrior resistance to outsiders but also align their deeds and ideologies with those of the mythical warriors. In effect, these murals are expanding their histories further into the mists of Irish history, making the Irish nation and their island home of primordial rather than modern origin.

One of the most popular warriors to be shown this manner is the image of Cúchulainn, an ancient warrior and defender of Ulster from invaders.¹⁵⁶ Born Sétanta, the young warrior killed the hound of a local lord and assuaged the noble’s anger by offering to take the deceased animals place; thus he became known as Cú (hound) Chulainn (of Culainn). However Cúchulainn is best known for his final act: tying himself upright to a stone in order to remain fighting against invaders of his homeland, an act which forever associated himself with the idea of fighting to the last breath an ingrained his ideals in the minds of many Irish rebels.¹⁵⁷ This connection between the ideals of Ireland and the fight to the death are popular motifs throughout nationalist and republican murals and connections are often made between Cúchulainn and specific individuals

¹⁵⁴ Bill Rolston, *Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace* (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 55; “Meon an phobail a thóg a nainmeacha.”
¹⁵⁶ “pronounced “kew-hullen”
as well as with the Irish people as a whole. The idea of Cúchulainn as a symbol of the Irish nation re-entered the national discourse and mythology on a large scale during the Irish cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. One of the principal visual artists of the period was the sculptor Oliver Sheppard, a product not only of a wealthy Dublin family but also some of the best arts schools in Europe. Sheppard’s interest in his native culture would pair with this rising tide of national cultural discovery and inspired him to create a statue of the wounded Irish warrior in 1911. Entitled The Death of Cúchulainn, the image of Cúchulainn that is recognizable in murals and other visual media is a direct take on Sheppard’s 1911 sculpture. Its association with the warrior mythos of Ireland was further enhanced when, in 1935 it was placed in the entrance of the General Post Office in Dublin by Eamon de Valera as a memorial to the Easter Uprising of 1916. Since that time the image of Cúchulainn has served as inspiration across Ireland to the point where unionists have claimed the very same image as their own, using it in much the same way that nationalists do: to give form to their warrior ideals and show their connection to Ireland’s mythic past.

This connection between Cúchulainn and the warrior dead of Ireland is sometimes emphasized by surrounding his image with those of deceased members of local paramilitaries or nationalist organizations. One such mural shows the deceased Cúchulainn lashed to the stone and surrounded by the portraits of the seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. Included are the words to the poem “Mise Éire” or “I am Ireland.” However this connection between dead nationalists could also be emphasized in a more simplistic way. A mural from St. James Road in Belfast shows Cúchulainn lashed to the letter “I” in the phrase “In loving memory” over which is mounted a plaque containing the names of deceased local members of the IRA. The muralists here are therefore drawing an explicit connection between those members of nationalist and republican military enterprises who gave up their lives in defense of their ideals. In a way, they are adding these individuals to the myth of Cúchulainn himself, turning them into participants as well.

Cúchulainn could also be more explicitly linked to the Irish nation as a whole as well as to his traditional connection to Ulster. This was done through the use of the four heraldic shields of Ireland, representative of the four traditional provinces of the island: Connacht, Leinster, Munster, and Ulster. When combined with the image of Cúchulainn these heraldic signs expand his connection to include the rest of Ireland as well as his home province. In a way, this collection of images further expands the idea of resistance embodied by Cúchulainn from the people of Ulster (common in Unionist murals), to the members of paramilitaries, to the people of Ireland as a whole. One example of this process shows Cúchulainn lashed to his stone in front of an Irish plain and surrounded by a halo. Next to him is the picture of Ireland made up of the

159 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 58; Thomas J. Clarke, Seán Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, Patrick Pearse, Éamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, and Joseph Plunkett.
160 Ibid., 39; Written in Irish it is rendered as “I nDíl Cuimne”
161 Connacht shows a shield bisected by a white half with half and eagle and a blue half with an armored arm holding a sword; Ulster is a yellow field with a red cross of St. George and the Red Hand in the center surrounded by a shield; Leinster is the celtic harp on a green field; Munster is three yellow crowns on a blue field.
heraldic shields of the four provinces. Above Cúchulainn is written, in Irish, the phrase “I am Ireland, great is my glory.”

Figure 14. Cúchulainn and the four kingdoms of Ireland (Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace, 28)

Cúchulainn however did not have a monopoly on portrayals of warriors from Ireland’s cultural milieu. A notable mural from Springhill Avenue in Belfast depicts a mythical warrior king out of Ireland’s tales heroically rising from out of a pond gripping his sword in one hand and raising his clenched fist in the air. King Nuada, or Nuadu Argatláin, was an ancient king of the Tuatha Dé Danann people. In the myths of Ireland, the Tuatha Dé Danann were supposed to be some of the first people to reach Ireland. Disfigured in battle by loss of his arm, a physician of the king is said to have replaced it with a fully functional arm made of silver. Ruling for close to thirty years, Nuada is said to have died in battle with great foes defending the homes of his people. The connection here between the muralists and the story is similar to that between Cúchulainn and those who painted him. The muralist is combining the images of a character from Irish mythology with the idea of the Irish nation and presenting them as one. In this way he or she is emphasizing the mythical nature of Irish resistance as well as its mythical origins in the mists of time.

162 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 28; “Mise Éire, nór mo glóir.”
163 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 57.
Specific warriors were not the only ones depicted in these murals appealing to the national character however. The warrior spirit and tradition of the Irish people could be displayed through artistic renderings of generic, unnamed warriors as well. One mural from the IRA wing of Long Kesh prison shows a celtic warrior pointing his sword at the viewer and gripping a scantily clad celtic woman to his side. Both are dressed in representations of celtic clothing common amongst the artists of fantasy works. The two figures are also presented within the ring of the Tara Brooch, an ancient example of Irish gold-smithing. Another from Chamberlain Street in Derry depicts a celtic warrior shown armed with spear and shield, covered in a cloak, and wearing a circlet. All of his clothing and arms are decorated with celtic motifs and the rest of the imagery on the mural echoes the appearance of celtic stone carvings and other art. Together these further display the desire of muralists in Northern Ireland to associate their modern paramilitary fighters and activists with a warrior ethos or image defined as “our warrior ethos.” By doing this they seek to establish the chronology as well as the ideals of the celtic warrior in their resistance to any enemy, foreign or domestic. By relying on images taken from Irish mythology or appearing to be from Irish mythology, the muralists also emphasize the culture which produced these warriors, both ancient and modern, as well as the ideals they lived up to. More importantly however, by painting these onto the side of buildings, the artists emphasize the failure of the British state or the Unionists to stamp out evidence of Irish culture across Ireland in general, but in Northern Ireland more specifically.

As previously mentioned however, the Irish mythology represented by the murals is not taken solely from those stories originating in the mists of time. More modern stories of warrior resistance and the maintenance of Irish culture were also popular motifs. Many murals depicted participants in the Easter Uprising of 1916 in similar ways as those who depicted more traditional heroes. Like the heroes of old, these modern warriors have standard tales, acts of heroic defiance, tragic ends and have all come to symbolize an ethos that the painters wished the nationalist people of Northern Ireland to emulate. As has been previously mentioned, the fighting at the General Post Office in Dublin during the uprising is a common scene within murals and contained images analogous to Cúchulainn and his stone or Nuada and his arm. The flaming GPO, the Irish tricolor, and the images of the martyrs are all often presented in ways urging the viewer to emulate them. Individuals such as Patrick Pearse and James Connolly often make appearances as heroes in murals; they are often surrounded by quotes or images meant to evoke a sense of respect or awe in the audience. These modern mythological heroes serve the same purpose in that they place the current nationalists and their ideals into the historical continuum of defenders of Ireland and her people. They put them in a larger framework of mythic stories, warrior ethos, and heroic actions which emphasize the long nature of Irish resistance against a multitude of foes. In a way then, they are gaining legitimacy by comparing themselves to mythical beings. They are also making a visual narrative of a national tradition of resistance by including these modern heroes with older and mythological examples. They are, in effect, archiving and preserving this national tradition in the format of an image and creating these continuums of visual narratives of contextually history.

This reliance on the traditional tales of the Gaelic Irish within the murals served not only to emphasize the cultural differences of the nationalists from the Unionists and the British but

166 Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 44; The centerpiece of the mural is, however, the words to the poem “Mise Éire.”
also to evoke feelings of nostalgia and admiration for these heroes of old. The intended goal may have been to evoke the desire to emulate these heroes of old. Much like American children often hold George Washington or other lions of American cultural history in a saint-like awe and are told by the elders to emulate them. In this way the murals would have relied on these shared cultural experiences of the tales of Irish history and mythology in order to impart a common theme of thought or deed. The reader will recall the reaction that Eamon Collins had to viewing a parade in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Uprising and how he connected the leaders of the rebellion with their Catholic faith and Irish nationalism. This is much the effect that these muralists sought to draw out of their audience.

Images of traditional Irish culture, outside of the realm of mythology, were also popular motifs for murals. They serve to show that Irish culture was alive and well in Northern Ireland despite long-term efforts to erase or suppress it. These murals also serve to emphasize the continuation of Irish life in Northern Ireland despite the difficulties caused by the Troubles. Images included cultural displays such as traditional Irish dancing. A mural from Hurson Park in Portadown in County Armagh shows three Irish girls in traditional dress dancing in a street. Surrounding them is a message of welcome to their neighborhood.\(^\text{167}\) Traditional music or instrumentation were also popular displays as demonstrated by a mural from Flax Street, Belfast. It shows an elderly man playing the national bag pipe of Ireland, the Uileann pipes, on the rocky slope of a hill.\(^\text{168}\) Another shows young people involved in three traditional Irish sporting games: hurling, camogie, and football. An attached message to the mural states “Gaelic games part of our heritage.”\(^\text{169}\) These themes within the mural serve to emphasize the widespread and unbroken nature of Irish cultural traditions and expressions in the modern society of Northern Ireland. These murals appeal to the traditions and expressions shared by the Irish nation across time and space and are meant to emphasize this relationship. Traditions are important to cultures because they emphasize continuity with the past and present, a point touched upon eloquently by Eric Hobsbawn. He wrote that traditions are “taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”\(^\text{170}\) These visual representations of this relationship then are meant to visualize this cultural continuity.

Representations of this unity are also displayed through geographic means as well as cultural images. Much like how the Unionists emphasized the British nature of Northern Ireland by displaying the boundaries of the country draped or painted in the flags of Britain or Northern Ireland, nationalists sought to portray their idea of the island by visually representing its geography. By showing the island of Ireland as whole, rather than in pieces, the artists of murals like the one from Sevastopol Street, painted in support of the nationalist newspaper *An Phoblact*, demonstrate the desire of the Irish people to see an Ireland untroubled by international borders and the conflicts they can bring.\(^\text{171}\) The mural shows the island of Ireland with the Irish tricolor and starry plough waving behind it. In front of island is the silhouette of a soldier and an armed multitude. It displays a desire to see the unity not only of the geography of Ireland, but of the

\[^{167}\text{Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 3: Murals in Transition in Northern Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2003), 6; the message reads: “Fálte fo dti Bothar Garbh Achaidh” or “Welcome to Garvaghy Road.” 168\}

\[^{168}\text{Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 54. 169\}

\[^{169}\text{Bill Rolston, Drawing Support 2: Murals of War and Peace (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1998), 56. 170\}


\[^{171}\text{Bill Rolston, Drawing Support: Murals in the North of Ireland (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1992), 47.}
people as well. This desire for unity was also displayed, conversely, by showing Ireland divided. However this division is represented in a traditional way: by displaying the borders of the four providences of Ireland. A mural from Clonard Street in Belfast shows the subdivided Ireland wrapped in barbed wire with a lark and flanked by the tricolor and the flag of Fianna Eirenn. These murals all represent the efforts by muralists in the nationalist and republican traditions to appeal to the culture of the Irish nation in order to engender support. By appealing to the cross-boundary commonalities the muralists could draw on support from across the island of Ireland and from across the wide-spread Irish diaspora. This is in stark contrast to the efforts of Unionist muralists to emphasize the British state in their murals. By utilizing the signs and symbols of Britain the Northern Irish connect themselves to the state of the United Kingdom which spans many nationalities and has defined borders within the British Isles and the world. This contrast serves to emphasize the goals of each side of the conflict: unity of the Irish nation for the nationalists and membership within the United Kingdom for Unionists.

IV. Comparisons

In reading through these investigations and explanations of the imagery behind many of the murals of Northern Ireland, it should be obvious to the reader the degree of overlap that existed between the two mural traditions. While each had very different end goals for their movements and ideologies, each side utilized many of the same or similar images in order to get their message across to the viewer. The use of militaristic imagery is one area where the two heavily overlap. This is most likely because of the similar goals held by each side in presenting their paramilitaries dressed in fatigues and armed with military weapons: to convey legitimacy. Both the Unionists and the nationalists had a vested interest in presenting their members as soldiers and members of a legitimate armed force. Their legitimate purpose being the protection of their nationals and projection of their national interests. In this way, presenting their armed men in uniform fatigues with a degree of uniformity in armament went a long way towards making that argument. Whether the actual violent operations of the paramilitaries were actually carried out in uniforms is a different matter altogether. It remains that the most frequent images of the fighters seen by the communities which ostensibly supported them were those painted on walls. Thus whether the paramilitaries actually appeared dressed as they were portrayed, the image most of their peers, and anyone presenting with an image of these murals, had of them were of the uniform men of arms and action.

The most common image of overlap between the two groups when depicting their armed paramilitaries was the ubiquitous ski-mask, friend of any involved in a dubious undertaking. In works depicting both lone and group fighters of both sides of the conflict, all involved are typically equipped with a black face covering. The mask, as demonstrated by the Mount Vernon UVF mural, is the most potent symbol of uniformity as it removes the most individual part of a human’s body: their face. Taken together the uniform fatigues and the black ski mask paired serve to render the soldier as no longer an individual, but as a faceless member of a united front. These faceless members would then, with the renouncement of their individual identities, be willing to commit acts far in excess of what is considered acceptable in society. Their identity is thus sacrificed in order to ensure that Northern Ireland remained British or that it became Irish. Of course the need of a mask to preserve anonymity of the individual within an operation or

172 Ibid., 32.
organization is critical as well. Preventing reprisals from other paramilitaries as well as the British state keeps the observed unit free from potential revenge attacks or prosecution which might serve to hamper the execution of future missions. In discussing the removal of individuality within the context of the paramilitaries and the murals attention must also be given to the appearance of gloves within the many of the murals. While gloves serve a practical purpose, preventing the transfer of finger prints to weapons or objects, they also prevent the transfer of gunpowder residue which might link an individual to a gun and a gun to a crime. Thus while both sides of the conflict had a vested interest in disguising the appearance of their members in operations and murals as well as presenting them as uniform, ultimately they were all part of the effort to create unified historical narratives sympathetic to their ideological views. By connecting their uniformed men of arms to the symbols of state or nation, the continuum of historical violence, and their pictorial projections of Northern Ireland’s future, each side sought to define their own narratives using many of the same images.

Both sides also used traditional images of national identity as well. Flags in particular served this purpose across Northern Ireland. The simplicity and recognizable nature of flags aided these muralists in their aim to reaffirm national and communal identities in the communities in which they painted. The British flag and the Ulster Banner served to underscore the historical and national ideals and realities of life as Unionists in Northern Ireland in the same way the Irish tricolor and the Starry Plough served to emphasize nationalist and republican sympathies among the native Irish. Both sides ultimately relied on the relative simplicity of the flag as a meaning-laden symbol and as a physical object in packaging their ideologies for consumption by the wider public. Thus the image of the flag, regardless of its actual content, managed to transcend the national bounds traditionally placed on them by governments and instead appealed to the more emotional cultural connections applied to them by the shared histories of their particular communities. By associating these flags with the individual communal recollections of the past the muralists served to reinforce their efforts at creating historical narratives sympathetic to their cause.

In the same way, muralists relied on images of mythological historical significance to reinforce these constructed historical narratives. In much the same way that the image of a flag served to underscore the national side of these ideologies, appeals to mythic events in history and mythology served to give human faces and known dates around which these narratives could be constructed. By utilizing the traditions around the Battle of the Boyne or the Easter Uprising respectively, each side gave specific historical heroes with whom their actions and ideas could be compared. They also served to visually draw direct connections between the mythologized actions of the past and the real actions of the present to highlight the past-present-future continuum of life in Northern Ireland. In the same way, utilizing images from traditional mythology served to give anchor points far in the mythic past of the island for these narratives. One of the most interesting points at which these mural traditions overlap is, in fact, in the use of the image of the mythical Irish warrior CúChulainn as the personification of a desired warrior ethos. As Neil Jarman writes “While both sides use CúChulainn to situate their identity in the deep historical or mythical past, this is not a coming together of opposing ideals, or an acknowledgement of shared roots; rather it is indicative of the gulf between them.”174 As parts of a western culture that equates antiquity with legitimacy, these stories of local defense, heroic action, and lofty ideals served to give the legitimacy of age to these constructed narratives of

national definition and resistance sometimes even overlapping in subject matter despite differing goals and ideologies.

Viewed as representative samples of the mural traditions of both sides then, it is easy to see that the artists who painted their murals across Northern Ireland were involved in much more than just urban graffiti or propaganda. Rather they were all involved in a complex pictorial process of historical narration relevant to their chosen communities. By depicting their memorials, historical events, militarism, and national loyalties in imagery highly reliant on the understanding of the communities that surrounded them, these artists sought to reaffirm their identities in the violence of the Troubles. By painting murals that emphasized the continuum of loyalty to the British crown and efforts to resist celtic Irish national sentiment, Unionist muralists sought to identify their current struggle against nationalist paramilitaries with those that had defined Ulster Protestants in centuries past. Likewise, by emphasizing the historical traditions of military resistance to British and Protestant power and the maintenance of Irish culture, nationalists and republicans sought to include their struggle within these historical narratives. Both sides were, in effect, seeking to accomplish the same thing in the minds of their viewers: the reaffirmation of local loyalties and the legitimization of then current actions and ideologies. By doing so, the murders, car bombs, and shootings would seem not out of place in a first-world industrial democracy, but contextual to much longer historical processes evident in the narrative histories of Northern Ireland.

V. Conclusions

The reader has now been exposed to a great variety of murals from all over Northern Ireland that deal with a great variety of subjects. While newsmen and politicians of the Troubles saw the murals as an eyesore and a visual representation of the moral and economic decline of Britain during the period, these examinations hopefully demonstrated the opposite. Instead of simple graffiti, the murals were instead pieces of complex art and expression that performed a multitude of roles within the communities that they were painted. They were art that functioned as propaganda, boundary markers, and archives of experience for the community as a whole. These complex messages were broadcast in visual form through the reliance of the artists on a massively complex dictionary of shared popular culture, local histories, and cultural as well as personal experiences. The potent mixture of these ingredients painted across the walls of towns and cities like Belfast and Derry performed crucial roles in the lives of those living around them and gave deep personal and communal meaning to otherwise unremarkable street art.

The mural on “Free Derry” corner, mentioned at the beginning of this project, is a perfect example of this process. In order to understand the mural as more than just a hastily painted message of resistance, the reader must understand the complex experiences of the Bogside community. A shared cultural understanding of what it meant to live in “un-free” versus “free” Derry, the history of ethnic and religious relations in the area, and the the resident’s ideas about how Derry should look in the future are all necessary to understand the much deeper message of six words painted in black block letters on a white wall. The intricate interaction of the personal experiences of Bogside residents, the shared communal experience of Catholics and Gaelic Irish in Northern Ireland, and the state of the country between 1969 and the present are all contained within that simple mural. Thus a simple mural becomes a marker for a Nationalist area, a popular sign of local and national resistance, and a rallying point for shared feelings and emotions. Similarly, in order to understand the local and broader connections of a King Billy mural, one
needs to understand the history of Protestants or Unionists in the immediate area of the mural, across the whole of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and their own experiences and outlooks on the country. Thus Derry’s oldest murals of King Billy represent Protestant and Unionist solidarity with their local and national past and present as well as the continuation of the traditions established by those forbearers and continued on into the present.

These individual murals can be interpreted with a great deal of insight into local and wider connections and can be excellent individual examples of the blending of past, present, and future in order to establish these constructed historical narratives. However it is when the murals are viewed and compared within a series that the wider roles of the works as historical narratives and archives become clear. Viewing and interpreting murals of King Billy, the Siege of Derry, the Apprentice Boys, Protestant winners of the Victoria Cross in World War I, and memorials to dead local paramilitaries reveal an intense dedication to the idea of Protestant permanence in the Unionist communities which invested the time and money to paint these works. They also reveal the past and present successes that the locals would like to remember as well as their persistent fears about the future should King Billy’s papist enemies ultimately prove victorious. Similarly in viewing nationalist murals that take as subjects CúChulainn, the Irish Potato Famine, the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Bogside, and memorials to local nationalists killed in the violence reveals and emphasizes local commitments to Gaelic Irish and Catholic culture and militant resistance to perceptions of cultural or political imperialism in their communities.

These murals therefore allowed the locals responsible for them to archive their experiences as well as their ideas about past, present, and future in a visual format and place it in an easily accessible context within the community. In this way a tragedy for the community, say the death of a young member of a local paramilitary organization, could be processed and archived within the continuum of the community’s historical narrative. A mural painted to remember the deceased places it within the continuum of other local murals in the neighborhood and the city or town. By utilizing the shared themes and imagery of these mural traditions the deceased ceases to be a tragic statistic, but is rather the latest in a long line of those willing to fight and die in order to preserve the local culture or way of life. To that end, these examples of local heroic resistance from CúChulain and King Billy to Mickey Devine and Trevor King all highlight the desire of the community to distance themselves from the Troubles as a single period. Rather they desire to be seen as historically justified actors in an ongoing opera of violence and ethnic tension in Northern Ireland. Thus these murals as a phenomena of the Troubles formed a visual archive from which locals could draw inspiration for the current time and the future as well as align their views of the past with the community.

These interpretations of the murals were, as established in the first chapter, hinged on the shared personal and cultural experiences of the surrounding communities in order to establish a basic pattern of interpretation. This concept, that of the “period eye”, is particularly important to this study as many of the signs and symbols used by the muralists to denote loyalties and other important designations in the conflict are conveyed only in a visual format. The importance of the imagery of a flag to display national allegiance is, of course, useless if the audience cannot identify the flag’s origin. Therefore, without this background of understanding the murals appear to simply be examples of poorly made street art advocating violence and intolerance. The exploration of these cultural experiences in conjunction with that of the specific imagery used helps to reveal the complexity of the images and the nature of the relationship between the murals.
Many of the murals covered in this work no longer exist, victims of their own success as beacons of local ethnic and cultural resistance in a time and place that wants to forget the conflict that gave birth to them. With the signing of the Good Friday Agreements in 1998 and the official end of the conflict, the apparent usefulness of the murals was at an end. In addition, many in Northern Ireland began or wanted to begin the process of repairing and rebuilding the country in order to encourage tourism and investment. To this end, many of the aging housing stock that had served as a canvas for the murals was torn down in favor of new housing and council developments. Other murals that survived the wrecking ball were often painted over or replaced with murals that emphasized less divisive subjects or events, often centering on moments of positivity in the community’s past. Many of the most famous murals, paradoxically, survived the end of the conflict that they helped establish and prolong as they had become important symbols of the conflict nationally and locally. Free Derry Corner, formerly the outward facing gable end of a street of terraced houses in the Bogside is now a singular wall surrounded by a roundabout, green space, and new housing. The terraced houses that had given the Bogside its reputation as a cramped, deteriorating ethnic ghetto has since been replaced with more spacious and modern council housing and redevelopment. Many of the older King Billy murals remain in the surviving neighborhoods where they were painted decades ago, relics of a by gone era and the continued celebration of the Twelfth. These murals, increasingly the sites of tours and explorations for tourists coming to see the sites of the Troubles, are often presented as the post-card representations of the conflict; individual, neat, an tidy images that can be shown to those back home as evidence of a trip to the site of Europe’s longest running, low-level conflict. However, the signing of the Good Friday Agreements in 1998 did not ultimately signify the end of the mural period in Northern Ireland’s history. Rather, the end of the conflict signaled the beginning of a shift in focus of the murals. As the redevelopments expanded, streets widened, and people moved to put away their distrust, new mural traditions moved in to take the places of those that had been excised. Artists on both sides of the conflict moved away from the images of assault rifles, hooded men, and paramilitary symbols and instead focused on celebrating their own side’s cultural contributions or other more positive aspects of their lives. Memorials, calls for justice, and accusations remain painted on walls but the tone has largely changed from aggrieved militancy to a peaceful dedication to justice. And while the original murals that remain might serve well as the last visual reminders of a conflict that caused so much death and destruction, the loss of their peers represents a loss of the archives as a whole. The message of these murals cannot be fully understood without the context provided by the others of their kind. The survivors are now simply anachronisms of a time seen, thankfully, in the past and increasingly removed from their cramped, victorian environs. Their canvases rapidly replaced by the modern touches of a land at peace: parks, new developments, schools, and shops, marking the final visual transition of Northern Ireland to a post-Troubles state.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources


