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# BELFAST'S MURALS

by

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## Introduction

Many cities, right across the world, have been decorated with murals. The twentieth century in particular has seen a resurgence of this art form, either as a means of protestation or as a mechanism by which to break the bleak monotony of urban life. Belfast's murals, however, are unique. There are works which perform these two functions, resulting from the issues of unemployment, poor housing and poverty which every city experiences; but the mural tradition which Belfast does not share with major cities worldwide is that of its political murals. Created largely by local people with little or no formal artistic training, these murals originated in the early years of this century before the creation of the state of Northern Ireland. Their subsequent development has been inextricably bound up with the varying fortunes of all within, and involved with, Northern Ireland. This thesis sets out to examine Belfast's murals, particularly the political works, which establish Belfast's mural tradition as unique.

As Bill Rolston notes in his book Drawing Support, Belfast's murals have largely been dismissed as a serious area of study, chiefly "on the grounds that they are not art" (Rolston, 1992, p i) and are viewed more as a form of vandalism. There is also, I feel, an unwillingness to ascribe the gravity of academic study to these murals for fear that this will in some way legitimise and give credence to the messages they contain. To acknowledge any skill or efficacy in these murals, it is not necessary to agree with or condone their imagery and sentiments.

There are three main sources which deal exclusively with Belfast's murals: firstly, Bill Rolston's 1992 publication, a slim volume which is largely a photographic record of various republican and loyalist works, but with a brief, though very useful, introduction to the history of the murals and their imagery; secondly, an entire edition of Circa (No 8, 1983) devoted to both political and non-political murals in Belfast, published at a time when the notion of republican mural painting was only just over a year old; and thirdly, a thirty minute radio programme, Community Artists (Porter, 1982), which gives a useful account of the history of loyalist works but which says much less about republican murals because they were such a recent phenomenon when the programme was compiled. Belinda Loftus, in Mirrors - William III and Mother Ireland (1990), also includes short sections on republican and loyalist murals, although her analysis of these is confined to works which employ images of King William or female, particularly 'Mother Ireland', representations.

The resultant paucity of documented research concerning the murals was really something of a blessing in disguise for the purposes of undertaking this thesis. Whilst it meant that information had to be pieced together from many disparate sources, it also ensured that the subject could not be approached with anything other than an open mind, and provided something to build on. While the three main sources (Rolston, 1992; Circa No 8, 1983 and Porter, 1982) each give versions of the history of the murals themselves and the imagery employed within them, they do not place the mural tradition in Northern Ireland into any kind of international context.

Furthermore, although it seems to be an accepted fact that the murals tend to be ignored or dismissed because they are not produced by fine artists and are therefore seen as somehow less worthy of discussion, none of these sources sought to ask why this is the case. As it is argued in this thesis, surely to acknowledge that the murals are distinct from 'Fine Art' only to dismiss their value as an area of study by employing 'Fine Art' criteria is something of a contradiction.

These murals do, of course, exist outside Belfast, in towns right across Northern Ireland; however, for the purposes of this research it was decided that to concentrate on Belfast alone would be more effective largely due to pressures of time and finance. I spent two weekends in Belfast in October and November of 1994, collecting photographs and getting to know some of the areas in which the murals are produced. Although in such a short space of time it was only possible to explore a few of these areas, the visits were extremely valuable; to see these murals in 'real life', to turn a corner and come face to face with a twelve foot tall, masked figure brandishing a shotgun or see an entire gable wall emblazoned with reds, yellows and greens in the midst of a grey, bleak housing estate, is an experience which cannot be relayed through photographs or television pictures.

Throughout the summer and autumn of 1994, Belfast was rarely out of the headlines. As news stories concerning both terrorist attacks and the negotiations which led to the cease-fires were broadcast across the world, so too, in many instances, were the murals which have come to symbolise sectarian conflict, and Belfast itself.

The cease-fires which emerged on both sides of the sectarian divide have prompted many new murals. After twenty-five years of violence, the whole political situation in Northern Ireland is being re-assessed. It seems too that this is an appropriate time to be examining the murals which have been so bound up with Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'.

# Chapter One: Belfast

**The city and its divisions; the conflict and the retreat into tribal enclaves; the identities of these tribal groupings within Northern Ireland; and the symbols which have come to represent Northern Ireland as a whole, because of but also regardless of its divisions.**

In 1983, Padraig O'Malley recorded a view of Belfast which reflects the bleak images conjured up in the mind whenever the city is mentioned:

> Belfast, ugly and sore to the eye, the will to go on gone, the signs of departure everywhere... Buildings are boarded up..., burned out housing estates a vivid reminder of the sectarian tensions that mark the quiet expression of passion in private places. The tall, silent cranes of the Harland and Wolff shipyards look down on a modern wasteland, on what is perhaps the first real-life laboratory of urban guerrilla warfare. Only the ghettos have their own vitality. By early evening Belfast is abandoned ... At night you don't travel much.
>
> (O'Malley, 1983, p.15)

Powerful as this description is, it almost enters the realm of stereotype; it is the kind of impression which those who live within this "real-life laboratory" would tend to make light of. Everyday life continues in Belfast, and the city shares many of its complaints with every other city in the world. These other cities are, like Belfast, deeply divided; divided, as Declan McGonagle observes, "between those who have and those who don't have" (McAvera, 1989, p.15). However, what Belfast does not have in common with every other city is its deepest division, which has eclipsed the issues of unemployment, poor housing and poverty - that of sectarianism. The poor social conditions which exist in parts of Belfast have often been cited as exacerbating sectarian tensions; the conflict has, in turn, only served to worsen the social problems.

Concern about poverty and poor social conditions lay at the heart of the Civil Rights Association when it began its campaign in Derry in 1968. As Martin Dillon noted in The Last Colony, its members sought reform on issues such as "houses, employment, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly" (Kennedy, 1994). In 1968, the issue of a united Ireland was not on their agenda. However, the C.R.A. campaigns are generally viewed as the beginnings of the present 'Troubles', as its demands to tackle poverty became quickly submerged by bitter sectarianism. As unrest grew, the C.R.A., through its marches and campaigns of civil disobedience, ensured that the streets of Northern Ireland became an active political forum, displaying, "new levels of street militancy" (Faulkner, 1975, p.59).

The conflict quickly escalated, until troops were deployed in August 1969 in an attempt to restore order and prevent further sectarian attacks. The troops themselves were subsequently drawn into the conflict, along with members of the police force, woven as another strand into the deepening hatred. The 'Troubles' served to intensify bitterness within Belfast, and this time the divisions became marked out in geographical terms too. The familiarity of the names of parts of the city brought about through the reporting of twenty-five years of violence is the result of these divisions: Falls, Shankill, Ardoyne, Sandy Row and so on have become known as the notorious enclaves which nurture the hatred. Indeed, so well known are these names that they even attract tourists (Curphey, 1994, p.34).

Belfast did have its 'ghettos' before 1969. The now-demolished community of Pound Loney, on the site on which were constructed the infamous Divis Flats, was the oldest native Irish part of Belfast; it lay "outside the walls because the native Irish were not allowed to live within the walls of the colonial city" (Anson, 1985, p.336). The present 'Troubles', however, had an effect more profound than anything previously. Large-scale population movement occurred as communities became increasingly defensive and introspective in the face of sectarian violence. Brian Faulkner recorded at the time that there "occurred a reversion to the tribal groups where people feel safest when threatened" (Faulkner, 1978, p.281). New housing estates which had been intended as 'mixed' areas rapidly became sectarian enclaves; Springmartin, for example, became almost exclusively Protestant, while New Barnesly became a Catholic ghetto (Whyte and Holland, 1994). In 1970, the 'peace line' between Falls and Shankill was constructed. Paramilitary activity, especially that of the Provisional IRA, further entrenched the divisions. Even the Army "tacitly accepted the right of various Republicans and known IRA men to rule and speak" on behalf of the people of certain communities (Faulkner, 1978, p.62). In Derry, "they even went so far as to draw a white line on the road, on one side of which lay 'Free Derry' and on the other side ... Her Majesty's territory" (Faulkner, 1978, p.62).

These demonstrations of marking out 'no go' areas are a form of what Desmond Morris refers to as "visual scentmarkings" (MacNish, 1994).

In an examination of urban graffiti, particularly in American cities such as Los Angeles, Morris states that humans are as territorial as any other animal, and that tribalism has become an increasingly important factor as cities have expanded and people have had to adapt to increasingly complex social groups. Within these groups, information is vital for our survival: information about who is considered an 'insider' and who is an 'outsider'; who is accepted, and who is seen as 'the other'. This concept is illustrated potently in Northern Ireland, with a sense of identity tending to be formed and defined

> negatively, in terms of what people are not ... the term 'Irishness' has been hijacked by Nationalists and given an anti-British flavour, in the same way that 'Britishness' has been twisted into something anti-Irish. (Childs, 1994)

Morris shows that in Los Angeles, for example, gangland (or 'tribal') graffiti is used to mark out territory by means of symbols which are recognisable to members of other gangs. This seems analogous to the marking out of divisions within Belfast; the symbols and emblems of various sectarian and political factions have been built into a distinctive visual syntax which serves to differentiate between 'us and them'. The message is generally perfectly clear even without examining the specific content.

These symbols and emblems have become badges of identity and are recognisable as such not only within Belfast and Northern Ireland but to 'outsiders' too. "This carnage has directions out", writes Brian McAvera on the image of Northern Ireland abroad, "what we export is hate" (McAvera, 1989, p.104).

Those outside Northern Ireland are aware of the formation of these negative identities and the way in which each group is taught to view the other as "not just different but worthy of hatred" (Childs, 1994). In the rest of the UK particularly, the prevalent attitude tends to be that the 'Troubles' are "something unique - something growing out of the history of Ireland and something which 'couldn't happen here'" (Faulkner, 1978, p.991). As noted in the BBC's programme Everyman, "Many English people tend to react to Northern Ireland with either boredom or outrage", seeing themselves as a neutral party having to referee "whilst these quarrelsome natives slug it out" (Childs, 1994). Thus, while the 'initiated' within Northern Ireland recognise the symbols and emblems in terms of specific groups across the sectarian and political divide, to those outwith the situation they are all simply representative of the hatred and division which have made Northern Ireland famous, regardless of which particular group has claimed them as its own.

As Belfast itself, along with Northern Ireland, has become "a by-word for sectarian violence" (Childs, 1994), these symbols and emblems, and associated slogans and banners, have become 'instant images' to represent bigotry and hatred. Throughout the summer of 1994 Belfast and Northern Ireland were seldom out of the headlines as the peace process unfolded; as a backdrop to these news stories, 'instant images' were broadcast into homes across the world, images which would be able to convey conflict, sectarianism, bigotry, hatred, tribalism and Irishness.

Two series about aspects of life in Northern Ireland, twenty-five years after the deployment of the first troops, were also broadcast as these headlines ran; both series employed such 'instant images' to introduce each programme. One used an armoured personnel carrier; the other - a mural.

## Chapter Two: The International Context

**Wall-painting as the earliest art-form; the resurgence of mural-painting throughout the twentieth century; the three general types of mural produced today; the fact that Belfast's murals do not correspond directly to any of these categories; and the emphasis this places on their unique nature.**

Wall-paintings are the earliest form of art known to man. From the examples which have survived, it seems that this prehistoric art-form was not reserved for special places or privileged individuals. By creating scenes of everyday life, with the forms of people and animals marked out with dyes and pigments directly onto the walls of dwelling-places, these prehistoric painters incorporated 'art' into the lives of ordinary people.

Throughout the twentieth century, murals have appeared all over the world, particularly for the decoration of exterior walls rather than the insides of buildings. Their use in various contexts has been championed by pleas from different quarters. After centuries of art becoming increasingly removed from everyday life, there have been several attempts in this century to re-establish the notion that, as with the earliest prehistoric paintings, art should be united with people and not kept beyond the reach of all but the wealthy elite. With increasing urbanisation through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, it became clear that for the purposes of advertising and propaganda in particular, buildings and streets were to become an important medium by which to bring messages in the very heart of what was becoming everyday life for increasingly large numbers of people.

The Constructivists in the post-Revolution Soviet Union, for example, brought their art, and hence their beliefs, into the streets through banners, posters, performance art and murals which sought to engage everyone. Art, through the Constructivists and their concept of Agitational Propaganda, assumed an active and potent role in shaping the politics of the emerging state. The Mexican muralists too set out to unite all ordinary people through their art. The medium of mural-painting, they proposed, constituted the "'highest, the most logical, the purest form of painting'" (Rochfort, 1993, p.8); they felt too that it was "'the most disinterested ... for it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. It is for the people. It is for ALL'" (Rochfort, 1993, p.8).

Murals today tend to be viewed as distinct from 'fine art'. In his study of Art for Public Places, Malcolm Miles places murals in the domain of public arts, and differentiates between 'art' and 'public art' thus: "The history of art has sometimes been presented as a history of styles. The history of public art will more likely be seen as a history of intentions" (Miles, 1989, p.12). Contemporary murals are generally created for two purposes: for political protestation, in common with the Constructivists and the Mexican muralists, or as a medium to brighten bleak urban environments.

However, these two types of mural divide again into three main categories.

Firstly there are the murals which have played a large part in the impression that mural-painting is not only distinct from the fine art tradition but is also less 'valuable', a less worthy occupation: these are the works which are viewed as decoration intended to make cityscapes less bleak and harsh. Through works of this type, which are often sponsored by local authority or government schemes, murals have become associated with urban decay. As Malcolm Miles notes,

> murals may have seemed, to local authorities, a cheap way to camouflage an environment without looking into more complex problems which would have brought into question planning procedures and the accountability of architects. This is one reason why murals have become associated with run-down areas. In prosperous parts of Britain there has been a resistance to public art because of such factors (Miles, 1989, p.76).

While work on murals within this first category is often undertaken by trained artists, a second type exists which consists of 'spontaneous' works, more closely related to graffiti. These impromptu wall decorations, often made in protestation, are usually created by those with no formal artistic training; the styles and materials employed seem to be influenced by 'graffiti art', particularly that which emerged from the gangland culture of cities in the United States, with spray paints often being used to create bold, simple images. A powerful example of such work was the decorated Western side of the Berlin Wall, on which layer upon layer of 'anti-wall' sentiment was built up as everyone from locals to tourists added their own thoughts and impressions with brushes and aerosol cans.

A third category also consists of protest murals; however in this case, the work is undertaken by trained fine artists, such as in the case of the Mexican muralists. These works are usually directly politically motivated and are often, like the work of the Constructivists too, a well-planned artistic movement involving groups of like-minded artists.

In Art for Public Places, Malcolm Miles sets out various criteria for the function and language of public art. He cites four basic functions which public art should perform: to help create a sense of place; to engage the people who use the place; to provide "a model of imaginative work"; and to help in the redevelopment of urban areas. Concerning the language and syntax employed in public art, he proposes three main questions by which to examine public art: "What is the intention (the motivation and strategy)? What is an appropriate language? What are the subjects?" (Miles, 1989, p.77).

From examining all these criteria, it seems that Belfast's political murals are unique. They do not fit with the intentions of public art as set out by Malcolm Miles, nor do they correspond directly to any of the general categories of mural. While there have been mural schemes in Belfast to paint non-political scenes in run-down areas of the city, the majority of murals do not seem to fall within this first category intended simply to brighten up bleak estates; they are not, by and large, spontaneous works of graffiti-art; nor are they created by trained and practising artists with a clear manifesto in which their intentions are set out.

However, at the same time, Belfast's murals also seem to combine elements of all three categories, creating this unique mural form.

Belfast's first murals, in the early years of this century, were Protestant works, and one of the main purposes of these murals was to brighten up the areas in which they stood, in order to restore a sense of pride; while not painted by trained artists, they were usually created by skilled craftsmen. Republican murals, on the other hand, developed from republican graffiti, and so share some elements with the spontaneous wall-decorations. The move to upgrade the graffiti into murals was initiated by committees, and was in part an attempt to consolidate local support whilst at the same time brightening up the area. Both the republican and loyalist/Protestant works also share similar elements to the fine art political murals, in that many of these works are planned in advance, with roughs being designed, chalked out onto the walls and carefully worked up. However, many of these murals act as a form of 'bulletin board', providing instantaneous comments on contemporary events, and in this respect are 'spontaneous', although very different to the graffiti-influenced murals. A further differentiation between Belfast's murals and the fine art works, of both sponsored schemes and clearly-defined artistic movements, is the quality of materials employed. Belfast's political muralists, due to lack of finances, generally work with poor-quality paints and equipment, using ladders rather than scaffolding, painting directly onto unprimed walls which are often cracked, crumbling and extremely porous.

The Mexican muralists, like the Constructivists, made a conscious decision to bring their message, through art, onto the streets. Diego Rivera wrote that Mexican muralism had

> 'for the first time in the history of monumental painting ceased to use gods, kings, chiefs of state, heroic generals, etc as central heroes ... For the first time in the history of Art, Mexican mural painting made the masses the hero of monumental art' (Rochfort, 1993, p.8).

Belfast's murals, like the Mexican works, became a part of everyday life; however, the intention of the city's political muralists is entirely different from the ambition of the Mexican muralists. Once designed as a celebration of religious identity, Belfast's murals are now seen as perpetuating the divisions, as consolidating only specific groups of people in opposition to others rather than uniting all people. Belfast's murals often set out to depict heroes, martyrs and mythological chiefs rather than making "the masses the hero". Ordinary people, particularly in republican murals, are depicted only when they can be elevated to the status of hero or martyr. And in Belfast, this has generally occurred as the result of bloody tragedy.

## Chapter Three: Art, Politics and Belfast's Murals

**The relationship between art and politics; the relationship between 'art' and Belfast's murals; the proposal that the division between 'art' and the murals is not as clearly-defined as specific sources suggest.**

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, documented research concerning Belfast's murals does not exist in abundance. This seems to be related to their dismissal as a serious area of study which, as Bill Rolston writes, tends to occur primarily "on the grounds that they are not art" (Rolston, 1992, p.i.). However, this does not mean that discussion of Belfast's murals does not occur in the context of fine art. Other mural movements have been examined in this context, whether the fine art of the Mexican works or the graffiti-influenced decoration of the Berlin wall; Belfast's murals are also brought into discussions which employ fine art criteria. However, as shown in this chapter, the conclusions drawn from such examinations are often that the murals are less 'valuable' than fine art and therefore not worthy of further discussion. This is brought about largely, I feel, because their intentions are entirely different to those of works of fine art. I would argue that it is not necessary to categorise the murals in order to legitimise study of them, but yet it seems that they are precluded from much academic debate because they do not fit within the confines of a particular category, in this case 'Art', the heading under which other mural movements fall. Since it is by using this category that Belfast's murals are often dismissed as a topic for further consideration, it is interesting to note, as shown throughout this chapter, that the boundaries and criteria which seem to exclude Belfast's murals are often more fluid than initial impressions suggest.

Art and politics seem to have a rather uneasy relationship. Any form of political art, even art with the slightest political references, has tended to be viewed as threatening and subversive. In the domain of art, politics

> was a dirty word ... The associations of the word seem to include notions of trouble-makers, agitators, people who couldn't possibly be real artists ... and if such people did lay claim to the word 'artist', then they produced something called 'propaganda' (McAvera, 1989, p.11).

In his study of Art, Politics and Ireland, Brian McAvera proposes that while such divisions have been created, with political subject matter, as Aidan Dunne remarked, "'not considered to be the legitimate province of the Fine Arts'" (McAvera, 1989, p.14), some art has in fact been enhanced and informed by its involvement with politics and social setting. He cites the work of Courbet, Heartfield and Victor Sloan as examples. In such works, McAvera writes,

> form and content will be held in suspension, neither denying the full joys of aesthetic pleasures ... nor imposing the content at the expense of aesthetic pleasure ... This is what separates agit-prop or propaganda from politically-informed art. The former has a black-and-white moral and ideological sense, and an equally simplistic aesthetic sense, if indeed the aesthetic sense is present. Such work is closer to advertising; the product is shaped to the dictates of a target audience, and its aesthetics, such as they are, are controlled and hemmed in by the need to sell the message. As a director might remark of actors who insufficiently realised a text, 'it doesn't breathe' (McAvera, 1989, p.38).

At the outset, McAvera establishes that his discussion of Art, Politics and Ireland will not include Northern Ireland's murals. His subsequent discussion of the divisions between art and politics, and between propaganda and "politically-informed art" appears to support this decision.

Belfast's murals would seem to fall into the former category. Combined with comments made elsewhere this serves to reinforce the view that Belfast's murals are apparently not worthy of inclusion in his examination of Art, Politics and Ireland. In New Tradition, for example, Richard Hamilton's 'The Citizen' is described as being "directly 'readable' in such a way that it was down-graded alongside Nationalist street images" (Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1990, p.118), while Lucy Lippard, in a discussion of 'activist art', makes a clear distinction even between such 'activist art' and Belfast's murals (Lippard, 1984, p.12) .

However, I would suggest that the relationships which constitute the basis of Art, Politics and Ireland, those between art and politics and hence, by extrapolation, between 'art' and Belfast's murals, are not as clearly defined as McAvera and others propose. Dealing specifically with Irish art, he gives the views of several Irish artists and critics in order to explore the definitions of, and distinctions between, art and politics.

In an early stage of the discussion, McAvera quotes Samuel Walsh, who stated that "Art is sometimes exactly what you think it is" (McAvera, 1989, p.30); this bears similarities to Gombrich's view that "there is really no such thing as 'Art'" (Gombrich, 1978, p.4).

Both opinions suggest that if boundaries exist between 'art' and other topics, they are extremely fluid and subject to the variations of personal opinion.

However, of the Irish and Northern Irish artists and critics interviewed by McAvera, most seem to accept without question that there are clearly defined divisions between art and politics; the issue, apparently, is not about the existence or otherwise of these boundaries, but the specific definitions of what lies on either side.

Brian Maguire makes a clear distinction between art and politics. In his view, "In art the audience is left outside the studio; in politics nothing exists for those who leave the people outside the deliberations" (McAvera, 1989, p.92). Danny McCarthy sees an equally clear-cut division: "If you impose politics on art, it ceases to become art, and becomes something else such as agit-prop theatre" (McAvera, 1989, p.17). In the case of Maguire's definitions it seems that Belfast's murals would serve as middle ground between the two. While they convey political sentiments, they differ from his view of both politics and art; the place where the murals are created, the "studio", is in the midst of their intended audience, and their creation is often precipitated by the existing political views of the majority of that audience. The kind of polarised politics expressed in many of the murals bears similarities to Jamshid Mirfenderesky's view of the role of the political artist; such a person, he feels, "has a clearcut political ideology, ranging from fascism to anarchism, regardless of what the ideology is. He uses art as a tool of political propaganda for changing society in his own point of view, for the betterment of social existence" (McAvera, 1989, p.18).

By this definition, Belfast's muralists can be considered 'artists'. This seems further supported by Paddy Gillan, whose view of political art seems also to encompass political murals; "Political art", he proposes, "can range from crude propaganda to very personal statements dealing with politics and the self" (McAvera, 1989, p.17). Only Una Walker, of those interviewed in McAvera's book, seems to accept the notion that art and politics do not have to be distinct entities on either side of a boundary. Her belief is that, "all art is political. Art is never neutral" (McAvera, 1989, p.15).

Walker's view is extremely useful to McAvera, whose intention in discussing Art, Politics and Ireland is to demonstrate the legitimacy of politics, and religious and social issues, in Irish Art. However, as we have seen, McAvera feels that "Irish political art ... has little to do with propagandistic murals" (McAvera, 1989, p.7). Artists in Northern Ireland, he writes,

> have seen at first hand what the results of warring factions are; they know in their guts that the reinforcement of entrenched ideological attitudes does not produce change in this country; they are trying to encompass divisions, not perpetuate them. As a result, they are not interested in reproducing the agit-prop work of a wall mural (McAvera, 1989, p.36).

He implies that these murals have less value than 'art' because of their directness and divisiveness, and that because fine artists in Northern Ireland tend to employ "ambiguity or layered reactions" (McAvera, 1989, p.36), rather than "knee-jerk reflexes" (McAvera, 1989, p.36), their viewpoint is more valid than that of the muralists.

I suggest that Belfast's muralists are all too aware that "the reinforcement of entrenched ideological attitudes does not produce change", but that they feel also that they are not served by the process of democracy in Northern Ireland: the very existence of the murals today is indicative of the frustration and absence of compromise in contemporary Northern Irish politics. Lucy Lippard too relates "the hermeticism of political imagery ... to the maddening insolubility of the Irish political situation" (Lippard, 1984, p.12). While the fine artists have "opted for a situationist approach to politics and its ramifications, implicitly arguing that party-political or tribal loyalties are beside the point" (McAvera, 1989 p.36), the muralists depict such "tribal loyalties". In the parts of Belfast in which these murals are found, the communities often feel themselves to be disenfranchised, suffering poor housing, high unemployment and the subsequent social ills which affect such communities all over the world; their very identity comes from these political and religious loyalties. The muralists choose to portray the sectarianism which has become an integral part of everyday life in Belfast.

Thus, it is obvious that the intentions of fine art political works and the murals are very different: to discuss the murals in a purely 'artistic' context, or to dismiss them using these criteria, is not particularly constructive, or even relevant. "'By definition'", wrote Jean Charlot, "'a mural is not intended to cater for the specialist art lover. Walls are not the proper surface for the naked display of self, a dialogue between the id and the ego.'" (Circa, No.8, 1983, p.3).

In the fine art tradition the form of the work is important, sometimes becoming an end in itself; in Belfast's political murals, however, the form is not a consideration, rather it is a means to an end. However, through their discussions on art and politics, McAvera and others have expressed opinions which I feel actually serve to bridge the gap to some extent between fine art and the propaganda and mural traditions. And although Belfast's murals cannot be discussed on the same terms as 'fine art', this does not make them, as McAvera appears to suggest, less 'valuable' or even, on occasion, less skilled.

## Chapter Four: Belfast's Mural Tradition

### A brief introduction to the history of Belfast's political murals.

Although Belfast's murals are often associated with the present 'Troubles', the history of mural-painting in the city stems from the earliest years of the twentieth century. It is unclear exactly what precipitated this use of murals. They may have been a 'solid' version of the banners which have long been associated with Belfast's marching tradition, serving to reinforce the emblems, pennants, flags and banners seen in parades all over Northern Ireland. Belinda Loftus notes that photographs of Belfast dating from the nineteenth century do not contain evidence of decorated exterior walls, while the development of murals in Belfast at the beginning of this century seems to coincide with similar house-decoration in industrial parts of Wales and Scotland; she also proposes that such widespread exterior decoration was brought about by the availability for the first time of cheap, high quality house paints (Loftus, 1990, p.31).

Today, murals in Belfast are seen as representative of both sides of the city's sectarian division. However, for more than six decades, the only political murals in Belfast were Protestant and loyalist. This is strongly linked to the position of Protestantism and Unionism within Northern Ireland. Unionist majority rule remained virtually unchallenged until the late 1960s, with the culture of Irish Catholics and nationalists being largely 'ghettoised'. To them, such public displays as mural-painting would have been unthinkable, partly from the point of view of their own safety, but also due to state control over the use and display of various emblems and symbols.

Padraig O'Malley quotes The Flags and Emblems (Display) Act (Northern Ireland) of 1954, which set out to give

> special protection to the occupiers of land or premises who wish to display a Union Jack. It is an offence to prevent or threaten forcibly to interfere with such a display. In respect of other emblems any police officer may, if he apprehends a breach of the peace, require the persons displaying the emblem to remove it, and in the event of failure to comply may enter the premises to remove and detain it. Failure to remove such emblems on police request constitutes an offence.

He adds that the "'other emblems' referred to invariably meant the Tricolour of the Irish Republic" (O'Malley, 1983, p.371).

There have been three main periods of Protestant and loyalist mural production, all very much bound up with the fortunes of Unionism in Northern Ireland: the 1920s, the 1930s and the period from the late 1970s through the 1980s to the present day. Loftus writes that "in all three periods the incentive to launch out on new murals appears to have been partly practical and partly political" (Loftus, 1990, p.31). A new outcrop of murals has also been produced during recent months, and this too is directly related to political events.

Mural-painting had been established across what is now Northern Ireland before partition, with the earliest recorded in Belfast dating from 1908. Throughout the early decades of the century, the Home Rule debate created great political uncertainty; these early murals were a celebration of Protestantism, and hence a display of assertion of the Unionist position within the six counties which were to become Northern Ireland.

After 1921, conflict raged throughout the island of Ireland; new murals were produced which sought to reinforce the Union, often by depicting events in contemporary Britain. Social problems also contributed to the production of murals; throughout the 1930s widespread unemployment ensured that people had time to design and paint these often complex and elaborate works. Popular scenes were those depicting battles in which Ulstermen had fought, such as the Ulster Division at the Battle of the Somme; Williamite victories over Jacobean forces were also common. Other works featured the sinking of the Titanic (which had been built in Belfast), the coronation of George VI in 1937, a visit by the Prince of Wales to Northern Ireland, and the ending of World War Two in 1945. Most of the murals at this time were based on existing paintings, prints and etchings; most of the muralists, while not fine artists, were trained and skilled craftsmen who had an "interest in all matters artistic" (Loftus, 1990, pp.31-34).

Similar circumstances brought about a resurgence in mural activity throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and into the 1990s. Over the last twenty-five years Unionism's position has been challenged time and time again, from the inception of the civil rights campaign, through the introduction of direct rule from Westminster and the proposal of various political initiatives, such as the Anglo-Irish agreement and the Downing Street Declaration, aimed at ending the sectarian hatred and the terrorism which evolved from it. The 'Troubles' themselves have contributed to the existing social problems, and again widespread unemployment throughout the last two decades has led to people having not only the inclination but the time to adorn Belfast's gable-ends.

Protestant works are today seen as one half of the phenomenon of Belfast's political murals, with republican murals, of course, being the other. However, these republican murals, as Loftus observes, do not "derive from the same kind of long continuous tradition as their loyalist counterparts" (Loftus, 1990, p.78). While the Protestant and loyalist works, and their unmistakable visual language, have been developing since the beginning of the century, republican muralists have established their works, their imagery and their message in little over a decade.

The earliest example of a republican wall-painting which Loftus gives dates from 1953; this was a commemoration of the 150th anniversary of Emmet's uprising and seems to have been a 'one-off'. Several further examples of republican wall decoration date to the late 1960s and early 1970s, but these, as Loftus again notes, seem to have been "little more than up-graded graffitti" (Loftus, 1990, p.78).

Throughout the late 1970s, with the hunger strikes and blanket protests, came an increasing amount of graffiti, now beginning to incorporate coloured emblems and flags. These painted slogans generally expressed either support for the 'Provos' or disgust and contempt for the British authorities and those who refused to grant political status to republican prisoners. In 1979, to mark the anniversary of internment, painted boards were produced, with a whole series of such boards depicting the first hunger-strikers appearing in 1980.

By the time of the second hunger-strike in 1981, a fusion of the graffiti and the painted boards had occurred, resulting in the first republican murals. Throughout 1981, a vast number of these appeared, helped in part by a long spell of dry, warm weather during the spring and summer months (McGuigan, 1983, p.16). Sometimes the work was spontaneous; generally, however, it was organised by committees, often including unemployed people, particularly the young. These support committees for the hunger-strikers undertook their work largely to consolidate local support; but the murals also served to antagonise the Army and the R.U.C., to cover up existing graffiti and to brighten up the local environment. From these beginnings murals have become an integral part of nationalist communities in Belfast, often painted, like their loyalist counterparts, in response to specific contemporary events. However, unlike the loyalist works, they have often been put to more far-reaching propagandist use, featuring in republican post cards, calendars, posters and press-releases.

Whatever the differences between republican and loyalist murals, they are generally viewed as part of the same tradition. The unique nature of the murals in an international context is further reinforced by the fact that this century-long tradition has been maintained by "successive generations of untrained artists" (Loftus, 1990, p.16). As Loftus records, in places where the mural tradition has been upheld by untrained painters, such as Eastern Europe and South Africa, the murals are non-political; where the works are political, they are the work of a "single generation of painters" (Loftus, 1990, p.16).

However, while seen in this light, as two halves of one entity, it should be remembered that republican and loyalist murals did develop separately, from different traditions, for different purposes, using different imagery. As Bill Rolston writes, the images in the murals of both sides sometimes seem to be the same - the use of flags, for example, or hooded figures bearing weapons; but any similarity is purely superficial. "Loyalism and republicanism are not equivalent political practices; their imagery thus has very different origins and purposes", he states. "Despite any similarities, they are not mirror images of each other. Rather they are windows which allow the onlooker to see into two very different political worlds" (Rolston, 1992, p.viii).

## Chapter Five: The Murals

**The functions of Belfast's murals; a discussion of Belfast's non-political murals and their role and effectiveness; an examination of both loyalist and republican murals in terms of the themes and imagery employed and the contexts in which they evolved; and direct comparisons between both mural traditions.**

> Like them or loathe them, they cannot be ignored. The political...murals of the North of Ireland are an integral part of loyalist and republican communities. In its murals, each group displays its hopes and fears, struggles and aspirations. Sometimes the murals are long lived, more often their existence is fleeting... (Rolston, 1992, back cover).

So runs the copy on the cover of Bill Rolston's examination of Northern Ireland's political murals, Drawing Support. In a few lines, it introduces the aims of these murals and establishes them as something more than just sectarian graffiti produced by bigots with the express purpose of perpetuating conflict. It seems that they are regarded as many things by many people, but that in spite or because of these varied opinions, they are not considered a serious area of study. In the introduction to the book, Rolston acknowledges this dismissal, and suggests reasons for it. Artists and art historians, he proposes, ignore the murals

> on the grounds that they are not art. Political groups which do not share the politics displayed...are likewise dismissive. Journalists and broadcasters regard murals merely as colourful backdrops and social scientists for the most part ignore them. Many people living outside the working class areas in which the murals are painted are unsympathetic, seeing the murals, on a par with graffiti, as vandalism (Rolston, 1992 p.i).

However, it is not necessary to categorise the murals, to fit them into some wider classification, such as 'Art', for example, or 'Agit-Prop', to transform them into a legitimate topic for academic discussion. "...one reason for examining the political...murals of the North of Ireland", writes Rolston, "is that they exist" (Rolston, 1992, p.i).

## The function of the murals

The editorial to Circa's issue in 1983 which deals with the murals discusses "the contribution mural-painting makes to art, and even if it is an art form" (Circa, 1983, p.3), but seems to concern itself largely with government-sponsored, non-political works. It does, however, note that the fundamental difference between these sponsored murals and the works of republican and loyalist painters lies with their function and that while in "the former, for the most part, the form becomes an end in itself, for the political works the form is a means to an end" (Circa, 1983, p.3). The editorial concludes that regardless of the images and messages conveyed in these political murals, "it has to be recognised that this art form gives meaning to the lives of a large section of the community who feel alienated...from mainstream art practice" (Circa, 1983, p.3).

This view is similar to that expressed by Geraldine O'Reilly in her 1983 thesis tracing The Development of Political Murals in the North of Ireland. She states in her introduction that murals eliminate the divide between the spectator and the piece of work, and that in Northern Ireland "they do represent a form of 'democratically-controlled' art within the respective communities" (O'Reilly, 1983, p.1).

However, I propose that this is a somewhat tangential issue, missing, or obliquely avoiding, the point: while the non-political murals in Belfast may be intended to serve the function of bridging gaps between 'people' and 'art', the function of the political murals, for which Belfast has become famous, lies with the messages conveyed.

Bill Rolston argues that these murals act as a "barometer of political ideology" (Rolston, 1992, p.i), and that they allow for the public display of political beliefs, clearly showing what republicans and loyalists stand for. With every new political development comes a new outcrop of political murals expressing the views of people whose very identities come from the issues which politicians debate and are displayed in bold and simple terms on Belfast's gable-ends.

The most important role which these murals perform is that of propaganda. Extreme factions of both loyalism and republicanism were, until recently, prevented from giving their views directly in television and radio broadcasts in the UK and the Republic of Ireland; one of the most effective methods of displaying the opinions of both sides was to emblazon them across expanses of wall. Not only would they be seen by both local people and visitors, but they would also be seen on television and in press reports in the many news items about sectarian violence in Belfast and Northern Ireland. However, while both serve this same general function, the use for propaganda purposes differs between republican and loyalist works.

Although republican murals have only been produced since the early 1980s, they have become widely known internationally. This has occured by means of the channels of promotion which republicans have long made use of; the dissemination of republican and nationalist ideology is by no means directly reliant upon the murals themselves. Postcards of the murals were produced and a 1982 Sinn Fein calendar featured photographs of them. Such photographs were also sent to newspapers worldwide, as well as being published in An Phoblacht/Republican News.

Republicanism is a relatively cohesive grouping, with strong local support for one clear message. This message could therefore be aimed at a primarily international audience without the fear that local sentiment was, or would become, fragmented.

Loyalism, however, is a much less cohesive movement, with a less clearly-defined message; much more work has to be undertaken at a local level to consolidate support. The term 'Unionism' is much more of an umbrella heading than 'Republicanism', since it draws in many strands, not only of political loyalism but also of Protestantism (the two tend to be seen as distinct in a way in which 'republicanism' and 'Catholicism' are often not). Along the staunchly loyalist Shankill Road, for example, there are twenty-three different Protestant denominations, each with their own opinions (Whyte and Holland, 1994). Unionism therefore has less of the power of the republican movement's unified propaganda operations. Unionist propaganda also has to contend with a rather ambiguous relationship with Britain. While its message expresses the wish to remain loyal to the British Crown, it may have to oppose policies of the British government in seeking to maintain the status quo.

Loyalist murals, therefore, play their most vital propagandist role at a localised level, attempting to unite many different ideologies behind an easily recognisable message; only then can that message be successfully broadcast to places outside Northern Ireland.

In the past, loyalist works involved everyone in the local community, from the raising of funds for materials to the execution of the design.

Local dignitaries and the unionist press would then attend the grand unveiling (Rolston, 1992, p.ii). While contemporary loyalist murals may not attract the same degree of pomp and ceremony, due in part to the fact that local politicians and the press could not be seen to support the militaristic sentiments these new murals often contain, they do share some of their intentions with the old murals. They may not express the views of all who would call themselves 'Unionists', but they do, at the very least, attempt to disguise the divisions.

## Sponsored mural schemes

Belfast's government- and local authority-sponsored murals exist, of course, for reasons and purposes entirely different from those of the polictical works. While the primary propagandist functions of the city's political murals is unique, the intention of the non-political works is shared by every other such 'community art' scheme across the globe.

These murals are designed to enhance harsh urban environments. Describing the tradition of political wall-painting within Belfast, Malcolm Miles writes that Belfast's murals are found "in working class areas. In communities which have little comfort, there has to be a celebration of something" (Miles, 1989, p.62). While this may have been an important consideration of the early political works, which were positive, celebratory Protestant images, it is a view which today seems to have more in common with the non-political schemes.

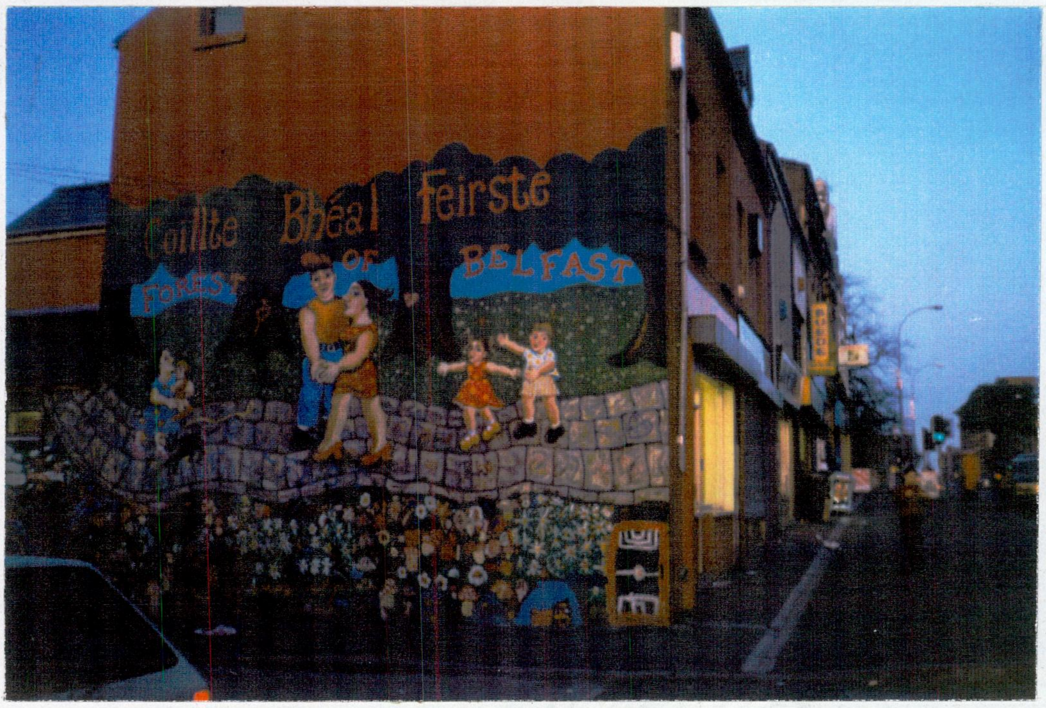
In Belfast, many of these murals have been produced by art students- a city-wide project was co-ordinated by Belfast College of Art in 1977, for example. The work produced in this and subsequent schemes, however, has largely been discredited. While undoubtedly well-intentioned, with the main objective being to "lend colour to depressing environments", they are often viewed by both local people and critics as insensitive or patronising (Miles, 1989, p.63).

Julian Watson records that those who painted such murals felt themselves to be fulfilling an important function within the communities by creating something which everyone could take pride in. "'Ultimately of course, through time, the colours will fade,'" said one of the students involved, "'but for many years to come in this community I think people will look at it and say d'you remember the summer the artists painted a mural for us.'" (Watson, 1983, p.9). It is this attitude which appears to form part of the problem, as far as the schemes' critics are concerned.

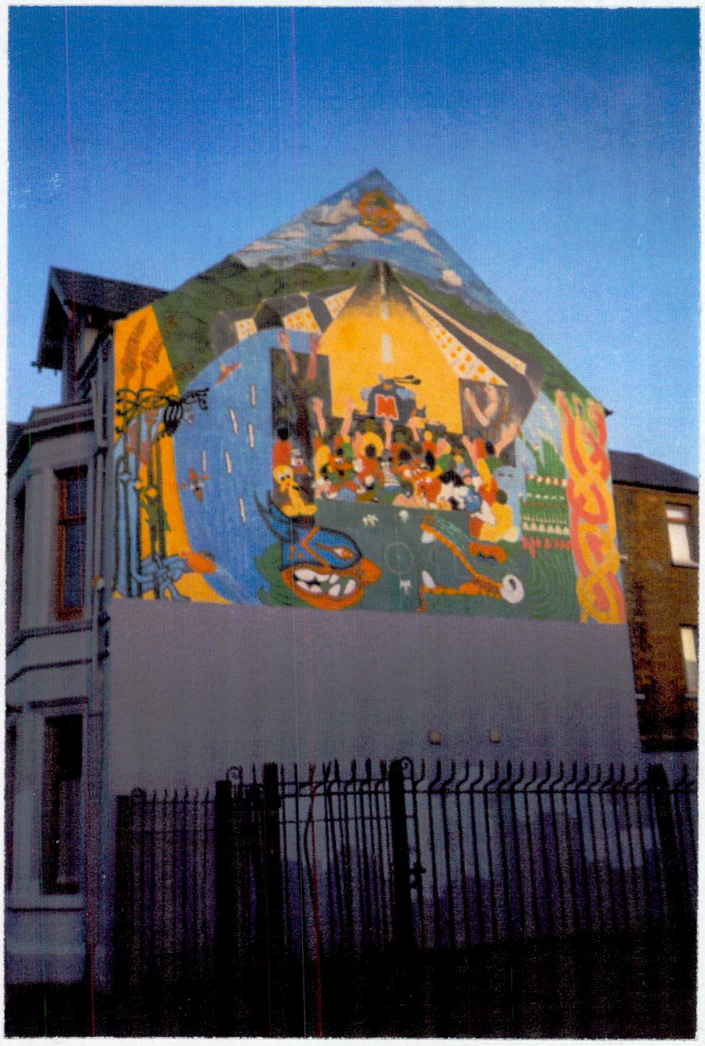
Belfast's political murals are painted by members of the local community, expressing views and issues which are of importance to many in that community. There is active involvement - people are not resigned to having to wait for "a fine art snatch squad" (Watson, 1983, p.9) to provide them with a splash of colour and a sense of pride. And while many artists who embarked on the non-political projects did, in fact, come from these very communities, knew and understood the social problems within them, and sought to provide some respite from the bleakness through wall-paintings, there were also those whose intentions may have been fuelled by a lesser degree of undersanding and empathy. Julian Watson is critical of much of the non-political work in Belfast; the intention in many instances, he writes, is simply "to brighten the place up and get the hell out" (Watson, 1983, p.7). On the question of whether such murals do actually fulfil the functions they lay claim to, he seems equally sceptical. "Even the worst sort of advertising hoarding is trying to **sell** you something, grab your attention" (Watson,1983, p.7).

But even supposing that all these murals did perform these roles adequately, that they did "brighten the place up" (Watson, 1983, p.7), there is still a feeling that they would serve largely to disguise the real problems within these communities. As Malcolm Miles writes, a mural "is no answer to poor housing or social deprivation, not in itself at least" (Miles, 1989, p.63).

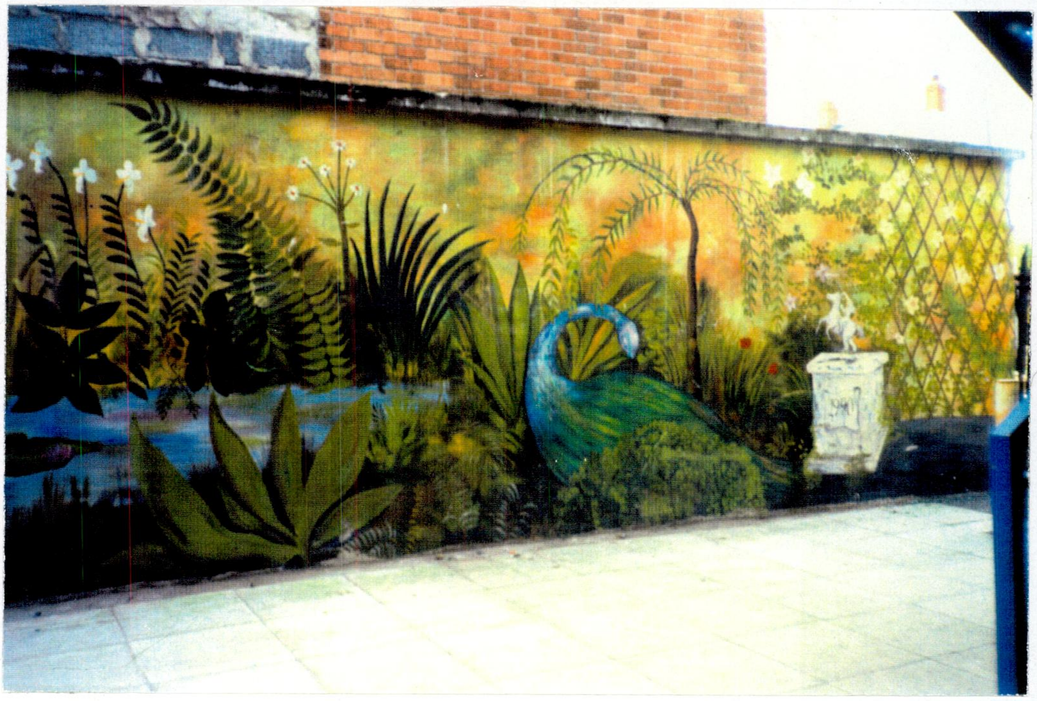
The other part of the problem with Belfast's 'community art' murals lies with the imagery employed within them, which is often viewed as having absolutely no relevance to the lives of local people. Cartoon characters, jungle scenes and circuses are popular choices for the muralists, and are deemed to be the main culprits. Humpty Dumpty on the outside of Newhill Youth Club, for example, attracts criticism from both Julian Watson and Des Wilson (Watson, 1983, p.7; Wilson, 1983, p.19) among others; Jackie Redpath writes that around "the Shankill we've had the full range from John Travolta to Jack and the Beanstalk and Henry the Eighth" (Redpath, 1983, p.21); Des Wilson again records that the "end of the Ormeau Road, crumbling under the spell of the redeveloper, was given the characters of Disneyland to contemplate" (Wilson,1983, p.20). He also describes a jungle scene painted in Springhill as having been completed with "brilliant flair and astounding absence of sensitivity" - once the artists had finished, local people were left "to contemplate their handiwork and to wonder if it really represented the artists' view of them and their district" (Wilson, 1983, p.19).


Coillte Bhéal Feirste
FOREST OF BELFAST

1 - Falls Road, November 1994



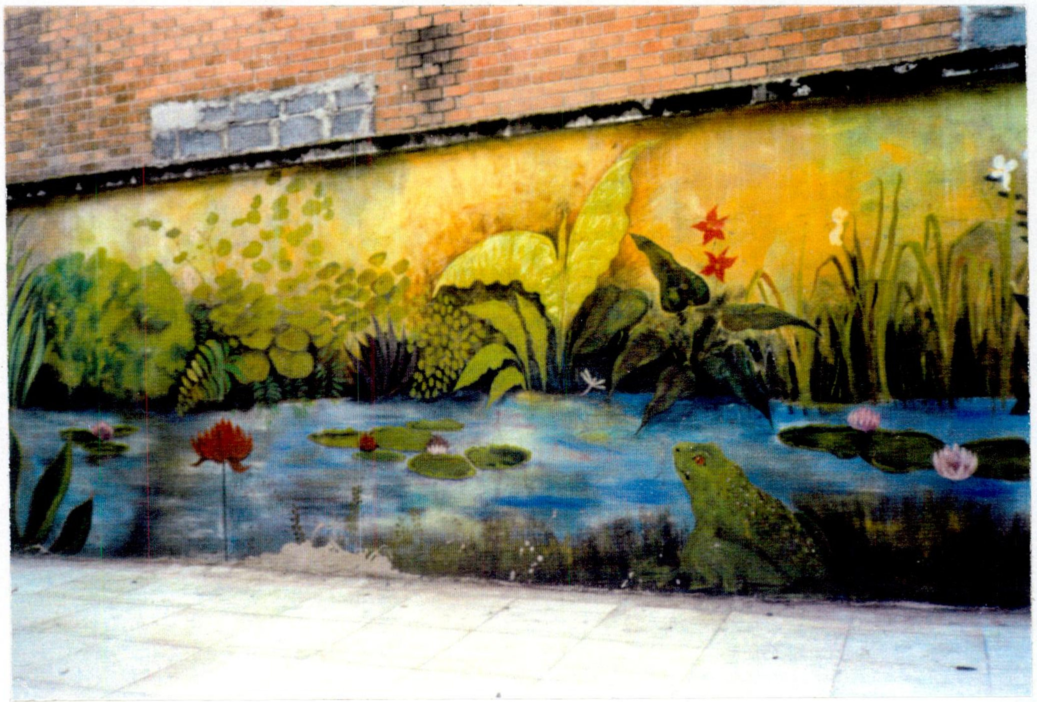
2 - Falls Road, November 1994

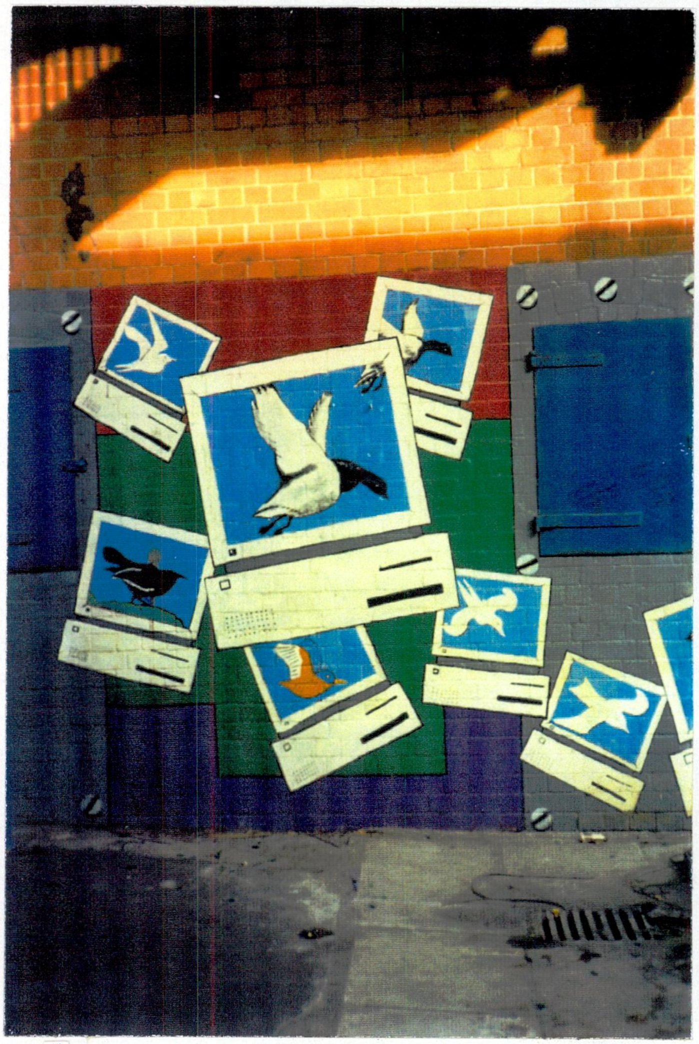


3

Under Tates Avenue Bridge, October 1994

4





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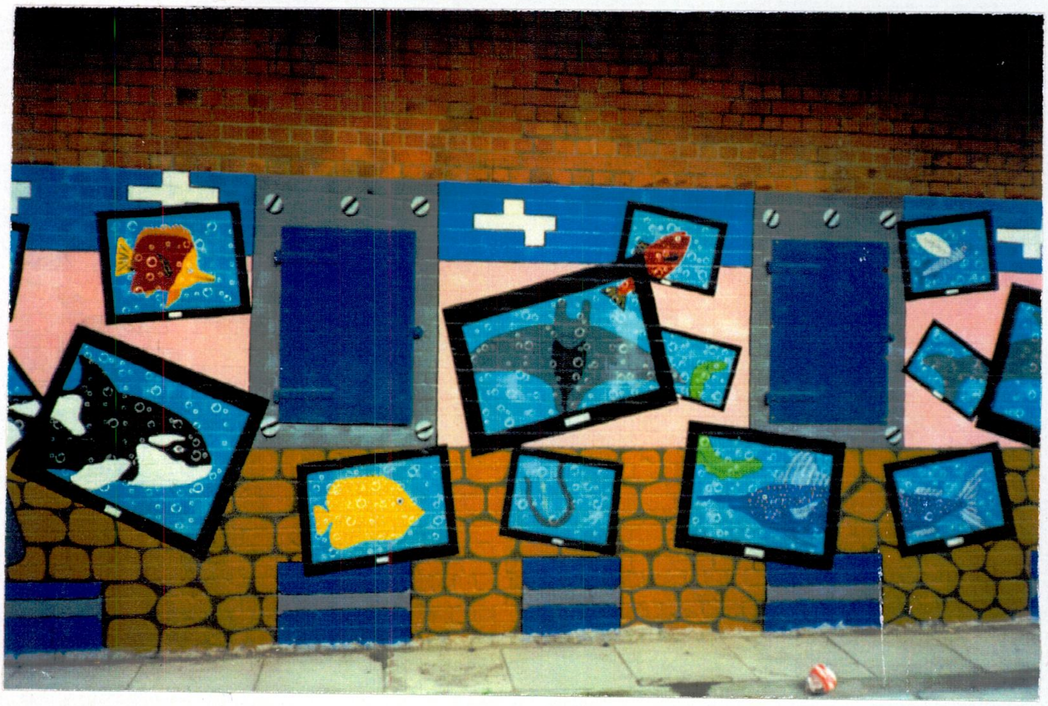
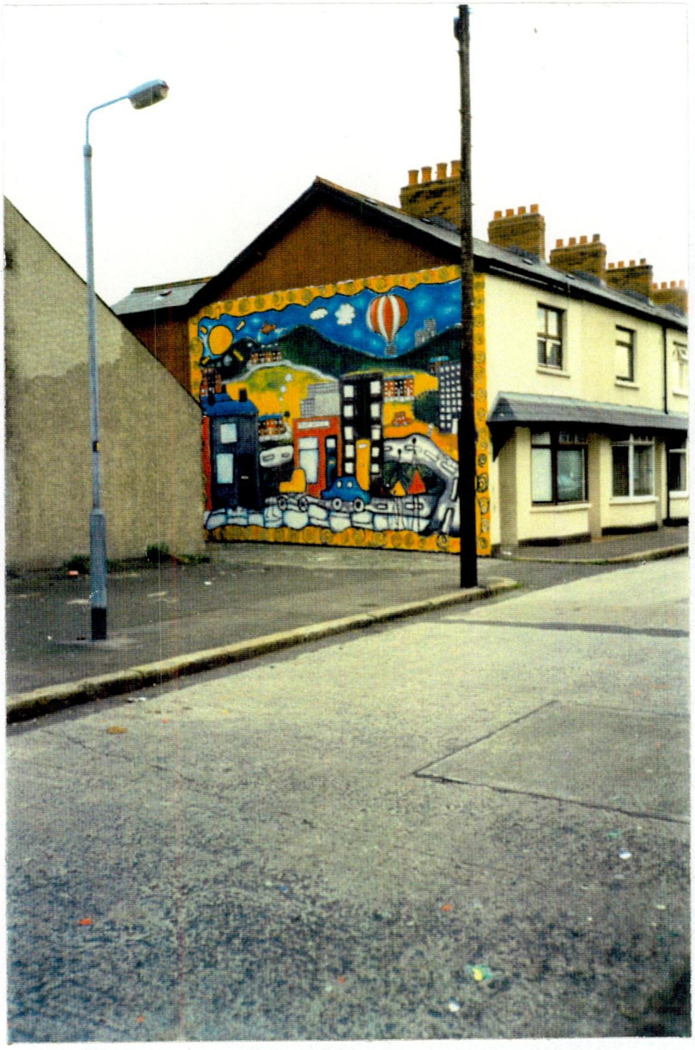
Under Tates Avenue Bridge

6





7 - Rockland Street, October 1994

However, while exploring parts of Belfast in the course of taking photographs, I must admit that such theorising on the intentions, functions and successes of non-political art was not foremost in my thoughts. I realise that because I do not live and work in these parts of Belfast in which social deprivation has been compounded by bitter conflict, my view is entirely different to most of those who have commented on these murals, and that had I been confronted by the "world of fantasy" (Wilson, 1983, p.19) provided by those works described above I too would have questioned their purpose and appropriateness. But the examples which I did see, illustrated in figures 1 to 7, brought momentary relief from the sectarian rhetoric painted into the very fabric of these areas. The examples from Falls Road do seem to be more sensitively dealt with than the examples criticised above. Featuring people who are not taken from a Disney animation, as in figure 1, or incorporating some of the celtic imagery which forms a part of local heritage, as in figure 2 these works do not seem as far-removed from local life. The images of peacocks, frogs, seagulls and fish may seem rather incongruous alongside the walkway under Tates Avenue bridge (figures 3 to 6), and the image of sunshine, hot-air balloons and clear skies a little optimistic on a damp Sunday in the Village across the road from one of the most enduring 'King Billy' murals in Belfast (figure 7). But these murals do create the impression, rightly or wrongly, even through the use of these 'escapist' scenes, that there are those who are trying to step back from sectarian politics and send out the message that within this "real-life laboratory of...warfare" (O'Malley, 1983, p.15), it is the "real-life" which goes on.

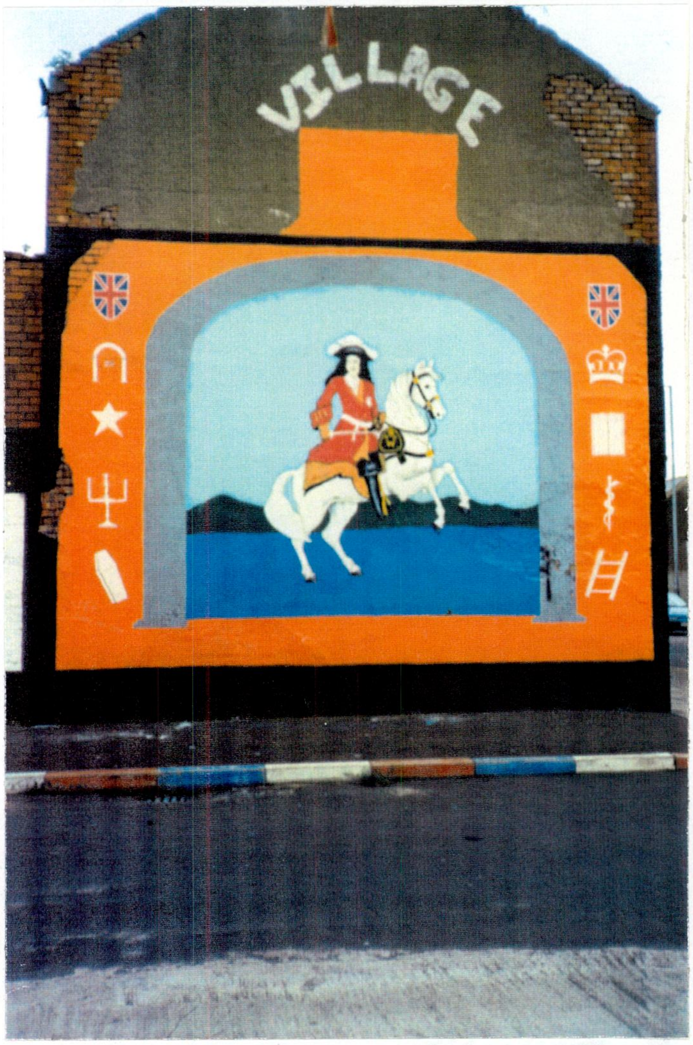
## Protestant and loyalist murals

In an area such as the Village, for example, or the Shankill, or Sandy Row, the imagery contained within the political wall-paintings is generally viewed as having more relevance to the daily lives of local people than that used by non-political muralists, however much the sectarian messages it conveys are condemned. The characters, symbols and language of the Protestant and loyalist murals form the basis of the identity of these communities, which has become increasingly important over the past twenty-five years as the Unionist position has changed to an extent which would have seemed unthinkable in the 1960s.

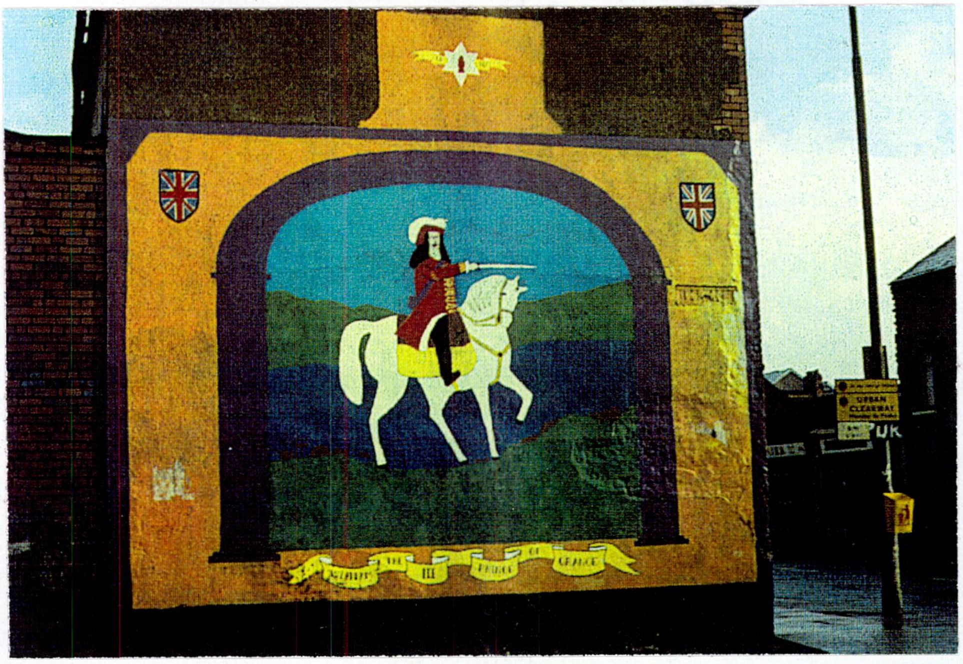
As stated in Chapter Four, the first murals to appear in Belfast were produced before the partition of Ireland, and were Protestant, rather that loyalist. While the message they conveyed was one of loyalty to the British Crown at a time when the Home Rule Bill was being vigourously debated, they did so by means of celebrating the religious identity of local people.

## 'King Billy' murals

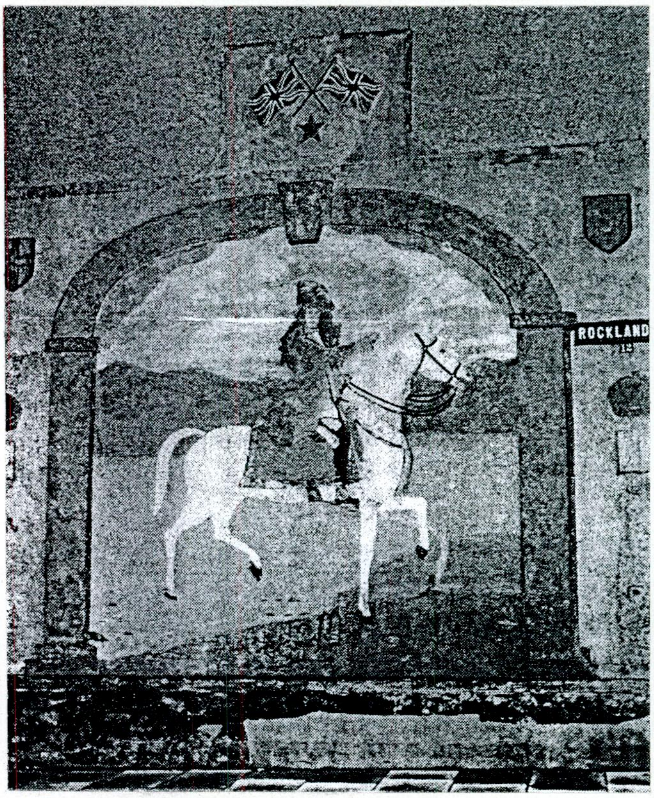
The first of these early murals depicted the Battle of the Boyne, in 1690; this is a theme which, along with representations of King William III, has recurred many times, and is still in use today. Figures 8 to 12 show the 'King Billy' mural in Rockland Street, which has been repainted regularly for many years; it was in the process of being painted again during my visit in October 1994.



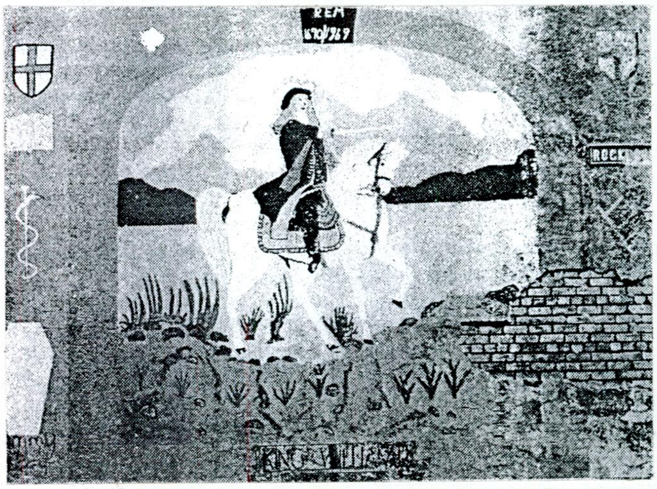
8 - Rockland Street 'King Billy', October 1994


WILLIAM THE III PRINCE OF ORANGE
URBAN CLEARWAY
UK

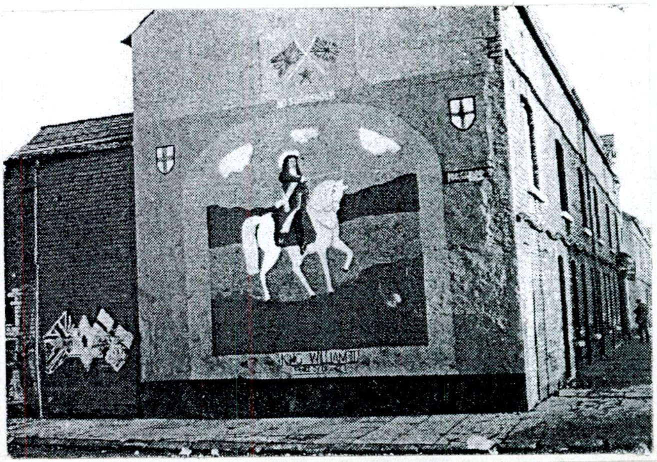
9 - Rockland Street 'King Billy', 1984



10 - Rockland Street 'King Billy', early 1960s



11 - Rockland Street 'King Billy', 1975



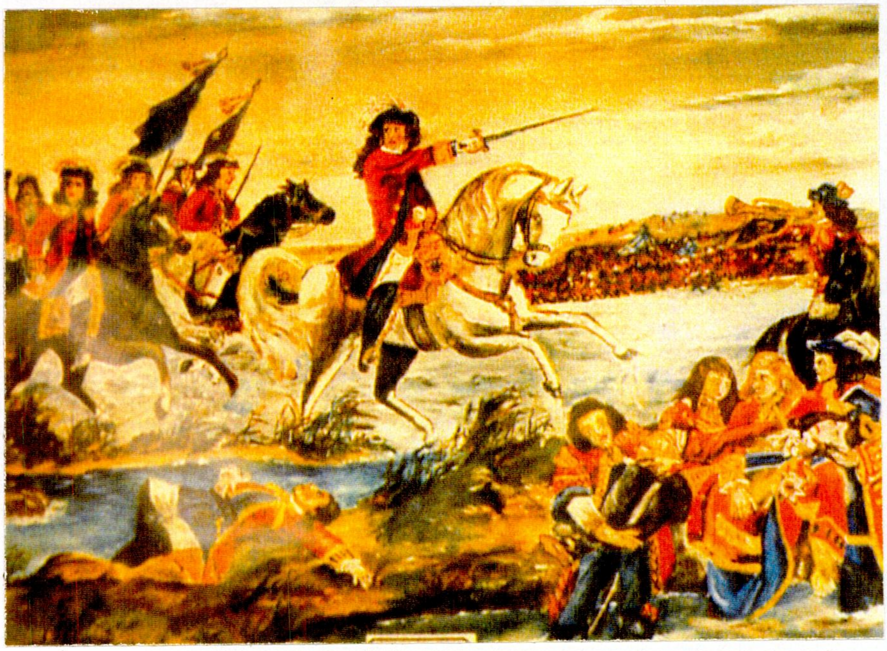
12 - Rockland Street 'King Billy', 1979

Such repainting, however, traditionally occurs in preparation for the annual Protestant celebrations on the 12th of July, the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

"Nowhere in the Western world can one find a historical figure playing such an important role in a current conflict", writes Belinda Loftus on the widespread use of a figure-head from three centuries ago in consolidating support in contemporary Northern Ireland (Loftus, 1990, p.16). She proposes that the figure of William III has been maintained because he, by defeating Jacobean forces in 1690, confirmed the Planters' status as rulers of the province, and served to justify their presence. During the subsequent three centuries, the position of Protestants and Unionists has been constantly questioned, and the Williamite victory in 1690 serves as a defensive response. And today, perhaps because Unionism is such a disparate group, 'King Billy' has become a figure-head which all its political and religious factions can identify with (Loftus, 1990, p.18).

Loftus records the views of many concerning the 'King Billy' murals:

> To outsiders...they are remote and irrelevent. To those who choose to have them in their streets they are simply symbols of their political and religious identity. To numerous members of the artworld in Northern Ireland they are folk art, to be preserved...with an Arts Council grant. And to most other observers, particularly nationalists, they are sectarian graffitti, a view summed up in the following comment on the Rockland Street painting... 'To appreciate the mural fully, alcohol is desireable, although hatred, prejudice and the right type of music also serve to induce the proper aesthetic response.'(Loftus, 1990, p.16).

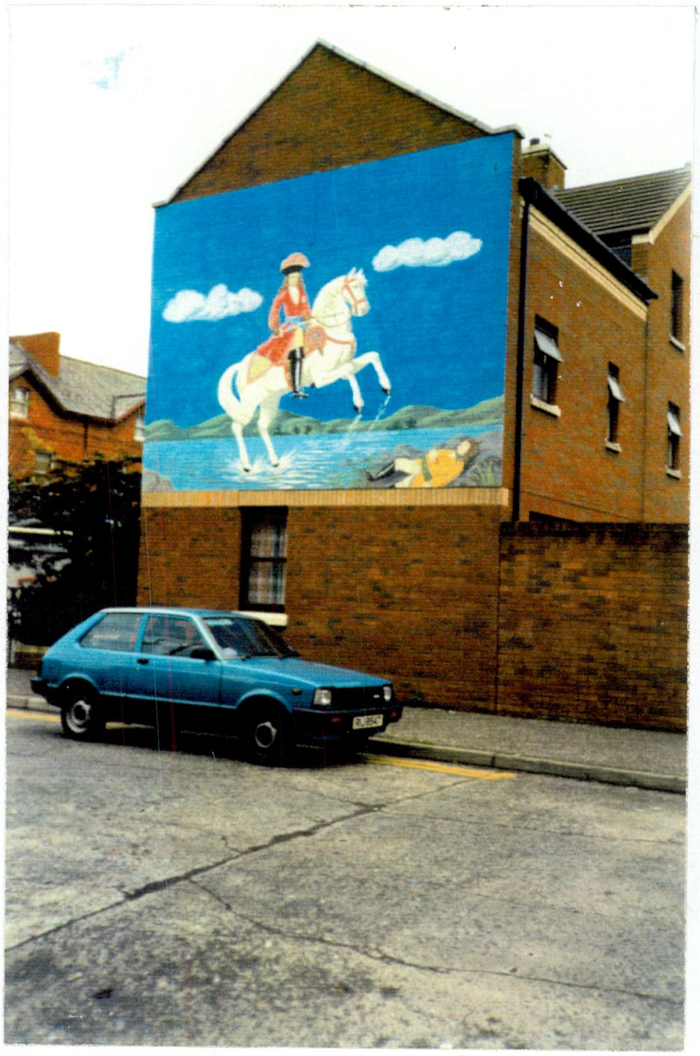


13 - Print based on West's painting of the Battle of the Boyne

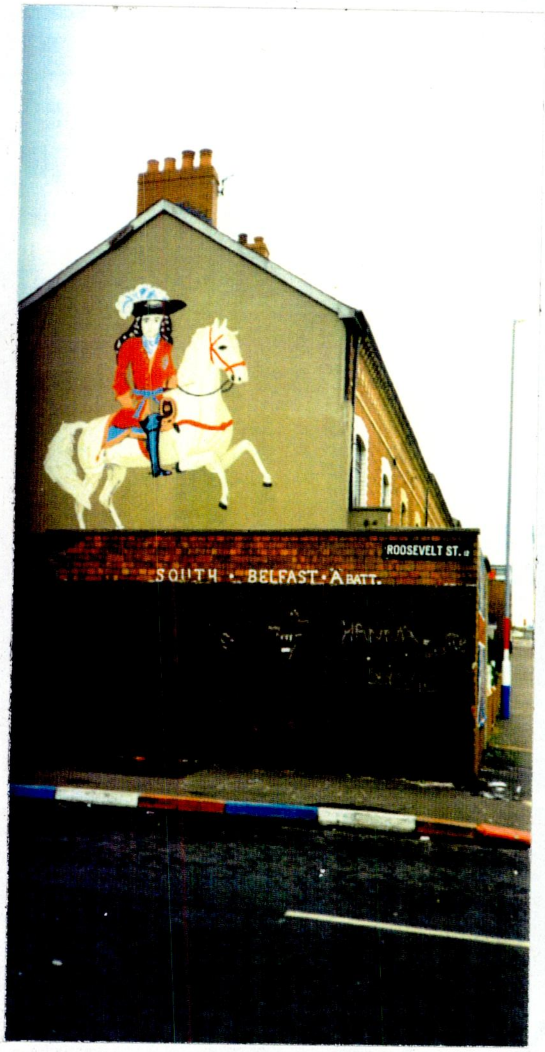
However, the early 'King Billy' murals were, as are most contemporary examples, much more skilled than "sectarian graffitti". They were created with great care and attention to detail by trained craftsmen, using imagery drawn from a long-standing fine art tradition.

The first representations of William III originated in the Netherlands. Theodor Maas and Jan Wyck are believed to have accompanied the Williamite forces in their campaigns, and many of their paintings and engravings were obtained by Scottish and English planters. Representations of the king were also produced by Godfrey Kneller; these were distributed among loyal Williamites in England and Ireland. The principal source, however, for Belfast's loyalist mural-painters, as well as for the vast array of popular 'King Billy' representations in, for example, postcards, playing cards and tea-towels, is Benjamin West's painting of the Battle of the Boyne, dating from 1780 (see figure 13). (Loftus, 1990, p.20). Loftus proposes that the reliance of many of the muralists on West's painting lies with the fact that King William is depicted face-on, with his horse in profile. The source is therefore easy to use (Loftus, 1990, p.32), particularly for those with little formal artistic training.

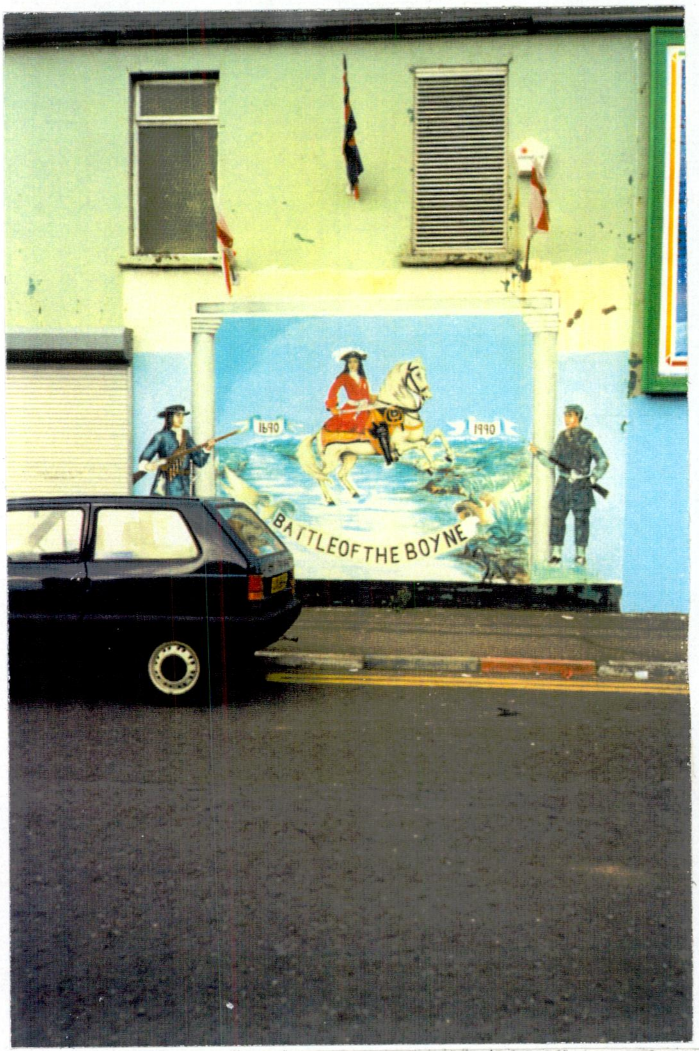
But obviously not everyone at that time had access to these representations of William. One of the first images of him which was available to large numbers of people was Grinling Gibbons' 1701 statue in College Green, Dublin. This representation of King William on horseback became the accepted symbol for Orange societies formed from the mid-eighteenth century; indeed its use in Orange regalia remains virtually unchanged to the present day (Loftus, 1990, p.22).



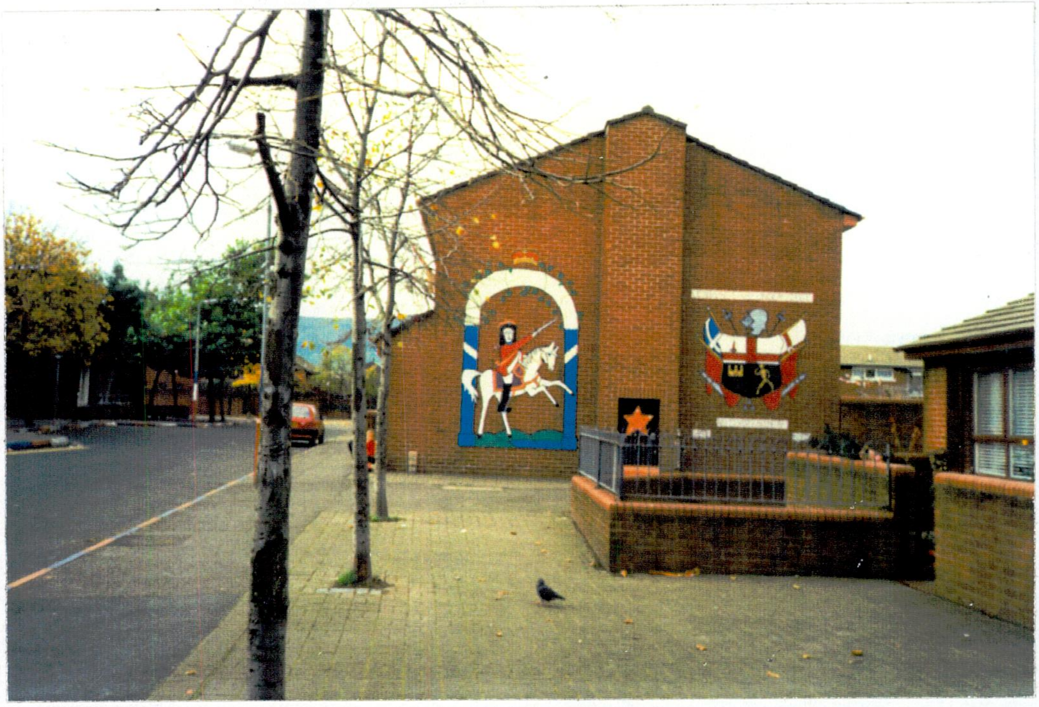
14 - Oak Street 'King Billy', October 1994


ROOSEVELT ST.
SOUTH BELFAST A BATT.

15 - Roosevelt Street 'King Billy', November 1994


1690
1990
BATTLE OF THE BOYNE

16 - Blythe Street 'King Billy', October 1994



17 - Rowland Way 'King Billy', October 1994

However, those who produce contemporary representations of William, including the muralists, tend to reject this official image of the Orange Order in favour of, occasionally, the Dutch propaganda images, but more commonly Benjamin West's heroic portrayal of the king (Loftus, 1990, p.24).

All the 'King Billy' murals shown here (figures 14 to 17), as well as the Rockland Street work (figures 8 to 12) are obviously based on West's painting, subsequent etchings, prints and copies of it or other wall paintings.

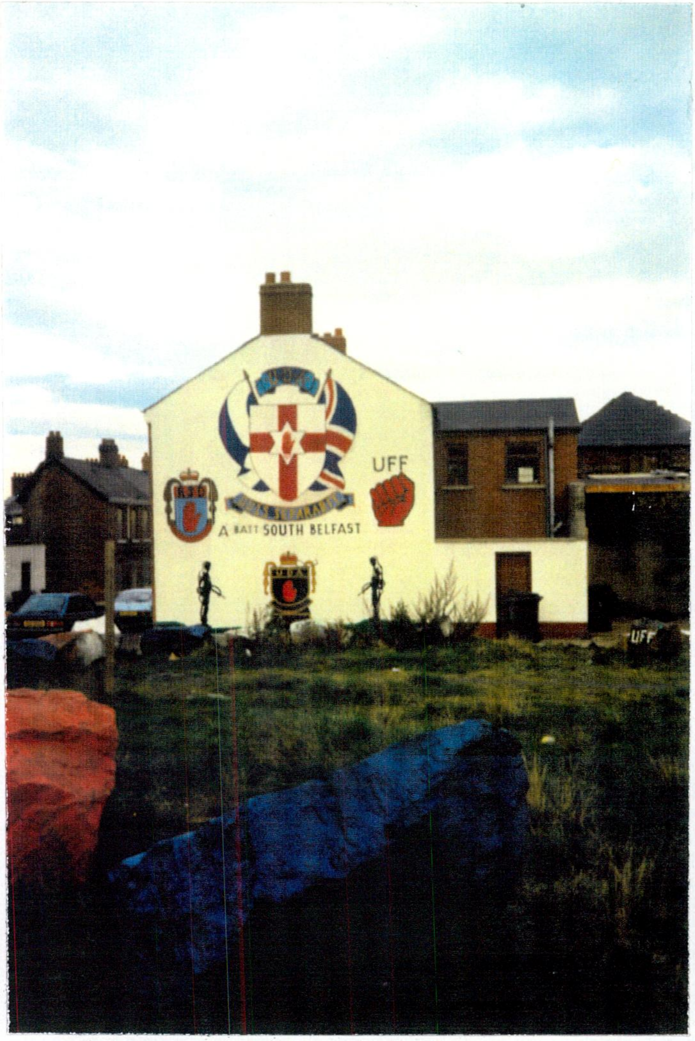
## The use of flags and heraldry

It seems that today, however, the use of William III in Belfast's murals is becoming less common. Loftus, for example, records that of the "seventy-five or so loyalist murals on view in Northern Ireland in the mid-1980s only twelve still featured William III (Loftus, 1990, p.32). She attributes this to an apparent decline of skill amongst loyalist mural-painters; "It is understandable", she writes "that many refer to recent loyalist murals as graffitti, for their painters generally lack the training or skill to produce a portrait of William III, and turn instead to more manageable displays of flags and heraldry" (Loftus, 1990, p.32). Malcolm Miles also feels that in loyalist mural-painting, "the tradition has degenerated". "... a shield, two flags, a slogan: easier things to draw" he comments (Miles, 1989, p.64). However, a more relevant analysis of this change would seem to come instead from examining the political content of the murals.

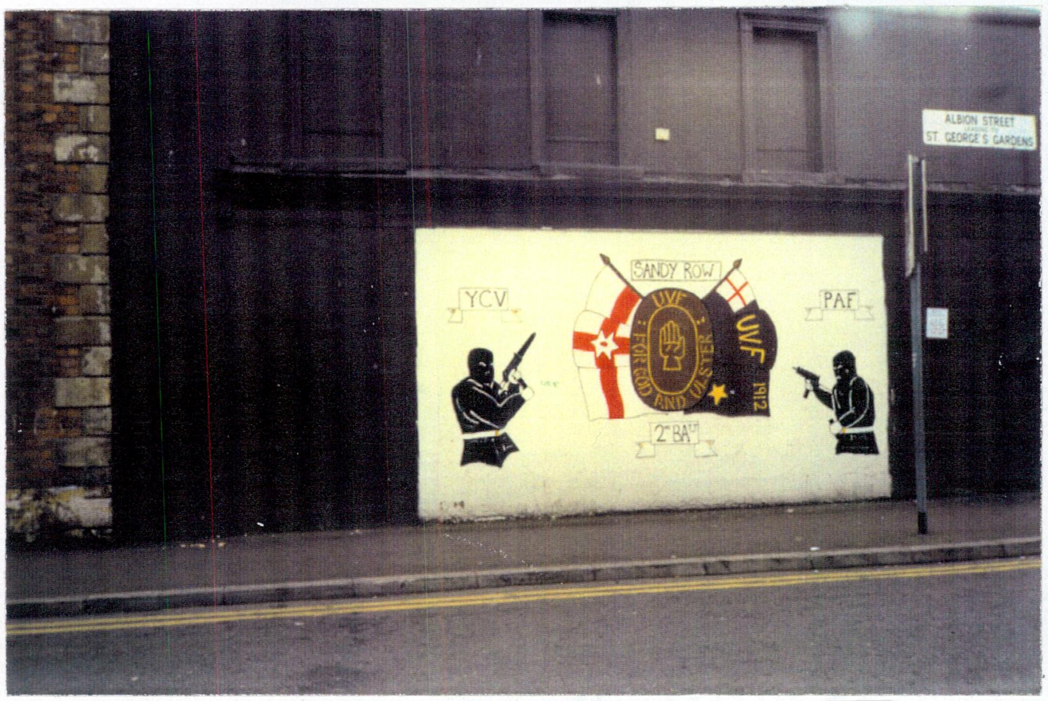
As Bill Rolston observes, loyalist mural-painters were faced with a dilemma through the late 1960s and into the 1970s; with the highly publicised civil rights campaigns, the deployment of troops and the introduction of direct rule from Westminster, the Unionist position in Northern Ireland was drastically altered.

Muralists could no longer produce "monuments to the state", through the depiction of celebratory images of Protestantism or elaborate historical references, when Unionists no longer had direct control over the state. They were therefore faced with new questions as to what kinds of imagery could be employed to reflect their altered position within Northern Ireland (Rolston, 1992, p.ii). This also occurred at a time when large areas of Belfast were undergoing redevelopment with new housing estates changing the shape of the city; long-established, close-knit communities were destroyed, or changed irrevocably, and with them disappeared much of the sense of local community pride which lay behind the original Protestant murals. Consequently, the number of murals being produced during this period fell dramatically.

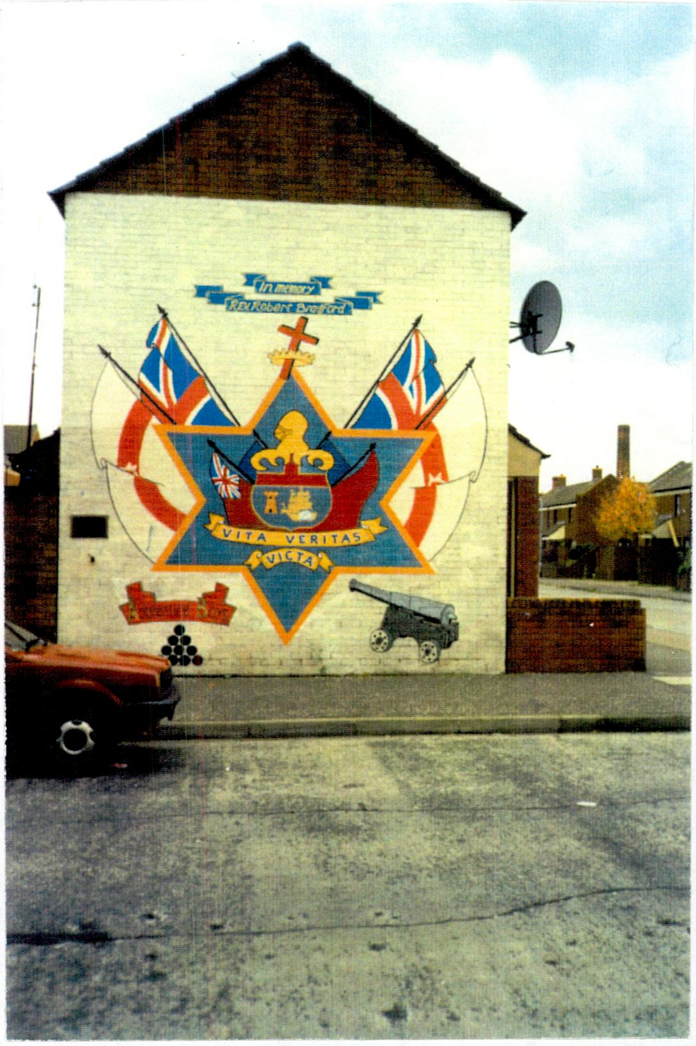
The solution to these problems produced new themes which provided one of the most distinctive styles of loyalist muralism. In order to demonstrate the aspirations of Unionists "in a less than ideal political situation" (Rolston, 1992, p.ii) and the notion of vehemently opposing British policy while emphatically 'being' British, the use of inanimate symbols became widespread. The "heraldic grandeur" of these new murals "displayed not so much assurance as rigidity in the face of rapid social change" (Rolston, 1992, p.ii). Greater change was to come, however, with subsequent political events.


UFF
A BATT SOUTH BELFAST

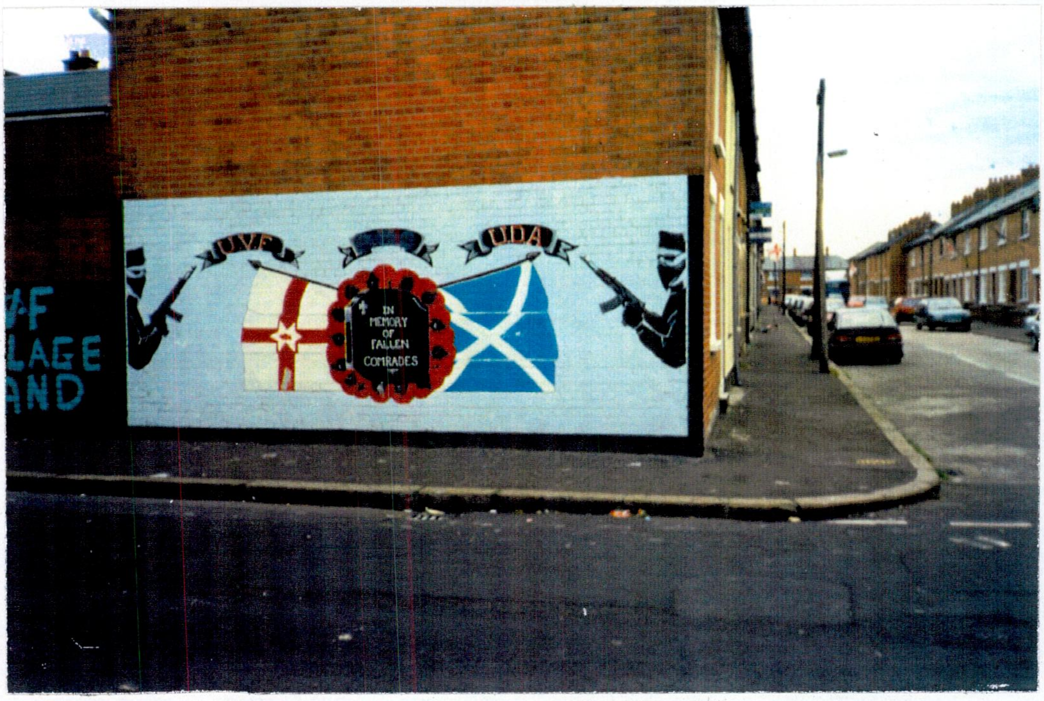
18 - Roden Street, UDA 'A' Battalion, November 1994


ALBION STREET
ST. GEORGE'S GARDENS
SANDY ROW
YCV
PAF
UVF
FOR GOD AND ULSTER
UVF
1912
2nd BATT

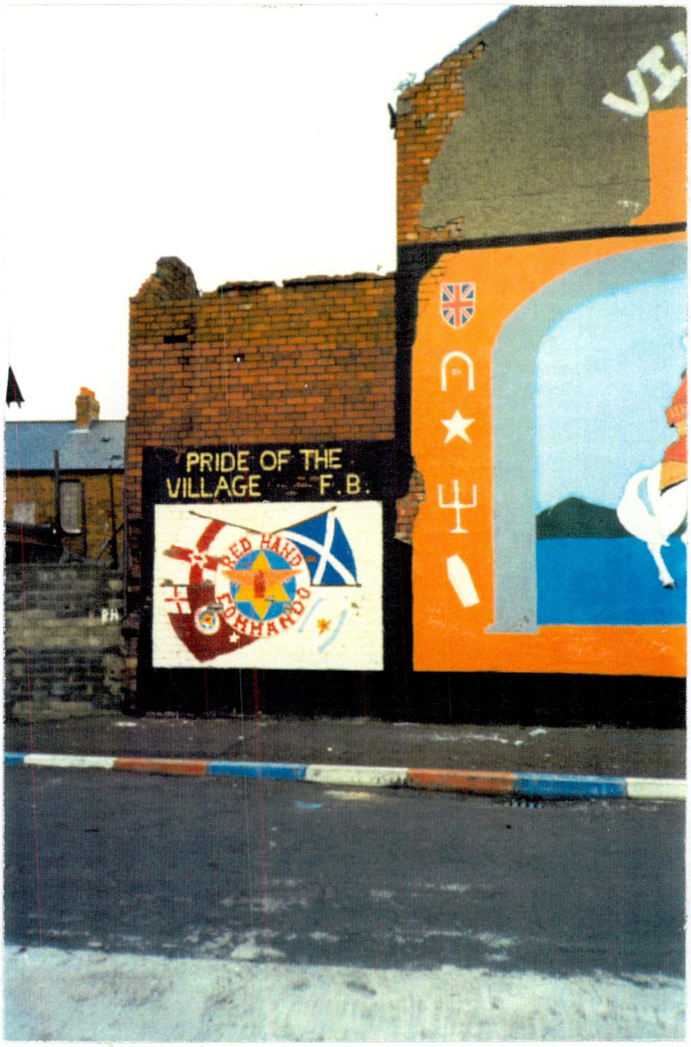
19 - Albion Street, UVF mural, October 1994


In memory
Rev Robert Bradford
VITA VERITAS
VICTA

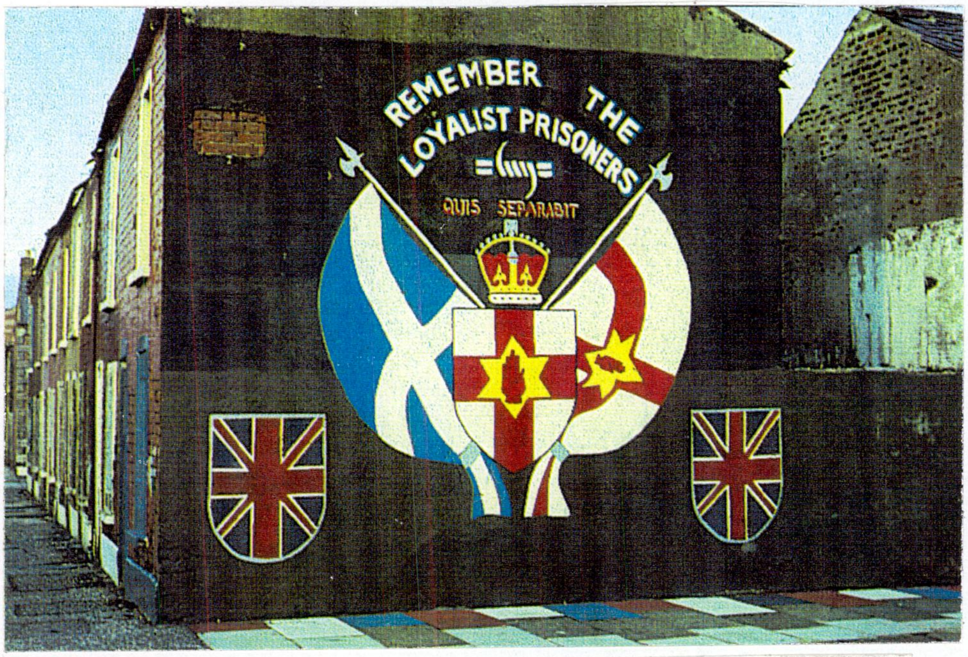
20 - Oak Street, Robert Bradford memorial, October 1994


UVF
UDA
IN MEMORY OF FALLEN COMRADES

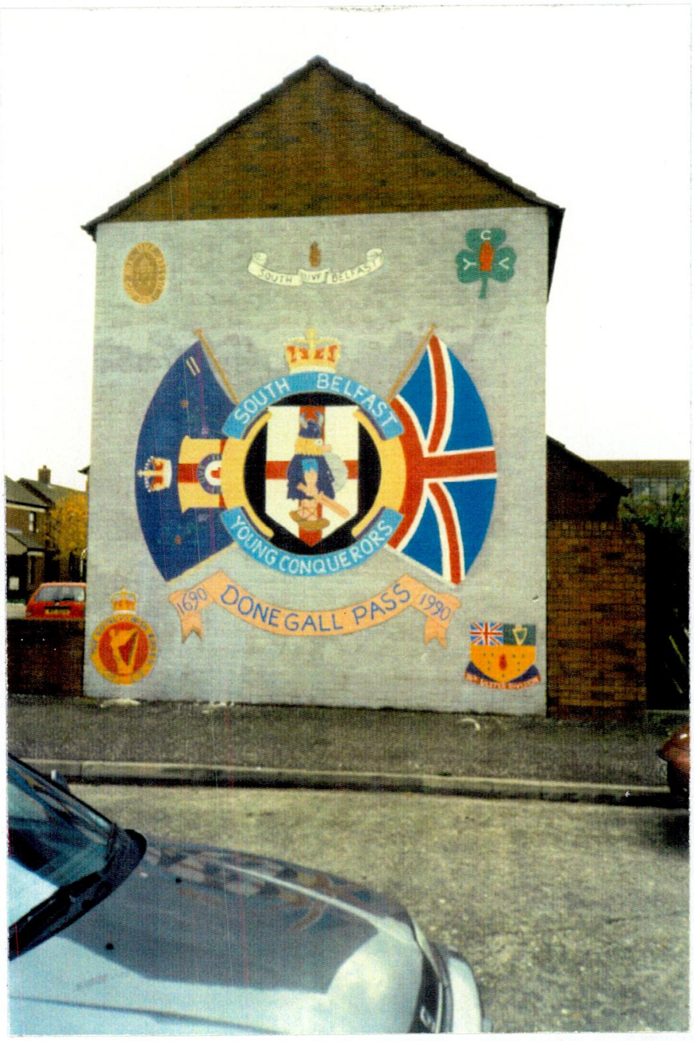
21 - Broadway, UVF/UDA memorial, October 1994


PRIDE OF THE
VILLAGE F.B.
RED HAND
COMMANDO

22 - Rockland Street, 'Red Hand Commando' mural, October 1994


REMEMBER THE
LOYALIST PRISONERS
QUIS SEPARABIT

23 - Lindsay Street, Loyalist Prisoners mural, 1981


SOUTH BELFAST
YOUNG CONQUERORS
1690 DONEGALL PASS 1990
SOUTH BELFAST
Y C V

24 - Pine Street, 'South Belfast Young Conquerors' mural, November 1994

The mid-1980s produced a revival of mural-painting in loyalist communities with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Many of these new murals contained highly militaristic imagery, as the strength and security of the Unionist identity were shaken once again (Rolston, 1992, p.ii). The Downing Street Declaration of December 1993 provoked a similar reaction from muralists, anxious to convey the impression of consolidated Unionist opposition to a suspected 'sell-out' to republicans.

The examples given here (figures 18 to 23) show the extent to which this use of flags and heraldic symbols has been employed, and the manner in which it has formed an unmistakeable visual language. The use of the syntax across several themes - assertions of the power of various paramilitary factions and the menacing portrayal of militaristic themes through to memorials for those killed in 'active service' for loyalist paramilitaries or murdered by republicans - establishes a cohesiveness, drawing all these concerns decisively together to form one clear loyalist message, something which may have seemed difficult to achieve within such a diverse grouping as loyalism/Unionism. In the Pine Street mural,for example (figure 24), another form of imagery is employed; the cartoon-style Viking in the centre of the work may, on its own, create the impression that this mural is produced either by, or on behalf of, children, or possibly a group for young people. However, because it is surrounded by the flags and heraldic devices of the unmistakeable loyalist visual language, the intended message of the mural becomes clear;

it is, in fact, a mural celebrating an outlawed paramilitary organsation, with the addition at the bottom of the emblems of the Royal Irish Rifles and the 36th Ulster Division together with a reference to 1690, all dubiously linked to provide the 'South Belfast Young Conquerors' with an historical context and a clear identity.

It seems that these newer murals do in fact fulfil their function, however much they may be criticised for their reduction of ideals into simple terms, into symbols. Their primary aim is propagandist: to unite all the shades of loyalism and Protestantism which come under the 'Unionist' heading in order to project one clear, coherent message to those within Northern Ireland and those beyond it.

By these criteria, which seem the most relevant by which to judge them, these loyalist murals are successful. Many of them are not completed with a high degree of technical proficiency, but those which are have considerable visual impact. To those within these communities, the emblems incorporated into these murals provide a potent symbol of identity and heritage, particularly important in recent times in the midst of rapid change in Northern Irish society. To those from Catholic, republican communities, they are regarded as threatening, as "exclusive Protestant claims to territory" (Loftus, 1990, p.35). And to observers who are distanced from the 'Troubles', the militaristic images and paramilitary references which have become an integral part of these murals are a chilling reminder of the fact that for a quarter of a century violence has been an integral part of life for many in similar communities throughout Belfast and Northern Ireland.

The change in loyalist murals since the beginning of the century has been dramatic, but it reflects the changes which have occurred in Northern Irish politics. As Bill Rolston observes, contemporary mural-painters are no longer the skilled craftsmen who carefully created bold scenes of Protestant celebration; they are highly politically-motivated young people creating works which the old-style muralists view as sectarian in a sinister way, being intentionally anti-Catholic and anti-nationalist (Rolston, 1992, p.ii). The shift in emphasis from 'Protestant' to 'loyalist' is indicative of the increasing politicisation of the situation in Northern Ireland. From "a defensive celebration of ... heritage" (Rolston, 1992, p.ii), Belfast's loyalist murals now convey negative sentiments, attacking those whom loyalists fear are threatening their identity and position.

## Republican murals

In other communities in Belfast, identity and heritage have been threatened, subdued and consequently "ghettoised" (Rolston, 1992, p.iii) since the creation of Northern Ireland; these are the republican and Catholic communities.

As described in Chapter Four, there is no long-established tradition of mural-painting within these communities, with the first, aside from the 1953 'one-off' commemoration of Emmet's uprising, appearing less than fifteen years ago in the early 1980s.

It is unclear exactly why republican mural-painting was precipitated solely by the second hunger strikes of 1981. 1994 marked the 25th anniversary of the deployment of troops in Northern Ireland; however the arrival of soldiers on the streets of Belfast in 1969, particularly after the initial 'honeymoon' period in which they were welcomed by Catholics, had no direct significance in terms of mural production at the time, despite the other forms of territorial markers which appeared during this period as part of the creation of 'no-go' areas. The subsequent dismantling of these areas by British troops in 'Operation Motorman' did not provoke any defiant escalation of these territorial markers. The issue of internment, introduced in 1971, did not at the time prompt any form of murals beyond spontaneous graffiti, despite the outrage which republicans felt concerning the policy of rounding up and detaining suspected agitators and terrorists.

These are all subjects which occur repeatedly in republican murals; yet at the time, although mural-painting had become established as a means of protestation in Belfast through the loyalist works, they prompted nothing other than roughly-painted, colourless graffiti.

The Flags and Emblems (Display) Act, introduced in 1954, did serve to restrict the use of the Tricolour and other 'republican' symbols in Northern Ireland. However, although this Act was not repealed until 1986, Belinda Loftus records that by the mid-1960s, it was largely ignored by republicans.

> There were no significant displays of tricolours in Northern Ireland until 1964, when the flag's appearance at the election headquarters of the republican candidate in West Belfast provoked a vehement protest by the Reverend Ian Paisley, and seizure of the flag by the police. 'People didn't care after that who knew what was in their hearts' recalled one republican sympathiser" (Loftus, 1994, p.88).

Republican marches and parades which took place in Belfast after this were headed by large Tricolours and other emblems associated with the republican movement. It seems that this period provided the right ingredients for the production of republican murals. Not only was there a resurgence in the use of republican symbols, but the republican movement was beginning to undertake its own propagandist work in an attempt to regain consolidated support. The parades which occurred were a part of this, resulting largely from the "IRA's need to recover lost face after the failure of its border campaign of 1956-62" (Loftus, 1994, p.88). Murals, too, could well have performed an important function. Yet still they did not appear.

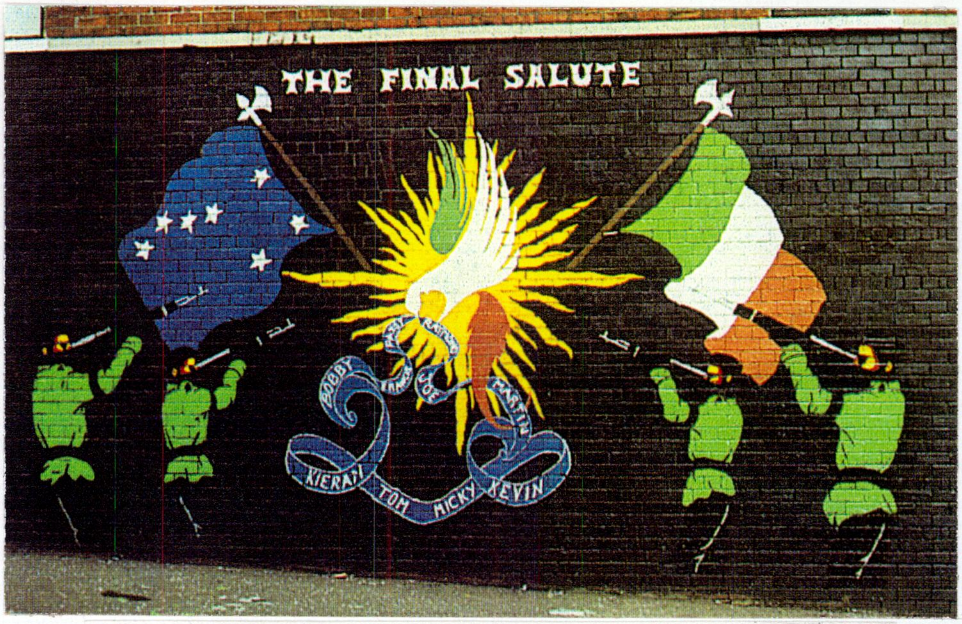
Even by 1981, there had already been one hunger strike campaign, and five years of 'blanket protests', neither of which had prompted murals, although during the latter half of the 1970s, republican graffiti did become more decorative, sometimes incorporating simplified emblems into the rough slogans. Painted boards depicting the hunger-strikers also began to appear, most notably in 1979. But it took the second hunger strike campaign to encourage the move from elaborate graffiti to full-scale murals.

Possibly this occurred due to a greatly increased sense of solidarity amongst those in republican communities. While Belinda Loftus states that one of the intentions of the committees which initially instigated the production of murals was the consolidation of local support for the hunger-strikers and their campaign (Loftus, 1990, p.78), it seems that this consolidation had largely already occurred as those in republican communities saw that the British government was prepared to 'let their men die'.

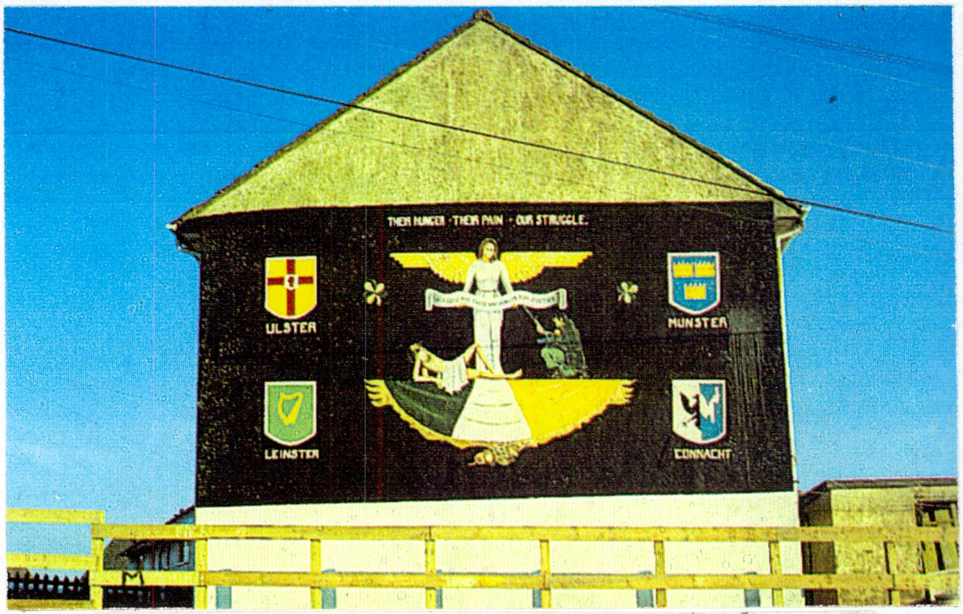
However, can it be considered as purely coincidental that these murals were suddenly produced when the world's media were focused on republican Northern Ireland to an extent never before experienced? The republican movement, and the IRA in particular, was now provided with a golden opportunity to convey its ideology to the rest of the world by incorporating it into the very fabric of these communities.

Hundreds of these murals were created throughout the spring and summer of 1981. Although they dealt with the issue of the hunger strikes themselves, a second theme was also used in many murals: that of the armed struggle of the IRA. Bill Rolston writes that it

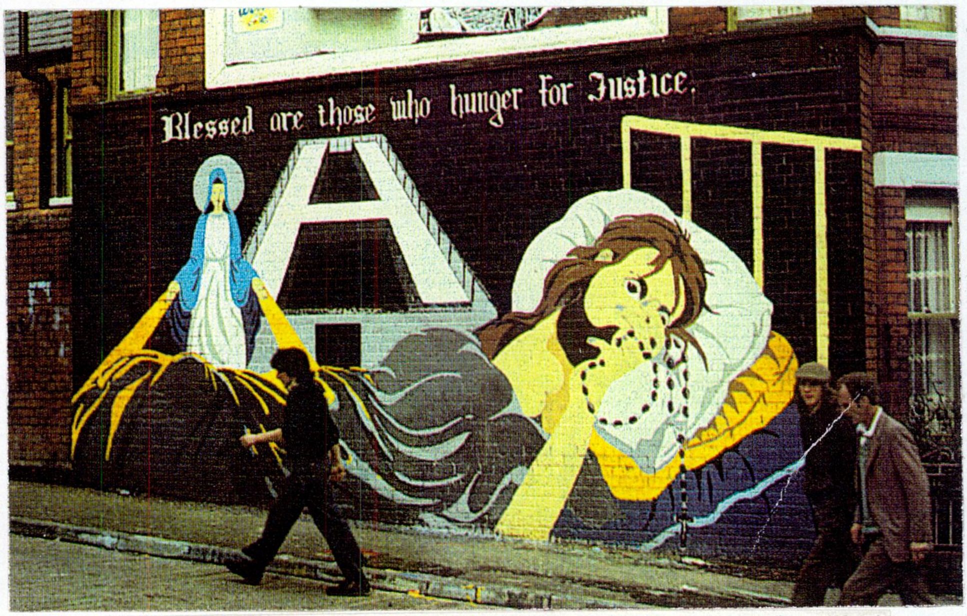
> could have been possible to represent the hunger strike solely in humanitarian terms. Muralists could have avoided referring to the IRA campaign in the hope of attracting more sympathy to the plight of the prisoners. In fact this did not happen.
> (Rolston, 1992, p.iv)


THE FINAL SALUTE
BOBBY
FRANCIS
PATSY
RAYMOND
JOE
MARTIN
KIERAN
TOM
MICKY
KEVIN

25 - Rockville Street, hunger strike mural, 1981


THEIR HUNGER · THEIR PAIN · OUR STRUGGLE.
ULSTER
MUNSTER
LEINSTER
CONNACHT

26 - Whiterock Road, hunger strike mural, 1981


Blessed are those who hunger for Justice.

27 - Rockmount Street, hunger strike mural, 1981

Thus two apparently contradictory forms of imagery dominated the early murals, being fused into one message which went beyond the specific issue of the hunger strikes: "here are our enemies, here are their victims, to allow such things to continue is obscene, we must endure first, and having endured we must change it all" (Wilson, 1983, p.20). The use of both militaristic imagery, as in figure 25, and religious themes, as figures 26 and 27 show, attempted to elevate the hunger-strikers to the status of martyrs, sacrificing themselves in the heroic struggle for 'justice'. The IRA campaign of violence was given a veneer of respectability and dignity through the confusion of hunger strike and armed campaign which the murals created.

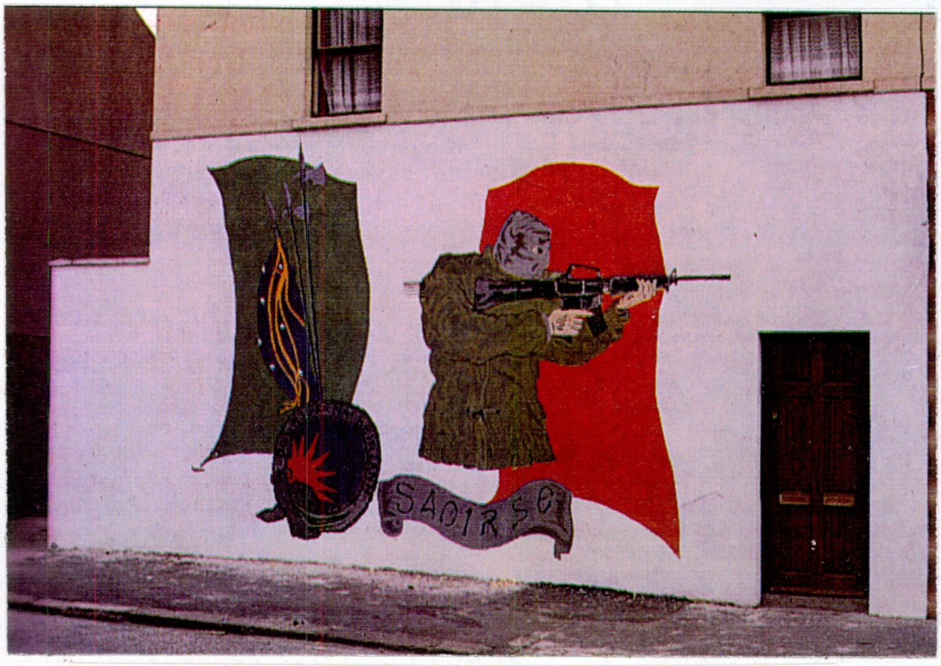
Brian McAvera comments on the appropriation of Christian imagery by the IRA, beginning with Richard Hamilton's view that the IRA sought to exploit a parody of this imagery. "One wonders", he asks,

> how Hamilton can be so ignorant as to the Irish connotations of what he himself referred to as 'the genre of the martyred saint'. Does he not understand the **use** of religious imagery by the Provos who are not 'exploiting a parody of Christian imagery'? This is to miss the point gloriously. Rather, remembering that their murals were in the midst of an entrenched catholic populace accustomed to, and steeped in, catholic imagery, they wished to **appropriate** the emotional, symbolic and intellectual aspects of catholic imagery for the purpose of legitimising their own actions. Hunger-strikers equal Christ figures - and not, for example, suicides. Parody has no place in the equation. They do not wish to mock or offend the Christian ethos - they wish to use it. (McAvera, 1989, p.116)

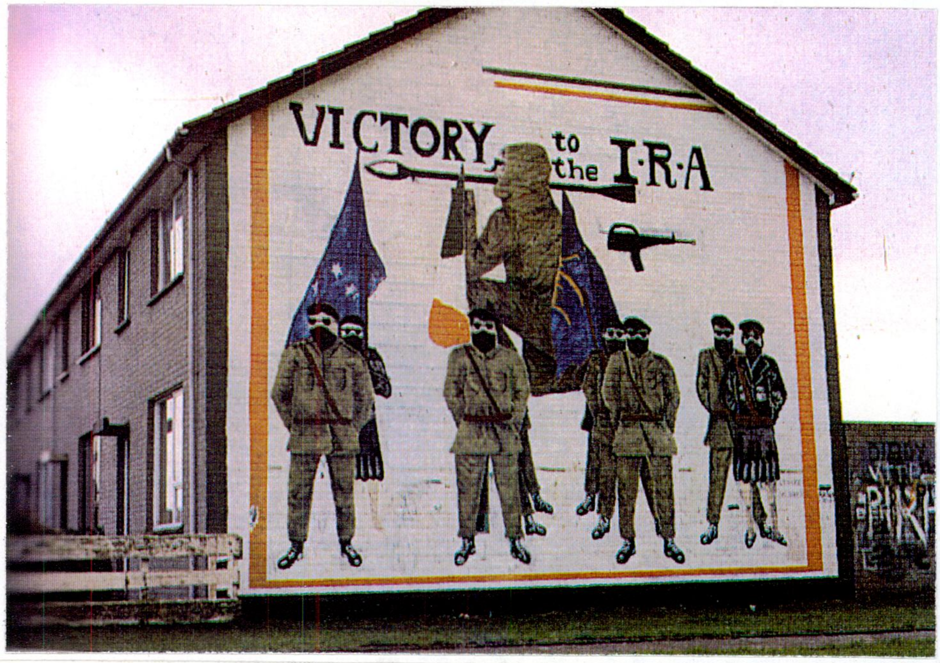
At the end of the second hunger strike campaign, republican mural-painting could have ceased. However, a further incentive was provided by the decision of Sinn Fein to contest the forthcoming elections, an issue which had previously been considered "tangential, even diversionary" amongst republicans (Rolston, 1992, p.iv).

Rolston records that murals designed for the election campaigns were "more impressive, and probably more effective than posters" (Rolston, 1992, p.iv), due to their large scale and also their association with the 'valiant struggle' of republicanism which had been established through the hunger strike works. Gerard Kelly, a prolific republican muralist who worked on some subsequent election murals, believes that people are attracted to visual imagery, that "'most people like art. They may not take much interest in it, but people would stand and look at a mural before they would read a paper'" (Rolston, 1992, p.iv).

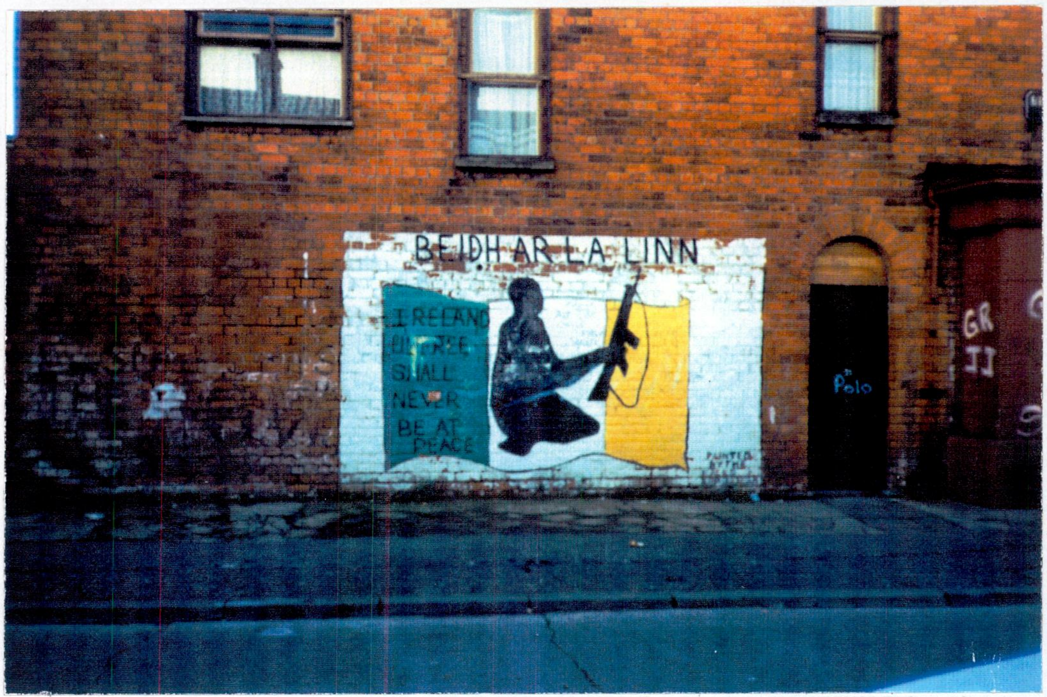
These election murals established the more widespread use of murals as an integral part of republican campaigning. Works were produced on a wide range of themes and contemporary issues: Military operations, usually in general terms (figures 28 to 30), but occasionally depicting a specific incident (as figure 31); historical and mythological works, such as the portraits of James Connolly and Patrick Pearse shown in figures 32 and 33 respectively; prison issues, in many cases connected to the campaign to ascribe political status to republican prisoners (figure 34); the issue of repression, (figure 35), often coupled with resistance to the 'oppressive' British regime (figure 36); and also the theme of 'internationalism', in which attempts were made to link the IRA and republican campaigns to other 'anti-imperialist struggles' across the world, depicting issues as diverse as the plight of native Americans to the campaign of the PLO (figures 37 to 39). The portrayal of women as a repressed minority group is also common to this theme, as figures 40 and 41 show. (Rolston, 1992, p.iv/v).



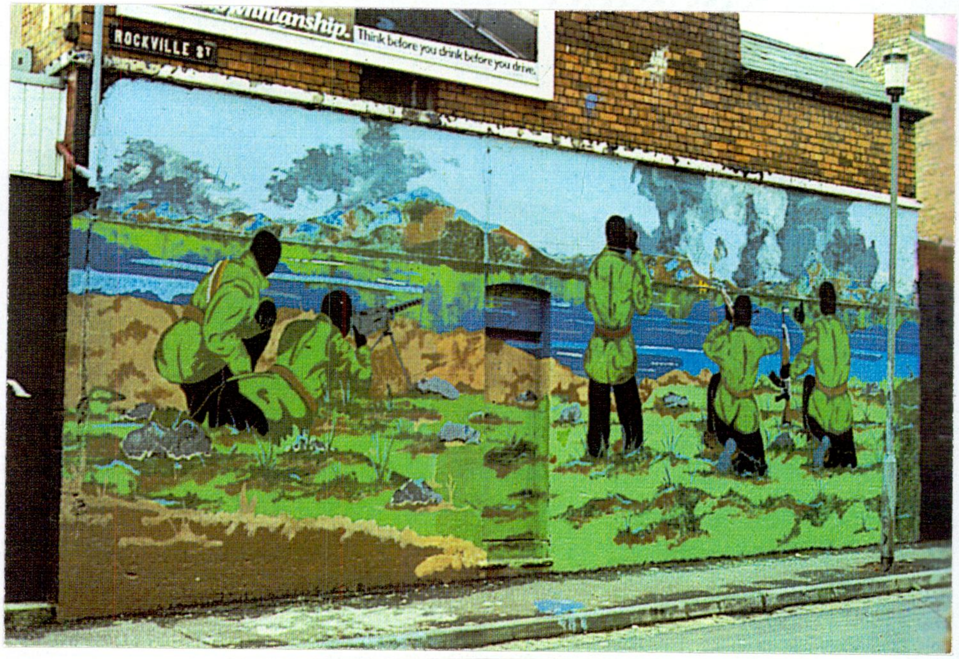
28 - Edlingham Street,hooded IRA member, 1988


VICTORY to the I·R·A

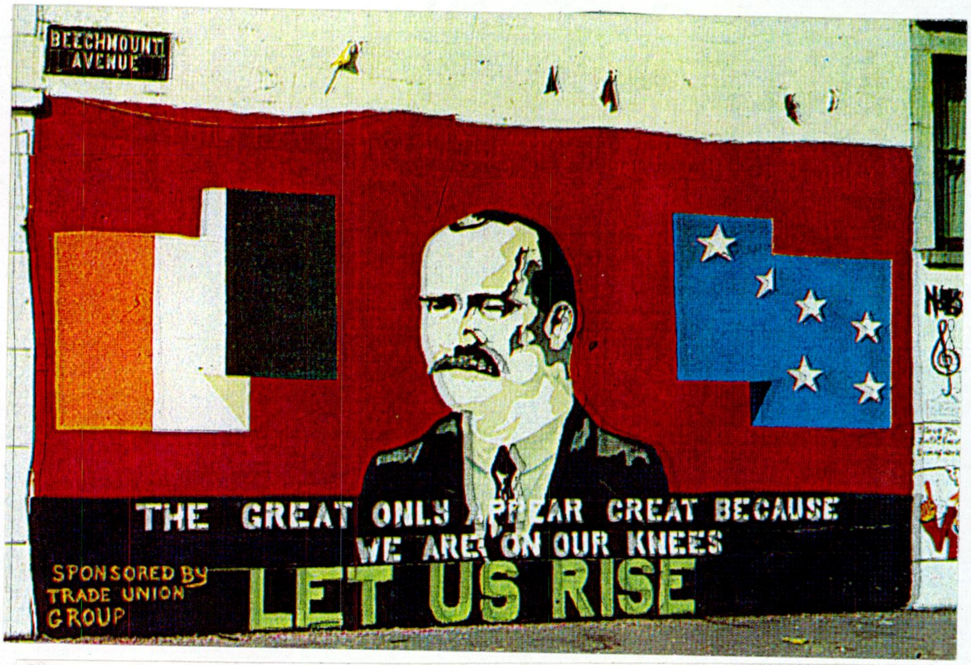
29 - Gardenmore Street, Twinbrook, 'Victory to the IRA', 1988


BEIDH AR LA LINN
IRELAND UNFREE SHALL NEVER BE AT PEACE
Polo

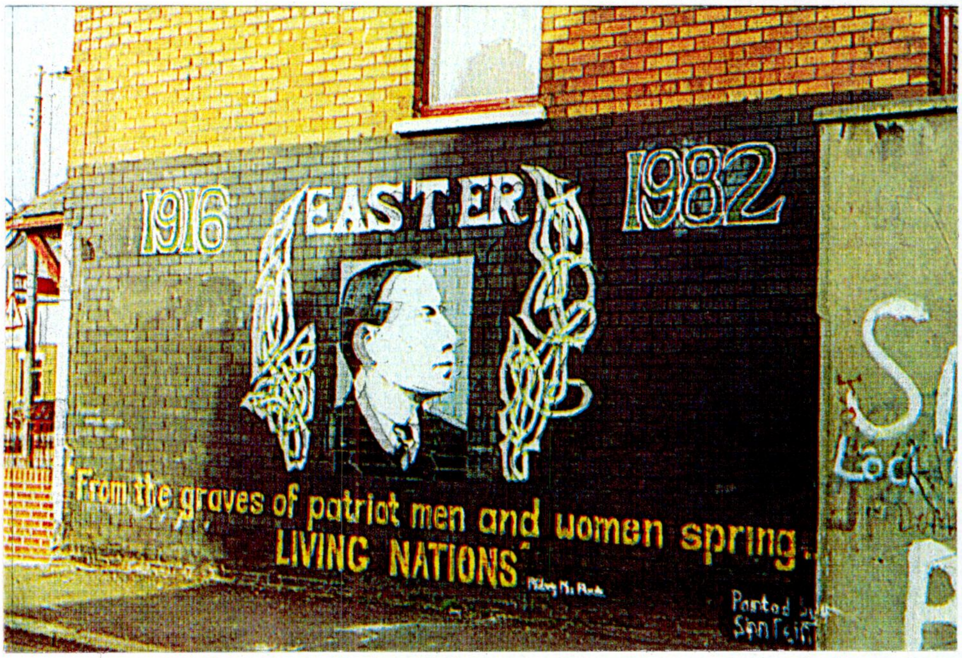
30 - Beechmount Parade, 'Ireland Unfree Shall Never Be At Peace', November 1994


ROCKVILLE ST
manship.
Think before you drink before you drive.

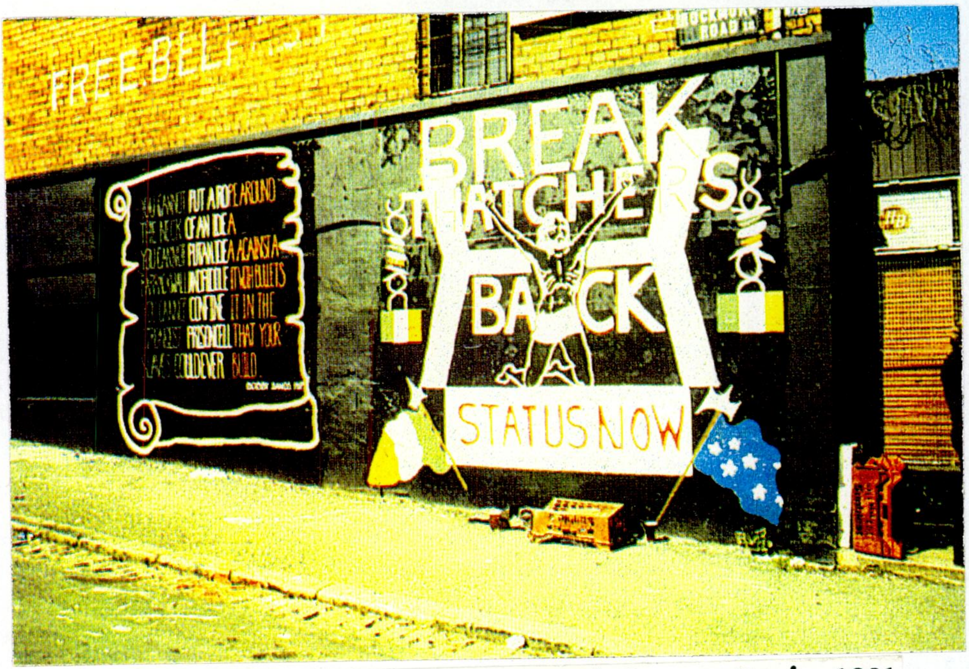
31 - Rockville Street, active service unit of the IRA at Narrow Water, Co. Down, 1981


BEECHMOUNT AVENUE
THE GREAT ONLY APPEAR GREAT BECAUSE WE ARE ON OUR KNEES
LET US RISE
SPONSORED BY TRADE UNION GROUP

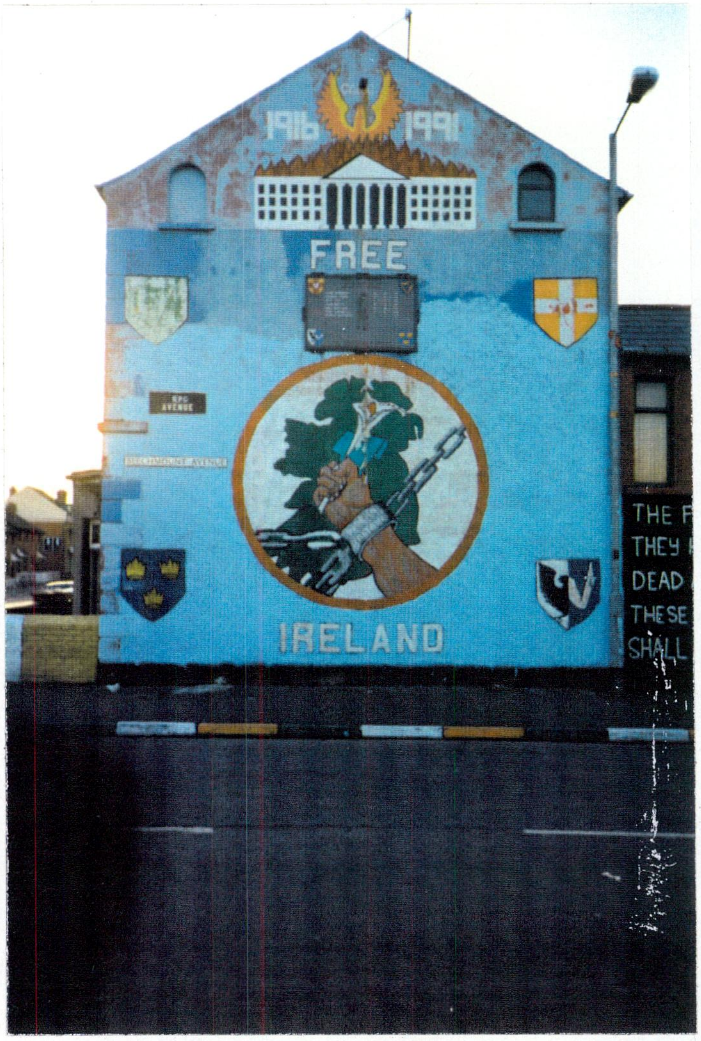
32 - Beechmount Avenue, memorial to James Connolly, 1982


1916
EASTER
1982
"From the graves of patriot men and women spring LIVING NATIONS"

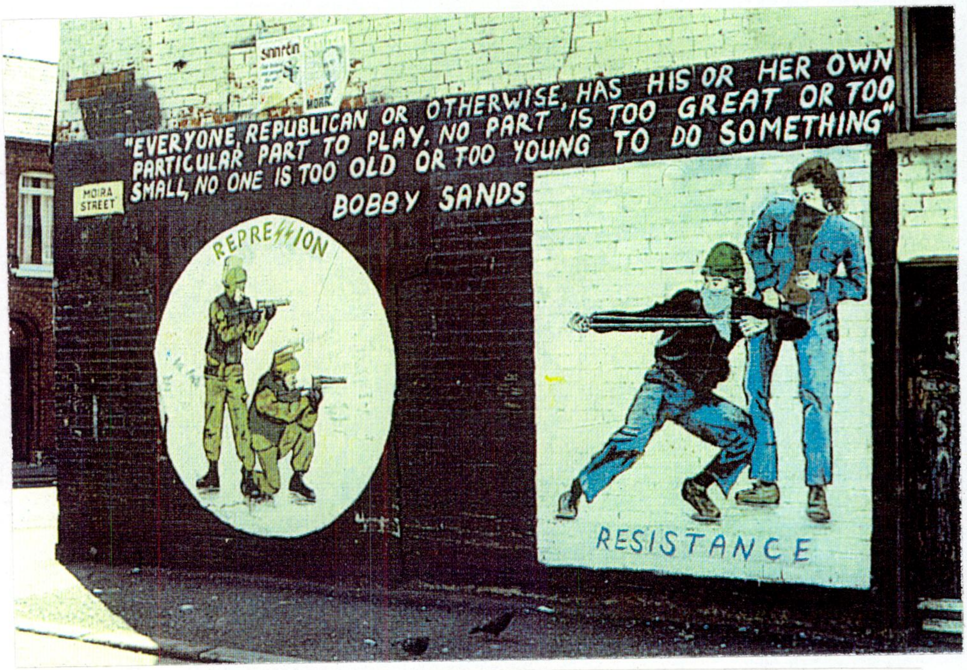
33 - Iveagh Drive, memorial to Patrick Pearse, 1982


FREE BELF
YOU CANNOT PUT A ROPE AROUND
THE NECK OF AN IDEA
YOU CANNOT PUT AN IDEA AGAINST A
FIRING WALL AND RIDDLE IT WITH BULLETS
YOU CANNOT CONFINE IT IN THE
STRONGEST PRISON CELL THAT YOUR
SLAVES COULD EVER BUILD
BREAK
THATCHERS
BACK
STATUS NOW

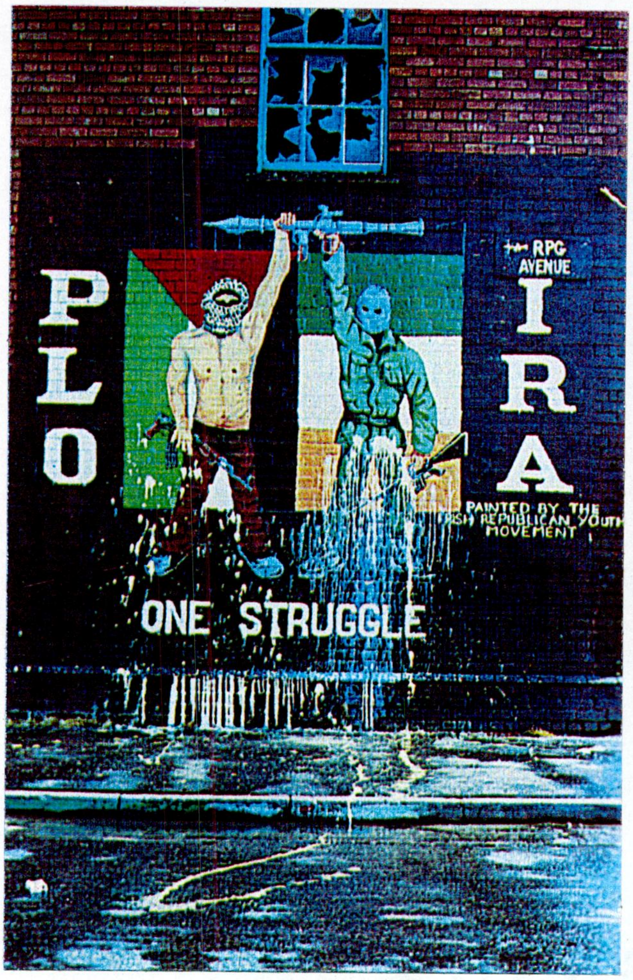
34 - Rockmore Road, '[political] Status Now', 1981


1916
1991
FREE
IRELAND
BEECHMOUNT AVENUE
THE
THEY
DEAD
THESE
SHALL

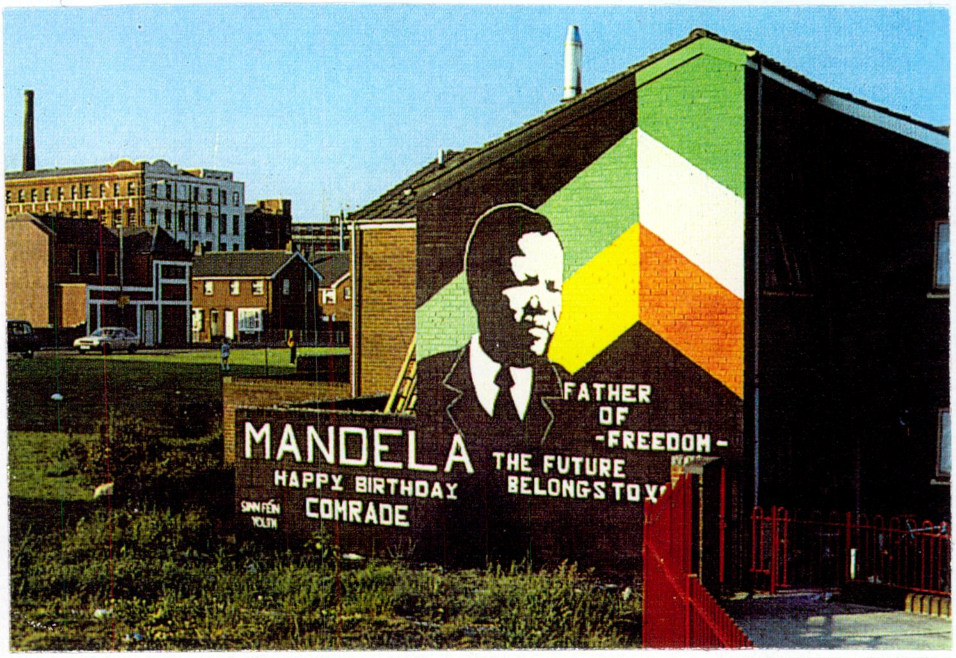
35 - Beechmount Avenue, 'Free Ireland', November 1994


"EVERYONE, REPUBLICAN OR OTHERWISE, HAS HIS OR HER OWN PARTICULAR PART TO PLAY. NO PART IS TOO GREAT OR TOO SMALL, NO ONE IS TOO OLD OR TOO YOUNG TO DO SOMETHING"
BOBBY SANDS
MOIRA STREET
REPRESSION
RESISTANCE

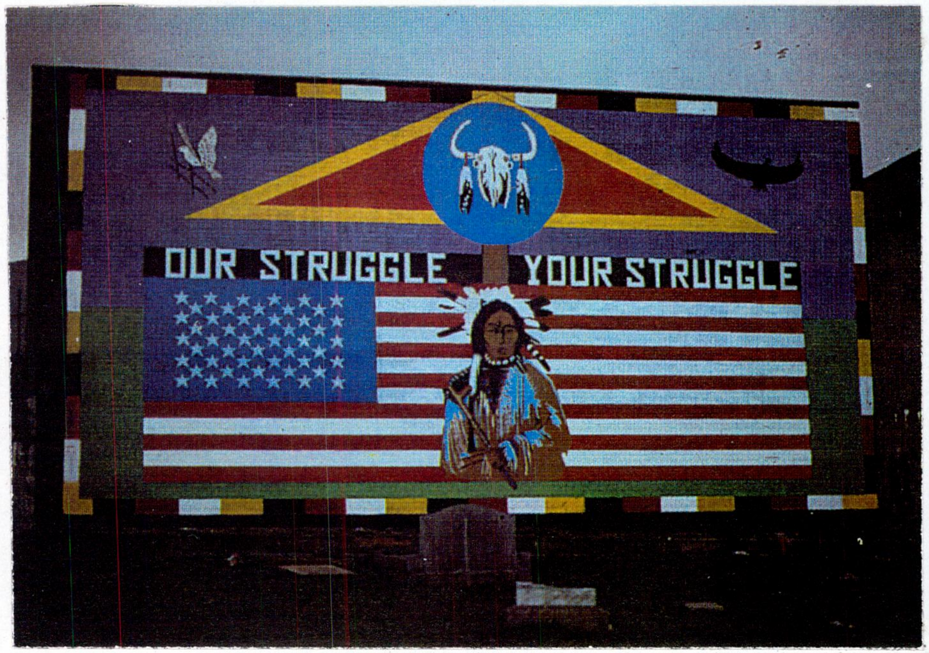
36 - Moira Street, repression and resistance, 1984


RPG AVENUE
PLO
IRA
PAINTED BY THE IRISH REPUBLICAN YOUTH MOVEMENT
ONE STRUGGLE

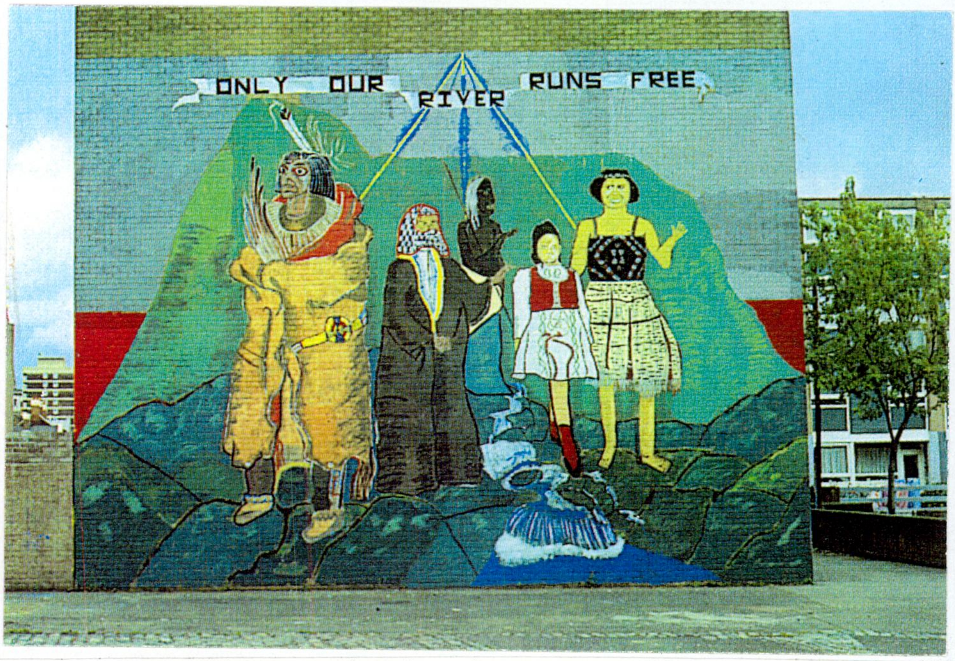
37 - Beechmount Avenue, PLO/IRA 'One Struggle', 1982


FATHER
OF
-FREEDOM-
MANDELA
THE FUTURE
BELONGS TO Y
HAPPY BIRTHDAY
COMRADE
SINN FÉIN
YOUTH

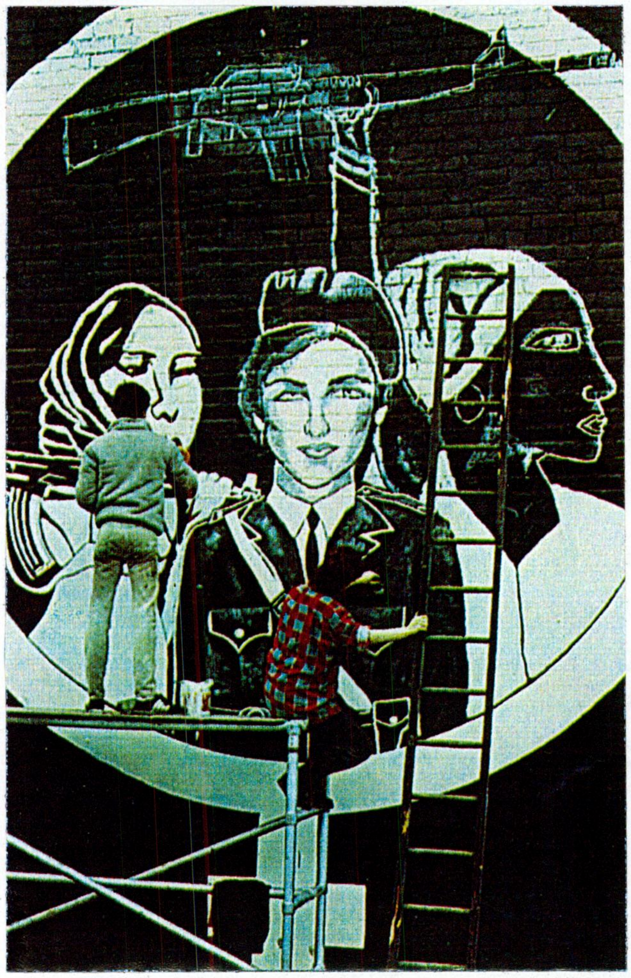
Falls Road, Nelson Mandela's birthday commemoration, 1988


OUR STRUGGLE
YOUR STRUGGLE

39 - Whiterock Road, 'Our Struggle, Your Struggle', 1990


ONLY OUR RIVER RUNS FREE

40 - Unity Flats, Irish dancer with women of various nationalities, 1989



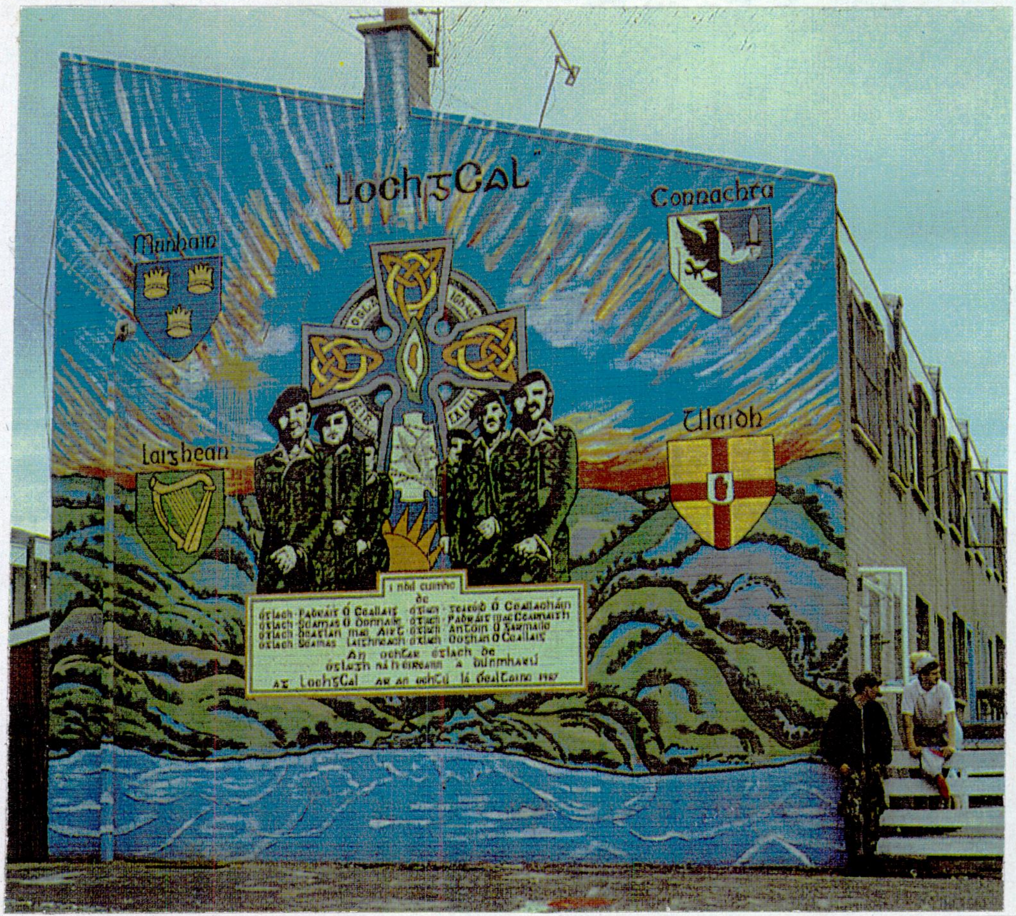
41 - Falls Road, 'Solidarity between women in armed struggle', 1983

Republican murals therefore tend to deal with a wide range of issues, drawing on many sources for the imagery employed. They are, as Bill Rolston notes, "much less tied to one historico-mythical event than loyalist murals. They are less ritualised" and "can be painted at any time" (Rolston, 1992, p.v). Belinda Loftus describes some of the early hunger strike murals as being "modelled variously on a Jeff Parks poster produced by the Greater London Council, a Socialist Workers' Party pamphlet cover, and a pro-H blocks poster produced in Teheran" (Loftus, 1990, p. 78). Rolston records that "Commercial film posters, anti-fascist graphics from the 1930s, socialist newspaper cartoons, murals and posters from other anti-imperialist struggles" have all influenced republican muralists (Rolston, 1992, p.v).

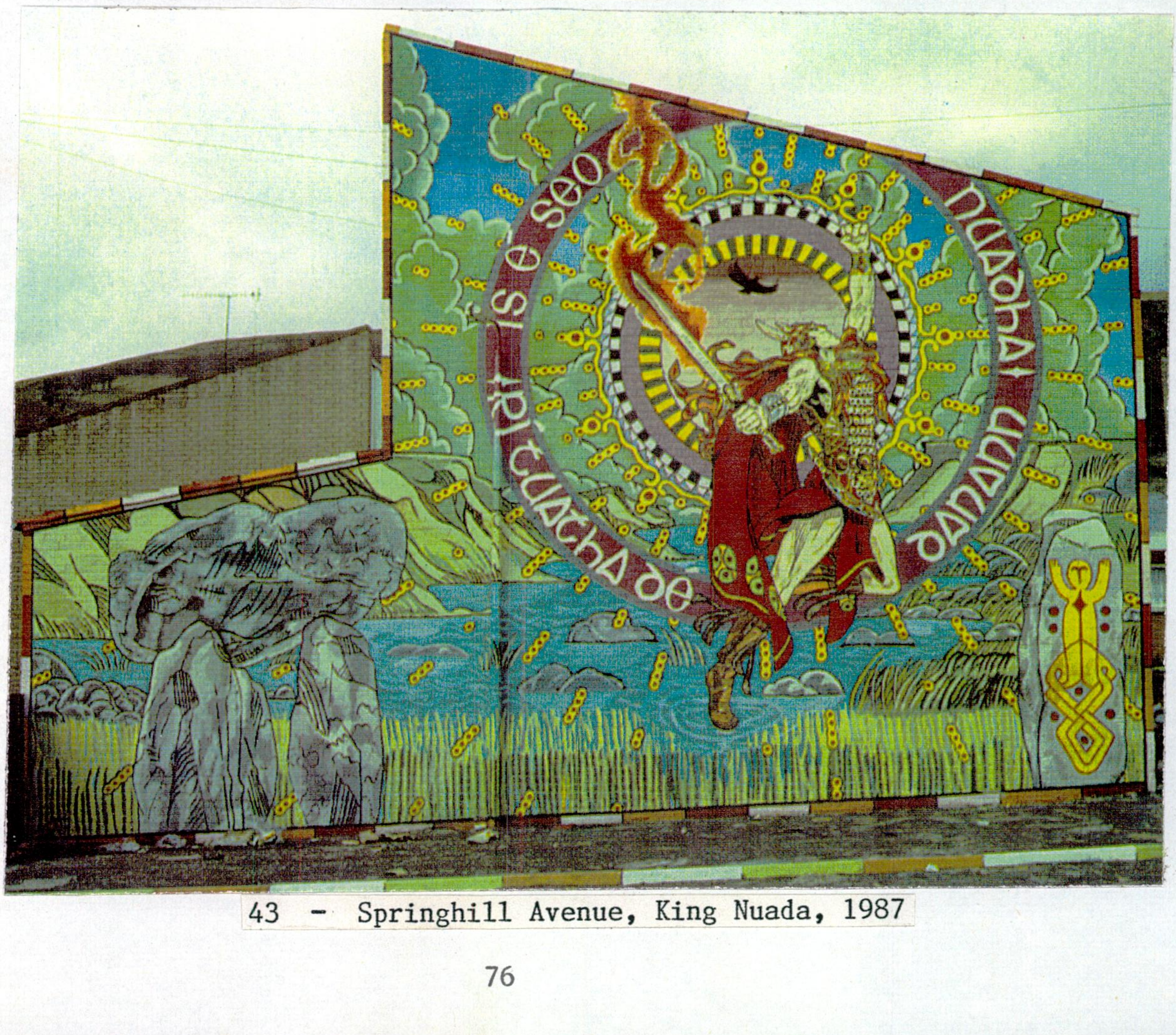
However, many of the murals also incorporate imagery and styles which are recognisable to everyone within republican and Catholic communities; most republican murals are designed using a striking visual syntax as distinct as that of the loyalist works. Malcolm Miles writes that

> even from some distance, the content is communicated before the text is noticed. Often the words are in Irish. It does not matter if local people speak it, the visual language tells them the content, and they know the stories as well as the songs" (Miles, 1989, p.64).

The use of religious themes, for example, provides imagery which is instantly understood by local people. The figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary are often employed, for example, because republican muralists are aware of their part in a "living, popular, visual tradition" (Miles, 1989, p.65). Celtic imagery, coupled with scenes and characters from Irish mythology, also forms an important part of this distinctive visual language.


Loch gCal
Mumhain
Connachta
Laighean
Ulaidh

42 - Springhill Avenue, memorial to IRA members killed at Loughgall, 1987


IS É SEO NUADHA RÍ TUATHA DE DANANN

43 - Springhill Avenue, King Nuada, 1987

Two of Belfast's most striking murals are based on scenes from ancient myths and Celtic ornamentation, as shown in figures 42 and 43. And while the representation of female figures is generally restricted to images of the Virgin Mary or Mother Ireland, usually as a figure of suffering and mourning, most critics tend to view the overall visual language of the republican works as being imbued with "a sense of the feminine" (Miles, 1989, p.64). The expressive use of colour and curving forms, Malcolm Miles proposes, ascribes to the "general characteristic ... a sense of matriarchal context" (Miles, 1989, p.64).

## Direct comparisons

It is this view of republican works as being designed around a syntax of "feminine, poetical shape-shifting" (Loftus, 1990, p.80) which form part of the main comparison made between republican and loyalist murals. The carefully-drafted, symmetrical, emblematic works of loyalism, with their limited colour range and rigid heraldry are cited as the 'masculine'. Malcolm Miles writes that

> What emerges from even a brief study is the degree to which each has its own language: the Loyalist being masculine, with the phallic Billy, his horse, his aggressive stance and the record of his conquests: the Nationalist being feminine, with the enveloping and curving figure of the Mother gathering up her persecuted and bleeding sons, the lark, the green" (Miles, 1989, p.65).

These interpretations of the specific languages employed within each type of wall-painting do tend to lead into the realm of stereotype: that the Catholic, republican community is, reflected by the associations of the 'femininity' of its murals, surpressed, put-upon, engaged in an heroic and dignified struggle to attain 'parity of esteem'; that Protestants and loyalists, as portrayed in representations of a victorious 'King Billy' and in the unbending forms of the flags and emblems, are the aggressors, the suppressors, conducting a vicious, reactionary campaign against those who merely seek 'justice'. The comparison of colour and form leads to the conclusion that Northern Ireland's Catholics are expressive and creative, while Protestants are rigid in their views, unflinching and introspective.

However, a more relevant comparison, which also accounts in part for these differences in visual syntax, would again seem to come from an examination of the political context in which these works have been produced.

As stated earlier in Chapter Five, the rigidity and coldness of the later loyalist murals developed from several factors. The elaborate scenes of Protestant celebration created by muralists during the early years of Northern Ireland's existence reflect an assurance of position, a security of identity, in an assertion of the strength of the Union. However, by the time of the production of the first of the new, heraldic murals, during the 1970s, loyalists found themselves confronted by a situation to which they did not know how to react; the muralists were left with a rather limited range of options. They could not depict the scenes of mythology, or religious references, which make many of today's republican works so striking, due to their strong republican connotations. Celtic imagery, which by this time was also strongly associated with Irish republicanism, was excluded for the same reasons. The representation of people, other than William III and anonymous figures, could not be undertaken either since the diverse nature of Unionism, with its consequent lack of one or two clear leaders, as well as the Orange Order's prohibition on the portrayal of living persons, made this virtually impossible. The clearest, simplest method by which to convey both support for the continuation of the Union and the threat to those who sought to dismantle it, was, therefore, to employ flags, emblems and symbols.

Rather than being purely the product of inherent 'Protestant' characteristics, it seems that such murals were also created because there was little alternative. The function of these works is the conveying of propaganda, primarily within loyalist communities themselves, in order to consolidate support. The use of these instantly-recognisable symbols provided an effective and unambiguous means by which to do this.

Republican muralists, however, did not have to contend with such restrictions on the imagery available to them. Being a much more cohesive movement than Unionism, and not having to concentrate entirely on the localised propagandist work which loyalist mural-painters had to undertake, republicanism was able to convey its messages to an audience abroad. The religious themes and Celtic decoration of many of the early republican works were not only easily recognised and understood by local people; these bold, often colourful, designs would catch the attention of the world as the international media traced the hunger strike campaigns, and would provide strong symbols of identity outside Northern Ireland for the republican movement. I feel that the masculine and feminine interpretations of the murals do not adequately account for the imagery employed within them, and that an examination of the political circumstances in which such imagery evolved provides a much more relevant evaluation. However, in the case of republican works there is no doubt that the deliberate use of female imagery strengthened the notions of persecution and suffering which these murals conveyed to the rest of the world. Images of the murals did rally support abroad, leading to visits by foreign sympathisers.

Brian McAvera, in the course of discussing the work of artist Dermot Seymour, also adds an important contribution to the debate. He writes that with reference to

> theories derived from... murals (protestants are graphic, tight and emblematic; catholics are sweeping and gestural), he [Seymour] points out that while it was true that loyalist murals were emblematic and republican murals were full of suffering, gestural figures, **once the protestants went on hunger-strike thus reversing the roles** their murals took on the suffering imagery " (McAvera, 1989, p.102).

Although visual evidence of the Protestant works discussed here has so far eluded me, it does appear that the reliance of comparisons between loyalist and republican works on the colours, shapes and themes painted on walls across Belfast provides us with only half the story. To go some way towards completing the other half, it is therefore necessary to examine the political context of the works, since the murals fulfil a political function and are shaped by political events.

The imagery employed by both loyalist and republican muralists is inextricably linked to political developments, and to the changes in identity, position and security which inevitably follow. While the early Protestant works were complex celebratory depictions of identity, the loyalist works which have superseded them now tend to act as a form of 'bulletin board', employing slogans, flags and emblems to provide instant comments on contemporary issues, often viewed as nothing more than graffiti. Republican works, which grew out of graffiti, initially dealt with "knee-jerk reflexes" (McAvera, 1989, p.36) to one contemporary issue;

many of the newer works, however, have been more painterly 'epics', such as figure 43, based around more general themes of identity and heritage. As Unionists have seen their position in Northern Ireland becoming increasingly insecure and have had to contend with altering perceptions of identity and an ever more ambiguous relationship with Britain, so the change in the style of Unionist murals has occurred.

The republican movement's transformation from a protest movement to a flourishing political grouping can also be traced in the rapid change from graffiti to bold, assured murals. The murals of both traditions appear to have changed places completely, in terms of their style and hence the underlying messages they convey, with each at the present time approaching the stylistic starting-point of the other. This, it seems, is wholly reflective of changing political fortunes within Northern Ireland.

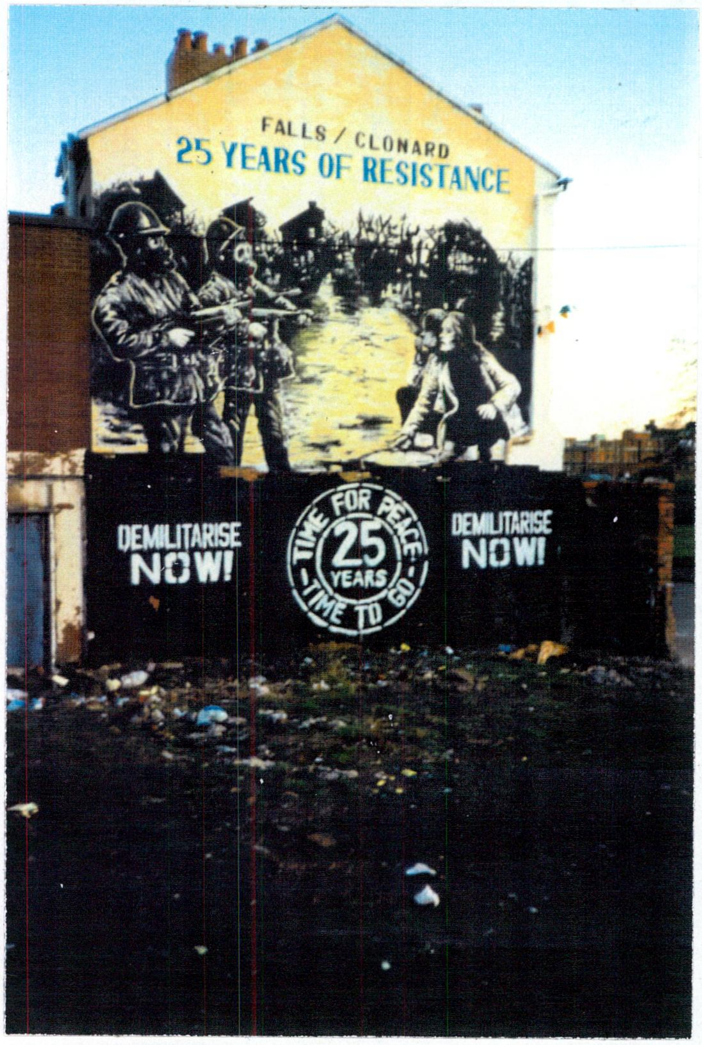
1994 provided some of the most dramatic political events of the present 'Troubles', culminating in the cease-fires from both republicans and loyalists. And this new chapter in Northern Irish politics is, of course, reflected in an array of new murals.

## Chapter Six: What Now?

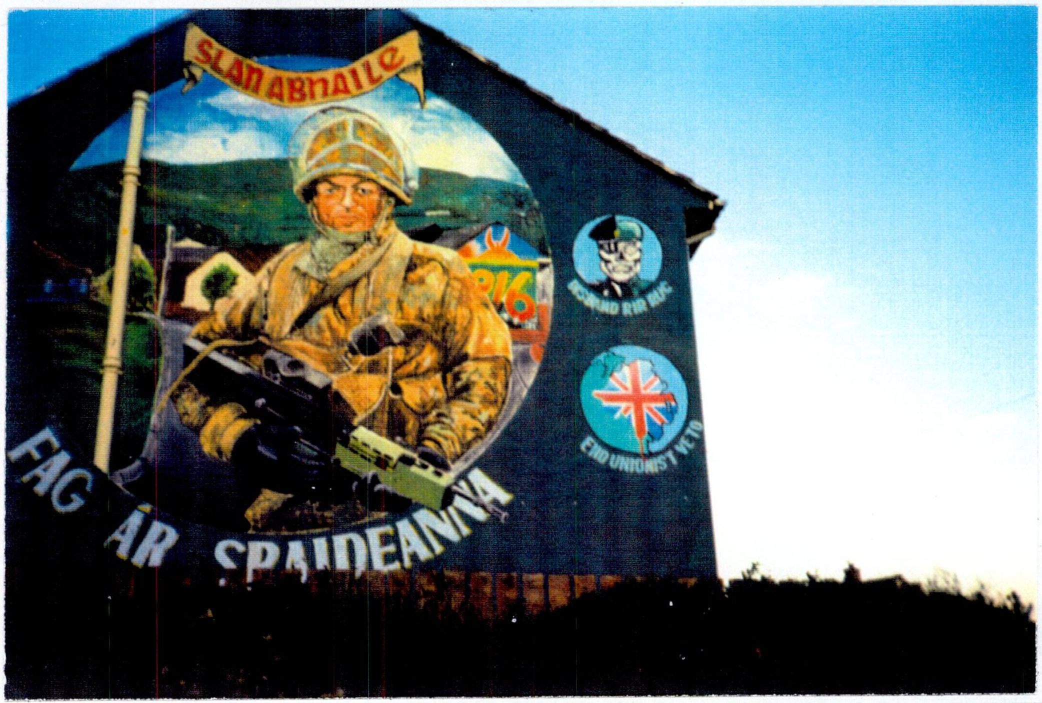
**Recent murals, in particular those created since the respective republican and loyalist cease-fires; the expectations and aspirations they reflect, and the glimpses of the future they provide.**

So strong are the associations of Belfast's political murals with the 'Troubles', with violence, that many people suggested I should visit Belfast sooner rather than later to collect photographs for fear that after the cease-fires the murals would be painted out. Certainly in the intervening period there has been much activity around the city's gable walls. However, as walks through two specific areas, Falls and Sandy Row, revealed, this has not been to erase murals. Rather, it has been to produce new ones.

As soon as it became clear that the IRA was going to call a halt to its 'military operations', republican muralists set to work on a new theme. As figure 44 shows, the central issue became the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland, reflecting the belief of republicans that it was their presence which made peace impossible. On the morning of August 31st, the day on which the IRA cease-fire was announced, this mural appeared on the front page of The Times, for example, with a caption indicating that it adorned the Sinn Fein headquarters (Times, 1994, p.1). This, however, is not the case, but provides a potent illustration of the propagandist power which these murals possess. The Sinn Fein offices are, in fact, situated across the road from this mural, but are decorated with a portrait of Bobby Sands, the first of the 1981 hunger-strikers to die, painted by Gerard Kelly in 1990 (Rolston, 1992, p.55).


FALLS / CLONARD
25 YEARS OF RESISTANCE
DEMILITARISE NOW!
TIME FOR PEACE
25 YEARS
TIME TO GO
DEMILITARISE NOW!

44 - Falls Road, '25 Years of Resistance', November 1994


SLAN ABHAILE
1916
DISBAND RIR RUC
END UNIONIST VETO
FAG ÁR SRAIDEANNA

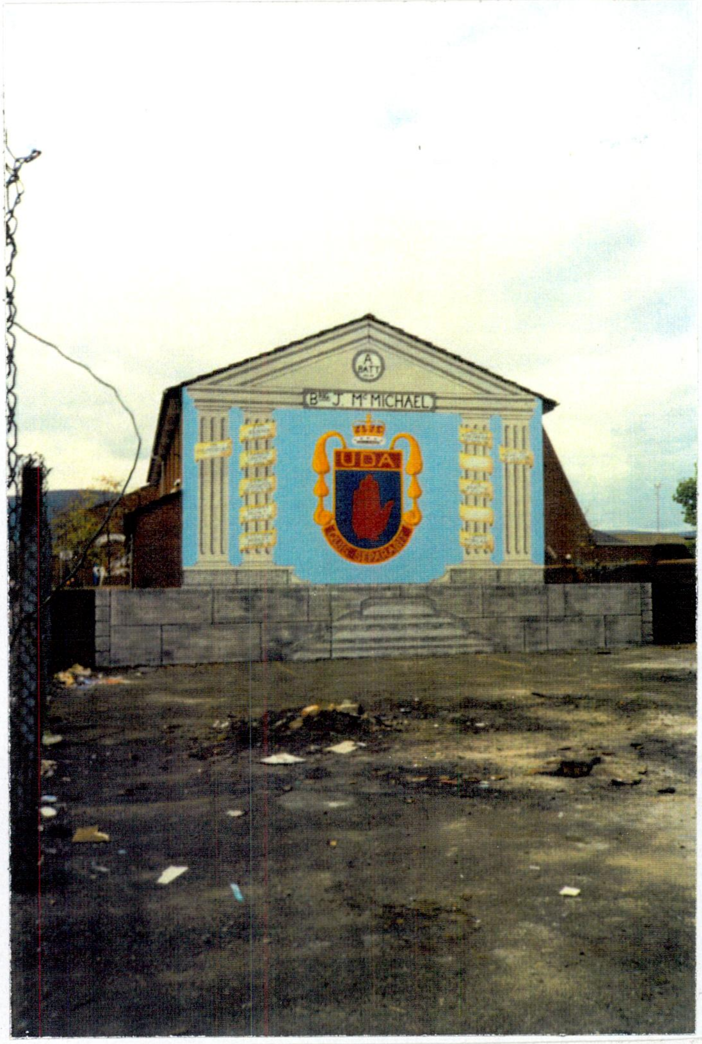
45 - Whiterock Road, depiction of British soldier with various republican demands, November 1994

Beside the portrait are the words "Everyone republican or otherwise has his/her own part to play", taken from Sands' prison writings, which would have seemed wholly inappropriate as an image to convey the new sentiments which were apparently sweeping republican Belfast. To associate the name of Sinn Fein directly with this new mural helps portray the role the party played in securing the cease-fire. For an organisation which has been viewed, particularly in the minds of the largely British readership of The Times, as an integral part of violence and terrorism, the impression that this and other similar murals create can only have been beneficial.

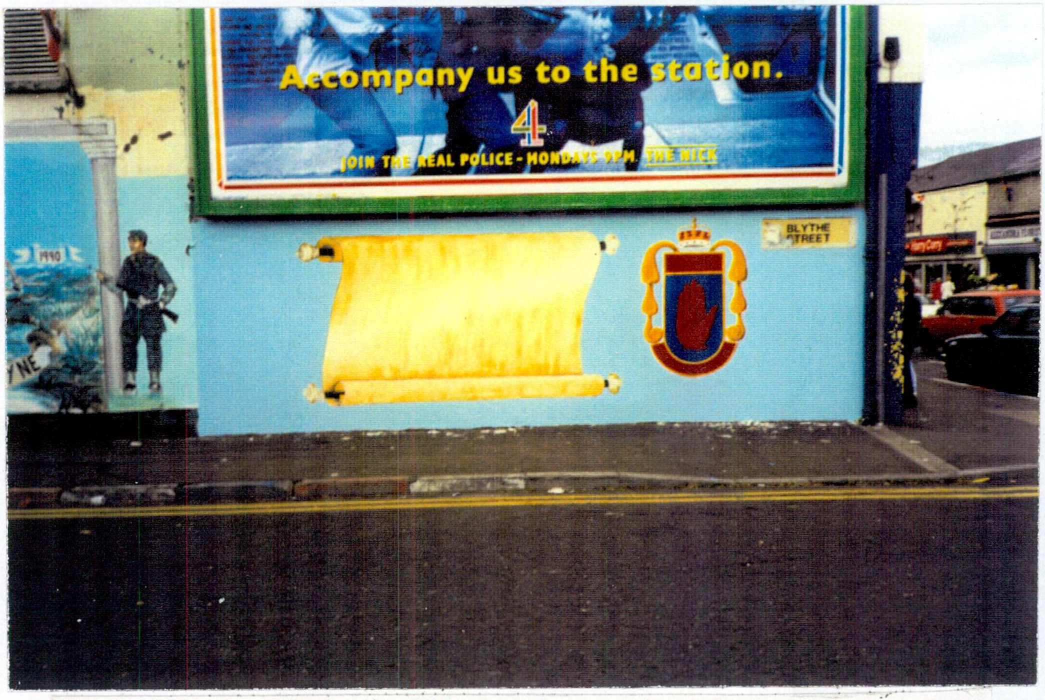
The assurance and confidence with which many of these new works have been created (figure 44, for example, demonstrates technical ability, as does figure 45, evidence perhaps of the involvement of people with artistic training), appear to reflect a new and powerful optimism in republican and Catholic communities. But in conjunction with these more painterly works, which seem to have moved away from the themes of religion, mythology and Celtic ornamentation of earlier works, the use of simple, quickly-applied symbols has also been employed. The "Demilitarise Now!" and "25 years - time for peace, time to go" slogans, as shown in figure 44, have been painted onto many walls in republican areas, sometimes alongside murals, but often on their own with no imagery. These have become a form of 'logotype', instantly recognisable to both locals and those outside these communities. Their development and use further highlight the importance of wall-painting to republican campaigning, with the appearance of these 'instant' symbols on walls across Belfast.

They are reflective too of the fact that republican murals have tended to be used for more wide-reaching propagandist purposes than their loyalist counterparts. The use of these simple logotypes and slogans ensures that even on an international level, the message will be understood, where the historical, religious or mythological references of early works, or even the images of recent murals, might not be instantly recognised by those outside the situation. It is obviously anticipated that many of these murals will be shown in newspapers and television broadcasts across the world; the employment of these symbols serves to reinforce the republican message that the time for violence has passed, but that the presence of British troops poses a threat to the whole peace process.

However, two visits to Sandy Row clearly showed that the reaction of loyalists to the promise of 'peace' was entirely different. During the first visit, in October, it became clear that most of the murals were new, or recently repainted. The striking memorial (figure 46) on the far side of a derelict site was obviously a new work, since the last date featured on it is from the beginning of September 1994. However, it contains no sign of a new, more conciliatory attitude, its most dominant feature being the emblem of the Ulster Defence Association with the organisation's motto 'Quis Seperabit' ('who will separate'). Another new mural which was in the process of being worked up was the example from Blythe Street (figure 47). While there was no clue as to the specific content, the inclusion of the UDA's emblem in such a prominent position appeared to suggest that this was not to be a mural dealing directly with the unfolding peace process.


A BATT
BDE J. McMICHAEL
UDA

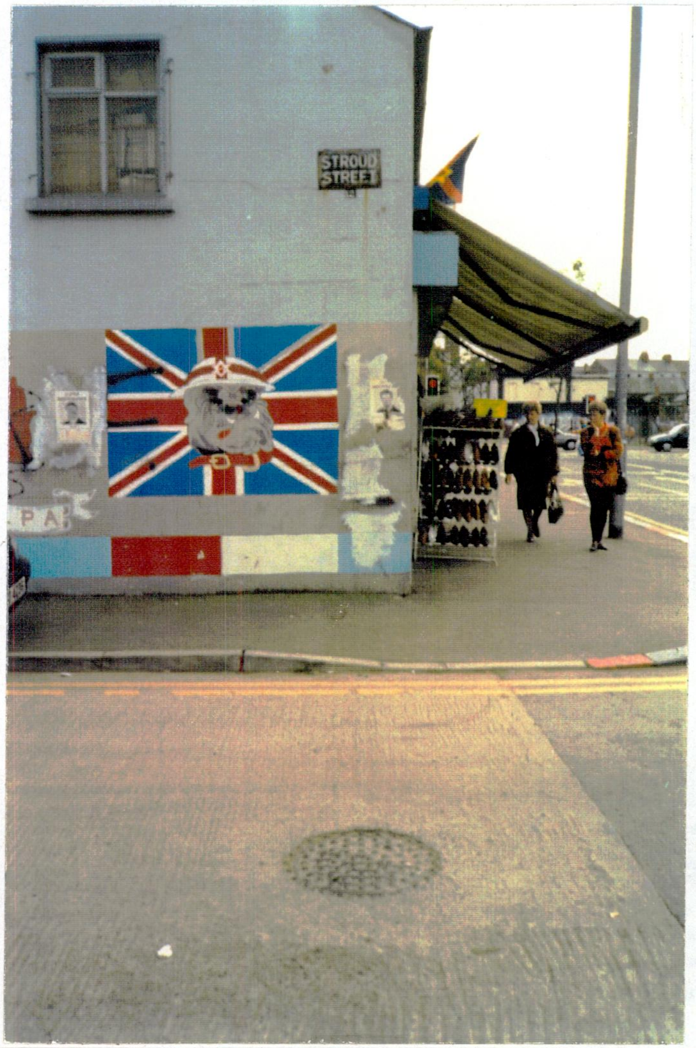
46 - Rowland Way, UDA memorial, October 1994


Accompany us to the station.
4
JOIN THE REAL POLICE - MONDAYS 9PM THE NICK
BLYTHE STREET
1990

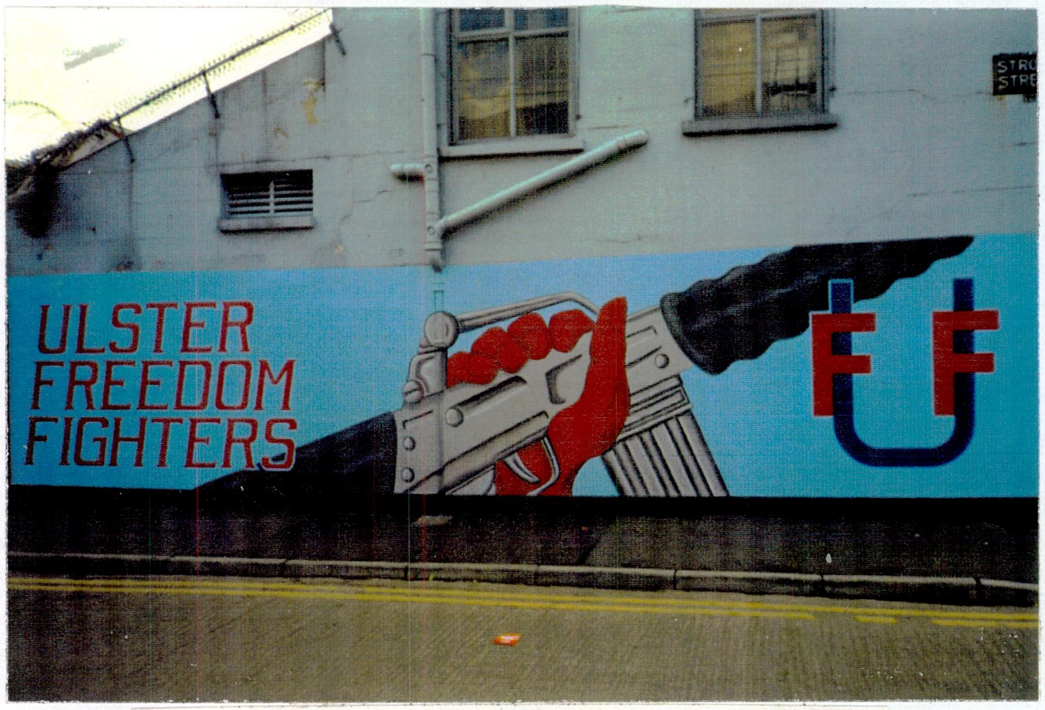
47 - Blythe Street, UDA mural - unfinished, October 1994

The second visit, four weeks later, took place after the cease-fire announced by loyalists. It was clear that, as in republican areas after the IRA cease-fire, loyalist mural-painters were producing new works too. However, the message these new murals conveyed was entirely different to that being broadcast from republican communities. Having seen some of the previous murals in Sandy Row, I was surprised by the changes which had occurred. In October, for example, the corner of Stroud Street featured a rather cross-looking British Bulldog, wearing an 'Ulster' hat, alongside the emblem of the Loyalist Prisoners' Association (figure 48). By November, and **after** the announcement of the loyalist cease-fire, this entire stretch of wall had been repainted, and was now emblazoned with a work conveying an extremely threatening message on behalf of the Ulster Freedom Fighters - a red hand, long associated with loyalism, brandishing a gun (figure 49). While the anonymous and sinister red fingers are not actually about to pull the trigger, the message is clear - that, cease-fire or not, if violence is what it takes to preserve the status quo, now seen by loyalists as being under considerable threat ~~by~~, then violence will be used. The mural in Blythe Street, too, had been completed by the time of this second visit; the newly-added text now carries a pledge from the UDA and UFF that they will "never, never (in any way) consent to the rule of the Irish" (figure 50).

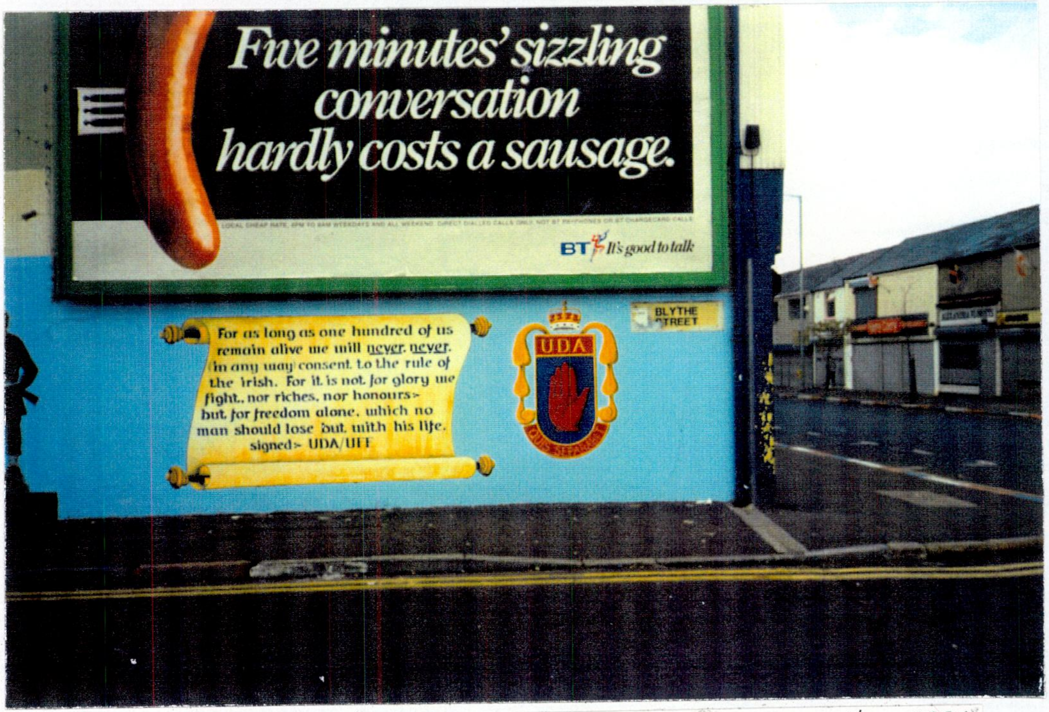
Aside from the signals they send out, these murals do display a technical assurance which is lacking in many previous works.


STROUD
STREET
PA

48 - Stroud Street, British Bulldog, October 1994


ULSTER
FREEDOM
FIGHTERS
UFF
STRO
STRE

49 - Stroud Street, UFF mural, November 1994


Five minutes' sizzling conversation hardly costs a sausage.
BT It's good to talk
For as long as one hundred of us remain alive we will never, never, (in any way) consent to the rule of the Irish. For it is not for glory we fight, nor riches, nor honours:- but for freedom alone, which no man should lose but with his life.
signed:- UDA/UFF
UDA
BLYTHE STREET

50 - Blythe Street, completed UDA mural, November 1994

The large memorial (figure 46) and the new Stroud Street work (figure 49) in particular show an new capability and confidence. In figure 49, for example, the image of the hand and weapon is proficiently dealt with, especially considering its large scale, while the precise spacing and regularity of the lettering suggests the involvement of someone who has a knowledge of, and training in, artistic and design skills.

However, although the message of these new murals, through the imagery and new sense of assurance, is apparently one of defiance, their overall sentiment in the context of the political events which prompted them provides a very marked contrast to the optimism and self-confidence which the recent republican murals convey about republican communities. Like the new republican works, figure 49 makes no use of the imagery traditionally employed; it contains no flags and heraldic devices, makes no references to 'King Billy' or 1690. But while the move from traditional imagery in the republican murals seems suggestive of a move away from the grievances of history and the symbolism of historical references into a contemporary, forward-looking frame of mind, the new loyalist works suggest an abandonment of historicism in favour of a new round of the struggle to maintain not only the political status quo, but also the standing of such groups as the UFF within loyalist communities and Northern Ireland as a whole. The apparent defiance of these murals veils thinly an increasing suspicion that the continuation of the Union is anything but a certainty; the murals seem to suggest that if peace in Northern Ireland is not permanent, loyalists are prepared to restart violence having freed themselves from these historical identities, and to bring the ensuing conflict into a new stage.

These new works, in both communities, provide an insight into the hopes and fears of much of Northern Ireland, a hazy vision of an uncertain future. For the first time, the muralists on both sides have produced work which comments on the same single issue, each with a strong, clear voice. However, the way in which each has done so illustrates more potently than ever the huge divisions which exist in Belfast and across Northern Ireland. It also demonstrates the discrepancies in the vision of the future which each community holds. The murals seem reflective of the view that, as the peace process unfolds, republicans have everything to gain, and loyalists everything to lose.

## Conclusion

Thus it seems that Belfast's murals have become known across the world, instantly recognisable as symbols of conflict. They are regularly seen as backdrops to news stories, on television and in the press and, therefore, play an important propagandist role in the dissemination of the hopes and fears of both sides of Belfast's sectarian divide. The city's century-long tradition of wall-painting has been inextricably bound up with the turbulent politics of Northern Ireland, being produced initially while the Irish Home Rule Bill was still being debated. This association with not only politics but the violence which has become the hall-mark of Northern Irish society appears to be an important factor behind the lack of written material on the murals.

There has been considerable research undertaken into other mural movements, from the 'fine art' of the Mexican Muralists to the spontaneous 'graffiti' on the Berlin Wall. Belfast's murals are absolutely unique, and yet there is great reluctance to discuss them; the implication seems to be that because they are such an integral part of the 'Troubles', to discuss them in an academic manner would not simply ascribe some legitimacy to their existence but would actually give credence to the sectarian messages they often convey. Rather than being simply ignored, Belfast's murals tend to be dismissed from discussion, are intentionally not included. This has seemed the case particularly in writings on Irish art, even Irish 'activist' art.

However, as Bill Rolston noted, a valid reason for examining the murals is simply "that they exist" (Rolston, 1992, p.i). This existence is wholly bound up with the 'Troubles', and the development of the murals and the imagery employed within them is reflective of the varying fortunes of both republicans and loyalists throughout Northern Ireland's history. An important aspect of research into the murals is an examination of their political context, since this tends to explain both the styles and the imagery employed by the muralists of each community, and also the differences between them.

Belfast does have a large number of non-political murals in common with many other cities world-wide, their function being to inject some colour and a sense of pride into bleak urban landscapes. In Belfast, they do also provide a welcome relief from the bitter sectarianism of many of the city's murals. They are, however, generally viewed as being unsuccessful, the imagery employed seeming inappropriate, insensitive, patronising and irrelevant. It seems to be accepted that the political murals are, for both communities,

> a force for social cohesion, a reminder of long-standing cultural identities. Despite the sectarian implications, they are probably more successful in their own terms than cosmetic attempts to 'brighten up' the areas (Miles, 1989, p.64).

Periods of resurgence in mural-painting across Belfast have tended to occur during times of political change in Northern Ireland, since it is during these periods that identities and heritage have to be reiterated and enforced, both to encourage a consolidation of local support and to convey fundamental messages to the outside world.

In 1994, some of the most dramatic changes of the present 'Troubles' occurred, particularly in latter months with both the loyalist and republican cease-fires, and the ensuing political debate. These new initiatives have been met by a combination of optimism and suspicion. The sentiments of both republican and loyalist communities are clearly reflected in the new murals which have marked a new chapter in Northern Ireland's history. The overtly political, religious and sectarian sentiments which the murals often contain provide an unambiguous description of the feelings of many within both communities; the history of the murals reflects the history of Northern Ireland. And this being the case, it seems foolhardy **not** to examine them, since they may equally well help to provide a glimpse of the future.

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