



## **Institutional Responses**

*A Troubles Archive Essay*

John Gray



*Cover Image: John Kindness - Romulous and Seamus*

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

# About the Author

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He has written and broadcast extensively on the social and cultural life of Ulster. He edited the *Linen Hall Review*, and his essay, 'Culture is for Change', appeared in *Re-imagining Belfast – A Manifesto for the Arts* (Belfast, 2003). He is the author of two children's books and his *City in Revolt – James Larkin and the Belfast Dock Strike* (Belfast, 1984; Dublin, 2007) has been widely acclaimed as a pioneering study of the labour movement and working class life in Edwardian Belfast.

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## Institutional responses

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" – Antonio Gramsci<sup>1</sup>

### Prologue

It was 1968. James Simmons, editor of the new poetry magazine, *The Honest Ulsterman*, announced "First steps in revolution," enlisting D.H. Lawrence's "Courage" – "What makes people unsatisfied is that they accept lies." He worried about the title of the magazine, asking, "Does that show how sick we are?"<sup>2</sup>

This was no Civil Rights Association manifesto, let alone a clairvoyant call to smash the Northern Ireland state. It was rather a cry for the breaking of taboos in a deeply conservative society. Though Simmons missed the portents of the coming major conflict, his libertarian agenda was to remain a contested zone. It did not embrace women: for Simmons, "literature starts and finishes with men talking to men".

As the Unionist government sought to fend off Civil Rights demands with limited and grudging reforms, it remained business as usual for the arts. It was the misfortune of the Lyric Theatre, a truly inspired voluntary endeavour, that in 1968 it moved from the drawing room of the O'Malley's into its purpose built new building as Northern Ireland's *de facto* premier theatre, a transition from private endeavour to public body. With the O'Malley vision of a "poetic theatre" indebted to the legacy of Yeats, and one with a "national" outlook this was a venture facing new difficulties. Its achievements could not be ignored by the state, but its disregard for the state was an immediate issue.

Pressure arose to play the National Anthem after performances. Frank Benner, a businessman, member of the Arts Council and Lyric Trustee, had enlisted a shadowy group of potential sponsors for whom the Lyric was "still politically suspect" hence "its attitude to the Constitution etc., must be clarified if the goodwill of the business world is to be won." The *Belfast Telegraph* agreed. The O'Malley's resisted: for them "monetary freedom could not be bought at the expense of artistic freedom". The other trustees resigned, and it was only with great difficulty that the Board was reconstituted. The Arts Council had not directly intervened, but the "Anthem" dispute threatened viability and justified funding delays.<sup>3</sup> Thus, even before the onset of the Troubles proper, political narrowness severely damaged the major new arts venture of the moment.

When in summer 1971 a space age "Arts Dome" rose in the Botanic Gardens, it did not even reflect James Simmons's cultural restlessness. Rather the Ulster '71 Festival marked the golden jubilee of the Northern Ireland state. For the organizers, "above all, the whole concept is a demonstration of faith in the ability of the Province to rise above recent troubles". Theatre was represented, without any sense of irony, by *Oh What a Lovely War*.<sup>4</sup>

Ulster '71 naturally secured the support of Northern Ireland's cultural institutions. All could claim success with 700,000 visitors by the September closure. The programme, with red hand of Ulster logo, was subverted by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association with a swastika overprinted variant – for them the state's 50 year

record was nothing to celebrate.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile internment was introduced on 9th August leading to a dramatic ratcheting up of the Troubles. The vandals were at the gate!

Less than two years later, in March 1972, the Stormont Government was abolished. The “Ancien Regime” had fallen, but it was by no means clear what would follow in the midst of an unprecedented crisis alternatively defined as “war” or “terrorist campaign”, and embracing acute communal conflict.

How would the cultural institutions deal with devastatingly changed times? They were all offspring of the collapsed order and had learned the cautions necessary for survival under the Unionist government. Their leaderships were often marked by “the colonial provincialism which staffed many Ulster institutions of the era with imported, and often unsuitable English adventurers.”<sup>6</sup> Arts practitioners were more rebellious by nature and middle class professional staff were not wholly immune to the “wind of change”, but revolution within the institutions was never on the cards. What remained to be seen was could they change?

## In The Eye Of The Storm

‘Whatever you say say nothing’ –  
Seamus Heaney (1974)<sup>7</sup>

There was still *Room to Rhyme* in 1968 as Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley toured the province. For Heaney the venture suggested “the beginnings of pluralism rather than the same old primness”. ‘Requiem for a Croppy’ was his “transgression”. *The Planter and the Gael* tour in 1969/70 featuring John Hewitt and John Montague more consciously headlined an across the community divide theme to the subsequent disgust of another participant, David Hammond, who saw it as “some kind of crippled vision of what Ireland was ...”<sup>8</sup> By 1972 ‘Requiem for a Croppy’ was no longer part of Heaney’s repertoire, because it “would have been taken as overt support for the Provisional’s campaign. So that’s when I stopped.”<sup>9</sup>

Much else stopped besides. The Arts Council had retired to the splendour of Riddell Hall where “corridors echoed, tiled floors smelt of wax and an open fire blazed in its lofty common room”. Here “lunches were long, literary, and rarely on unlicensed premises [and] visitors spoke apocryphally of empty desks.” A policy of “steady as she goes”<sup>10</sup> seemed best when the outside world was reeling.

Theatres lost their audiences as towns closed down. The most bomb damaged venue was the Grand Opera House. Closed by 1972, it was rescued by the Arts Council in 1975. Even following massive renovation and re-opening in 1979, it was severely damaged by bombs in 1991 and 1993<sup>11</sup>. The 1976 bombing of Malone House destroyed much of the Ulster Museum’s costume collection<sup>12</sup> as lamented by Paul Muldoon in ‘Gathering Mushrooms’:

We might have been thinking of the fire-bomb  
That sent Malone House sky-high  
and its priceless collection of linen  
sky-high<sup>13</sup>

Elsewhere the Arts Council Gallery in Bedford Street was frequently severely damaged, the main library in Derry/Londonderry at Brooke Park was destroyed in 1973<sup>14</sup> and in 1993 the Linen Hall Library narrowly survived firebombing.<sup>15</sup>

In inner city branch libraries staff withdrew the registration cards of murdered members.<sup>16</sup> Falls Library was variously damaged by “explosives, petrol bombs, burning vehicles, stones, bricks and bottles”. It was on occasion occupied by protesting Republican women and a platoon of soldiers, and when a tricolour was placed on the roof Loyalists threatened to destroy the Library, while Republicans threatened it if the flag was taken down.<sup>17</sup>

At Belfast’s Central Library, the main regional reference resource, a rooftop army lookout post triggered threats in 1976 and key collections were moved to military custody at Aldergrove Airport until c.1978. Chief Librarian, Ivor Crawley, believed that “local history is just a part of world history and should be treated accordingly”<sup>18</sup> and “Business” and “Science” were prioritized as the local exploded all around. Belfast, Ulster and Irish Studies, uneasily named to cover all possible sensibilities, only secured a separate reading room in the 1990s.

The tide of barricade literature was collected instead by the independent Linen Hall Library. In 1971 the police threatened seizure of the collection, a challenge parried by Library connections with the Unionist government.<sup>19</sup>

At the Public Record Office police seized a Republican archive in 1978. The staff member responsible was rushed into exile at the British Library.<sup>20</sup>

In 1981, the public library services launched the Northern Ireland Local Studies List, ostensibly a “comprehensive” listing of local publications. The Linen Hall Library was excluded from participation undoubtedly because it would have listed much controversial material. Nonetheless the first issue of NILSL inadvertently included an entry for leading hunger striker Bobby Sands’ Prison Poems.<sup>21</sup> A Democratic Unionist Party outcry followed, and NILSL abandoned “comprehensive” pretensions.<sup>22</sup>

Censorship was to the fore too at the Ulster Museum when Art for Society arrived in 1978. Distinguished judges selected works from all over Britain but Museum attendants refused to hang some and the Trustees supported them. Conrad Atkinson’s depiction of the British Army and the IRA on Belfast streets was particularly objectionable. Half the exhibition found a more liberal home in the Arts Council Gallery.<sup>23</sup>

Richard Kirkland welcomed the Museum’s “pluralist historiography” in 1996 but looked for “some indication of post partition development.” Instead he was “led directly from 1920 to an exhibition of dinosaurs followed by the micro-colonial instant represented by the mummy of Takabuti.” Such a satiric gift arose where “an absence acknowledges unfinished business just as it bespeaks a form of timidity.”<sup>24</sup>

The Ulster Folk and Transport Museum owed much to the inclusive regional philosophy of George Thomson, and the idea that our rural built heritage was a shared one. John Hewitt, that other great regionalist, suggested:

What they need now, somewhere about here,  
Is a field for the faction fights<sup>25</sup>.

Later “settlement patterns” tell a story – a Catholic parochial hall, replete with gaelic revival motifs has now arrived main street.

The Ulster American Folk Park opened in 1976 providing a dramatic journey from an unkempt Ulster to an ordered American future. David Brett saw it as a “philosophical garden for a ‘Protestant’ tradition”. Origins in the restoration of Thomas Mellon’s homestead influenced the deeply Presbyterian trajectory, only tempered by the subsequent arrival of a future Catholic bishop’s cottage.<sup>26</sup>

It was not until 1992 that the Tower Museum in Derry became the first to mainstream the Troubles in its narrative display, earning a special commendation in the European Museum of the Year Award (1994) for its “great courage”. A real AK-47 on display was seized by the RUC in 1996, but the Museum has won broad cross-community support.<sup>27</sup>

While it is easy to dismiss the immobilism of the Arts Council at the height of the Troubles, some sought to change it. Brian Ferran recounts a ten year partnership with the Irish Congress of Trades Unions on the theme ‘Art and Work’, involvement with the German artist, Joseph Beuys, leading to the formation of Art and Research Exchange, and a first exhibition by Conrad Atkinson.<sup>28</sup> For all this, the Linen Hall Library’s 1986 *Troubled Images* exhibition of political posters was the only one that directly addressed the conflict even if dismissed by one critic as “propaganda not art”.<sup>29</sup>

Michael Longley pioneered new commitments by the Arts Council to literature and the traditional arts. Those he assisted remain a rollcall of the truly significant. By 1983 he was playing devil’s advocate saying, “Thank you for buttressing the reputations of Mozart and Beethoven” but questioning the fate of traditional music, working class drama, and the “class imbalance” of what the Arts Council did.<sup>30</sup> In 1985 Anthony Weir described the Arts Council as “like a medieval guild”.<sup>31</sup>

All cultural institutions faced fresh challenges after the Republican hunger strike of 1981. More than the simple carnage of “war” was now involved as the Republican movement adopted a “ballot box” and “armalite” strategy,<sup>32</sup> and culture became central to the battle for “hearts and minds”. Amongst the areas involved was the Irish language where Sinn Fein councillor, Pádraig Ó Maolchroibhe, declared, “Every phrase you learn is a bullet in the freedom struggle”.<sup>33</sup>

In 1985 the Conservative government banned the funding of community and cultural organizations deemed to have links with paramilitary organizations. Conway Mill which organized wide ranging educational and cultural programmes, and the Irish language body, Glór na nGael were amongst those affected. Michael Longley saw this as “shortsightedness” which “threatened ... the very idea of Cultural Traditions”, an arena in which he had become actively involved.<sup>34</sup>

Pressure on the BBC to limit its coverage of controversial matters had been a matter of course in pre-Direct Rule days. Under Labour Secretary of State, Roy Mason, duress was renewed from 1976 onward and at a celebrated dinner party remembered as “the second battle of Culloden” he accused the BBC of giving a “daily platform” to the IRA.<sup>35</sup> By 1984 the General Advisory Council was assured that “there have been very few occasions” when representatives of banned organizations had been interviewed. While “terrorist outrages” had to be reported, the justification for giving “airtime to criminals” was “less clear”.<sup>36</sup> The requirement for prior approval up to the highest level in any case constrained coverage. It was not enough and in 1988 the broadcasting ban excluding interviews with Republicans and members of other banned organisations came into force and was to last until 1994.<sup>37</sup>

The Government opened up another front with a major commitment to community relations initiatives from 1987 onwards.<sup>38</sup> The first chair of the Cultural Traditions Group, James Hawthorne, set the tone by asking, “Can we set aside the militant, the vilifiers, the violent and the bigoted so ordinary decent people can accept pluralism”. There was a concern that they might be viewed as “toffs against terror”,<sup>39</sup> but serious players were recruited, and even an arch critic of the community relations industry, Robbie McVeigh, accepts that “much of its power came from the sincerity of its advocates”. For him they were “people convinced of their own liberalism” implementing “a profoundly conservative analysis”.<sup>40</sup>

The CTG at the outset recognised “that it had to pass the ‘green litmus test’ – finding a credible policy on the Irish language” but sought to bypass the problem that “the language had unfortunately become associated with Republicanism”.<sup>41</sup> The outcome was Lontaobhas Ultach/the Ultach Trust (1989) with a core objective “to encourage cross community involvement in the language”, and a wholly exceptional endowment of £250,000, thus the first official funding for Irish was given for “one discourse of the Irish language” while others were left outside “the circles of power”<sup>42</sup> including the still unfunded Irish language schools in mainly Republican areas.<sup>43</sup>

The critique of the community relations industry was not the preserve of Republicans and radicals alone. At the CTG ‘Varieties of Irishness’ conference (1989) future Unionist leader, David Trimble, objected to the title of the conference and the playing of Irish traditional music.<sup>44</sup>

Those involved in the burgeoning terrain of new independent theatre companies from the late 1970s onwards “saw themselves as presenting ‘a challenge to the state’s cultural engineers’ in the Arts Council”.<sup>45</sup> Though often operating on a shoestring, they constantly broached new issues and helped local dramatists make an impact further afield.<sup>46</sup>

Field Day (1980) envisaged nothing less than an imaginative “fifth province”, perhaps reflecting the increasing detachment from violent conflict of its Derry base. Its first production, Brian Friel’s, *Translations*, was a triumph but its evocation of a “colonial” moment ensured that it was dragged back into its northern environs by suspicious critics.<sup>47</sup>

*The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature* (1992), was seen as dangerously overarching by many, and by omitting women’s writing unwittingly spoke of a past age, not a new one.<sup>48</sup> The passion of this debate was encapsulated in Damian Smyth’s accusation of “ethnic cleansing” because of the omission of the Ulster weaver poets.<sup>49</sup>

Charabanc was founded by five unemployed actresses rebelling in a city where “If you’re male and you’ve got two legs and you’re not blind, you get the part”.<sup>50</sup> The Lyric Theatre in 1981-2 cast 83 men and 38 women in plays all written by men, while the boards of the three Belfast theatres were exclusively male. Now women, working with Martin Lynch, created a major success with *Lay up Your Ends* (1982). Pam Brighton as Director brought British radical theatre practice to bear with good effect, yet there was an instinctive constraint: Charabanc avoided “prescriptive political labels such as ‘Marxist’ or ‘Feminist’”.<sup>51</sup>

Change came to the Arts Council in 1991 via embarrassing convulsion. They appointed Hackney Council officer, Michael Haynes, as Director, by-passing Deputy Director, Brian Ferran. *Fortnight* concluded, “The good news is that [the Arts Council] has appointed a black Englishman – the bad news is that it has not appointed a Derry

Catholic." Haynes's qualifications proved to be bogus, and Ferran was appointed.<sup>52</sup>

Queen's University was "in the forefront of the fair employment crisis" in 1998 according to David Millar<sup>53</sup>, while the National Anthem played on at graduation ceremonies.<sup>54</sup> More generally the "fundamental structure of power" within the universities militated against contrarian research, and could also do so in the name of a "cosmopolitanism" which, for Bill Rolston, rewarded "those whose origins and concerns were as far removed a possible from ... the archaic quagmire of Northern Ireland politics."<sup>55</sup>

The cultural expression of this impetus lay in the Belfast Festival at Queen's, still proclaiming itself as second only to Edinburgh. Long stripped of its pre-Troubles fringe it served, as the *Irish News* put it in 1989, as "a beacon of normality" in the leafy fringes of Belfast. By 1993 Damian Smyth was attacking a Festival that was "in no sense a civic event", and complaining that, "because it is tied in with the feel-good baggage, you're basically not allowed to say anything bad about it".<sup>56</sup> The Festival remained our anti-Troubles cultural manifesto.

There were no such dangers with Féile an Phobail/the West Belfast Festival. Founded in 1988 it successfully supplanted the tradition of bonfires and rioting marking the anniversary of internment, but proclaimed its Republican provenance – as one Director, Catriona Ruane, soon to be Minister for Education, said "We don't hide our politics". Critics of those politics often missed what the Festival was achieving whether in the partnership of Marie Jones and Dubblejoint with plays that later toured internationally, the arrival of international film stars, or in pertinent political debate, all helping to create one of the largest community festivals in Europe.<sup>57</sup>

We had created this city within a city but still chose to be shocked by the raw single identity narratives that emerged from it. *A Prisoner's Wife* (1997) won the Belfast City Council award for best arts partnership, but, when the award was dedicated to prisoners families, Unionist councillors sought to withdraw Féile funding.<sup>58</sup> Dubblejoint and Justus caused further controversy with *Binlids* (1997) set against the background of internment.<sup>59</sup>

On the other side of the frontier, Gary Mitchell's, *In a Little World of Our Own* (1997) explored Protestant loyalist working-class life. He was not interested in "tiresome propaganda" and wanted to "tell our truth", but was already concerned that "my community has no interest in presenting itself to the world".<sup>60</sup>

On the eve of the Good Friday Agreement, Ronan Bennett described our artistic fare as "the culture of the affluent and educated citizenry ... the 'Troubles' scarcely figure. Not in art, not in life". For him the 1969 Peoples Democracy poster, "Malone Road Fiddles While Falls Burns" still held good.<sup>61</sup>

Yet most were unwilling to be enlisted in a *dirigiste* Republican culture. Seamus Heaney in 1980 was not to be "commanded" in the cause of Republican prisoners.<sup>62</sup> Nor were many at the cutting edge of otherwise radical arts initiatives. They could not answer Bobby Sands' posthumous reproach that "The men of art have no heart"<sup>63</sup>, or not on the terms demanded. Art marked by "aloofness" was the weaker for it, yet the autonomy of the artist remained critical.<sup>64</sup> Cultural institutions could not enlist with any particular party to the conflict, though they were bound, in some measure, to be servants of the state which funded them. Too often aloofness was the easy way out.

Hostility to the "brutish" Provos carried its own risks, thus the broadly progressive Brian McAvera distrusted art "which feels that it ought to deal with social or political work" and "naïve" English artists.<sup>65</sup> Doubts of precisely this kind enabled local institutions to justify avoidance while the Wolverhampton Art Gallery assembled its significant Northern Ireland Collection of political art.<sup>66</sup>

In negotiating these snares we could no more depend on the neutrality of public institutions than at the outset of the Troubles. Sinn Fein was right, but so were Unionist critics of the same institutions. As the Peace Process reached its climax the state was changing and so were its clients. It was a transition being mediated by an emerging cautiously "liberal" elite, often of the self-elect. Who would command the future?

## Endgame

*"I feel the hand of history upon our shoulders" – Tony Blair<sup>67</sup>*

Elton John, Pavarotti, and Michael Flatley performed on the Stormont lawns.<sup>68</sup> Thanks to the Good Friday Agreement we were back in the celebrity mainstream. In Ancient Rome circuses marked moments of triumph and

distracted in times of doubt. The Northern Ireland Events Company fulfilled this role for us on a profligate scale until it imploded in disgrace with an unbudgeted deficit of £1,662,450 in 2007.<sup>69</sup>

Belfast's unsuccessful 2002 European City of Culture bid was marked by uneasy hyperbole. Daniel Jewesbury questioned its "'One Belfast' mantra" which "simultaneously proclaimed a policy of 'Equal but different', a kind of cultural power-sharing in which all cultures are to be valued and none to be questioned."<sup>70</sup>

The Good Friday Agreement depended on a "two cultures" deal, which, if extended across the wider cultural field, risked confirming divisions where there was possible fluidity.<sup>71</sup> Aodán MacPóilin writing a year later gloomily foresaw that "violence ... may be gradually replaced by cultural conflict."<sup>72</sup>

Irish and Ulster-Scots were provided for as though equal and opposite. Business followed the funding with the University of Ulster matching its Irish and Celtic Studies Research Institute with a new Institute of Ulster Scots (2001)<sup>73</sup>, while in 2002 Queens University's cross-cultural Institute of Irish Studies was threatened with closure.<sup>74</sup>

Yet no language war broke out, though DUP blocking of an Irish language act remained contentious.<sup>75</sup> Rather Irish has achieved unprecedented status, and Ulster-Scots piggybacked on its achievement. Ulster-Scots, the relative newcomer, has faced the greatest strains in living up to its aspirations. *On Eagle's Wing* (2004), "the largest musical production in the world", aimed for the world stage. Despite former President Jimmy Carter's praise for the "Scots-Irish [sic]" and his anticipation of a *Riverdance* like triumph<sup>76</sup>, it failed to take wing. Loyalist, David Adams, has recently dismissed Ulster-Scots as "a laughably pathetic late attempt" by some Unionists to fill an identity "vacuum."<sup>77</sup>

The first St Patrick's Day Festival to reach Belfast city centre in 1998 demonstrated the difficulties of commemoration. Máirtín Ó'Muilleoir celebrated "the tens of thousands who turned Belfast City centre black with green ... shredding the pages of past wrongs, binning the Belfast of the pogroms and second-class citizenship, erasing the memory of too many Twelfths on the wrong side of the swagger stick" and declared "We've arrived." Clearly only one community had arrived. Funding was withdrawn in 1999-2005, but restored in 2006 following the adoption of "Good Relations" strategies by the organisers and by 2007 17.5 per cent of participants were Protestants.<sup>78</sup> Transition seemed possible.

The 1998 Bicentenary of the United Irish Rebellion provided an immediately more positive model, with 19 district councils supporting major programmes of events, including key Unionist ones.<sup>79</sup> The Bicentenary was notable for hostile public interventions by key academics. Brian Walker, Director of the Institute of Irish Studies at Queen's, warned of the dangers of a "one sided" commemoration<sup>80</sup>, and subsequently addressed an Orange Order dinner!<sup>81</sup> A.T.Q Stewart's contribution in the *Belfast Telegraph* on the eve of the bicentenary of the rising in Ulster was headlined, "Don't dare to speak of '98".<sup>82</sup> Edna Longley asked, "Why not forget all those seductive dates in the commemoration calendar? The vengeful cycles of civil war invariably turn mnemophilia into necrophilia."<sup>83</sup> Here was a call for an unrealisable "end of history" in an Ulster context.

Orange marches remained most problematical of all. "Celebrating diversity" could not solve acute territorial issues. Both communities eventually worked hard to defuse the situation without actually resolving it. Hopes that "the twelfth" can become a Mardi Gras experience for all still seem fanciful.

Single identity arts were immediately centre stage. Dubblejoint and Justus's contribution to the 1999 West Belfast Festival, *Forced upon Us*, picked at open sores while the future of policing was still bitterly disputed. The Arts Council withdrew grant aid for "clumsy propaganda", a decision seen by many as covertly political.<sup>84</sup> Thus the agit-prop practice which Director, Pam Brighton had brought from England, and first successfully applied with Charabanc, was seen as dangerous when applied in a single community context. Yet Féile contributed beyond former boundaries as its film element became the Belfast Film Festival in 2000. In 2006 Gary Mitchell, by then a refugee from Loyalist Rathcoole, opened Féile while Dubblejoint premiered his *Remnants of Fear*.<sup>85</sup> With Sinn Fein sharing power, the cultural imperatives of a once besieged community begin to change.

The new era brought an apparently tailor-made Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and in 2001 Minister, Michael McGimpsey, proclaimed, "Arts and culture is not an add-on, its an integral part of the society we are trying to create"<sup>86</sup> Yet his Department lacked cash and clout, thus chronic under-funding remained unresolved. Strategies, including that of the Arts Council, remained in thrall to business priorities, with "artistic entrepreneurs" rather than artists *per se* in the ascendant.<sup>87</sup>

The Arts Council became more broadly based, and by 2001/2 a significant shift in funding to community arts was evident to the fury of Ian Hill who denounced an “artistic *Animal Farm* where professional appears to equal Bad and ... distressed, ghettoized, socially deprived and amateur equals Good.”<sup>88</sup> It was an argument that ignored how major talents do emerge from the grass roots.

As the global financial crisis bites, the old totemic enterprises may well prevail. In 2007, the Belfast Festival at Queen’s secured additional funding from DCAL.<sup>89</sup> It is an important window on the wider world, but governments under stress and corporate sponsors prefer flagships to fleets, though the one cannot function without the other. It will be up to a new underground generation to contest terrain still so successfully held by those least affected by the Troubles, Northern Ireland’s powerful middle class elite.

The arrival of this Troubles Archive project suggests that it is time to bring the elephant out from under the table – to review the role of arts and cultural institutions in the conflict. Elsewhere Healing Through Remembering has published their *Artefacts Audit*.<sup>90</sup>

It remains a contentious arena. As the Report of the *Consultative Group on the Past* ran into a storm of criticism in 2009<sup>91</sup>, its misfortunes coincided with the collapse of proposals for an International Centre for Conflict Transformation in the hunger strike H Block at the Maze. In 2006 this was intended to “symbolise where we have come from ... and point us in the direction of where we want to go ...”<sup>92</sup>, but it was going nowhere.<sup>93</sup> Yet meanwhile the almost equally symbolic Crumlin Road Jail was surreptitiously opened by the Department of Social Development in 2005 “as an early example of an innovative approach to prison planning”.<sup>94</sup> Sensitivities in predominately Nationalist Derry/Londonderry remain less evident: the Museum of Free Derry, which had already assembled an important archive, opened in January 2007 as ‘The National Civil Rights Archive.’<sup>95</sup>

The Linen Hall Library’s revamped *Troubled Images* exhibition toured world-wide from 2001 onwards.<sup>96</sup> By contrast the Ulster Museum’s touring *Treasures from the North* (2007) somehow omitted conflict-related art, although Troubles artefacts appeared in *The Irish at War* (2003).<sup>97</sup>

By 2007 concepts of what might be art had expanded as the Arts Council set about Re-Imaging Communities and their murals<sup>98</sup>, surely justifying Ian Hill’s allegation that “art must be tuned to the service of the state”.<sup>99</sup> A “fine art” mural of “King Billy”, a single community identifier, is funded as an improvement on “the Grim Reaper”, or there is avoidance, as when artist Ray Henshaw wants to “re-establish a sense of history – history predating the Troubles”<sup>100</sup>, or there is absurdity, as when the “Flight of the Earls” is acceptable provided they decommission swords as they board ship (in 1607!).<sup>101</sup> Yet Bill Rolston noted that murals were already undergoing “transition” of their own accord in 2003.<sup>102</sup>

We do change. Conrad Atkinson, defenestrated from the Ulster Museum in 1978, returned in 2007 for his exhibition, *Some Wounds Healing: Some Birds Singing*, in the new Grand Opera House extension.<sup>103</sup> The Museum, when it reopens after refurbishment in autumn 2009 will feature a Troubles gallery. David Park’s, *The Truth Commissioner* (2008)<sup>104</sup> proved the possibilities of compelling post-Troubles fiction where none can easily escape that “hand of history”; but history advances, however painfully, as must our cultural institutions.

## John Gray

### End notes

- 1 Gramsci, Antonio, (Q.Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.276.
- 2 *Honest Ulsterman*, No.1 (1968).
- 3 Conor O’Malley, *A Poet’s Theatre* (Dublin; Elo Press, 1988), pp.75-83.
- 4 Ophelia Byrne, ‘Theatre Companies and Venues’ in Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds (eds.), *Stepping Stones: the Arts in Ulster 1971-2001* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2001), pp.1-2.
- 5 Yvonne Murphy et al. (eds.), *Troubled Images: Posters and Images of the Northern Ireland Conflict from the Linen Hall Library* (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2001), p.53.
- 6 Ian Hill, ‘Arts Administration’ in Carruthers and Douds, p.218.
- 7 Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), ‘Whatever You Say Say Nothing’, pp.57-60. This was a commonly used phrase in the Catholic community. When Danny Devenney used it for a ‘Loose-talk costs lives’ Sinn Fein poster in 1981 he was unaware of Heaney’s poem (Yvonne Murphy et al., p.71).

- 8 Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965: Moments of Danger* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), p.64.
- 9 O'Driscoll, Dennis, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), pp.117-119.
- 10 Ian Hill, 'Arts Administration' in Carruthers and Douds, p.219.
- 11 Lyn Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House Belfast* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1995), p.122.
- 12 Noel Nesbitt, *A Museum in Belfast: A History of the Ulster Museum and its Predecessors* (Belfast: Ulster Museum, 1979), p.65. This is the only reference to the conflict in this history.
- 13 *Quoof* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp.7-9.
- 14 *Londonderry Sentinel*, 27 June 1973.
- 15 Stephen Castle, 'Belfast Blitz Dampens Peace Hopes', *Independent*, 2 January 1994.
- 16 Author's experience at Oldpark Branch Library, 1972.
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