Transcendental Art

A Troubles Archive Essay

Billy Hutchinson

arts council of Northern Ireland

Cover image: BELUM.U1934 Ulster Past and Present (1931) William Conor 1881-1968 © The Estate of William Conor Collection Ulster Museum

About the Author

Billy Hutchinson was a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force and served sixteen years in prison for paramilitary activity. While in prison he was instrumental in negotiations with the prison authorities and the British Government to bring about an end to violence and the release of all political prisoners. When Hutchinson was released he continued to work with the Ulster Volunteer Force to bring about a ceasefire in October 1994. He entered community work in 1990 as the director of the Springfield Intercommunity Development Project, a cross community forum which brought together Republican and Loyalist communities to explore ways to address social issues using community relations, community development and conflict resolution.

Hutchinson was elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1998, representing North Belfast. He is also a former member of the Belfast City Council, representing the Oldpark electoral area for two Council terms. He has now returned to the community as the coordinator of the Mount Vernon Community Development Forum and has received accolades for his work in a range of community capacity building programmes and work with excluded communities. He has also worked in a number of countries, most recently Iraq, examining the role of armed groups.

Billy Hutchinson is a Social Science graduate and holds a post graduate diploma in Town Planning. He was a lay member of the Department of Education and Training Inspectorate and had responsibility with his colleagues for inspections of all education sectors in Northern Ireland.

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This is not a piece about Loyalist art *per se*. Rather, it is a narrative that explains Loyalism's contribution to art in all its forms and how art influenced the thinking of incarcerated Loyalists. My thinking, which underpins agreeing to write this piece, is that it is important that this narrative gets its rightful position in the annals of history and has the opportunity to challenge stereotypical views of Loyalism.

The contemporary prison tradition of Loyalists originates with the incarceration of Gusty Spence et al in 1966. This is the starting point for this essay because it provides the historical backdrop to the art my comrades and I encountered while incarcerated as political prisoners.

Having developed an understanding of the prison system which encompassed their physical, psychological and political wellbeing, Spence created a strategy and delivery plan that would empower those incarcerated. Part of this plan was to move prisoners away from institutionalisation and towards a military-style camp whereby we were encouraged to integrate the military training of drilling, lectures, and so on, with participation in some form of handicrafts.

Spence and others had learned the skills that allowed them to produce handicrafts, which in turn allowed them to pass on the skills to the influx of loyalist prisoners who flooded the Gaol from 1969. As well as cascading skills he was encouraging a learning environment, both informally and formally. He had created an environment in the Victorian Gaol which he later transferred to Long Kesh when all political prisoners were transferred there. Long Kesh provided Spence more scope to deliver his strategy as we were no longer in a Victorian prison but were now in a prisoner of war camp with the introduction of Special Category status, which drew a distinction between politically-motivated prisoners and criminals.

Spence's notion of cultural expression through art was rooted in the work of the famous Shankill Road artist, William Conor. Conor, who was known as the 'People's Artist' for his expression of life in Ulster society, lived for a long time in the area of Crumlin Road Gaol. Spence was inspired by the works of Conor and by the artistic elite who revered his work for the artistic expression of life in our society in peace and war. Consequently, he had murals painted on the cubicle walls inside the huts in each of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)/Red Hand Commando (RHC) compounds, as a matter of pride in our heritage, not just decoration. These murals were designed to represent our past, present and future, as well as our political expression about our country. Many represented the reality of life within the Loyalist community: the poverty; the smudge-face labourers in their cloth caps who

trudged home from the factories; a pawn shop on the Old Lodge Road, close to the birthplace of Conor. Even power and ambition found their way onto our walls: Stormont and City Hall; Belfast City Centre with the old red double-decker buses from the '60s, also adorned the walls of our illustrious Art Gallery.

Our military history and traditions provided additional inspiration. All the huts housing UVF/RHC volunteers were named after Battle Honours of the 36th Ulster Division. When I moved to St Quentin in compound 21, the mural was a 1913 UVF depiction of opposition to Home Rule. We were surrounded by art telling the stories of our culture and these influences formed the art gallery in which we lived.

My favourite mural was one inspired by the British anti-war poet, Siegfried Sassoon. *Suicide in the Trenches* depicts a UVF volunteer split down the middle by a bolt of lightning. Half of him depicts a 36th Ulster Division soldier under heavy fire in a rainsoaked WW1 trench. The other half shows a '70s volunteer incarcerated behind barbed wire and over-shadowed by watch towers. Sassoon's poem was emblazoned underneath.

> You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
> Who cheer when soldier lads march by
> Sneak home and pray you'll never know
> The hell where youth and laughter go.

Later, following my release, I wanted to explore Conor's works and was pleasantly surprised to discover *Ulster Past and Present* as part of the Ulster Museum collection. I was drawn to this piece which depicts Celtic warriors walking past Neolithic stones at the Giants Ring and on the other side women draped in shawls and men in cloth caps going to work. This reminded me of my favourite piece in Long Kesh, as it told the story of Ulster past and present.

Spence ensured that those under his command acted and behaved like prisoners of war and instilled in us that we were ambassadors for the UVF/RHC. He taught us to argue our story by using any methods of expression possible, which included narratives in writing and painting in the same way that William Conor expressed working-class life in his drawings and paintings. It was Conor's influence on Spence that paved the way for our depiction of the life of Ulster Society in a country not just divided by class but also by religion and the politics of identity. All of the aforementioned was captured in the paintings in Long Kesh, not primarily for the aesthetics but for the narrative of the Loyalist place in history.

By 1973 handicraft workshops conducted by people like Spence had taught new prisoners the rudiments of leatherworking. At this time, there were no templates or stencils and much of the work was done by hand. The more able artists drew what you required on the leather and people with good handwriting skills crafted the alphabets. Early leatherwork from the period 1972-73 is exclusively in that style. Later, when the crafts became more prolific, stencils, specialist tools and stamps would be imported from Canada. Even then, the tools and materials were expensive and not everyone could afford to have them. In the very early days of the compounds, the deficit was addressed by a communal approach to handicrafts, again in keeping with the new thinking from Spence. This included skins of leather and the associated tools being paid for out of the central welfare funds, prior to mass orders being produced with the intention of raising contributions for the compounds' welfare fund.

One of the earliest and most accessible forms of prison art was the production of hankies. All that was required were the hankies, a biro and a set of felt tip pens. Images on the hankies ranged from poems to pop groups, from political messages to memorials, and everything in between. By far the most popular image to appear on hankies was a drawing of the three Scottish soldiers who were early IRA victims.

Although the idea of all handicrafts being communal still existed, connection to the outside world was via the Orange Cross organisation. This welfare group, dedicated to the well-being of UVF prisoners, gathered orders and distributed and sold handicraft items on the outside to assist those on the other side of the wire. Many such items became much sought after, particularly in Scotland and places like Liverpool and Preston in the north west of England. Within the prison, prison guards and soldiers had a great interest in many of the handicrafts and would insist that whatever was being made carried the UVF insignia or the Long Kesh name to show its authenticity. One of the most sought after items in Magilligan Camp was a pin board which had been specially designed to depict a compound with Nissen huts and which was adorned with genuine clippings of barbed wire taken from the compound fence, usually in full view of the prison guards.

The influence of art during my incarceration opened a creative vista that I never had before and gave me a different

angle to bring to my practice as a Community Development worker. Reflecting my appreciation of how art can induce transformation, I have engaged Community Artists to work with residents to identify social problems and to describe the solutions, expressed here by Anne-Sophie Morrisette:

> The inclusion of artists – many of whom, while Belfast residents, have never visited Mount Vernon Estate – has had the benefit of transforming outsiders' perceptions of the area.

I would not have considered this had it not been for my experience of the use of art while incarcerated. My incarceration gave me a new view of art. It was a form of escapism, but an escapism that was not unreal; on the contrary, the insight into creativity and its many forms gave me a new-found confidence in culture and allowed me to define my past, present and future.

Within the Long Kesh camp, all shades of Loyalist paramilitarism served together in the same compounds. From the UVF perspective they now had what has been famously described as a 'mini-Sandhurst' and, latterly, in reference to the prodigious amount of studying, 'The University of Long Kesh'. Virtually all of those incarcerated at the time knew what it was like to take part in drill instruction, weapons training, political lectures, remedial studies, debating societies and many other forms of education. Your day was full and you only had what can be described as free time or recreation after 4.00pm each week day. It was during these times that handicrafts and private reading or studying took place. One prisoner who went to Long Kesh as a fresh faced 17 year-old relates:

> I was in awe for the first few months of my incarceration. Upon entering Compound 11 in January 1973 I came face to face for the first time with the Loyalist working class icon, Gusty Spence. What he was setting out to do then, almost forty years ago, is still overwhelming when I think about it. He single-handedly changed an institutionalised environment into one where we, the UVF and RHC, controlled what way we lived. Within the constraints of walls of course, by and large we decided what we did during the day, we took our orders from the Officers and NCO's and the only real input the prison staff had was to open up, count us and lock us up again each day. I fell into this regime quite easily because I considered myself a soldier on the outside and I should be treated accordingly as a prisoner-of-war on the opposite side of the wire. I was the perfect foot soldier. I revelled in the drill and classes, partook of all the educational studies and lectures and wanted to learn all the new skills that were on offer. The ones we called, 'the older hands', meaning those who had been in the 'Crum' in the sixties, were teaching handicrafts and it was amazing to see what skills they had developed. For instance, I remember one of my first days in Compound 11 being fascinated and puzzled when I saw the skins of leather hanging from the barbed wire and then even more amazed to watch Gusty, at a handicraft session, fashion a shoulder holster from one of those skins without the aid of templates - it was a whole new world.

Handicrafts and leather work was only part of the re-education plan aimed at making the Volunteers more aware of their capabilities, of trying to tease out latent skills and talents. The men were encouraged to draw, to paint, to discuss topics that were relevant to their current position, to sing and play music, to entertain each other, to write letters home, letters to newspapers, magazines, periodicals, to your MP to complain about prison conditions. Some wrote poems and short stories, many of which were published on the outside in Loyalist magazines and booklets. Some of the political writings and thoughts that were being processed in those early prison years, when read now, seem far ahead of their time. Gusty's speeches on each twelfth of July at our anniversary parades reflect what a visionary he was. They were much anticipated then and remain essential reading today.
Another Volunteer remembers:

> I suppose it must have been around the late '70s, maybe '78 or '79, I had been there from '75. It was around this time that many discussions were taking place amongst people who were starting to change their outlook on how things were going on the outside and we eagerly awaited Gusty's Twelfth day speech. There was much debate of what he would say and we spoke about it leading right up to the Twelfth—and invariably dissecting it afterwards. Gusty was also a great orator and it was inspiring to hear him deliver. He inspired me to read and latterly to write. I had a decent grammar school education before incarceration but never learned half the things I learned while in Compounds 18 and 21. It was a privilege in many ways to be there and it was also motivational to be around so many like-minded people as well as learning from people like Gusty, Billy Mitchell, who is much underrated as a writer, and Davy Ervine, who all underline what talent there was within the compound system.

In 1979 an excellent educationalist moved from Magilligan prison to Long Kesh - a man named Dominic Henry. He transformed the education system and fought a long and hard battle with the Northern Ireland Office to introduce proper formal education into the jail. The education included the Open University courses. With Spence's foresight in the UVF compounds at that time, there was a participatory approach to being involved with education. Many volunteers had gained 'O' levels and some had progressed to 'A' level. Many now made the progression and commitment to undertake the Open University. In the years that followed, the achievements of those individuals and the collective results gained are laudable and deserve greater recognition. Given the background of these individuals, it is extraordinary that recent statistics show, from both the Compound and H Block systems, 24 Loyalists worked towards or graduated with degrees. This helped affirm the link between art and education, as most of the prisoners who studied Humanities and History of Art began to express new-found creativity.

Not all Volunteers, however, participated in the formal education on offer, for a variety of reasons, but of the ones who didn't many honed their own skills in other ways. There were the compound poets, story writers, songwriters, and jokers. On the inside, one of the ways to amalgamate all of these skills was in the organisation of an annual Christmas concert. One life sentence prisoner recounts:

> It was great fun and I looked forward to it each year. From around mid-November we met and discussed ideas and worked out what the theme would be. Normally we had a series of linked set pieces and in between each act there would be a group on or a comedian, all linked up of course with an MC who memorably fell off his platform one year and broke his arm. The writing would try to incorporate themes of the time. Politically at home and world-wide, jokes would have been made at the expense of our audience, all done light-heartedly, deliberately to take people's minds off the added pain of incarceration at the festive period. The group had about five guys in it. All instruments were hired and sent in to us by the UVF on the outside and we named the band after current pop bands, only with our own slant. One year we were The Blues Brothers and wore Linfield jumpers; another it was Sid Keyhole and the Ginger Nuts; and another, They're Throwing Stones. And surprisingly, the standard of writing was quite good, albeit in always a humorous way and in many respects paved the way for a couple to take up the mantel many years later when released.

For many of the Loyalists in the compounds, taking the classes on offer, both formally and informally, gave them the opportunity to develop their skills. So too did letter writing. Although primarily seen as just a form of communication with loved ones on the outside, over the years letter writing became a way for people to learn grammar, to learn how to construct, to spell and to communicate effectively. Some of the prisoners were prolific and penned multiple letters each day. Most would have perhaps written three or four a week and some raised the subject to an art form. Robert highlights how:

> In later years I came to realise the importance of proper letter writing and took pride in setting it out, making sure the grammar was correct. I used a Thesaurus to make sure I didn't use the same word or phrase too often and I would attribute this more than anything to making me a better writer.

To the prisoners, prison art was not confined to painting images which expressed a culture, tradition or history. For some, it was more than visual; it was a state of mind which encompassed writing, performing, music, education – all the 'tools' of creativity which were in and of themselves artistic. In this sense, art can be defined as something universal that people can tune into because it moves them. Consider how one former prisoner defines it.

> A cubicle eight feet by eight. A hut sixty feet by twenty. A compound with a two hundred and seven metre perimeter. A box, within a box, removed from reality. An existence of tenses – living in the past, thinking of the future. Now did not exist. Reality was in the mind, a mentality. Can you feel alone in a crowded room? Isn't silence sometimes deafening? How can you transcend incarceration? At first I wrote out of necessity, corresponding with family and friends and writing to magazines – assignments for academic study.
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> Then in 1976 my life changed. A friend lent me a copy of Bob Dylan's *Desire*. I placed it on the turntable, watched the stylus find the groove and bang … I transcended incarceration. "Pistol shots ring out in a bar room night". "Up on the white veranda she wears a necktie and a Panama hat". Like the character in Jack London's *The Star Rover*, I was transported to other places within me. Through the creative genius of Dylan, I discovered the illusion of time. I could lose myself in a world of imagery, surrealism, chaos, for long periods.

> I learnt being creative is an exploration, it is limitless. To some it is visual, some aural, some written. In Dylan it is all of these. When he sang of murder on the streets of Patterson, New Jersey, I was there. This was the catalyst which ignited my creativity. I began to 'colour' my letters home. I wrote songs about loved ones. Once a year we had a Christmas concert and with others I wrote comedy sketches, caricatures, satire.

For this individual, artistic expression found a collective outlet beyond the walls of Long Kesh. This was in the formation of 'Etc', Ex-prisoners Theatre Company, a small group of former prisoners and others, developed to enlighten audiences about what prison life was like. In partnership with 'Epic', Ex-Prisoners Interpretative Centre, they produced a fifteen minute drama entitled *Yo Mister* as part of an interactive exhibition of ex-prisoners' memorabilia. Following its debut production in October 1999, directed by the community arts director Tom Magill, it toured to ten other venues throughout Northern Ireland and was subsequently performed in the Linen Hall Library by the well-known local actor Richard Dormer as part of Tinderbox's New Writers project.

The contribution of former prisoners to the world of art can be hampered by negative media attention. For example, it might not be widely known that what was billed, at the time, within the 2000 Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, "as the biggest community drama ever in Ireland", *Playing For Time* was written by a former prisoner. Roisin Ingle in *The Irish Times* wrote that, "this was a dramatic spectacle with more heart and imagination than many professional productions and should have been judged on a script that, while flawed, tried hard to make sense of one of the most disturbing characteristics in post-Agreement society".

In this there are echoes of the challenges former prisoners face in their contribution, via art, to the transformation of our society. We need look no further than the negative media attention given to another production *Reason to Believe*, by Robert Niblock, another former prisoner. The play, which included Ivan Little and Niall Cusack in the cast, performed to sell out audiences throughout Belfast and to positive critical acclaim. When it became known that Robert had been a Loyalist prisoner, the press and media wasted no time in making known his past. This has the knock-on effect to other like-minded people who remain very reluctant to publish. Robert states:

> I started writing around the time of the first Drumcree. I wrote a little testimony to warn young people of the perils of going down the road I trod so many years before. I delivered that testimony to many young people throughout Northern Ireland and this whetted my appetite to write and I continued with short stories. I kept all this stuff to myself because I wasn't sure what to do with it and I also had the notion that others might not find it very good. Eventually I wrote a draft of a full-length play and showed it to some close friends. Unknown to me, one of those friends passed the draft along to a professional script reader who basically got in touch with me, organised a reading, and went about securing funding to have it produced. I was very excited and when a couple of top actors were lined up to play in it, I suppose I became aware that I had produced something of quality. That feeling turned to despair within days of the play being performed. The detrimental press coverage I received made me re-think all I was trying to do, to such an effect that I considered stopping writing. Luckily I haven't but the lessons are there for others.

However, when they do 'raise their heads above the parapet', critics with a more balanced and objective perspective will be honest in their assessment. Witness Jane Coyle's review in the *Belfast Telegraph* of a former prisoner's art:

> A Catholic from west Belfast has come together in friendship and creative partnership with a writer, a former loyalist prisoner from north Belfast, with a cast from across the community. The play shows the sophistication developing at the grass roots; it has no flags, no emblems, no overt sectarian allegiances, and allows the audience to make up its own mind as to where the characters stand. They are living proof that, for all the depressing public announcements and political prevarications to which the Northern Ireland public is regularly subjected, the peace process is moving forward.

In the late '80s and early '90s when most of the Loyalist prisoners were being released, the Compound men, many of whom had been there from the early '70s, found themselves in what would be considered ordinary, everyday types of jobs. They fell into the family way and most relinquished violence, having seen the futility of the countless deaths. Some went on to greater things - councillors, politicians, lecturers, community workers, teachers; but for some reason very few chose to write, not just about the prison experience but about anything. Why not? Perhaps it was a lack of confidence in their own ability or that they didn't think anyone would be interested;

perhaps they just wanted to keep things to themselves. There have been many Loyalist ex-prisoners who have written upon release, and in later years, but have kept their work hidden. Even in response to some overtly Republican myths, especially around the prison experience during the most recent conflict they, in their wisdom, have decided not to come forward. To witness such onesided plays as Martin Lynch's *Chronicles of Long Kesh* is demoralising for those prisoners who have never considered themselves, as portrayed in Lynch's production, to be drink swilling psychopathic Taig haters. And yet very few responded.

The perception in many people's minds, perpetrated by biased media reportage, is that in the past conflict Nationalists and Republicans were the good guys and Loyalists were the baddies. History is being re-written as we progress and is depicting Loyalism in a very unfavourable light. Former prisoners face a dilemma: if they don't try to record their experiences then all is lost as far as educating people goes, but if they do raise their heads they are vilified for being an ex-prisoner. If you don't try to change you are a dinosaur, yet if you do then the finger is pointed at you to say, "hold on a minute, what are you doing, you don't have the right to change because you had a past". This has had an extremely detrimental effect on many people wanting to write. In spite of their undoubted ability to make a worthwhile contribution to the arts, former Loyalist prisoners continue to struggle to overcome society's negative stereotypes. Perhaps the collective response to incarceration will one day be replicated in a creative expression which artistically portrays their role in history.

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