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**“Representing loyalist paramilitary heritage in non-museum exhibitions – aims, practices and challenges”**

The inherent dissonance of heritage, due to the multiplicity of ways of interpreting the past, is exacerbated when the past involves conflict (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Among the vast terminology referring to heritage associated with war, violence and injustice (Samuels, 2015: 111-114), the concept of “difficult heritage” is particularly operative for post-conflict societies. In a study of how the city of Nuremberg dealt with its Nazi heritage, Sharon MacDonald defines it as “the past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity” (2009: 1). In a Northern Irish context, the recent conflict constitutes difficult heritage, as illustrated by the protracted debate on its legacy. Twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, despite broad official aspirations to build a shared society, an agreed approach is yet to be found on issues relating to truth recovery, justice and how to remember or commemorate the past. Part of the challenge lies in the way different experiencing of the past leads to different perceptions of the present, as Paul Connerton reminds:

Images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory. To the extent that their memories of a society’s past diverge, to that extent its members can share neither experiences nor assumptions. (1989: 3)

Much of the ongoing effort to build a shared future for Northern Ireland is based on history and memory work: storytelling and heritage initiatives are legion, within community groups, as part of museum outreach activities or under the aegis of the Community Relations Council and various NGOs (Crooke, 2007; Crooke 2010). Memory work is instrumental in conflict transformation, as it creates provides context and creates meaning, both for self and mutual understanding (Hamber, 2015; Maddison, 2016: 207-270). The difficulty, however, is that memory work can either reinforce or reshape identities and may therefore result in either strengthening entrenched positions or bridging divides.

Among the various narratives of conflict, those of perpetrators of violence – loyalist paramilitaries in this chapter – are particularly contentious. There is no consensus about the promotion of peace and reconciliation through conflict heritage (Simone-Charteris and Boyd, 2010: 180-84), which is seen either as a tool to reinforce existing divisions (Tunbridge and

Ashworth, 1996: 4) or as an opportunity to rethink the relationship between the past and collective identity (MacDonald, 2015). Writing about “political tours” in conflict-afflicted areas in Northern Ireland, Sara McDowell warns against possible negative side effects:

Support given by tourist visits, then, works to reinforce both the legitimacy of the landscape in question and the narratives being evoked. [...] In [the Northern Irish] context, selling conflict heritage must be seen as a spatial practice which, contrary to improving community relations and transforming the nature of the conflict, instead redefines and reinforces territorial politics and transforms the conflict into a war by other means. (McDowell, 2008: 406)

Conversely, Simone-Charteris and Boyd suggest that:

Political tourism, despite being considered as controversial and even divisive by some public sector bodies and a few members of the tourism industry, is nevertheless contributing to reconcile the two communities, which for the first time ever, are being able to explain their different perspectives in a peaceful manner, thus discouraging the resurrection of violence and conflict. (2010: 195)

As places where the past is remembered and displayed through narratives and artefacts, museums and exhibitions take part in the conversation about the legacy of conflict. The contentiousness of their task is illustrated by the criticism the Ulster Museum faced in 2009 about its new artefact-free Troubles Gallery (Bigand, 2016), or by the more recent controversy about an exhibit listing all those killed in the Free Derry area between 1969 and 1972 in the newly reopened Museum of Free Derry (Steel, 2017; Derry Journal, 2017). Permanent exhibitions about the conflict are few across the province. The Tower Museum in Derry~Londonderry and the Ulster Museum in Belfast present a multi-perspective narrative, while the Museum of Free Derry and the Irish Republican History Museum in Belfast look at the conflict from a republican point of view. No existing museum depicts it from a loyalist viewpoint.

This chapter looks at two exhibitions displaying loyalist paramilitary heritage. One is the Andy Tyrrie Interpretive Centre (ATIC) on the Newtownards Road in East Belfast. It describes itself as a Loyalist Conflict Museum and tells the story of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), from the early 1970s to the end of the 2000s. The other is called “Our Journey, Our Narrative” and is part of the Action for Community Transformation Initiative (ACT), an organisation that helps former Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) combatants go back to civilian life. The exhibition tells the story of the UVF from the 1910s to 1998 and the transition period that followed. It was situated on the Shore Road in North Belfast until it relocated on the Shankill Road in West Belfast in April 2017. Both exhibitions have been put together and are run by former members of the paramilitary groups they present the story of.

For various reasons, the exhibitions require specific methodology to assess them, which will be looked into first. Based on on-site visits and interviews with staff, the analysis of the exhibitions will consider the aims of the two exhibitions in portraying former paramilitary organisations, the type of visitor experience they offer, as well as the challenges they face as small-scale heritage initiatives.

### **Challenging research subjects – micromuseums, partisan museums and perpetrators' heritage**

For several reasons, the two exhibitions under study are not typical museum exhibitions and therefore pose a challenge as research subjects. To start with, they operate outside the official museum sector in Northern Ireland, which includes all local accredited museums, whether publicly or independently-run. It means that they cannot avail of the support of the Northern Ireland Museums Council, whose role is to assist museums in fields such as collections care, acquisition policies or education and learning. To become fully accredited museums, ATIC and ACT would have to meet a series of agreed standards relating to governance, collections care or public access that they are currently in no position to meet, because of their funding, staffing capacity and/or facilities. Both are recently registered charities, operating from small premises. The exhibitions are displayed in two rooms in the case of ATIC, in one for ACT. Their visitor numbers are in the low hundreds. ACT's exhibition is a by-product of the social work the organisation carries out with former members of the UVF, rather than its main purpose. In fact, both exhibitions can be described as micromuseums (Candlin, 2015: 6-13), that is to say "small, independent, single-subject museums" or, to be more specific:

Collections that are variously run by trusts, businesses, special interests groups, and private individuals, and are open to the public; that concentrate on types of objects, themes, or individuals, that fall outside of the traditional academic compass, occupy a low level in the hierarchy of traditional classificatory tables, or that take a non-scholarly approach to subject that could be encompassed by academe; and finally, [they] are small insofar as they have relatively low visitor numbers and/or modest incomes and/or occupy a physically limited space. (2015: 12)

Fiona Candlin's purpose in studying micromuseums throughout the UK was to challenge certainties about how museums operate and to open up new horizons in museology. She looked at how practices in micromuseums can question or affect the norms imposed by major institutions. She observed that, more often than not, micromuseums go against the grain of mainstream curatorial trends. In her view, they are generally not "exemplars" of good practice, as "the staff at micromuseums often lack the capacity, skills, money, or inclination to comply with health and safety legislation, to store and display the exhibits in a way that

minimizes damage, or to develop interpretation strategies” (2015: 14). Criticisms are therefore counter-productive, she argues, as micromuseums have little power to improve their processes. Her observations provide useful methodology to study ATIC and ACT.

Another specificity that distinguishes the two exhibitions from mainstream museums is their open partisanship in support of a specific interest group. This is at odds with recent professional recommendations for museums to become social actors (Cameron, 2005), promote diversity and social inclusion (Sandell, 2002) and adopt multi-perspective approaches in their displays (Witcomb, 2003; Bradburne, 2011). ATIC and ACT are charities classified as advancing, among other things, community development and conflict resolution, which defines them as social actors. It could be said they promote diversity by giving a platform to groups whose voice is little, if at all, heard in exhibitions across the province. Yet they are, in Northern Ireland terminology, single-identity initiatives and since they “represent one communal, group or political voice”, they fall in the category of “sectional museums” (Brown, 2008). Writing about the Northern Irish context, Kris Brown observed recurrent strong curatorial control in the sectional displays he visited. It took the form of a didactic or moralistic narrative that left little room for debate or alternative interpretation; of a central message articulated around ideas of victimhood, defensiveness or historical misrepresentation; of linear and ordered narratives which left aside difficult questions and highlighted the continuity between past and present; and of a lack of reflective criticism. Sectional, single-perspective or partisan museums are not exclusive to Northern Ireland. Examples abound, particularly in relation with difficult heritage. They often reveal as much about the contemporary context as they do about the past events they represent. For instance, the Apartheid era in South Africa and racial violence and segregation in the United States were memorialized differently in each country’s historical narrative and museums (Autry, 2017). Likewise, the controversy about the prospect of a Fascism museum in Mussolini’s birthplace is forcing Italy to address its relation to its past (Loriga, 2017).

At the core of these debates is the question of the curatorial control museums or exhibitions wish to maintain or are willing to relinquish. The current trend is for museums to be less prescriptive, to shift from being “sites of authority” to being “sites of mutuality” (Hopper-Greenhill, 2000: xi). Yet this seems contradictory with the idea of giving a voice to a group perceived to be, rightly or wrongly, voiceless. In her study about micromuseums, Candlin deals specifically with “the problematic ethics of partisan museums” with a case study about

Lurgan History Museum, a private collection of republican artefacts located in Northern Ireland. Her analysis of the visitor's experience serves to counter the assumption that good museum practice necessarily means a multi-perspective approach on a subject. Candlin argues that since partisan displays make no claim to neutrality, give a voice to marginalized groups and explain their narrative results from a particular environment, their single-identity narrative should be valued. In such contexts, she argues, the requirement of a multi-perspective narrative may well be fairer, but is not necessarily just and potentially oppressive (Candlin, 2015: 75-92). Adrian Kerr, the director of the Museum of Free Derry, defends a similar viewpoint. He describes his museum as "openly subjective" (2011: 348) and considers the sectional museum phase as a necessary step on the road to mutual understanding in Northern Ireland:

Divided histories need to be addressed when the divisions are still causing conflict, and the only way to address them is accept they exist and tackle them head on. I would argue that the best way to do this here is to encourage smaller, subjective, community-based museums where different communities have the comfort and the freedom to tell their stories their way, and others have the same comfort and freedom to come and hear them and understand them. (2011: 367)

This vision of a mosaic of single-identity museums, into which ATIC and ACT legitimately fit, begs a question: who will feel comfortable and free enough to visit the exhibitions? Despite continuous efforts at building a shared society, divisions remain and post-conflict Northern Ireland has been described as a case of "benign apartheid" (Nagle and Clancy, 2010). While it is accepted that dissonance in heritage is inherent and enhanced in conflict-related situations, an extra difficulty about ATIC and ACT lies in the fact that the groups they represent were active perpetrators of political violence during the conflict. Loyalist paramilitaries caused just under 30% of the deaths during the conflict and amount to about 5% of the total death toll (McKittrick et al., 1999). Although officially defunct, the UDA (and associated group Ulster Freedom Fighters) and the UVF (and associated group Red Hand Commando) are still proscribed and classified as terrorist organisations in the UK. Such elements may trigger different reactions among potential visitors: they may deter some people from visiting altogether, while others may object to what they perceive as a form of legitimization or glamorization of political violence. The debate about turning the HMP Maze/Long Kesh site into a heritage centre was replete with such arguments (McAtackney, 2014)<sup>1</sup>. The underlying question here is the place to be given to (former) paramilitary groups in the creation and promotion of heritage. Sociologist Lee A. Smithey views heritage and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Louise Purbrick's chapter in this volume.

memory work in PUL communities (Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) as part of conflict transformation (2011). He shows how community leaders have embraced heritage initiatives to make up for what they perceive as “a deficit of historical knowledge among members of their organisations and communities that leaves them feeling insecure and unprepared to engage in cross-community dialogue and political debate” (153). He identifies five functions of PUL heritage work: celebrate, remember, educate, unity and community relations (169-75). The weight given to each function is critical, as too much stress placed on one may be detrimental to another. Smithey acknowledges the difficulty of dealing with paramilitary legacies, especially when sporadic unrest linked to paramilitary activity has continued to happen since the organisations officially stopped to operate. If heritage is to lead to better community relations, critical and historical reflection is key, in order to avoid entrenched positions becoming fossilized (185-6). His analysis provides a useful toolkit to assess ATIC and ACT’s exhibitions as snapshots of where the debate about dealing with the past stands.

ATIC and ACT’s exhibitions sit awkwardly in the museum world and traditional expectations and interpretative frameworks may not easily apply to them. Still, the exhibitions are valuable in the conversation about the legacy of conflict as they give a voice to otherwise rather marginalized voices. Moreover, they fit the description Christopher Whitehead gives of museum display as “a political, public production of propositional knowledge intended to influence audiences and to create durable social effects” (Whitehead, 2016i: 2). It is precisely why, he argues, they must be studied.

### **Aims – empowering the voiceless**

The ACT and ATIC exhibitions have been put together and are staffed by former members of the paramilitary group they tell the story of, respectively the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA). When I visited “Our Journey – Our Narrative” in North Belfast in November 2016, then in West Belfast in April 2017, I was shown around by ACT coordinator Dr William Mitchell. Billy Rowan, a volunteer in ATIC, guided me through the exhibition in East Belfast in November 2016. When asked how the idea of their respective exhibitions came about, both men insisted they wanted to have the story out there because the republican narrative dominated the environment. It is a commonly held view across loyalist communities, which fuels a sense of social and political disenfranchisement, particularly in working-class areas (McAuley, 2016: 142-7). Mitchell recalled how he once took an ACT group to Israel but realized, when the return visit happened, he couldn't bring the young

Israeli visitors to a specific place to tell them about the conflict from a loyalist point of view the same way they had been told about the republican point of view in the Irish Republican History Museum. He ended up giving them the loyalist vision of the conflict on an empty car park. The discrepancy between a highly visible republican narrative and a virtually invisible loyalist one prompted him to put the exhibition together to reach some sort of balance. It was not a question, in his words, of giving a “comparative narrative”, that is to say to counter each point of the republican narrative, but rather a feeling that the loyalist narrative needed to be heard too. Significantly, the exhibition opened on Ulster Day 2012 (29 September), exactly 100 years after the signing of the Ulster Covenant, one of the founding episodes of Unionism/Loyalism<sup>2</sup>. The same logic of giving a voice to the voiceless and reacting to a perceived dominant republican narrative applies for ATIC. Rowan reported how ATIC’s founder David Stitt, while working as a community worker in East Belfast, would see Black Taxis from West Belfast (i.e. associated with the IRA) around the murals on the Newtownards Road, telling tourists about loyalist murals in a loyalist area: “David wanted the Loyalist people to be able to tell our story our way”. ATIC opened at the end of August 2012, in the same commemorative context.

The desire to redress misrepresentation or, in this case, non-representation, prompted the putting together of the displays, with the idea to address both people from within and without the community. The exhibition leaflets present the angle they opted for:

ATIC: “The Andy Tyrrie Interpretive Centre has been created to enable our community, as it emerges from forty years of violent conflict, to reflect on those years and hopefully that process of reflection may give us an understanding of what actually happened to us. There are reams and reams of press reports, pictures, books and TV programmes depicting many stories but all written by others. The Loyalist people have not told their story yet ...”

ACT: “This exhibition charts the major political developments which led to the creation of the Northern Ireland state, the social and political unrest that followed and the events which secured peace in the province. “Our Journey – Our Narrative” provides an insight into the journey of ACT members during this latter period of our recent history, as well as their efforts at securing peace and endeavours to transform themselves in the post ceasefire climate.”

We notice here a distinctive rhetoric for each organisation. ATIC talks more to its own community than to outsiders, placing the focus of how the community needs to reclaim

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of the debate about the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912, supporters of the Union were encouraged to sign the Ulster Covenant, by which they pledged to defend their position in the Union. The text was signed by just under a quarter of a million men. A distinct text, the “Declaration” was signed by about the same number of women.



possession of its own story. On the contrary, ACT primarily targets outsiders: the narrative is formally structured as a “journey towards peace”, the exhibition serving as an offshoot for the organisation’s community work. As a result, the two groups are portrayed in a different way – one is still trying to make sense of its past and doesn’t appear well grounded in the present, while the other is presented as being able to reflect critically on its own behaviour and having a sense of agency in front of new circumstances. This somehow reflects the history of the two paramilitary groups after the agreement: the UVF was more proactive in transitioning from political violence to the political arena, while the UDA was slowed down by internal divisions and localism (Spencer, 2008: 227-45).

### **Practices – What visitor experience?**

While their subject material and aims are largely similar, ATIC and ACT’s “productions of propositional knowledge” reflect each organisation differently and make for rather distinct visitor experiences. Visitors standing on the pavement outside ATIC in East Belfast are immediately faced with an ambiguous message: they are greeted with a welcome sign in five languages and a quote about peace-building by Albert Einstein, while the museum is described as a “Loyalist Conflict Museum”. Its front displays the coat of arms of the UDA and the UFF, two officially defunct paramilitary organisations, and the centre is named after Andy Tyrie, a prominent figure of the UDA until the late 1980s. The combination of words and symbols may be confusing or overall contradictory for outsiders, who might be unfamiliar with the names, actors and history of the UDA/UFF.

Inside, the exhibition is organised over two floors. On the ground floor, newspapers clippings from the early 1970s to the late 2000s are displayed chronologically on the walls, charting the existence of the UDA from its emergence to its official disbanding. The collection of artefacts, donated or on loan from former members of the UDA, includes prison art, leaflets, caps, flags, scarves, as well as a model replica of the H-Blocks of HMP Maze/Long Kesh. A mannequin in full paramilitary regalia stands besides the portrait of the Queen and decommissioned guns hang on the wall. The exhibition continues on the first floor, with a focus on life in prison, larger exhibits, including a makeshift Lambeg drum made in the Maze out of a large plastic container, and more guns. The collection appears rather random, with no systematic labels. On a second floor, there’s a space for group discussions.



Billy Rowan, who runs the exhibition single-handedly, talks visitors through the timeline of the organisation, using paper clips as prompts to explain the creation of the UDA, first as a vigilante group, then as a paramilitary group, how it evolved through the conflict and finally decommissioned its weapons in 2009. It is difficult to make sense of the display without his mediation, as the paper clippings aren't all legible and there is very limited contextual interpretation. The same goes for the artefacts, especially the bigger objects like weapons and paramilitary regalia, some of which have no labels. The display is very raw, with context and interpretation mostly provided by the staff in charge. We have mentioned that lack of critical distance has been identified as one of the drawbacks of sectional displays and that a degree of it is deemed necessary to avoid entrenching existing positions. ATIC's narrative contains a few hints of reflective criticism, for instance when Rowan explained how the UDA carried out most of its armed attacks under the name of the UFF – this allowed it to remain a legal organisation until 1992 – or when he mentioned some members went down the criminal route

in the 1980s. Talking about the UFF and common criminals was recognising that the UDA didn't always stay true to what the exhibition portrayed as its respectable *raison d'être* as a provider of safety for the community. But the nuances of the broader narrative may be lost on visitors, especially as some exhibits can be at best intimidating, at worst offensive. Apart from guns and masked men, a painted board panel adorned with the two coats of arms reads “Better to die on your feet than to live on your knees in an Irish Republic.” The lack of contextual panels may give visitors the impression that the narrative they’re being given is binding, or that they’re not given the full story. Some of them may find it daunting to enquire further. However, the contentious contents is almost secondary in the difficulty the visitors may have in reading a micromuseum, especially if they expect to find familiar bearings, like interpretative panels. Candlin notes that micromuseums shouldn’t be experienced the same way. In particular, she insists on looking for the museum’s voice in the staff’s: “concentrate on the more conventional forms of exhibition interpretation, such as wall-texts, could easily lead researchers to assume that very little information was disseminated and nothing could be learned from visits when the opposite situation may well be true.” (2015: 17). The same could apply for visitors, but the experience may destabilize some, notably because it requires unlearning usual museum habits.

ATIC also serves as a memorial of sorts, with one corner of the ground floor dedicated to fallen UDA members. Each day, the memory of the dead is commemorated with a notice, which is also posted on ATIC’s Facebook page, often with less polished language. There is an undeniable element of nostalgia in the exhibition, of the sort Brandon Hamber observed in conflict museums in Chile, the Netherlands, China and South Africa – not so much for the conflict itself but for a time when the community was acting together, could defend itself, was organised and/or ingenious (Hamber, 2012). It is epitomized in ATIC by several exhibits, notably the makeshift Lambeg drum, prison art or various pictures of parades. But there is also a contrast between artefacts suggesting strength, stereotyped masculinity, possible threat – such as paintings of masked men kicking doors open or aiming at a target with a rifle – and the narrative of a victimized community. Rowan himself insists that the community feels cheated by the post-conflict arrangements and, if given the chance to vote again, would vote against the Belfast Agreement. His story is a sad one, but he tells it in earnest. The narrative of deprivation applies to the area where ATIC is located: where the community used to thrive in the nearby shipyard, poverty is now stark. The surrounding urbanscape, marked by the

iconic Belfast cranes and commemorative, paramilitary-related murals, conveys the same sense of loss, perceived aggression and defence.

To Rowan, the exhibition is about the past, not the present, and yet ATIC's front door and leaflet talk about peace-building and conflict transformation. The ambivalence of the message is also to be found in the way the "Other/enemy" is described – in this case, republicans. They are mostly demonized in ATIC's written material, but the conversation reveals them to be invisible contributors to the collection. Rowan explained how, after he saw a model of the H-blocks in the Irish Republican History Museum, he had one made for the museum by the same man, a former IRA prisoner.

All of this makes for a rather unsettling visitor experience, the educational value of which may be difficult to grasp and/or questionable to some, depending on their own experience or knowledge of the conflict. Some may feel confused by conflicting messages, or even antagonized. If we consider Smithey's list of 5 identified functions of PUL heritage initiatives, celebration, commemoration and unity seem to weigh more than education or community relations. Overall, the message in ATIC is a rather fuzzy one, mixing tangible displays of strength, defensiveness and sacrifice, with intangible touches of vulnerability, helplessness and reflexive criticism.

By comparison, the ACT exhibition offers a more focused visitor experience. At the time of my first visit in October 2016, it was set up in the association's offices, on the first floor of a commercial block on the Shore Road, in a predominantly PUL area of North Belfast. What was advertised on the street was the ACT initiative, not the exhibition, which meant that visitors would hardly stumble upon it. In April 2017, ACT moved to a shop unit on the Shankill Road, a predominantly PUL area in West Belfast. Its front now bears a "Shankill Road Museum" sign, giving the exhibition more visibility for passers-by, both locals and tourists. In both locations, the display is in one large single room, with panels organized chronologically, from the signing of the Ulster Covenant to the post-Belfast Agreement years. The artefacts on display are linked either with the 1910s or with the prison experience of UVF members during the more recent conflict. The exhibition is text-rich and didactic. There is a small newspaper archive as well as TV footage shown on a screen. The only uniforms present date from the 1910s, along with a wooden replica of an early UVF rifle for children to dress up in cap and sash –no modern UVF uniform or weapon are displayed. A collection of academic books about the conflict is available for visitors to consult. Tables and chairs are at hand for group discussions and community activities.



The choice of the 1910s as a starting point for the narrative is significant for several reasons. The events of the decade, in particular the signing of the Ulster Covenant (1912) and the Battle of the Somme (1916) are essential parts of the PUL collective identity (Brown, 2007; Viggiani, 2014: 128-149). 1913 was the year when the first UVF was formed, as part of the anti-Home Rule movement. In its transition to political activism, the modern UVF looked back to the period of the Home Rule Crisis and described its agents as “the founding fathers of unionism” (Mitchell, 2002). Including the 1910s and the historic UVF in the exhibition serves to stress the continuity – and therefore legitimacy – of the loyal tradition through the years. The link with the past is made even more prominent in the Shankill Road premises,

where panels on the decade are visible from the pavement and thus used as pull-factors for visitors.

During my first visit, William Mitchell briefly explained how the exhibition was organised, detailed a few artefacts in the 1910s section and in the prison art section and left me to look at the displays on my own. The format of the exhibition, combining contextual panels and artefacts, is closer to that of a mainstream museum than ATIC's. A large place is given to context, with half the panels devoted to the period before the recent conflict began. Critical distance is also a major element, as the conclusion of the paragraph about the Civil War in 1922-23 exemplifies: "the events of extreme violence and upheaval of early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland – which included the creation of Northern Ireland and Eire – set the stage for future conflict and discord." This is a broadly received historical interpretation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century origins of the conflict, which gives the visitor a sense of being given a rather dispassionate narrative of the past.

The emergence of the modern UVF is treated with similar distantiation. The panel entitled "Early Campaign of the UVF 1965-1969" include the following extracts:

"Many current scholars posit that the UVF was reformed by right-wing Unionist opposition to liberal thinking of Prime Minister Terrence O'Neill."

"The UVF's aim was to mislead authorities. They believed blaming the IRA would erode confidence in O'Neill and his 'bridge building' policies"

"Quote from Gusty Spence: 'The UVF was not reconstituted because of a threat from the IRA. There might have been – there probably always was an implied threat from the IRA – but I believe it was reconstituted in order to oppose or be used as a bargaining counter against some of the things which O'Neill<sup>3</sup> had brought out into debate."

As many members of the modern UVF, including former prisoners, moved on to create the Progressive Unionist Party in the 1970s, a working-class-based party supporting a democratic socialist ideology, the continuity of the UVF from the 1910s to the 1960s and later is rather a bumpy one, and it's worth noting the display addresses the issue. The narrative is informative but not narrowly binding. For instance, 2 dates are mentioned as the officious and official starting date of the Troubles. The timeline reads:

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<sup>3</sup> Captain Terence O'Neill was a moderate Unionist. He became Prime Minister of Northern Ireland in 1963. The conciliatory measures he sought to introduce to reduce sectarianism were perceived to be detrimental to Unionist interests. He faced increasing criticism from his own electors as well as escalating violence and resigned in 1969.

1968	5 October	Often seen as the day the Troubles started. Confrontation between Police and Civil Rights protestors in Londonderry draws international attention.
1969	14 August	Officially recorded as the day the Troubles started. British Army is placed on active service in Londonderry and in Belfast the next days.

Reflective criticism appears in several panels, which openly recognize the violence of conflict, the lethal actions of paramilitaries on both sides and the tragic loss of civilian lives. For instance, the date when Peter Ward, a Catholic man was killed by the UVF in 1966 is included, which some would consider as the starting point of the Troubles. Likewise, on the one panel giving the timeline of the Troubles, the victims of bomb attacks perpetrated by loyalist and republican paramilitaries are acknowledged (Dublin and Monaghan in 1974, Enniskillen in 1987, Omagh in 1998).

The narrative continues with a large section devoted to life in prison, mixing personal testimonies (including from former female prisoners) and artefacts. The final part of the narrative includes the transition to politics, the impact of conflict on former combatants, their wives and families, and the post-agreement timeline. The focus is clearly on the experience of UVF members and their journey to the present day. The narrative is not a counter-narrative to the republican one: the “Other” whose behaviour is decried isn’t the republican community, but rather the Unionist middle-class establishment. One testimony from a former prisoner reads:

There is so much hypocrisy around ... There are these SuperProd figures who tell you how they nearly did what you did. But if you asked them for a job they wouldn’t want to know you because you’re a Loyalist prisoner. I’ve seen the same people sit in Church and say “Oh I don’t condone what has been done but we didn’t start it ...” People who would never dream of being actively involved but who sit in front of their televisions, and when a certain person comes on, they have murder in their hearts.

The personal testimonies, most of which are from a male perspective, do not shy away from expressing emotions, relating the hardships of imprisonment and the devastating impact on paramilitary engagement on families and on the community at large. They offer models of masculinity that are less brash and stereotyped than in ATIC. This is where ACT’s work in helping former combatants go back to civilian life, notably through self-reflection, is the most perceptible. The exhibition is tailored both for outsiders and the members of the working-class loyalist community it represents, who have moved on from being agents of conflict to agents of conflict transformation. The dimension of empowerment, despite hardships, is

essential, both in the exhibition and in the work of the organisation. The exhibition prioritizes the functions of educating and remembering over celebrating and unifying. With its critical depiction of the past, it offers a more engaging starting point to further community relations than ATIC.

### **Challenges – Funding, visitor numbers and best practices**

As loyalist heritage initiatives, ACT and ATIC define themselves as agents of conflict transformation in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Yet their role as social agents has not reached its full potential, notably because of several challenges we will now turn to.

The first challenge has to do with funding, on which development, sustainability and staffing rely. Personal communication with Billy Rowan suggests a rather precarious future for ATIC: the centre has no stable source of funding and relies on donations from visitors and friends, charging 5£ per person for groups. In 2015-16, it had an income of just over 6,500£ and spent a little over 5,000£<sup>4</sup>. Rowan works there as a volunteer 4 to 5 days a week, more if there are group tours at weekends. In practice, he says ATIC runs “from month to month”. Not only does this make it difficult to envisage significant changes to the display, but the uncertainty regarding the future of the exhibition echoes the sense of powerlessness that emerged from the story he tells. The ACT Initiative is in a slightly more stable position. The exhibition doesn’t have specific funding, but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation currently supports the organisation. The British charity sponsors initiatives promoting social change, including conflict transformation in Northern Ireland, one of its five priority areas (Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust website). ACT is one of 31 projects having received a Joseph Rowntree grant since 2014. Previous funding had come from the International Committee of the Red Cross. Securing funding from such well-regarded charities is a sign that ACT is a proactive member of the voluntary sector and that its work is valued and recognised. This helps to further empower the group it represents and can, in turn, serve as a stepping-stone for future projects, even if future funding is never guaranteed.

Another challenge for both organisations is how to promote their exhibition, given they operate outside the official museum sector and deal with contentious heritage. Although neither keeps strict records of visitor numbers, both are looking to increase their yearly visitor numbers, currently in the low hundreds. Billy Rowan explained how the 12<sup>th</sup> of July and the weekend of Remembrance Sunday in November were the busiest periods in ATIC. Student

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<sup>4</sup> [https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/ccni\\_ar\\_attachments/0000100616\\_20160401\\_CA.pdf](https://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/ccni_ar_attachments/0000100616_20160401_CA.pdf)



and youth groups are common visitors, both locals and from further afield, including from the Republic of Ireland, Canada, Switzerland and the USA. William Mitchell said ACT welcomed 25 groups in 2016, hailing from various horizons, notably Ukraine, Israel, Palestine and the USA. Overall, about 300 people visited the exhibition in 2016, a third of which from a nationalist background. Both organisations use their own networks of community workers and conflict transformation initiatives as the main channel of promoting their exhibitions. A few visitors find out about the exhibitions through Facebook and word of mouth.

The two organisations have adopted different strategies to increase the visibility of the exhibition. ATIC has contacted Visit Belfast, the main tourist information centre in the city centre, to display its leaflets there. According to Rowan, Visit Belfast hasn't been very responsive, with the consequence that the centre isn't advertised to the flow of tourists going through Visit Belfast. The lack of response has generated disappointment in ATIC but no further action has been undertaken to further press the matter. It is worth mentioning that the front page of the leaflet combines inspirational slogans ("Building the Peace", "Conflict Resolution and Transformation", "Making a positive difference") with pictures of masked men parading on the streets – it is representative of the ambivalent message conveyed by the exhibition, and a possible reason for Visit Belfast's reticence. ACT's move to new premises in West Belfast has enhanced the visibility of the exhibition, not only because of the new, more accessible location, but also because of the possibilities of partnerships with other conflict transformation initiatives. West Belfast has long attracted the bulk of political tourism in the city, with tours available on both sides of the interface between the predominantly Catholic/Nationalist/Republican Falls Road and the predominantly Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist Shankill Road. ACT's plan is to avail of this more favourable context and design a joint political tour with EPIC (a conflict transformation association for UVF ex-prisoners), the Crumlin Road Gaol where many political prisoners were detained during the conflict, the Black Taxi Tours and the Irish Republican History Museum, all of which already have the endorsement of Visit Belfast. Such a project would attract new visitors and further empower the community it represents, as Mitchell hopes to train ACT members to run the exhibition and employ them to do so.

The last challenge has to do with best curatorial practices. If Fiona Candlin's recommendations are to be followed, this point is hardly worth mentioning, since the current budget constraints of ATIC and ACT mean they have very limited leeway to improve their

practices. Basic collections care like monitoring temperature, relative humidity, light levels, and air quality is non-existent, through lack of knowledge, funding or time. There is no storage room in ATIC and only limited storage space in the new ACT location. Not all the artefacts are in display cases – some can be touched and passed around. In ATIC, the display of guns on walls can be deemed as ethically problematic and glamourizing violence (Centre for Collaborative Heritage Research, 2008). Again, applying the analytical framework for mainstream museums to heritage initiatives like ATIC and ACT only results in pointing out their shortcomings (Candlin, 2015: 13-15), when this chapter has sought to show the valuable aspects of the two exhibitions. Neither Billy Rowan nor William Mitchell has had any training in collections care or interpretation. Rowan said he learnt as he went along, talking to groups of visitors using the paper clippings as prompts and his knowledge of the organisation, while Mitchell explained he designed the exhibition after visiting several museums, notably in Poland. If staff in ATIC and ACT were to be encouraged to get training and improve their curatorial practices, who could they turn to? As small-scale, independently-run, non-accredited exhibition spaces, ATIC and ACT operate under the radar of the Northern Ireland Museums Council, who would have the relevant expertise. NIMC is also part of the Museum Development Network and works in collaboration with the British Association of Independent Museums. These bodies may sound too formal for grassroots initiatives like ATIC and ACT. Indeed, even though the artefacts on display and the narratives told are uncomfortable and contentious ones, their priority is to empower the communities they represent. Any expertise on best curatorial practices, if required and provided, would have to be passed on in a manner that would comply with the same imperative, and not be perceived as constraining or binding. Ways and means need to be imagined that would take into account the built-in limitations of such small-scale heritage initiatives, the fragile post-conflict environment in which they operate and the enduring sense of disenfranchisement and related trust issues in the communities they represent.

## **Conclusion**

For the last twenty years, Northern Ireland has been having a conversation on how to deal with the difficult heritage of the Troubles. Adjectives used to describe this conversation – challenging, uncomfortable, necessary – could also describe the two exhibitions discussed in this chapter. ATIC and ACT challenge the researcher in museum studies and the visitor by upsetting the rituals of museum analysis and experience. To many people, the very fact of engaging with their contentious subject matter requires leaving their comfort zone. The two

exhibitions perform some of the functions of mainstream museums by creating meaning, for the communities they represent and for outsiders, thereby advancing self, mutual and general understanding. As such, they are necessary social agents. They also contribute to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland by empowering the groups they represent and giving them the voice they feel is missing from the conversation. Their very existence helps understanding the peace process: the distinctive characteristics of the narratives and displays they have produced are telling signs of where these communities stand at after twenty years of peace, as is the fact that their success or shortcomings depend on their social, political and even geographical environments.

In her study on how past wrongdoings were memorialized in Nuremberg, Sharon MacDonald described how difficult heritage may disrupt the present (2009:1). In a recent article on the now global turn to difficult heritage, she argues that:

The act of publicly addressing terrible historical acts undertaken by the collective is no longer necessarily a disruption to positive identity formation. On the contrary, increasingly it seems to be a sign of moral cleanliness and honesty, and, as such, a performance of trustworthiness. (2015:19)

Even if difficult heritage poses “moral and representational challenges”, she considers the growing confidence in addressing difficult heritage may open up new representations of the past, transcending the polarization between perpetrators and victims to include the role of the silent majority (2015:19-20). Such representations of the conflict haven’t yet entered Northern Ireland museums or exhibitions, but the degree of reflective criticism at play in the exhibitions mentioned, however limited, is a step in that direction. The imperative of social responsibility imposed on museums (Janes, 2007) can hardly be expected from such small-scale initiatives as ACT or ATIC. Yet for their social role to expand as heritage initiatives, conversations with critical friends – visitors, academics, museum professionals – might prove fruitful.

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