

TERRITORIAL PISSINGS

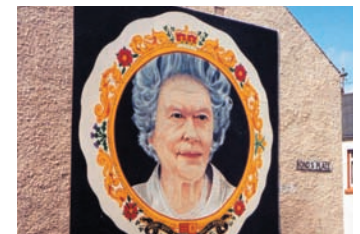
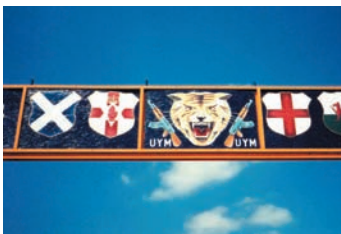
REPUBLICAN AND LOYALIST MURALS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

ADAM HELMS

In the summer of 2003, Adam Helms traveled to Northern Ireland to document the murals of Catholic and Protestant communities in Derry, Armagh, and Belfast. Each evening he was there he drank a minimum of two Guinness, usually followed by a Jameson on the rocks.









On Sunday, January 30, 1972, British paratroopers shot and killed thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers in Derry. Bloody Sunday, as it came to be known, effectively ended the non-violent civil rights movement in Northern Ireland and inspired a wave of enlistment in the Provisional IRA's war against the British military. Today in Free Derry Corner, in the Bogside where the shootings occurred, Irish Tricolors fly and the buildings are covered with murals commemorating the event.

When I was in Derry photographing, I met up with Will Kelly, one of the Bogside muralists. Will, who now lives in Australia, returns to Derry for a month every summer to complete a new mural with his brother Tom and their partner. Will, who lived in Derry at the time of Bloody Sunday, seemed exhausted by Northern Ireland politics and the painfully slow peace process, which he constantly mocked. I imagined this was why he chose to live so far away, even though he was clearly proud of his work as a muralist in Derry.

THE BOGSIDE INN

The notorious Bogside neighborhood in Derry, Northern Ireland, was the site of the Bloody Sunday shootings [see caption at left] and, for a time, was controlled solely by the IRA. It's no surprise that with such a violent history of resistance it would be home to the highest number of Republican murals in Northern Ireland. "REAL IRA" (a dissident Republican splinter group still dedicated to violent methods of resistance) is spray painted on houses and pubs throughout the area.

Most of the Bogside murals are in close proximity to each other, surrounding Free Derry Corner where the Bloody Sunday shootings took place. As I was photographing the murals, I noticed a pub right in the middle of them called "The Bogside Inn." There always seemed to be tough looking young men hanging around outside, all times of the day or night. In an area still buzzing with dissident Republican activity, I imagined that many of their fathers were involved with the IRA and perhaps Bloody Sunday itself. Will Kelly, a Bogside muralist, told me that going into the Bogside Inn would be like walking into Dodge City. I knew right





THE LADY AND THE SLIPPER

The Shankill Road in West Belfast figures prominently in the lore of the Troubles. Adjacent to the Catholic Falls Road but separated from it by a large and obtrusive peace wall, the Shankill is where the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) re-formed in 1972. It is the territory of the infamous Augustus “Gutsy” Spence, the founder of the modern UVF, and was home to Lenny Murphy and the UVF members referred to as the “Shankill Butchers.” It is still considered a hard-core area of Protestant paramilitary activity; the plethora of murals on all sides of the Shankill serve as evidence enough of this.

I was warned to be extra vigilant on the Shankill because there was an Ulster Defense Association (UDA) feud going on and there had been several murders—a journalist had recently been shot for unknown reasons. As I was leaving the Belfast city center, I asked a man in a shop to point me in the direction of the Shankill. He looked at me with a combination of amusement and horror and asked if I had a death wish.

The most common symbol in the Loyalist murals is the image of a raised right hand, known as the red hand of Ulster. The mythic origin of the red hand is hotly disputed, but according to the Protestant Loyalist version, two kings (or brothers, or even giants I was told) were in a boat race from Scotland to Ireland. The winner of the race would claim the island as their own. The race was close, with neither king gaining a clear advantage. As they neared the finish, in an act of desperation, one of them hacked off his right hand and threw it onto the island, ensuring his victory and ownership of Ireland.

The bloodied red hand of Ulster is used in emblems and crests in the Republic of Ireland, but in the North it is primarily a symbol of Protestant dominance over the Catholics and as an assertion of the Loyalists’ right to Ulster. The red hand, which appears in the murals of all four Loyalist paramilitary organizations, is sometimes pictured clenched in a fist to represent militancy. One mural I found in Tiger’s Bay in North Belfast depicted the hand wrapped in barbed wire to symbolize Loyalist political prisoners.





The figure I saw repeated most in Republican murals was Bobby Sands who was the first prisoner to die of starvation during a series of hunger strikes in the Maze prison in the early 1980s.

In October 1980, the British government classified IRA detainees as criminals rather than political prisoners and prohibited them from wearing civilian clothes and mingling freely. In response, the IRA instructed the detainees to begin a hunger strike and to refuse the mandated prison uniforms and don prison blankets instead. They were also told to smear their excrement on the cell walls. The first hunger strike ended with what the IRA perceived as a flawed agreement, the second ended with the deaths of all eight prisoners.

All the hunger strikers are commemorated as martyrs, but the image of Sands holds a special place in Republican mural iconography. The image of his smiling face is often accompanied by the quote "our revenge will be the laughter of our children."

then I had to have at least a couple of pints in the place; I didn't want to leave the Bogside without sitting in the pub where I could perhaps be drinking alongside men affiliated with the IRA.

I chose what I thought would be the most innocuous time for my little adventure, a Sunday morning. It was around 11:00 AM when I walked in and realized how much I had miscalculated my timing. The place was packed wall-to-wall—I couldn't see one empty seat. There were mostly men, and every one of them was covered in tattoos and had huge facial scars that ran from their ears to their mouth or chin. These guys are known in Ireland as "hard men." Dodge City indeed.

I finally found a seat and started in on my first drink. The man I sat next to looked at me like I was from another planet, but immediately introduced himself as Charlie. Charlie was a man with a bit of girth and by his amicable nature and the way he approached me, I could tell he was well on his way to a long day of drinking. He pulled in closer and began to talk to me at close range, so that I couldn't avert my eyes. He smelled like he appeared, as though he had spent the majority of his life sitting right where he was, smoking and drinking the days away with endless pints of Guinness. In the ninety minutes or so that I sat with him,





By this time I was anxious to say the least, and the sheer number of murals I saw when I arrived only served to increase my paranoia. These were the most bellicose and hardcore of all the murals I had seen yet: masked gunmen appeared on every other wall. People gave me icy stares as I passed them on the street. I was quickly running through the film in my camera, and toward the upper Shankill I realized I needed to change rolls.

On top of this, I had to take a piss. Badly. In most places these wouldn't be problems for a tourist, but these weren't the streets most tourists visited. It wouldn't be the strangest thing in the world to change my film on the street, but I figured there was no faster way to get a sound beating or even get myself shot, than to publicly urinate on the Shankill Road.

The pub that was closest to me was ringed on either side by UVF and Red Hand Commando murals and I thought there was a good chance paramilitaries would be waiting for me inside, but I had no other option—my teeth were starting to float. The pub was called "The Lady and Slipper." Maybe I would be okay. I walked across the street and pushed open the door.

The largest and most ominous paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland is the Ulster Defense Association (UDA). Formed in 1971, the UDA is a loose coalition of Protestant vigilante groups—at its peak the UDA was said to have fifty thousand members. From the start, the UDA was criticized as a criminal organization that lacked the discipline and resolve expected from a military outfit. The UDA today is involved in the drug trade and gun-running. Most of the violence committed by the UDA and their military wing, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), is due to feuds amongst commanders and other Protestants, rather than sectarian violence.

The UDA and UFF murals were a powerful presence in every Loyalist area I visited. In purely visual terms, UDA and UFF iconography equally dominate the Loyalist communities.





The tradition of the heroic female guerrilla was still very much alive in West Belfast: women appeared in dozens of Republican murals (never, so far as I saw, in Loyalist murals). Although women play active roles in most guerrilla or resistance movements, I assumed these murals reflected the IRA's open recruitment policy; they'll take anyone, regardless of sex. They consider all members of the community—men, women, and children—as integral to the success of their movement.

The area with the largest concentration of murals depicting women was around the Falls Road in West Belfast. One mural in particular stays in my mind: a female figure is clad in a rag-tag uniform and a beret and proudly holds a gun upright—looking very much like the familiar icon of Che Guevara.

he consumed no less that six pints to my two, and it was only just after noon.

Charlie and I talked about Derry and the Bogside for a while and he asked me typical questions about the United States and movies and all the sunshine in California. When the subject veered from entertainment to politics and American foreign policy, Charlie became animated and scooted in closer. He informed me that we were in fact sitting in a notorious Provo bar (Provo is a colloquialism for the Provisional IRA, or PIRA) and, later, that the bar man was Martin McGuinness's brother. (Martin McGuinness is one of two senior negotiators in Sinn Fein and was the PIRA Chieftain of Derry during the sixties and seventies.) He let me know that if anyone heard the two of us talking about these things, they would take us out back and shoot us both in the knees.

I suspected Charlie was bullshitting me because there is no way someone really involved with the Provos would be blabber mouthing to a total stranger, but he was entertaining so I didn't mind. I moved myself over to escape such close quarters with Charlie and I told him, rather forcefully, that perhaps we should change the subject as I didn't particularly want to get knee-capped that day. He understood and spent





Four hard-looking men stared back at me from the bar with expressions of shock, as though I had walked in naked or was wearing a clown suit. I stood there as they shouted at me with accents so thick I couldn't make out a word. They stopped speaking all at once and one of them asked if I had bombs, guns, or munitions in the bag I carried. I responded to this question with a grin from ear to ear, walked toward the bar and opened my bag, showing them that I had nothing but a camera and a newspaper.

As soon as they realized how harmless I was they put their arms around me and welcomed me into their lair. I was quick to ask about the bathroom to relieve my bladder, which by this time I thought might burst. When I came back to the bar, a fresh pint awaited me, bought by a guy who introduced himself as Daniel. Another one was William and the other two were both named Ian. From what I know, most of the Protestant paramilitaries spend all their time in pubs "doing business," so I could imagine my presence was a welcome change to the monotony of sitting in the same pub day in and day out with the same people. All four of them hit me with question after question about where I was from and what I was doing. Daniel told me he had painted a couple of the

The UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) is today the second largest Protestant paramilitary organization in Northern Ireland. The original UVF was an all volunteer movement formed in 1912 to oppose home rule. In 1916 it was absorbed into the British army as the 36th Ulster division to fight in World War I. In the total slaughter that was the Battle of the Somme, the UVF was wiped out in one day. The acronym was a memory until 1974 when the present UVF was re-formed in West Belfast to counter IRA activity.

Many murals depict contemporary UVF paramilitaries alongside soldiers from the original movement, sometimes standing together on the battlefield of the Somme. The UVF mythologizes itself as an organization that represents the historical and popular will of the Loyalists—unlike the UDA who, according to the UVF, lack historical legitimacy.





I had heard that at the beginning of the latest Intifada in the Occupied Territories, Republicans were flying Palestinian flags and Loyalists were flying Israeli flags. When I was in Northern Ireland, it had been nearly two years since the Intifada had started and most of the flags were gone, but I did see a number of what I call "solidarity murals," which promote Republican unity with other separatist movements across the world.

The mural pictured above in Derry depicts a green IRA Phoenix holding an Irish Tricolor and a Palestinian flag. On the Falls Road in Belfast there were two murals condemning the Israeli military as well as stencils instructing people to boycott Israeli goods. Also off the Falls Road was a mural promoting ETA, a Basque separatist group in northern Spain, and another featuring an image of a Turkish hunger striker inspired by Bobby Sands. The Republicans feel a connection to these movements because they all espouse a form of irredentist nationalism in the face of a far superior military power.

the rest of the time I was there talking about John Wayne and Charles Bronson; he was as intrigued by Charles Bronson as I was by thinking I could be sitting around IRA guys.

Even though I told him Charles Bronson was dead, right before I left the Bogside Inn, Charlie, three full pints in front of him, told me it was my responsibility to give Charles his regards. I promised I would and, turning, walked toward the door. I realized then that two men at the end of the bar had been watching us the whole time. They kept their eyes on me and nodded as I left. Maybe Charlie wasn't as full of shit as I thought.

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murals and I knew this to mean he was, in fact, one of the multitude of masked gunman appearing on the walls of the Shankill. I had no doubt these guys were paramilitaries, which was confirmed when one of the lan's asked me if I wanted to join the UVF. I figured it was best not to inform them I was in Northern Ireland to photograph murals on all sides of the conflict. As far as they knew, I was there to document only the murals of Loyalists like themselves.

After a second pint, I looked around and realized the pub was filling up. I figured it was time to move on, my film was changed and I seemed to be drawing attention. As I left, Daniel told me to come back the next day so I could meet their friends and learn more about the history of the area. At first this seemed intriguing; I could hang out and really get to know my new friends in the UVF. But I began imagining scenarios where they became suspicious of me, thinking I worked with the CIA or something. The more I indulged in these self-important fantasies the less inclined I was to return. The next day, various paranoias and delusions filling my head, I decided to avoid the Shankill altogether and return to the Falls Road; enemy territory that nonetheless seemed more welcoming.

