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Eternal Battle — the Memory of Conflict in Belfast Murals

Summary: The murals present in the urban space of Belfast are one of the most distinctive forms of expression of the beliefs of Northern Ireland loyalists. Their symbolism and depictions of historical events that create a coherent imagery not only produce a network of associations and symbols, but they also contribute to maintaining the group's distinctive identity. This article provides a detailed analysis of murals themselves as a medium, as well as that of the motifs appearing on those of them which still exist within city's landscape. The heraldic and vexillological symbols discussed are placed within the broader context of loyalist ideology and worldview. The role of paramilitary organisations in the creation of the system of symbols present in the cityscape is being examined. Recurring depictions of historical events on the city walls are being discussed within the broader context of the narrative of the past favoured by loyalists in Northern Ireland. Loyalist art constructed the image of reality in this way. The role of memory of the past in creating the contemporary social imaginary plays a special role in this discussion. These reflections, which align with the research on national myths, lead to conclusions regarding the role played by memory politics and historical narratives in creating a sense of religious, ethnic and political distinctiveness. This analysis is particularly relevant in the context of the changes that have been taking place in Northern Irish society in recent decades, including those related to the Brexit process.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, Belfast, murals, loyalists, unionism, politics of memory, historical narratives, symbolism

For several decades, Belfast has been undergoing a substantial transformation. The post-industrial city, hitherto associated with ethno-religious conflict, is changing in order to attract tourists. Bombs no longer explode on the streets, nor is the presence



of British soldiers to be found. However, in some districts, a passer-by may still have the impression that their actions are being watched by a figure in a balaclava, rifle in hand — immortalised on one of the numerous murals.¹ The memory of the conflict has been preserved on the city walls and continues to affect members of local communities.

Although we are accustomed to thinking of the conflict in Northern Ireland as a dispute that ended with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, antagonisms are nevertheless still present in the city.² Furthermore, the social and economic problems that once fuelled the conflict have not disappeared. The decline of industry in Belfast and the attempt to change the character of the city by attracting tourists have not significantly improved the economic situation in the poorest districts. A large proportion of the city's inhabitants still live in ethnically and culturally homogeneous enclaves — Protestant or Catholic housing estates.³ Acts of sectarian violence still occur in Northern Ireland, and according to police data, paramilitary organisations responsible for acts of terrorism between 1969 and 1998 are still active and conducting recruitment.⁴

Sally Browne, in her article *Northern Ireland's fragile peace: how the Troubles paused and mutated since its official 'end' in 1998*, posits that the dispute has not been ended, but merely suspended and quietened; it continues to smoulder, however, and the process of reaching an agreement related to the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union has only exacerbated it.⁵ The problem of the existence of a heavily controlled border between Ireland and Northern Ireland was once one of the main points of contention. EU law also served as a safeguard against the curtailment of the rights of the Catholic minority. The Brexit process has therefore released hitherto suppressed, yet still smouldering, antagonisms.

Collective memory and its physical manifestations have an impact on the perpetuation of patterns that gave rise to conflict in the past. Symbolically, an eternal battle continues on the streets of Belfast: literally in the form of commemorations of the Battles of the Boyne or the Somme, and figuratively — between two groups whose conflicting historical narratives clash in the urban space through the medium of murals.⁶

Terminology and Research Methodology Used

The conflict in Northern Ireland is often presented as a religious dispute; however, this is a distinct oversimplification. The religious aspect in Northern Ireland is strongly linked to ethnic and cultural identity, however this is not a doctrinal conflict.

1 *Prepered for Peace Ready For War*.

2 Piórko A. 2008, 233–234.

3 Dawson G. 2020, 149.

4 Browne S. 2019, 222–225.

5 Browne S. 2019, 215.

6 McDowell S., Switzer C. 2011, 82.

It is not the Catholic Church that remains in conflict with the Protestant Church of Ireland — it is the congregants of these churches who remain in dispute, where the element of faith becomes merely a determinant of the division into two warring groups.⁷ Therefore, it becomes crucial to define the studied community in a way other than through the prism of religion.

Irish Loyalists are a group of Northern Irish residents who perceive themselves as ethnically, culturally and religiously distinct from the rest of the inhabitants of the island. Politically, Loyalists present Unionist views, seeing a need to continue the union with Great Britain, in contrast to Republicans, who seek to abolish this link. However, although Irish Loyalists identify as British — citizens of the United Kingdom — they also emphasise their ethnic distinctness and describe themselves as Ulstermen: descendants of the Scottish settlers of the Ulster Plantation who arrived in Ireland in the 17th century.⁸

The distinct, characteristic identity of Loyalists is based on a system of employed symbols. The aim of this article will therefore be its thorough analysis, both in terms of the signs used and their connotations, as well as the narratives created through them. Of particular importance in this context will be considerations regarding the memory of historical events that shaped the consciousness and distinct identity of this group, and the manner of their commemoration and representation in public space. The main task will therefore be an attempt to seek an answer to the question of the functions of murals and the goals pursued through them.

Although the text will also include references to the Republican muralist tradition, the analysis will focus on wall depictions created in the Loyalist and Unionist tradition containing its symbolic components. In order to focus on currently functioning symbolism and narrative, the source material will consist of murals whose existence in the urban space was confirmed in 2024 and later. Conversely, those that disappeared from the streets of Belfast before 2024 will be omitted, except in situations where the mention of earlier depictions serves to outline the history of the phenomenon.

It should also be emphasised that today another form of expression is appearing, arising from the mural tradition but simultaneously competing with it: large-format banners. Due to their specific nature, completely different aesthetics, and even more ephemeral character, this article will devote attention only to murals understood as wall paintings, and the accompanying material culture such as commemorative plaques (but only in combination and relation to the primary medium). The application of these selection criteria yields a fairly large set of source materials, consisting of approximately 40 wall depictions analysed in the text. Thus, over 100 years of the Loyalist mural tradition will be subjected to study, as the earliest depictions appeared

7 Cairns D. 2000, 438.

8 Moore R., Sanders A. 2002, 10.

on the streets of Belfast in the first decades of the 20th century, while the latest examples discussed in the article commemorate the coronation of King Charles III in 2023.

It is also crucial to emphasise that this analysis is conducted using tools characteristic of historical research, rather than from the perspective of an art historian or anthropologist, although these issues certainly also fall within the scope of such research. The analysis of the narrative used, particularly that concerning symbols and depictions of historical events, serves here for considerations on identity and the perception of history by the Loyalist group. It thus forms part of the discourse on the issue of national myths.

Murals and Their Creators: Social and Economic Context

Murals are large paintings executed directly on the walls of buildings. The contemporary meaning of this term and its connotations largely derive from the Mexican movement of muralism. One of its most characteristic elements was the link between art and political and social manifestos, as well as the ideas of socialism. For Mexican artists, murals were also a form of expressing pride in their culture and tradition.⁹ It is also worth mentioning the tradition of using this medium for advertising purposes, where large-format advertising is placed in the form of a painting on the wall of a building at the initiative of a company to support its economic activity.

Both aforementioned contexts are extremely important from the perspective of analysing the murals of Belfast. They create a historical narrative and emphasise the identity of the community. Their message is often saturated with political context and enters into polemics with the narratives of other groups. On the other hand, murals are created through private initiative, and their authors often create their works based on clear guidelines from those commissioning them.¹⁰ The aesthetic aspect of the works often yields to the information being conveyed. This information is comparable to an advertising message: symbolic, quick to read, and intended for a specific target audience whose established network of associations will allow for the rapid reception of the intended message.¹¹

It is therefore justifiable to ask: who actually is the author of the analysed message and who, through the medium of murals, shapes the politics of memory?

The process of creating this characteristic form of street art has only recently been studied, therefore detailed data on every painting is not accessible.¹² The current state of knowledge allows for the categorisation of several groups of commissioners. Historically, murals were created at the initiative of local communities, often associated with

9 Coffey M. 2012, 1–5.

10 Lissle D. 2006, 40.

11 Lissle D. 2006, 37.

12 Crowley T. 2011, 33.

a specific district or area of the city. Social organisations and paramilitary groups were also responsible for the creation of paintings.¹³ The artists creating the murals were less responsible for creating the message itself. They often remained anonymous, working for commissioners and receiving payment for it, whereby some of them worked on both Loyalist and Republican murals.¹⁴ In this respect, the murals of Belfast are closer to commercial advertising murals than to Mexican muralism.

Heraldic and Vexillological Motifs

Heraldic symbols and flags are an emanation of one of the primary ideological elements of Loyalism: the attachment to the union with Great Britain. The mere presence of elements referencing British heraldic tradition distinguishes the Loyalist tradition from the Republican one, which rejects these elements entirely.

Loyalist murals on the streets of Belfast often visually reference the Royal Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.¹⁵ Other heraldic symbols, such as British lions or Scottish unicorns, are also utilised. A significant element of the crest is prominently displayed: the British Crown, which simultaneously manifests attachment to the institution of the monarchy and the reigning sovereign.¹⁶ Monarchist sentiment is also expressed through symbolic depictions praising Charles III and celebrating his accession to the throne.¹⁷ These are accompanied by the prominent, traditional phrase *‘God Save the King!’*¹⁸ This motto also functions independently of the monarchical context on murals concerning other subjects.¹⁹ In some depictions, the French phrase *Dieu et mon droit* (eng.: *God and my right*) is also present, serving as the traditional heraldic motto of the British monarchy.²⁰ However, no maxim appears as frequently as the motto of the Unionist movement: *Quis Separabit?* (eng.: *Who shall separate us?*).²¹ These words, a quotation from St Paul’s Letter to the Romans, emphasise what Loyalists perceive as the indissoluble nature of the relationship with Great Britain, while simultaneously engaging in polemics with the Republican movement, which advocates for precisely such a separation.²²

13 Lissle D. 2006, 40.

14 Lissle D. 2006, 42.

15 *Gertrude Star Flute Band*.

16 *East Belfast Protestant Boys; YCV Division; Loyalist Tigers Bay; Tigers Bay First Flute*.

17 *God Save The King*.

18 *God Save The King*.

19 *Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant*.

20 *Dieu Et Mon Droit; Gertrude Star Flute Band*.

21 *East Belfast Brigade Remembers Our Fallen; Robert Dougan Memorial; UDA South Belfast Brigade A Battalion; Village South Belfast Brigade C COY*.

22 All illustrations used in this article are from the Virtual Belfast Mural Tour website. The author would like to give special thanks to the VBMT team for granting permission to use them.

Fig. 1. *Dieu Et Mon Droit*
(Source: VBMT)



Loyalist murals constantly use the symbolism of national flowers, depicting the connection between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom in a literal intertwining of the stems of Scottish thistles, English roses and Irish shamrocks.²³ This allows for the incorporation of both a clearly legible symbolic message and an aesthetic element into the display. It is worth noting that murals, most often located in working-class

She also encourages you to visit the Virtual Belfast Mural Tour website and see other murals at <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/>.

²³ *Dieu Et Mon Droit; Ordinary People Extraordinary Roles.*

districts, also serve the function of beautifying a landscape dominated by the brick buildings of terraced houses.²⁴ Both the aesthetic element and the symbolism of pride, accentuating the values of a given community, are extremely precious to the residents of these parts of the post-industrial city.²⁵

The most legible group of national symbols is comprised of flags. Murals are thus adorned with depictions of the national colours of England, Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland.²⁶ In this way, Ulster is celebrated as one of the constituent elements of the Kingdom.²⁷

The primary place in the Loyalist imaginary is occupied by the flag of the United Kingdom, the so-called Union Jack. It might seem that its depiction on murals constitutes, like other flags, an element of identification and an emphasis on the group's identity. However, placing this phenomenon in a historical context reveals another aspect related to it. As a state symbol, the Union Jack was subject to special legal protection until 1987, which penalised its tearing down, destruction, or removal. However, flags associated with the Catholic or Republican tradition did not enjoy the same kind of protection.²⁸ This created a system in which a symbol key to the identification of Loyalists and Unionists was covered by special legal protection, while symbols important to Republicans could be easily removed and destroyed. In this context, the Union Jack became not only an identity element — it was also the most obvious symbol of social inequality and 'Protestant Ascendancy' in action.²⁹

The attachment, also at the symbolic level, to the concept of the Union is also strongly linked to one of the main elements of the Loyalist narrative — a phenomenon described by researchers as the 'siege mentality'.³⁰ Although Protestants in Northern Ireland have historically constituted a majority, they were a minority relative to the total population of the island. In the view of Protestants, only the system of Protestant Ascendancy guaranteed security and protection against Catholic revanchism. The Union constituted the guarantor of that security.³¹ The prospect of granting autonomy to Ireland deeply unsettled Unionists: it actualised a vision in which political and economic issues would be decided by Republicans and Catholics. The Union is therefore perceived as the only form of defence against such a fate.³²

24 Vannais J. 2000, 21.

25 Vannais J. 2000, 21.

26 *God Save The King; Ballybeen UFF; Dieu Et Mon Droit; Symbolising the Union of England Scotland Ireland; The Ulster Conflict Is About Nationality.*

27 Bryan D. 2005, 26.

28 Bryan D. 2005, 28.

29 *Protestant Ascendancy* – an economic and political dominance of the Protestant population in Ireland from the 17th to the 20th century, maintained through legislative acts discriminating against the Catholic population (*Penal Laws*).

30 Cairns D. 2000, 445.

31 Goalwin G. 2013, 201.

32 McIntosh G. 2000, 93–112.

**Symbols and Emblems
of Paramilitary Organisations**

The sense of threat felt by Loyalists influences the role fulfilled by the murals they create. They are intended to deter a potential adversary and manifest control over a given territory. On the walls of Belfast, this task is performed by depictions related to the activities of paramilitary organisations.

The most prevalent type of symbols immortalised in the form of paintings are the emblems of organisations such as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) and the Young Citizen Volunteers (YCV). It is worth mentioning that among the aforementioned organisations, only the youth wing is not included on the United Kingdom government's lists of proscribed terrorist organisations.³³

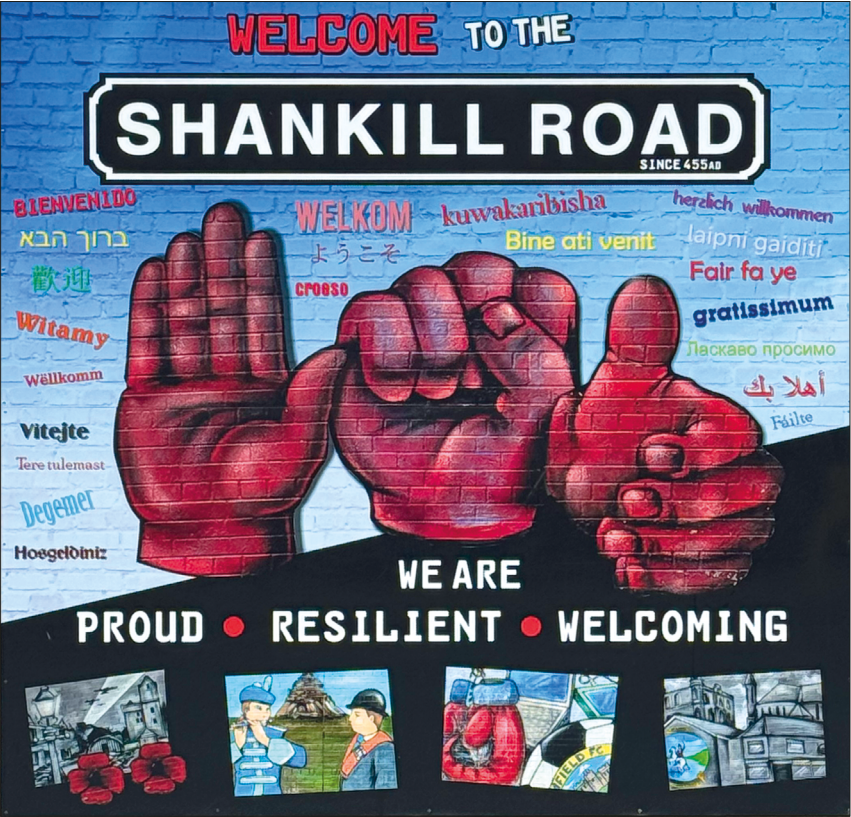


Fig. 2.
Welcome to the
Shankill Road
(Source: VBMT)

33 Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations list.



Fig. 3. Prepared For Peace Ready For War (Source: VBMT)

The most widespread and culturally recognisable symbol is the emblem of the Red Hand of Ulster, used by most paramilitary organisations. It is also the only symbol of likely Celtic origin consistently used by Loyalists. The bloody hand marks the streets of Protestant districts in its numerous variants: inscribed within a six-pointed gold star as the symbol of the UFF,³⁴ adorning an intense green shamrock with the YCV designation,³⁵ or inscribed in a circle and surrounded by the motto 'For God and Ulster' where it marks the presence of the UVF.³⁶ The Red Hand may be bleeding,³⁷ clenched in a fist,³⁸ or, perhaps most surprisingly, extended in a gesture of greeting and surrounded by cheerful welcomes in various languages, as seen on the mural welcoming people to the Shankill Road.³⁹ This last example, it must be emphasised, is significantly distinctive from other murals due to the function it performs. The *Welcome to Shankill Road* painting, although it uses a traditional symbol of Loyalism, has a primarily joyful and encouraging tone, softening the image of this area (formerly a centre of activity for Loyalist groups). In both its message and form, it contrasts with the traditional role of paramilitary murals.

This role is best expressed through depictions of masked, armed figures. UVF militants thus overlook the residents of Mount Vernon Park from above the barrels of rifles.

³⁴ Ballybeen UFF.

³⁵ YCV Division.

³⁶ East Belfast Ulster Volunteer Force; For God and Ulster.

³⁷ Brian Robinson Mural; South Belfast Volunteers.

³⁸ Ulster Young Militants; Loyalist Tigers Bay.

³⁹ *Welcome to the Shankill Road*.

The only part of the figures' faces not obscured by a balaclava are the eyes, which follow the gaze of the passer-by.⁴⁰ Similar depictions can be found at other points in East Belfast.⁴¹ On some murals—those celebrating the activities of youth organisations—it is children who are armed with baseball bats and rifles.⁴²

These depictions fulfil several functions. Primarily, their task is to mark territory controlled by military organisations. In this respect, Loyalist murals do not differ from Republican ones.⁴³ They are created in enclaves and inform anyone entering a given territory of its character, while also serving a deterrent function.⁴⁴ Thus, a large portion of the information contained in the mural is received by the group of 'outsiders' intended to be deterred in this way.

However, the second part of the information reaches the local residents, for whom these murals become a symbol and a landmark.⁴⁵ They are also intended to provide them with a sense of security and a conviction of the protection extended over them by paramilitary organisations.

It is worth emphasising that after the Good Friday Agreement, the profile of these organisations changed. They morphed towards organised crime, engaging in the trafficking of weapons and drugs.⁴⁶ According to police data, 25% of all individuals involved in organised crime in Northern Ireland are members of paramilitary organisations, which still maintain their ideological profile, treating criminal activity as a method of financing their ideological work.⁴⁷ The support of the local community and control over the narrative of the conflict are absolutely crucial for their operations and recruitment capabilities.⁴⁸

Murals and Narratives of the Past

One of the key functions of murals is the construction of community identity by creating narratives about historical events.⁴⁹ The way the past is perceived, and the act of inscribing it into accepted frameworks, allows contemporary events to be explained by incorporating them into established patterns.

40 *Prepared For Peace Ready For War*.

41 *Trevor King Mural; For God and Ulster; UDA South Belfast Brigade A Battalion; Ulster Young Militants*.

42 *Ulster Freedom Corner; YCV 1st Belfast Battalion B Company*.

43 Smithey L.A. 2009, 96.

44 Goalwin G. 2013, 202.

45 Flannery E. 2006, 76.

46 Smithey L.A. 2009, 91.

47 Browne S. 2019, 221–222.

48 Smithey L.A. 2009, 95.

49 Campbell S. 2017, 105.

It is therefore justifiable to no longer analyse specific symbols, but depictions of historical events, to discover what kind of memory network is created by Loyalist murals. Which events are actively commemorated? What role do historical patterns play?

One of the most characteristic features of the historical narrative visible on the murals is its punctiform rather than linear nature. The history presented in the paintings is captured at characteristic, breakthrough moments.⁵⁰ Certain elements are excluded from this narrative, while other events are emphasised and celebrated.

A great absence in the Loyalist vision is the ancient, pre-Christian past. Traditionally, references to the Celtic imaginarium constitute the domain of Republicans.⁵¹ Although there have been attempts in recent years to fit certain mythical heroes into the Loyalist narrative, this is not a permanent element of the imaginarium, and currently, no mural with this type of message functions in Belfast.⁵² Likewise, the use of the Gaelic language is linked to the Catholic community and the Republican movement.⁵³ Consequently, on the Loyalist side, there is a need to demonstrate a right to the land, justifying the group's presence in Ireland. This can only be realised through depictions of the Irish landscape as a backdrop for the Loyalist message. Paramilitary fighters are thus depicted against the backdrop of the hills surrounding Belfast and urban buildings.⁵⁴ Another form of emphasising this connection is the symbolic depiction of the borders of the six northern counties.⁵⁵

In analysing the narrative of the past preserved in murals, three key historical events can be distinguished around which Loyalist group identity is built: the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, the Ulster Crisis of 1912–1914 and the Battle of the Somme in 1916. These are moments in history that conform to a pattern highly characteristic of the Loyalist narrative, which can be dissected into several key narrative elements.⁵⁶ The first is the element of threat to Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. In the case of the Battle of the Boyne, it is the threat from Jacobite forces seeking the return of a Catholic monarch to the throne.⁵⁷ The events of the Ulster Crisis, on the other hand, were caused by the threat of the Home Rule Act coming into force, under which Protestants would become a minority in a separate Dublin parliament dominated politically by Catholics. This threat was still present in the Loyalist consciousness during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, which in their narrative was to serve as a test of Northern Ireland's loyalty to the British Empire.

50 McAuley J.W., Ferguson N. 2023, 145.

51 *You Cannot Break Ireland*.

52 *Loyalist Cuchulainn Shankill Parade Belfast* [removed]. Moore R., Sanders A. 2002, 12.

53 *C Company Carnan Street; YCV 1st Belfast Battalion B Company*.

54 *C Company Carnan Street; YCV 1st Belfast Battalion B Company*.

55 *Donegall Road Remembering the History of the Bonfire*.

56 Beiner G. 2007, 370.

57 Cairns D. 2000, 441.

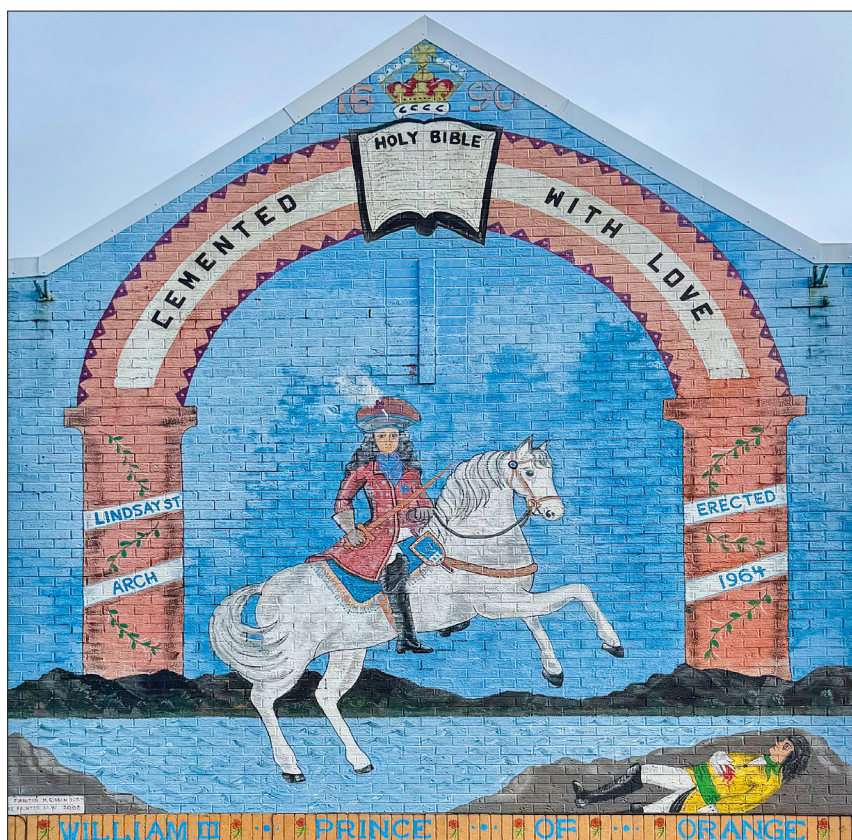


Fig. 4. Prince William of Orange (Source: VBMT)

The motif of threat is strictly linked to the element of mobilisation and the repelling of enemy forces in the face of overwhelming danger. Thus, both the murals depicting the triumph of William of Orange on the banks of the River Boyne⁵⁸ and those commemorating the mobilisation of Unionists during the Ulster Crisis,⁵⁹ as well as the soldiers of the 36th (Ulster) Division during the Battle of the Somme,⁶⁰ actually depict the same phenomenon: a moment of testing and mobilisation upon which the survival of the community and Protestant Ascendancy depends. Victory occurs on the edge of defeat, and the collective is bonded by a sense of peril.⁶¹ Success, in turn, guarantees the continued functioning of the group on its preferred terms.

58 *Prince William of Orange.*

59 *Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant; Better The Grave Than Slavery; Trevor King Mural; UVF; Carson's Volunteers; For God and Ulster.*

60 *Cosy Somme Association East Belfast; Carson's Volunteers; Lord Street Remembers; Lest We Forget.*

61 Beiner G. 2007, 371.



Fig. 5. Trevor King (Source: VBMT)

The Loyalist struggle of the second half of the 20th century is also inscribed into this pattern. This is achieved through a specific symbol: the Flanders poppy. In the cultural sphere of the former British Empire, this is a sign commemorating the heroism of soldiers on the fronts of the Great War. The tradition of commemorating fallen soldiers in this way dates back to 1919 and continues to this day.⁶² However, the use of the poppy on Belfast murals is not limited solely to commemorations of British soldiers' combat in the World Wars, which gives the symbol different connotations in this specific context.

Poppy wreaths in Belfast are an element of murals reminding viewers of the victims of Republican terrorist attacks.⁶³ However, it is not only civilian victims of the conflict who are celebrated in this way. Poppies frame murals dedicated to members

62 Village South Belfast Brigade C COY; Welcome to the Shankill Road.

63 We Owe It To The Future And The Victims.

of Loyalist paramilitary organisations. In this manner, for example, Robert Dougan — an active member of the UDA killed in an assassination in 1998 — was commemorated.⁶⁴ A poppy wreath also frames the likeness of Trevor King, one of the UVF commanders heavily involved in terrorist activities.⁶⁵ Memorials do not always concern specific individuals. The symbolism of the poppy on murals refers just as often to a collective hero: a member of a paramilitary organisation who lost their life fighting ‘for the cause.’⁶⁶ Memory of the heroes of the Great War is also linked and fused in the Loyalist narrative with the memory of the activities of the Loyalist movement from 1970 to 1998. On the streets of Belfast, examples of murals commemorating events of the First World War can be found near which plaques or badges have been placed celebrating members of Loyalist paramilitary organisations who died tragic deaths.⁶⁷

Historical events are thus arranged by the Loyalist community into a specific pattern but are also used to create a positive image of movement members by comparing them to fallen soldiers. This creates a message not only for Loyalists and Republicans but also for bystanders. In this way, murals are used to win the sympathy of those not involved in the cultural conflict. The paintings thus become a method of fighting for victim status — which is crucial for gaining social support. In this context, murals dedicated to figures of Loyalist ‘martyrs’ are extremely important in creating the group’s image.⁶⁸ Forms of commemoration and the politics of memory contribute to the cementing of the conflict. As long as the community identifies as victims, perceiving the other group only as oppressors, it is difficult to speak of dialogue.⁶⁹

Summary

Murals and the symbolism contained within them perform several functions in the urban space of Belfast. Primarily, they serve to build group identity by creating a shared network of associations that construct community identity. Through heraldic symbols, flags and emblems, connections to Great Britain are emphasised. Pro-British sentiment is an element that distinguishes Ulstermen from other inhabitants of the island. Group identity is also built by references to historical events that define its history. The element of pride in the achievements of ancestors, creating a positive vision of one’s own community, is significant here.

⁶⁴ *Robert Dougan Memorial.*

⁶⁵ *Trevor King Mural.*

⁶⁶ *Village South Belfast Brigade C COY; C Company Carnan Street.*

⁶⁷ *Poppy Mural.*

⁶⁸ Beiner G. 2007, 386.

⁶⁹ Spencer G. 2023, 226.

An equally important aspect is the confirmation of the right to Irish land — whether in the form of backdrops for murals celebrating events or individuals important to the community, or through the placement of the paintings and their role in marking the territory of Protestant estates.

This is linked to the function of power projection, in which Loyalist murals inform the recipient of the group's historical victories: the triumph at the Boyne or during the Ulster Crisis. This is also achieved through depictions of members of paramilitary organisations, symbolism related to weapons and aggression, or even through the use of the British flag symbol, which in the context of Belfast acquires a new meaning, reminding one of centuries of Protestant Ascendancy.

The deterrent function is directed at recipients from the Republican camp. However, shows of strength and triumph also reach members of the community with a Loyalist outlook, creating a sense of security and protection. Given which organisations commission some of the murals, one can point here to a link between this protection and the existence and functioning of paramilitary and criminal forces, which in this way emphasised the legitimacy of their operation.

The sense of security also merges with the created historical narrative. Celebrated events from Northern Ireland's past conform to a recognisable and stable pattern underpinning the 'besieged fortress syndrome' presented in Loyalist views.⁷⁰ In this narrative, there is a sense of constant threat that must be overcome through the mobilisation of the community, ensuring triumph and the preservation of dominance.

Today, however, this narrative pattern does not work as effectively as it once did. The 2021 census clearly showed that one of the eternal fears of Protestants has finally come to pass: they have become a minority even within Northern Ireland.⁷¹ In Belfast, according to the census, 45% of the population was raised Catholic, while only 36% was raised in one of the Protestant denominations.⁷² Demographic data shows that the system of Protestant political, economic, and social dominance can no longer be restored, a fact of which the Loyalist-leaning community is aware.⁷³ This also manifests in political changes. In February 2024, for the first time in history, a member of the Republican party Sinn Féin, Michelle O'Neill, became the First Minister of Northern Ireland.

The memory of past events preserved in murals reinforces the cultural distinctness of Loyalists while simultaneously presenting a trap for them, in which a focus on the past and dwelling on ancient victories does not provide the tools to deal with the challenges of the present.

70 Szczecińska-Musiałek E. 2015, 120.

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Loyalist Cuchulainn. Shankill Parade. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/2938/rec/6>

Ordinary People Extraordinary Roles. Spier's Place. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/10180/rec/1>

Poppy Mural. London Road. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/20382/rec/5>

Prepared For Peace Ready For War. Mount Vernon Park. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/23230/rec/7>

Prince William of Orange. Oak Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/5272/rec/6>

Robert Dougan Memorial. Blythe Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/21938/rec/8>

South Belfast Volunteers. Donegall Road. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/11806/rec/32>

Symbolising the Union of England Scotland Ireland. Thorndyke Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/13690/rec/7>

The Ulster Conflict Is About Nationality. Newtownards Road. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/23287/rec/22>

Tigers Bay First Flute. Hogarth Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/5835/rec/9>

Trevor King Mural. Disraeli Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/2630/rec/14>

UDA South Belfast Brigade A Battalion. Rockview Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/9356/rec/25>; <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/1577/rec/10>

Ulster Freedom Corner. Newtownards Road. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/23282/rec/22>

Ulster Young Militants. Hopewell Square. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/7035/rec/16>

Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant. Thorndyke Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/13676/rec/5>

UVF. Ardenvohr Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/7580/rec/2>

Village South Belfast Brigade C COY. Tavanagh Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/9370/rec/30>

We Owe It To The Future And The Victims. Derwent Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/9956/rec/3>

Welcome to the Shankill Road. Northumberland Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/20758/rec/12>

YCV 1st Belfast Battalion B Company. 121 Disraeli Street. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/24681/rec/1>

YCV Division. McAdam Park. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/1626/rec/4>

You Cannot Break Ireland. Glenalina Road. Belfast. <https://ccd.claremont.edu/digital/collection/mni/id/1372/rec/11>

VBMT — Virtual Belfast Mural Tour. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/>
(Available online: 1 September 2025):

Ballybeen UFF. Strone Park. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ballybeen-uff-mural.htm>

Better The Grave Than Slavery. Thorndyke Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/better-the-grave-than-slavery-mural.htm>

Brian Robinson Mural. Disraeli Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/brian-robinson-mural-mural.htm>

C Company Carnan Street. Carnan Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/s-company-and-c-company-carnan-street-mural.htm>

Carson's Volunteers. Carlingford Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/carson-s-volunteers-mural.htm>

Cosy Somme Association East Belfast. Carlingford Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/cosy-somme-association-east-belfast-mural.htm>

Dieu Et Mon Droit. Thorndyke Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/dieu-et-mon-droit-mural.htm>

Donegall Road Remembering the History of the Bonfire. Coolfin Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/donegall-road-remembering-the-history-of-the-bonfire-mural.htm>

East Belfast Brigade Remembers Our Fallen. Island Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/east-belfast-brigade-remembers-our-fallen-mural.htm>

East Belfast Protestant Boys. Hemp Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/east-belfast-protestant-boys-plaques-and-mural-mural.htm>

East Belfast Ulster Volunteer Force. London Road. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/east-belfast-ulster-volunteer-force-mural.htm>

For God and Ulster. Castlereagh Road. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/for-god-and-ulster-mural.htm>

Gertrude Star Flute Band. Martin Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/gertrude-star-flute-band-mural.htm>

God Save The King. Mackey Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/god-save-the-king-mural.htm>

Lest We Forget. Killarn Close. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/lest-we-forget-mural.htm>

Lord Street Remembers. Lord Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/lord-street-remembers-mural.htm>

Loyalist Cuchulainn. Shankill Parade. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/cuchulainn-loyalist-mural.htm>

Loyalist Tigers Bay. North Queen Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/loyalist-tigers-bay-mural.htm>

Ordinary People Extraordinary Roles. Spier's Place. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ordinary-people-extraordinary-roles-mural.htm>

Poppy Mural. London Road. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/london-road-poppy-mural-mural.htm>

Prepared For Peace Ready For War. Mount Vernon Park. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/prepared-for-peace-ready-for-war-mural.htm>

Prince William of Orange. Oak Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/prince-william-of-orange-mural.htm>

Robert Dougan Memorial. Blythe Street. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/robert-dougan-memorial-mural.htm>

South Belfast Volunteers. Donegall Road. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/south-belfast-volunteers-mural.htm>

Symbolising the Union of England Scotland Ireland. Thorndyke Street. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/symbolising-the-union-of-england-scotland-ireland-mural.htm>

The Ulster Conflict Is About Nationality. Newtownards Road. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/the-ulster-conflict-is-about-nationality-mural.htm>

Tigers Bay First Flute. Hogarth Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/tigers-bay-first-flute-mural.htm>

Trevor King Mural. Disraeli Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/trevor-king-mural-mural.htm>

UDA South Belfast Brigade A Battalion. Rockview Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/uda-south-belfast-brigade-a-battalion-mural.htm>

Ulster Freedom Corner. Newtownards Road. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ulster-freedom-corner-mural.htm>

Ulster Young Militants. Hopewell Square. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ulster-young-militants-mural.htm>

Ulster's Solemn League and Covenant. Thorndyke Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ulster-s-solemn-league-and-covenant-mural.htm>

UVF. Ardenvohr Street. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/uvf-ardenvohr-street-mural.htm>

Village South Belfast Brigade C COY. Tavanagh Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/village-south-belfast-brigade-c-coy-mural.htm>

We Owe It To The Future And The Victims. Derwent Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/we-owe-it-to-the-future-and-the-victims-mural.htm>

Welcome to the Shankill Road. Northumberland Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/welcome-to-the-shankill-road-mural.htm>

YCV 1st Belfast Battalion B Company. 121 Disraeli Street. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ycv-1st-belfast-battalion-b-company-mural.htm>

YCV Division. McAdam Park. Belfast.

<https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/ycv-division-mural.htm>

You Cannot Break Ireland. Glenalina Road. Belfast. <https://www.virtualbelfastmuraltour.com/you-cannot-break-ireland-mural.htm>

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