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Political Imprisonment and the Sanctity of Death: Performing Heritage in “Troubled” Ireland*

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Abstract

The “Troubles” is a euphemism associated with sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s until the late 1990s. Similarly, that term also is used to depict turmoil in all of Ireland between 1916 through 1924. During both eras, political imprisonment coupled with various forms of political violence (e.g., bombings, executions, and prisoner abuse) marred Irish society in ways that invoke socio-religious meaning. In particular, the *sanctity of death* captures the intense semiotics of those events and points to further theorizing along lines of the Durkheimian tradition. As we shall examine herein, violations of the *sanctity of death* compound social conflict and the resistance it creates. Fieldwork was undertaken in Dublin and Belfast where official landmarks were explored in-depth: Kilmainham Gaol and the Crumlin Road Prison, respectively. Additionally in Belfast, other – unofficial -- cultural sites provide further evidence of socio-religious symbolism, most notably the Irish Republican History Museum, Roddy McCorley’s Club in West Belfast, and murals in both Loyalist and Republican communities. Whereas Durkheimian theory remains at the forefront of the analysis, insights also are informed by heritage studies, in particular notions of cultural performance in contested societies.

Introduction

In her cultural characterization of Ireland, Jessica Scarlata writes “imprisonment is a central trope of Irish nationalism, often deployed to portray the injustice of an Ireland occupied by foreign rule. Irish nationalism celebrates people jailed for resistance to British forces” (2014: front flap). Indeed, political imprisonment – along with political violence -- permeate the social landscape during momentous periods of Irish history known euphemistically as the “Troubles.” Whereas that expression has more recently been used to describe the conflict in Northern Ireland (from c.1969 to c.1998), the term was also common in all of Ireland, especially during the 1916 Rising (followed by the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War). The cultural nature of the “Troubles” reaches so deeply into Irish society that it invokes socio-religious meaning. To be examined in detail, multiple forms of victimhood are not only mourned but also celebrated for their sacrifice to Irish Republicanism. From a Durkheimian perspective, those socio-religious impulses activate what is described as the *sanctity of death*. Especially in the context of the “Troubles,” communities go to great lengths to uphold the cultural demand for a proper memorialization after the tragic loss of life (see Seaton, 1996; Stone, 2006; Stone and Sharpley, 2008). Robert Hertz – an early Durkheimian scholar – delved into that phenomenon, declaring that “death has a specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective representation” (Hertz, 2009: 28). Burial rites, to be sure, figure prominently in Irish culture, and those rituals are powerful expressions of shared values.

This interpretative critique on political imprisonment draws on research in the Republic of Ireland (also known as the South of Ireland) as well as Northern Ireland (also known as the North of Ireland). In Dublin (in the Republic of Ireland), the Kilmainham Gaol – a former Victorian prison turned heritage museum -- serves as a site for the first portion of fieldwork. The next round, in Belfast (in Northern Ireland), takes us into a similar Victorian institution known as the Crumlin Road Prison, which also has opened its doors to tourists. Whereas those government landmarks maintain an official narrative about the “Troubles,” there are other – privately run -- cultural sites that project an array of heritage semiotics. Taking full advantage of their offerings, this study explores the Irish Republican History Museum and Roddy McCorley’s Club in West Belfast. Further afield, murals in both Loyalist and Republican communities are considered for their rich heritage expressions. Although Durkeimian theory remains at the forefront of the analysis, the investigation also is enlightened by observations on heritage, particularly notions of performance in contested societies (Graham and Whelan, 2007; Smith, 2011, 2006; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

Performance and Surfing the Tensions in Heritage

While heritage is treated as something of value to be cherished and curated, Smith re-theorizes that “there is no such *thing* as heritage” (2011: 69). Rather, heritage is a cultural performance that takes stage at various sites such as museums and exhibitions. The process of performance attaches certain cultural meaning to things and places; however, those expressions are subject to alternative interpretations, counter-arguments, and at times, blatant rejection. As we shall discover in this analysis, those cultural strains

figure prominently in Irish history and campaigns to memorialize the *sacrifice* of political imprisonment. Those tensions remind us that claims of heritage evoke deep emotional states, both positive and negative. At a higher degree of abstraction, “all heritage is intangible, insofar that heritage is a moment or process of re/constructing cultural and social values and meanings” (Smith, 2011: 69; 2006). Heritage is notoriously multivalent since it is not only a path for seeing and feeling but also a way of remembering and forgetting. In some instances heritage is presented as a theatre of memory (Samuel, 1994), at times regressing into a contested arena of dispute and denial (Graham and Whelan, 2007). Toward that end, heritage is a double-edge sword that has the power to unite as well as to divide, to include as well as to exclude. Durkheimian scholars have long recognized that community solidarity can jump the tracks; thereby, activating destructive energies that lead to ostracizing, scapegoating, and “other-ing” (Erikson, 1966; Smith and Alexander, 2005; Welch, 2006).

The aforementioned thoughts suggest that the performance of heritage is a process of negotiation to connect the past with the present while determining who counts and who doesn't. As intangible as those activities are, they nonetheless occur at specific places, creating forms of sited-ness that are either sanctified or condemned, depending on one's cultural and ethnic identity. In a word, heritage as it exists in Ireland is “troubled.” Compounding that dissonance are tendencies to challenge the dominant narrative, or what Smith identifies as the “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (AHD). The AHD seems to project a version of events and history as irrefutable since in large part it is assembled by “experts” who claim to possess a “special knowledge” about what actually happened and how it should be projected to an audience (see Foucault, 1980). The power to perform

heritage acts to de-legitimate competing narratives and perspectives. In concert, there is often a clash of performances that surf the tensions of heritage, sites, and symbols (Smith, 2011; 2006; Waterton, Smith, and Campbell, 2006; Waterton and Watson, 2013).

The Sanctity of Death

With its socio-religious overtones, the notion of the *sanctity of death* seems almost self-evident; still, the construct can most certainly benefit from some sharper theoretical attention. In the realm of cultural sociology, an important starting point is Emile Durkheim (2008 [1915]), especially since there is continued interest and rethinking of his work (Alexander, 2005; Bellah, 2005; Smith, 2008; Smith and Alexander, 2005). Likewise, scholars have revisited the contributions of Durkheim and the *Année sociologique* group, which included the young pioneering theorists Marcel Mauss and Robert Hertz (Guyer, 2014). Altogether, those luminaries of the early French sociological school set out to “discover the origin of social solidarity in a modern and secular way by departing from traditional, theological explanations” (Kwon, 2014: 123; see Durkheim and Mauss, 1963 [1903]; Riley, 1999). Despite their shared perspectives on socio-religious phenomena, they differ in key ways. For instance, Durkheim focused on the creation and maintenance of social solidarity. By contrast, Hertz assumed “the task of studying the responses of society to breaches in that solidarity” (Hertz, 1994 [1988]: 18). In this ethnographic project on “Troubled” Ireland, it is important to bear in mind that violations of the sanctity of death not only create resistance but, in doing so, also perpetuate conflict. Before embarking on those developments, we offer a bit more detail on Hertz and his study of death.

As a promising scholar – and pupil of Durkheim – Hertz was among the casualties of the First World War. At the age of 33, he was killed leading his military unit in the attack on Marcheville. Hertz’s intellectual legacy survives through the translation of *Death and The Right Hand* (2009 [1960]). That volume consists of two separate works. For our purposes, focus remains on the first essay “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death” (originally published in 1907). Hertz begins by reminding us that “we all believe we know what death is because it is a familiar event and one that arouses intense emotion” (2009: 27). Perhaps hinting at the sanctity of death, he goes on to add that “the body of the deceased is not regarded like the carcass of some animal: specific care must be given to it and a correct burial; not merely for reasons of hygiene but out of moral obligation” (2009: 27). Toward that end, Hertz observed that the final ceremony serves several social – and spiritual – purposes. It provides a proper burial to the remains of the deceased so as to grant peace to the soul. Moreover, the final ritual liberates the living from their obligations of mourning and allows them to rejoin “communion with society” (2009: 62).

In the introduction to *Death and The Right Hand*, E.E. Evans-Pritchard commends Hertz’s essays for reaching beyond ethnographic findings and techniques. Indeed, they also generate conceptual interest, even in social anthropology in which theory resides on a relatively low level of abstraction. “Method and theory are not, of course, the same, but it can be said that a method of analysis is of value only if it produces some advance in theory” (Evans-Pritchard quoted in Hertz, 2009: 20). Approaching a series of case studies of “Troubled” Ireland, we remain mindful of *meaning* of the sanctity of death along with community efforts to restore its violations. In

tandem, those phenomena contribute to solidarity and collective identity: both of which are contested forms of heritage (Graham and Whelan, 2007; Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

Dublin and the Early “Troubles”

The famous Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin opened as a prison in 1796 and closed in 1924. After decades of complicated negotiation over how to preserve its history and heritage, the Kilmainham Gaol was finally transformed into as a museum (O’Dwyer, 2010). The experience of touring this prison museum/heritage site is worth noting from a Durkheimian perspective since visitors are organized into groups as they follow the guide, thereby adding to a moment of solidarity. Scholars remind us that locomotion is a key feature of the museum experience. With “mind on legs,” visitors move about the site in ways that will enrich their understanding of Irish political history (Bennett, 1995; Casey, 2003; Williams, 2007). To be sure, the tone of the tour is not that of a cheap theme park. Surrounded by imposing Victorian architecture, visitors are likely to conform to the serious manner of the narrative, as dominant as that discourse may be (Smith, 2011; 2006). The tour guide makes clear that Kilmainham Gaol is a “national treasure” – the Bastille of Ireland -- and with the style of an academic he reiterates some of the main points of its chronology that suggest tension between political rivals.

From the 1790s onwards, freedom from British rule, as a republic, became the form of political independence favoured by radical Irish nationalists. More moderate nationalists aspired to ‘Home Rule’, or constitutional independence for Ireland within the British Empire. A remarkable number of leading figures of

Irish nationalists were imprisoned at Kilmainham Gaol, and some were executed here. (Visitor's Guide, n.d.; see Cooke, 2014; O'Dwyer, 2010)

Before delving into the political themes of Kilmainham, the guide reminds us of the significance of the Great Famine. **[1]** What is commonly known among the Irish as the Hunger, the famine consumed over a million people between 1845 and 1850. The Gaol figured prominently during the famine since it saw a massive influx of prisoners, many of whom were confined to a small cell with four others. These were not menacing criminals; rather, most of these men, women, and children were charged with begging and stealing food. As we shall discuss later in this critique, the phenomenon of hunger re-emerges in resistance to political imprisonment in the form of hunger strikes.

The Kilmainham Gaol was closed in 1910 but from 1916 to 1924, it was re-commissioned to incarcerate political prisoners, another reminder of its painful heritage. During the War of Independence (1919-1921), political prisoners were held by British forces. Amid the Civil War (1922-1924), however, the Irish Free State Army took control of Kilmainham to imprison their rivals who opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1921). Adding to that controversy, the Free State Government executed 77 Irish Republicans at the Gaol. Those bitter memories would persist and fester resentment between those political groups and their members, thereby prolonging plans to transform Kilmainham into a heritage site. To overcome those barriers, the 1916 Rising took on central importance as a unifying event. In the 1960s, a heritage committee comprised of disparate political backers "agreed on the notion of preserving the jail as a monument to 'Ireland's heroic dead'" (O'Dwyer, 2010: 88).

On Easter Monday 1916, units of the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizens Army seized the General Post Office and other landmarks due in large part to their semiotic value within the British Empire. By strategic design, the Rising was a material and symbolic challenge to British rule. Greatly outmanned by British troops, the rebels held out for nearly one week before surrendering. Hundreds of Irish men and women were rounded-up and imprisoned at Kilmainham Gaol. From May 3rd to May 12th (1916), fourteen of those men were executed by firing squad. Patrick Pearse, Commander-in-Chief of the Volunteers was the first to be shot. The last execution was that of James Connolly of the Irish Citizens Army.

Setting the stage for a thick narrative on execution, tourists are funneled into a dimly lit auditorium and seated on rows of benches. They quietly wait as the guide positions for a solemn moment. At that point, the Kilmainham Gaol becomes a performative space to narrate heritage (see Casey, 2003; Smith, 2011). A slideshow is projected on a large screen as the speaker introduces the audience to some of the principle figures in the 1916 Rising. The drama of the presentation heightens when talking about Joseph Plunkett. A photograph of Plunkett shows him with his fiancée, Grace Gifford. The audience is informed that as an act of mercy, Plunkett was granted permission to marry Gifford – hours later he faced the firing squad. Suddenly, the movie screen scrolls up revealing the altar where the couple exchanged wedding vows. All the time, the group had been sitting inside a Catholic chapel – a holy space. Such sited-ness greatly enhances the experience of heritage and memorialization. At that juncture, Kilmainham combines all the features of a performance museum, namely space (the

chapel), images (photographs of the Plunkett and Grace), and objects (the altar decorated with ornate candle sticks and other Catholic artefacts) (see Waterton, 2009; Williams, 2007).

Having been “moved” emotionally by the story of Plunkett and Gifford, the audience is then “moved” physically out of the chapel, another reminder of the role locomotion in the performance of heritage. In single file, visitors are escorted down a dark corridor and into the cellblocks where each of the condemned spent their last days before being executed. Of course, Plunkett was held in one of these cells. Having just heard about his marriage, the emotional register seems to move toward the pain of separation compounded by the fate of execution. The use of space also reinforces the experience of heritage as visitors are taken to the East Wing of the Gaol. So as to create a moment of suspense, the guide patiently pauses for all members of the group to gather at the entrance. The large door to the East Wing is kept shut as the guide says a few well-chosen words about the power of Victorian prison architecture. Then suddenly he flings open the door and visitors are immersed in the grandeur of an enormous atrium. It has been said: “Architecture matters because it lasts, of course. It matters because it is big, and it shapes the landscape of our everyday lives. But beyond that, it also matters because, more than any other cultural form, it is a means of setting the historical record straight” (Sudjic, 2006: 23). The East Wing does not disappoint. With Victorian authority, it delivers a feeling of power and awe (see McConville, 1995). The guide does not interfere with visitor’s absorption of the architectural splendor, allowing them to practice space and mill around without any specific itinerary (see Alpers, 1991).

The guide offers some commentary about the significance of visibility, surveillance, and panopticism in Victorian penology (see Smith, 2009). Then he resumes that narrative on executing the rebels. Attention is directed to one particular cell. Above the door, a sign reads “Mrs. Joseph Plunkett 1923, Nee Grace Gifford.” Upon recognizing the name, tourists walk closer to make contact with this special space. Informed that this cell housed Grace entices visitors; paradoxically, they are kept at a physical – and emotional – distance since the heavy door is padlocked. Such tension is eased as visitors are drawn to a peephole in the door that allows them to peer into this “forbidden” room. A religious insignia on the back wall of the cell reminds tourists that it is a sacred space.

The tour continues in lock-step cadence as the group scampers outside to catch up with the guide who waits at the (in)famous Stone Breaker’s Yard. Its vast empty space projects a sense of tragic absence (see Williams, 2007). The narrative fills in the void. The guide points to a cross -- a religious symbol of sacrifice -- stabbed into the ground in the distance; he explains that it is in this very location, 14 soldiers were shot by a British firing squad. An antique metal plate riveted to a stonewall authenticates the site. To reinforce cultural heritage, a statement is written in Irish first, then in English: “Here, After Easter Week, 1916, The Following Leaders Were Executed.” Three names are quickly identified because they have been mentioned several times over the course of the tour: P.H. (Patrick) Pearse (executed on May 3), Joseph Plunkett (executed on May 4), and finally James Connolly (executed on May 12). With dramatic emphasis, the guide points his finger to the back of the yard where a wide double-breasted garage door occupies an otherwise vacant lot. The gate has special significance to James Connolly

who was the last to be shot. His execution is among the more controversial since he was wounded in battle during the Rising. After being captured by the British, Connolly was taken to hospital. When his execution was ordered, he was placed in an ambulance and driven to Kilmainham Gaol and into the Stone Breaker's Yard through the double doors. The wounded Connolly was unable able to stand before the firing squad so the British commander summoned a chair. When seated, Connolly met his fate. By virtue of being wounded in the Rising and later executed – while seated -- Connolly is memorialized as an especially significant sacrifice.

A storyboard in the elaborate exhibition hall, explains the importance of these events that figure prominently in a heritage that all Irish can share. “All Changed Utterly” is profound phrase in the poem “Easter 1916” by W.B. Yeats who reminds visitors that “a terrible beauty is born.” In didactic fashion the text explains that the initial response to the Rising was “one of anger at the destruction caused to the heart of Dublin, the executions quickly changed the mood.” Memorial masses and enthusiastic fund-raising rallied the Irish who began to reconsider their status in the Second City of the British Empire. The poetry and prose of Pearse, Plunkett, and Connolly were widely circulated. “From these writings emerged the impression not of reckless adventurers, but men who has sacrificed their lives patriotically for an independent Ireland.” Suddenly, the 1916 Proclamation that was announced at the onset of the Rising gained deeper resonance, leading to the War of Independence.

For continued commentary on Irish heritage, visitors are invited to spend time in the vast set of displays. With “mind-on-legs” they are drawn into a particularly interesting gallery titled “Last Words 1916” (see Mac Lochlainn, 2006). At the doorway,

a poster reiterates the ongoing narrative on the executions, which “rapidly transformed the popular perception of these men into heroes in the pantheon of rebel martyrs. At a more human level, they left behind wives, children, loved ones, proud of what they had done, but broken-hearted too.” Entering this shadowed room, heritage is performed through the cultural power of personal poetics, religious artefacts, and sacred space. Among the more compelling artefacts is a miniature replica of the altar where Plunkett and Gifford exchanged their wedding vows. The compact shrine features Gifford’s scrapbook opened to a page with a photograph of Plunkett and another of herself with a handwritten caption that reads “the dress worn at my wedding.” A copy of the 1916 Proclamation is attached to the parallel page, thereby underscoring the national context of their loving relationship. Even more poignantly, a handwritten-written marriage proposal conveys Plunkett’s deep emotions.

2 December 1915

Darling Grace,

You will marry me and nobody else. I have been a damned fool and a blind imbecile but thank God I see I love you and you only and will never love anyone else.

Your love,

Joe

The sincerity of the letter is given extra weight by Grace’s wedding band carefully placed to the left of the proposal. Another hand-written note continues to authenticate a series of events: it is a letter from Major W.J. Lennon to Grace asking that she return to the prison on the night of Joe’s execution. Nearby is a locket of Plunkett’s hair inscribed personally

by Gifford (“Joseph Plunkett’s hair cut off in Jail may 4th”). While that statement seems to bring closure to the story of Plunkett, his memory survives – along with a locket of his hair (a seemingly sacred artefact).

Tourists interested in more Irish heritage can visit the Collins Barracks museum. A major installation, “Easter Rising: Understanding 1916,” does simply as the title suggests, it delivers a scholarly and dynamic lesson on the those events which altered the course of Irish history. In keeping with the theme of this analysis, we concentrate on a few items that convey the *sanctity of death*. “Executions” headlines a poster that informs visitors that following their court-martial, the signatories of the 1916 Proclamation were shot by firing squad, despite growing protests in Ireland, Britain, and America. Among the objects on display is a modest painting of a blindfolded rebel facing two rows of British soldiers. The “action shot” shows the moment before the shooting as the commander still has his arm raised and the riflemen lean forward as they concentrate on their target. Nearby a priest is shown giving his last rites to the condemned, enhancing the sanctity of death. While the painting is an artist’s rendition of the firing squad, the actual death certificates of those executed serves to *officially* authenticate the executions. The last statement of James Connolly (9 May 1916) is accompanied by a pair of artefacts: his portrait and his bloodied undershirt shirt. A caption explains that presumably the garment was removed when he was wounded in the leg” during the Rising. The text continues to reiterate the dominant narrative at the Kilmainham Gaol tour, noting that the execution of Connolly (“the last to die, shot propped up in a chair because of his leg wound”) and the others, “turned them into martyrs in the eyes of much of the Irish population, both at home and overseas.”

The *sanctity of death* is again examined in reference to the “Hunger Strikes.” Whereas the practice of hunger striking for political prisoner status is often associated with the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland in 1980 and 1981, that form of resistance was practiced in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. A placard commemorates Thomas Ashe who died on hunger strike in 1917, resulting in some concessions. But the protests continued: 60 Irish prisoners went on hunger strike in 1920. That year, Terence MacSwiney died at the Brixton jail (England) after 74 days on hunger strike, attracting international attention to the plight of Irish prisoners of war. A vintage photograph documenting an act of solidarity with the hunger strikers at Mountjoy prison in 1921 joins the text. Among the four women protesting outside the prison gates is Charlotte Despard, suffragist, socialist, and republican activist. **[2]** As we shall see in the segment on Belfast, hunger strikes -- and the solidarity they create -- figure prominently in the sanctity of death during the “Troubles” (from c. 1969 to c. 1998).

A final landmark within walking distance of the Collins Barracks delivers extra lessons on Irish heritage. With a sense of pilgrimage, many visitors make their way to the “Old Cemetery” (Arbour Hills) where the 14 rebels are laid to rest. Well-manicured grounds and the neighboring church enhance the sacred quality of the space. The impressive monument built in 1956 pays tribute to signatories of the Proclamation who were then executed in 1916. A curved wall of Ardbracon limestone features a gilded cross in the center. The 1916 Proclamation of the Republic is inscribed both in Irish and English. As a reminder that this is a revered space, a placard shows a 1963 photograph of U.S. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy standing solemnly behind a wreath placed at the

memorial. He is joined by other dignitaries and high-ranking soldiers who stand in formation. Ceremonies at Arbour Hill have not always been successful in promoting a unified Irish heritage. In 1924, the first “official 1916 commemoration” was marred by poor attendance due to “objections to the Free State authority” (O’Dwyer, 2010: 15).

Even today, tourists with a keen eye will detect some tension at the Arbour Hill heritage site. First, in addition to the 1916 memorial, the compound also includes an Anglican Church and a graveyard for British military personnel killed in the War of Independence. Second, a 30-foot containment wall borders the cemetery with a guard tower perched in the corner. Visitors might be “troubled” to learn that the sacred cemetery sits next to the Arbour Hill Prison. The prison is fully operating; moreover, it is known for housing pedophiles. Hence, the pilgrimage to commemorate the 1916 martyrs is strained not only by the presence of the British military but also by the prison and its despised convicts. In a word, that cultural tension might be deemed a *sacrilege*, detracting from the overall sanctity of death (see Smith, 2008). Despite those tensions, the events of 1916 still loom large. In 2016, the Irish government launched an “official commemoration” of the 100-year anniversary of the 1916 Rising against British rule. Irish President, Michael Higgins, placed a wreath at the spot where rebels were executed in the Stonebreakers’ Yard in Kilmainham Gaol. While much of Ireland celebrated, Unionists in the North, however, remain hostile to the heritage performed in Dublin. All the major unionist parties boycotted the commemoration (McDonald, 2016).

Belfast and the Later “Troubles”

In Belfast, Black Taxi tours offer visitors a unique way to learn about the later “Troubles” – a turbulent period from the late 1960s until the 1990s. By way of introduction, the taxi driver provides a brief overview of the conflict that left more than 3,500 people dead (Graham and Whelan, 2007; McKittrick, Kelters, Feeney, and Thornton, 2001). Sorting out the rival paramilitaries, the driver outlines the complex symbols of political, ethnic, and religious identities. As the “Troubles” intensified, two ideologically different communities became further polarized. While the subject requires a good deal of caution, the groups are commonly referred to as either Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist (who regard themselves British) or Catholic, Nationalist, Republican (who regard themselves Irish). **[3]** Those sectarian groups – with varying degrees of commitment – continue to hold competing national aspirations. The Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist community, the majority in Northern Ireland, aspires to maintain its connection to British sovereignty. By contrast, the minority, the Catholic, Nationalist, Republican group, supports a united Ireland. Since 1998, Northern Ireland is a distinct political entity within the United Kingdom governed by a power-sharing deal enshrined in the Belfast Agreement (also known as the Good Friday Agreement) (see Hennessy, 2005; Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). Before the Peace Process, however, paramilitaries representing those separate political/religious/ethnic communities engaged in “a low-level war” (Green, 1998; McAtackney, 2014; McEvoy, 2001). Indeed, ethnosectarian conflict has reinforced a contested heritage that largely persists today. Moreover, Graham and

Whelan note that the Peace Process “was fashioned so as to avoid creating mechanisms for addressing the legacy of the past, not least the commemoration of the fatalities of the Troubles” (2007: 476; see McEvoy and Conway, 2004).

The taxi tour begins in a working class Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist neighborhood where murals proudly display their identity. Similarly, those murals memorialize paramilitary soldiers who died in the conflict, thereby stressing the sanctity of death. For example, the mural devoted to Lt. Col. William Bucky McCullough (1949 – 1981) shows him smiling with silhouettes of two paramilitary standing at attention. Surrounded by three wreaths, a statement reads: “In Loving Memory of All Our Fallen Comrades from A Coy [Company], B Coy, C Coy, 2n Batt UFF West Belfast Brigade Murdered by the Enemies of Ulster. A comparable mural commemorates Stevie “Top Gun” McKeag (Military Commander, 2nd Batt. C Coy, West Belfast Brigade). The Union Jack is joined by the flag of Ulster and the insignias of the UDA (Ulster Defense Association) and the UFF (Ulster Freedom Fighters). The image incorporates poetics with the solemn words “Sleeping Where No Shadows Fall.” “The dead,” as Graham and Whelan observe “remain a potent and emotive means of legitimating and perpetuating the ethnonationalism and sectarianism characteristic of political debate in Northern Ireland” (2007: 480). Highlighting the controversy over political imprisonment (which included Loyalist as well as Republican paramilitaries), is a brightly colored mural featuring an illustration of the H Blocks with two hands shackled. “Freedom 2000” refers to the release of all political prisoners under the conditions of the Belfast Agreement.

The driver then takes visitors to the neighboring area of West Belfast, a stronghold of Republicanism. To get there, one must travel the length of one of the “peace lines” (30 foot walls that separate the Protestant and Catholic communities). The walls are covered by more murals as well as political and ethnic graffiti (e.g., “Loyalist Shankhill Rd. Supports Republican Feud”). Passing through one of the gates into the Republican side, the cultural landscape changes noticeably. Rather than Union Jacks, the Irish tricolor flag flies ubiquitously. The territory of heritage is also noticeable by street signs written in the Irish language. The neighborhood is enhanced by memorial gardens where heritage is also performed. The memorial on Bombay Street (officially known as the Greater Clonard Memorial Garden) is especially meaningful since it is located at the actual site where some claim the “Troubles” began. **[4]** In 1969, Protestant rioters attacked and burned down the homes of Catholics residing on Bombay Street. Fresh flowers serve to underscore a sense of living history conveyed on a metal sign announcing:

This plaque is dedicated to the people of the Greater Clonard who have resisted and still resist the occupation of our country by Britain. We acknowledge with pride and sacrifices they made throughout every decade. Their names would be too numerous to mention, and their deeds of bravery and resistance are unequalled. We, the Republican Ex-Prisoners of the Greater Clonard, salute you and your reward will only be a United Ireland.

The statement is accompanied by the coat of arms of each of the four provinces of Ireland, thereby reinforcing the Republican vision of a united nation. The wall above the plaque lists the names and faces of the Republican volunteers who perished in the

struggle against British forces. Chief among them is Tom Williams whose story is threaded through a lengthy narrative on the sanctity of death. Standing in the memorial garden one experiences the power of sited-ness as the guide points to one of the homes on Bombay Street. It is the very house where Volunteer Williams lived in the 1940s. A plaque above the front door pronounces (in Irish and English) that Williams was executed at the age of 19 at the Belfast Gaol (later known as the Crumlin Road Prison located in a Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist section of Belfast). To be discussed later, the controversy over the execution of Williams (and his initial burial) represents a brazen violation of the sanctity of death.

While still in West Belfast, tourists often visit one of the most revered murals featuring Bobby Sands. His smiling face and long flowing hair exudes a radiant persona. Sands was the first of the ten hunger strikers to die in 1981. His funeral was one of the largest in the history of Ireland. With international dignitaries in attendance, the final ceremony served to uphold – even celebrate – the sanctity of death. Like the other hunger strikers who endured a long and agonizing death, Sands is memorialized as a martyr who sacrificed himself for the Republican movement. Compared to murals in the Loyalist neighborhoods, those in the Republican sections strike an optimistic chord, rather than a decidedly militant and intimidating one (see *Economist*, 2014a, 2014b; McAttackney, 2014; Rolston, 1992). The mural of Sands (which adorns the side of the building housing the Sinn Fein political headquarters) is no exception to that theme. In addition to being listed as a Member of the British Parliament (elected while on hunger strike), he is remembered as a poet, a Gaeilgeoir (a speaker of the Irish language), a Revolutionary, and IRA Volunteer. The mural includes some of the legendary symbols that surround his

memory, most notably the lark that has broken from the confines of shackles – flying to its freedom. A quote captures his almost “saint-like” charisma and leadership: “Everyone. Republican or otherwise has their own particular role to play . . . Our revenge will be the laughter of our children” (see Sands, 1998). Decades after his death, Sands still embodies the heritage of the Irish Republican movement.

An extensive row of murals has become a hugely popular tourist destination in West Belfast. The colorful and vibrant paintings rejoice the virtues of justice and equality, deliberately inscribing Irish Republicanism within other international struggles (e.g., the plight of African Americans, American Indians, Basques, Palestinians, and South Africans). Unsurprisingly, a recurring theme is the commemoration of the hunger strikers. One image, in particular, superimposes the 10 hunger strikers into the 1916 Rising with the Proclamation prominently displayed. That mural also honors hunger strikers of previous periods, most notably Frank Stagg who is quoted: “I want my Memorial to be Peace with Justice.” Other murals reflect on tragedy, such as those killed by Loyalist Michael Stone during an ambush at a Catholic funeral (of IRA members shot by British agents in Gibraltar). Indeed, the Stone incident remains a vivid example of the violation of the sanctity of death – and contested heritage -- as the media captured his indiscriminate gunshots and grenade throwing. Other controversies add some edge to an otherwise upbeat series of paintings, including a “wanted poster” of (then) British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (“for murder and torture of Irish Prisoners”). Another image recognizes political prisoner Kieran Nugent who defied the British penal regime by refusing to wear a prison uniform, thus becoming the first of the “Blanket Men” (known

for wearing only a blanket during their years of imprisonment) (see Campbell, McKeown, and O'Hagan, 1994; Feldman, 1991; McKeown, 2001).

Amid the murals is a billboard boasting a large photograph of the interior of the Crumlin Road Gaol – “Belfast’s Infamous Prison.” The advertisement attracts visitors to an important site where they can witness more of the contested heritage of Northern Ireland as well as symbols expressing breaches of the sanctity of death. Much like Kilmainham, all tours at the “Crum” are guided in groups. Unlike a shared sense of Irish solidarity in Dublin, however, visitors seem a bit guarded about their sympathies whether Loyalist or Republican. Perhaps due to that tension, the tour guide (barely) mentions that the “Crum” held both Loyalist and Republican political prisoners. Curiously, the “Troubles” do not dominate the narrative; rather, its history as a Victorian prison becomes the prevailing story (or Authorised Heritage Discourse, Smith 2011). Dating back to 1841, Crumlin Road Gaol was designed by esteemed architect Sir Charles Lanyon who based it on the radial plan of Pentonville Prison (London). Its past is dotted with hunger strikes, escapes, floggings, and riots, as a result the “Crumlin Road Gaol is a foreboding place with a dark and disturbing past” (Souvenir Guidebook to Crumlin Road Gaol, n.d., n.p.; Greg, 2013). Of course, as the tour guide explains, high-profile executions add to the Gaol’s rugged reputation. A total 17 men were hanged to death; according to the Capital Punishment Amendment Act (1868), they “buried in an unmarked grave, in unconsecrated ground” (Souvenir Guidebook to Crumlin Road Gaol, n.d., n.p.).

Visitors are navigated to the actual site where the bodies remain. The only remnants are some initials etched into the stonewall. Those impersonal burials did not sit well with some of the communities in Belfast. Again, the story of Thomas Williams looms large. In 1942, the IRA commander was convicted of murdering a police officer; subsequently, he was executed and buried at the Gaol. For decades, Republicans intensely lobbied the government to recognize the Irish tradition and heritage. Eventually, the Royal Prerogative of Mercy was exercised for the case of Thomas Williams, thereby remitting the part of his sentence requiring the burial within the walls of prison. At the site of burials at the Gaol, a large pewter sign lists the name of Thomas Williams along with the others buried there. It informs visitors that the Royal Prerogative of Mercy was again exercised in 1999, allowing the bodies of Thomas Williams (and Michael Pratley) to be exhumed and reinterred elsewhere. Williams was finally given a proper (Catholic) reburial at Milltown Cemetery. The Williams case illuminates the power of persistent community organizing aimed at correcting a breach in the sanctity of death. Those efforts, in turn, served to build Republican solidarity as well as assist the healing process in the aftermath of the “Troubles.” [5]

Whereas the Black Taxi Tour and the “Crum” allow visitors to investigate the history of Belfast through public landmarks, more complicated narratives on the “Troubles” can be found in the privately run collections housed at the Irish Republican History Museum and Roddy McCorley’s Club in West Belfast. [6] There, themes of the sanctity of death abound. The Irish Republican History Museum is dedicated to Eileen Hickey who served as the IRA O.C. (Officer Commander) for the women held at the Armagh Gaol during the “Troubles.” The museum serves as a place of remembrance for

Hickey as well as those who were imprisoned or murdered during the conflict. The space has a “community center” atmosphere as (helpful) volunteers cut old newspaper clips to be added to the growing collection of artefacts and images. As the title of the Museum suggests, this exhibit focuses on the Irish Republican history dating back to previous rebellions against British rule. Still there are enough contemporary items to make visitors feel the emotional register of the “Troubles,” particularly from the point of view of Republicans, Nationalists, and Catholics. The exhibit stands apart from others due to its recognition of women in Irish history. “A significant feature of the commemorative landscapes that have evolved in Northern Ireland since the late 1960s relates to their highly gendered nature and, in particular, to the invisibility of women in the visual iconography of the Troubles” (Graham and Whelan, 2007: 480; see Dowler, 1998; Scarlata, 2014). Upon entering the Museum, visitors are greeted by the “Republican Women’s Role of Honour.” Nearly twenty names of women are listed in chronological order of their death (e.g., Maura Meehan – Shot dead by the British Army on the 23rd Oct 1971. Age 31). The honor roll is joined by a floral display similar to one from a funeral. “In Remembrance,” the sign reads: “We also remember with pride, those women from this and past generations, who died dedicating their lives to the cause of Irish Freedom. Most of these women endured a life of severe hardship, blatant discrimination and personal suffering and in many cases years of imprisonment for their Republican beliefs (Si Eire mo Thir).”

Visitors who have also toured Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin will recognize the obvious references to the executions in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. A crudely

drawn illustration shows James Connolly strapped to the chair with British soldiers pointing their rifles at close range. The meaning of the image is enhanced by poetics:

James Connolly.
For inside that grim prison
lay a brave Irish soldier
his life for his country
about to lay down.
He went to his death
like a true son of Ireland
and the firing party he
bravely did face.
When the order rang out
present arms and fire
James Connolly fell into a
ready made grave . . . [7]

As a another reminder of the importance of Tom Williams in Belfast history, a collection of objects are arranged as a shrine. Unlike other references to Williams, this display features extensive text describing key events. It explains that on Easter 1942, the government of Northern Ireland banned all parades commemorating the anniversary of the Easter Rising. An IRA unit staged a diversionary action that allowed three parades to flow through West Belfast. However, an armed skirmish between the IRA and the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) ensued and a policeman was fatally shot. Although five

members of the IRA were convicted and sentenced to death, their sentences were commuted. Without knowing precisely who fired the fatal shot, Williams took full responsibility for the actions of his men. As narrated at the “Crum” he was hanged there and initially buried in an “unmarked” and “unhallowed” grave. To reiterate, his remains were released due to the campaign by the National Graves Association of Belfast, another reminder of the power of heritage groups.

Before Williams was put to death, he inscribed some messages on the back of playing cards. On one card he wrote, “To who ever who receives this to pray for me always & pray for the cause for which I am dying. God Save Ireland.” Fr. Alexis witnessed the execution and later addressed prisoners in the prison chapel.

I met the bravest of the brave this morning. Tom Williams walked to that scaffold without a tremor in his body. The only people who were shaking were us and the hangman. I’ve one other thing to say to you. Don’t pray for Tom Williams, pray to him, for at this moment Tom is a saint in heaven.

The national media weighed into the controversy over the execution of Williams. A large copy of *The Irish News* in 1942 connects the past with the present, thereby adding to the performance of heritage. The banner headline boldly states: “WILLIAMS WALKED STEADILY TO HIS DOOM: ‘Could Not Have Been Braver,’ Says Priest.” The tribute to Williams inside the Museum contains an eclectic group of objects. A photograph of the executioner’s box stuffed with rope seems a bit grim. Pressed under a glass frame, is Williams’s shirt that was wore when he was wounded during the shoot-out. The shirt’s presence aspires to connect Williams to James Connolly; as mentioned previously, Connolly’s (bloodied) shirt is on display in Dublin. Next to the tricolor Irish flag is a

certificate from the National Graves Association declaring Williams a “martyr” at the age of 19 – a picture of his boyish demeanor confirms his youth. A family tombstone honors several generations of the Williams clan, concluding with a note of “proud memory” of Thomas Williams. His re-burial took place on 19th January, 2000. Thousands of admirers attended the funeral, including Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams (see Adams, 1990). Fr. Paddy O’Donnell from the Clonard monastery (near the home of Williams) delivered the final blessings. Adding a contemporary look to the exhibit is a colored photograph of Fr. Kelly who heard the last confession of Williams. To the faithful, that final ritual allows the soul to be consecrated for the afterlife (see Hertz, 2009).

Unsurprisingly due to the enormous impact that the hunger strikers had on shaping the discourse of political imprisonment during the “Troubles,” the Irish Republican History Museum delivers a steady narrative on those events. Each of the dead hunger strikers are given considerable exposure and tribute. Photographs of them are noticeable for their cheerful demeanors that seem to defy any accusation that they were “dangerous terrorists.” Moreover, the political nature of the hunger strike is cast into deeper mythic proportions since they are consistently portrayed as martyrs who sacrificed their lives for a free Ireland. Many items on display demonstrate a high degree of solidarity among their supporters. Toward that end, a series of calendars are devoted to the Republican movement. Hanging such calendars in one’s home allows Republican and Nationalist families to “do time” with the political prisoners and hunger strikers, thereby maintaining solidarity. That level of support is notable for its international reach. Stepping into the library of the Museum, visitors are welcome by the Irish tricolor flag joined by the American flag. Those national symbols, however, are situated into a

religious context. Nearby is relatively recent group photograph of worshippers at the Holy Redeemer College in Washington, D.C. (2006) as they attend an annual mass to honor the 1981 hunger strikers. Also on display inside the church are the flags of Ireland and the USA, thereby connecting not only the secular with the sacred but the Irish with its larger diaspora.

Granted, there is much more to explore at the Irish Republican History Museum; however, for the sake of brevity, discussion turns to another private collection. On the far end of West Belfast sits a somewhat secluded Roddy McCorley's Club. There, themes of the sanctity of death are deeply embedded in the performance of Irish Republican heritage. Curiously, Roddy's is a "forbidden space" since to enter one must be a former political prisoner (see Foucault, 1986). Nonetheless, the pub and second-floor museums are an open secret and tourists are given friendly access. Much like the Irish Republican History Museum, Roddy's pays tribute to the Tom Williams, the 1916 Rising, and Michael Collins whose death in 1922 is remembered in a poster featuring an image of Jesus Christ. The caption reads: "Died for Ireland . . . Another Martyr for Old Ireland."

Leading up to the hunger strikes of 1980 and 1981 were other forms of resistance, namely, the blanket protest and the no-wash (dirty) protest (1976-1980) The collection boasts several artistic renderings of prisoners wearing nothing but blankets as they demanded their status as political prisoners. In the next period of resistance, prisoners refused to bathe. That expression of self-imposed "pollution" was compounded by the smearing of their feces on the cell walls (see Douglas, 1966). An exhibit authenticates the dirty protest with an photograph of BBC journalist shown interviewing a prisoner in his polluted surroundings. Since the dirty protest was aimed at achieving political status, that

noble cause seems to transfer an otherwise profane act to the realm of the sacred and sacrifice. As the Irish prisoners entered the phase of the hunger strike, the decision was reached to purify themselves by showering, shaving, and allowing their cells to be cleaned by high-powered hoses. The collection narrates these events by way of popular culture. A montage displays still shots from the “multi award winning film HUNGER” in which Bobby Sands (played by Michael Fassbender) is given such hagiographic treatment that even movie critics were moved by the performance. “Positively riveting, an artistic masterpiece . . . a harrowing, poetic film” -- *Time Out New York*. “. . . both horrifying and, strange to say, beautiful,” A.O. Scott, *The New York Times*. On the wall is a framed copy of *The Irish News* with the bold headline “Sands dies on Day 66 of fast in the Maze.” Those words seem to add a certain degree of Catholic reverence to Sands’s death since the term “fast” implies a religious obligation. It should be noted that the movie photographs featured in the exhibit showing the half-naked (starved) bodies of Sands and the other hunger strikers reinforces “an overwhelmingly masculine” image of the Troubles, skewing Republican heritage toward (militant) men and away from women (Graham and Whelan, 2007: 480; see Dowler, 1998; Scarlata, 2014)

As a visual backdrop, the gallery includes multiple pictures of the Long Kesh/Maze prison where those historic events unfolded. Known as the H Blocks due to their physical layout, the institution was closed in the wake of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. Initially, political leaders agreed to refurbish the compound for the development of the International Centre for Conflict Transformation as well as a space for remembrance (Graham and McDowell, 2007). Over time, however, the prison was gradually (and quietly) demolished, leaving a “representative” sample of its former life:

one guard tower, one chapel, one H block, and the hospital (Wylie, 2004). In her book, *An Archaeology of the Troubles: The Dark Heritage of Long Kesh/Maze Prison*, Laura McAtackney offers a rare study of the ruins of the prison, including various documents (e.g., secret prisoner communications), artefacts (e.g., a plastic cup holding a small incendiary device), and landscapes (e.g., murals), altogether mapping out the heritage of political imprisonment. Toward that end, her description of this “highly mythologized site” provides a pathway for theorizing about culture, identity, and power (see Welch, 2015b). McAtackney shares her material -- and conceptual -- observations of the “death bed” of Bobby Sands, whom sympathizers regard as a martyr. Unsurprisingly then, the bed, draws a degree of respect that is “palpable,” revealing “how the emotive quality of place can transcend its physical structures” (McAtackney, 2014: 270). It is pointed out that in all probability, that particular bed is not the actual one where Sands died. But that doesn’t really matter since its mythic symbolism – and emblem of Irish Republican heritage -- has already been established for those who wish to venerate it (Graham and McDowell, 2007).

Conclusion

Sites of confinement inject deeper political and symbolic significance into social conflict. Indeed, such landmarks as Robben Island (South Africa) and Seodaemun Prison (South Korea) have become touchstones for honoring political prisoners victimized by apartheid and Japanese occupation, respectively (Welch, 2015a; see Croke, 2005). Kilmainham Gaol – the “Bastille of Ireland” -- has joined that pantheon of prison museums, opening its impressive interiors and famed storylines to the public (Cooke, 2000; O’Dwyer, 2010). Albeit rather understatedly, the “Crum” recognizes the

controversy over political imprisonment. Still, it is the Long Kesh/Maze prison that is remembered for being built on the (false) notion that political prisoners could be “magically” disappeared by British authorities. Like Robben Island, Seodaemun, and Kilmainham, Long Kesh/Maze lingers as a forbidden place, thereby complicating its role in heritage performance. Unlike other former prisons, their Northern Irish counterpart has yet to be officially transformed into a space of commemoration. With few exceptions, visitors are not permitted to enter the remaining buildings. As another sign of contested heritage, Unionist and Loyalist politicians are uneasy with the legacy of Long Kesh/Maze. Whereas the compound is shrouded with shame due to decades of systematic brutality, Nationalists and Republicans also recognize it as a site of noble resistance against the British regime. For that reason, Unionists and Loyalists fear that opening Long Kesh/Maze to tourists would convert the site into a shrine to the ten hunger strikers who died there in 1981. Hence, the cultural phenomena of memorialization and pilgrimage are kept from materializing, thus pushing the sanctity of death to the periphery of certain sectors of institutional memory (see Graham and Whelan, 2007).

Perhaps because the “iconic” site of political imprisonment -- Long Kesh/Maze -- has been off-limits, its heritage is performed at elsewhere. With the courtesy of a Black Taxi tour, visitors can gaze at the seemingly endless display of both Loyalist and Republican murals inspired by political imprisonment. Tourists eager to discover other forms of (contested) heritage are likely to gravitate to the “museums of the Troubles” (e.g., the Irish Republican History Museum, Roddy McCorley’s Club). As McAtackney (2014) convincingly explains, those private collections represent the “distributed self” by which the cultural meaning of Long Kesh/Maze thrives beyond state control. The Peace

Process in Northern Ireland is still a political work in progress, and correspondingly the performance of (official) heritage is carefully regulated (e.g., imposing limits on occasions for flying the Union Jack at Belfast City Hall). Arguably from a Durkheimian perspective, efforts to suppress – or ignore – the memorialization of victims (on both sides of the conflict) tends to prolong emotional recovery. “In the final analysis,” according to Hertz, “death as a social phenomenon consists in a dual painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis. It is only when this process is completed that society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death” (2009: 86).

Notes

1. Each of the tour guides prepares and recites his or her own scripts: some emphasize the Famine, others focus on gender and/or children, etc. (McAtackney, 2015).
2. Inspiration for hunger strikes in Ireland is often traced to protests by the suffragettes (Murphy, 2014).
3. Again, a level of nuance is needed when discussing identity in Northern Ireland so as to avoid essentializing political and religious affiliation. For instance, not all Catholics consider themselves Nationalist or Republican and not all Protestants regard themselves Unionist or Loyalist (McAtackney, 2015).
4. There is no real consensus when the “Troubles” actually began (McAtackney, 2015; see Hennessey, 2005).
5. In Australia, a similar case of the *sanctity of death* surrounded the hanging of legendary bushranger Ned Kelly who was buried on prison grounds in 1880. His Irish Catholic clan and devoted followers persistently campaigned -- even until recently -- to grant his body a proper Catholic burial (Welch, 2015a, forthcoming).
6. Curiously, there are no state-sponsored memorials to civilians who died in the course of the Troubles; hence, commemoration is expressed in community and privately supported gardens, exhibits, and collections. To reiterate Graham and Whelan (2007), that characteristic of Northern Ireland demonstrates the extent to which the government deliberately avoids the legacy of the past and its thousands of fatalities.
7. James Connolly carries significant heritage weight in Belfast since he was the only 1916 Rising leader to have actually lived there. After his execution, his wife and family stayed in West Belfast (on Falls Road) (McAtackney, 2015).

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