Difficult Conversations

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Difficult Conversations: Dealing with the Past in Heritage Spaces in Northern Ireland

Elizabeth Crooke

Summer 2022, at the entrance to its main exhibition area, the Ulster Museum in Belfast displayed the Derry Girls blackboard, a prop from the hit Channel 4 show (Figure 1). The board was central to the scene when pupils from two schools, one Catholic and one Protestant, in 1990s Derry/Londonderry, came together to explore their similarities and their differences – only to fill the board with stereotypes about the two communities. Their fictional school trip captured the essence of the experience of young people across Northern Ireland who participated in Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) and its forerunners (Smith and Robinson, 1992, 1996). For many of these young people this was their first chance to explore aspects of identity and belonging, a topic avoided for fear of widening divisions (rather than the comedic chaos shown in Derry Girls). Although museums were sometimes the venue for such cross-community visits, few documented The Troubles, the conflict that had dominated the region since the late 1960s and caused 3,720 deaths and 47,541 injuries in a population of approximately 1.5 million. The lack of engagement with The Troubles can be attributed to museum practice in the 1980s and 1990s: contemporary issues were rarely explored in the network of mostly social-history museums; rapid-response collecting, which today is often a museum’s response to crisis, was still decades off; and museum-initiated programming/engagement activities, based around social issues was rare (Crooke, 2001a).

The result of caution around displaying and interpreting The Troubles was a learning and heritage landscape that was detached from the reality that individuals and families were facing daily, instead focusing on more benign subject matters, such as folklife, archaeology and fine art. This was all in the pursuit of providing ‘oases of calm’ – considered then to be the most appropriate response of museums (Buckley and Kenny 1994). The display of the Derry Girls blackboard in the Ulster Museum in 2022 is indicative of the shift in the Northern Ireland museum sector. This shift reflects changes in museum practice nationally and internationally towards more consideration of social and contemporary issues (Crooke, 2007; Sandell, 2002). Given this was relatively new for the Northern Ireland sector, new methods needed to be learned and practiced (Crooke, 2001b). It also marks a local willingness for museums and heritage projects to contribute to peace building strategies in the region, such as A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005). This increasing engagement with The Troubles has been accompanied by critical and sometimes difficult conversations about method and purpose of the museum and heritage sectors, including recognising museums (whether publicly funded or independent) as politically engaged spaces (Crooke, 2010, 2021, 2023).

When the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed on the 10 April 1998, the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair suggested the ‘burden of history’ could begin to lift from our shoulders. The experiences of the past three decades were too raw and too important for this ‘burden’ to simply dissipate. An opportunity arose in the new peace process power dynamic to lay claim to the

1 Fact Sheet on the conflict in and about Northern Ireland https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/htr/day_of_reflection/htr_0607c.pdf [Accessed 14 December 2022]
Figure 1. Derry Girls blackboard, Displayed at the Ulster Museum. Image: E. Crooke (2020).
past three decades, to take ownership of the narrative that would be shaped when writing The Troubles story in the context of the peace process. Post the GFA, there was unfinished business in the recognition of past experiences; in this new regime, The Troubles came to dominate the memory and heritage space, to be found amongst community museums, heritage trails, engagement projects, and new forms of memorialisation (see case studies in Crooke and Maguire, 2018). The community heritage project took multiple forms: the creation of oral history archives, such as the Dúchas, established by Falls Community Council (Crooke, 2007); makeshift museums recording individual and community sacrifice at the height of The Troubles (Markham, 2018); calls to preserve prison sites (Purbrick, 2018) and opportunistic tour guides within both communities, making the most of Belfast’s addition to the sites of interest for dark tourism (Mannheimer, 2022). In each of these cases heritage practices, the formation of archives and collections, and museum displays are shaped by the social and political environment and interventions within it.

In Northern Ireland the heritage initiative, with a claim on The Troubles experience, needs to be approached with caution. We all create our preferred version of the past, but when we put that on public view, selecting objects, testimony, buildings and landscapes to authenticate that version of the past, we must be aware of the consequence of making that intervention in the public or civic space. Although the interpretation of the past as heritage is never neutral (Smith, 2006), in shared public spaces that past must always be scrutinised for what it reveals about social and political purposes. Arguably, a museum or heritage project is not the exclusive remit of the community that researches, collates and presents their story. Instead, the consequence of that initiative goes far beyond the immediate locality and those most intimately involved in the project. For instance, as well as celebrating or commemorating a local experience, a community heritage initiative can exclude, entrench differences, and be used to justify division (Crooke, 2010; Markham, 2018). Such projects occupy a particular position in relation to critique. Often the initiative of a few enthusiasts within the community, the community heritage project is not always spaces of dialogue for the exploration of alternate versions of events, either from within the community of origin or from the ‘other’ political or social communities. Further to that, those outside the community may either feel, or be told, they cannot critique the community initiative, because it is not their lived experience. As a result, community-heritage initiatives may escape the scrutiny that can be posed at heritage and community initiatives developed by local authorities or centrally such as by National Museums NI.

In Northern Ireland the number of community-heritage projects has grown in the 25 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, many of which make a pitch for public finance. Difficult conversations are taking place across the region as organisations, with the knowledge and financial capacity to support such community-heritage projects, invite communities to think more critically about how they remember. These conversations are addressing the methods, purpose and consequence of such projects, both within the communities and without. As all concerned have got more experienced in these sorts of offer, new methodologies have emerged both from the museums themselves and in collaboration with funders, based on co-production with communities. In this climate, organisations and facilitators are offering support to enable publicly funded projects with the aim to make a positive contribution to a shared and better future, a central tenet to the past two decades of good relations legislation.

Difficult conversations in Northern Ireland’s museum sector
For this contribution on ‘difficult conversations’ I have spoken to two individuals in Northern Ireland, both of whom have been involved in
支撑后社区，他们正在处理社区的争议历史。他们两个都被选为能够为这个对话带来见解的人。保罗·马伦，作为北爱尔兰国家彩票遗产基金的负责人，一直在讨论该地区将焦点放在记忆和身份工作上的社区项目资金分配。科莱特·布朗利，爱尔兰亚麻中心和利斯本博物馆的教育服务官员，在利斯本和卡斯特莱奇市议会，多年来一直与社区团体会谈以解决身份问题。在博物馆和遗产环境中，社区项目可以被视为再生或包容项目的一部分，将个人带在一起分享社区历史的兴趣。这样的项目得益于几十年来与和平相关的特殊欧洲联盟计划（SEUPB）以及再生/社会发展基金，如遗产彩票基金（HLF，现在是国家遗产基金）。在余下的贡献中，我记录了这些个人与寻求支持的社区团体进行的艰难对话。当关键人物（资助人、博物馆理事会成员或社区外展官员）需要社区成员思考遗产项目的目的、价值和潜在影响时，就会出现一种新动态。这种动态鼓励社区团体以新的方式工作，以不同的方式处理他们的历史，并有时与他们过去的不同观点进行互动。对于资助人或遗产实践者来说，这种对话可能很困难，因为他们不想疏远社区团体，而宁愿鼓励这样的对话。对于社区团体本身来说，他们需要经历一段艰难的旅程，无论是对他们自己，还是对需要与他们共同前进的其他社区利益相关者。在最成功的情况下，该协调员也是一个学习者，更好地了解社区的优先事项，并改变他们自己的实践，以成为共享权威的一部分。自1994年以来，遗产基金在北爱尔兰投资了2.6亿英镑用于各种再生和社区项目（国家遗产基金，2022）。最初，资助人担心专注于社区身份的项目，担心这样的项目可能具有政治动机（马伦，2018）。然而，随着信心的增强，出现了显著的成功。其中一个是HLF资助的钻石战争纪念碑项目，由北爱尔兰德里/伦敦德里一个基于社区的和平建设组织——霍利韦尔信托领导。作为为英国军队服役人员立的纪念碑，它被新教社区拒绝。随着发现纪念碑上也有同样多的天主教名字，纪念碑被转换成两个社区都可以接受的地方。保罗·马伦反映，即使是使叙事复杂化，也可能显得不合时宜，但可以“从思想和有据的复杂化可以被视为可取的”（马伦，2018，第38页）。钻石战争纪念碑项目和其他项目在十年的世纪纪念礼（期间纪念爱尔兰历史中重要的历史事件）中挑战了主导叙事，因为这些叙事简化了人们对历史的理解，暴露了更多差异的解释。这一旅程认识到历史的多样性是困难的，因为现有的历史版本是身份和归属感的关键。马伦认识到，处理这样的修订和信任从事研究方法的人的动机可能很困难，不论是在社区中，还是由资助人发起，马伦提醒我们，“没有讨论是中立的”项目协调者需要在项目生命周期的早期就对可能的挑战直言不讳。方法是“从一开始就达成一致”，每个人都愿意“推翻二元论”，因为这是我们真正了解唯一的方法。
start to properly explore’ (Mullan, interview 17 October 2022). This method, he suggests, is essential to a democratic society, adding that embracing diversity and plurality ‘isn’t about trying to convince everybody to think the same way as you think. It’s about embracing the fact that there is difference, and recognising that we won’t always be able to agree’ (Mullan, interview 17 October 2022).

In Northern Ireland, there is no room for complacency. Despite the examples of heritage practice that focuses on plurality and diversity, still new projects arise that can been seen in terms of, what Mullan describes as, pure propaganda, offering a politically motivated version of events that would cause division both within and between communities. In such cases, a project can take a ‘fascinating Irish story’ and turn it into a ‘purely political project’ (Mullan, interview 17 October 2022). The stakes are higher when public money is being used to fund new community heritage projects, because of the suggestion of endorsement. In such instances, ‘difficult conversations’ can only succeed if they are held between communities and trusted facilitators.

According to Mullan, the facilitator provides ‘expert challenge’ to enable groups to ‘evolve their thinking and bring in other critique’. Mullan suggests by fostering an ‘agonistic space’, of constructive critique and dialogue, projects can ‘evolve a narrative that satisfies a community’ and ‘speaks more outwardly to other people, coming across more honestly and not propagandist’. For Mullan this is an example of ‘thoughtful democracy’, which is a place where ‘you can have conversations about difficult issues’ (Mullan, interview 17 October 2022).

**Shared authority at Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum**

In her 29 year career Collette Brownlee has seen an evolution of museum practice to one that is more willing to critique museum purpose and operation, enabling the space to be better suited to outreach and engagement work. For her, engaging in ‘difficult conversations’ within the workplace has enabled the museum service to think in new ways about audience participation in the museum, making it increasingly relevant. She suggests ‘a museum cannot sit in isolation from what is going on outside’, and it must address the historical themes that are critical to society, no matter how difficult that might be (Brownlee, interview 21 October 2022).

Lisburn Museum is located in a largely Protestant/Unionist City Council, and when Brownlee suggested the museum host a project considering 1916 Easter Rising, an event associated with the nationalist communities, her senior managers were initially hesitant. The new project built upon the engagement methods of a ‘World War One and Us’ (2015), which located family stories associated with the Great War. Using that approach ‘The Rising and Us’ (2016) revealed Lisburn’s connections to the republican rising in Dublin. Brownlee described the project as ‘risk taking work’ and, despite the team’s experience of other projects, at outset ‘everybody was very fearful’. By adopting a shared authority approach, the participants and the museum explored the most challenging aspects, finding a way of displaying the event that encouraged inclusivity. At Lisburn shared authority was based around an engagement agreement, which allowed each contributor to explore and manage expectations. This built trust between the museum and participants, giving each confidence in the project method, purpose and potential outcomes.

This approach has enabled the museum to explore ‘hard histories’, including ‘histories no one spoke about’ (Brownlee, interview 21 October 2022). An opportunity for this came in 2020 when Lisburn Museum opened an online exhibition on the centenary of the ‘Swanzy Riots’, an event in the city’s history that was not well known despite the scale of the events. The riots can be placed in the context of the Irish War of Independence (1919–1921), which included targeting of the Royal Irish
Constabulary by the Irish Republican Army. The assassination of District Inspector Swanzy in Lisburn in August 1920 triggered days of burning, looting and riots that forced Catholic residents of Lisburn to flee. This was a topic that had been pushed aside from local memory ‘as not a very pleasant phase in the town’s history’ (Brownlee, interview 21 October 2022). Brownlee had not anticipated how the exhibition would resonate with colleagues who had witnessed riots and displacement during the recent Northern Ireland Troubles. The process of engaging with that led to ‘difficult conversations’ amongst staff, because we are still ‘dealing with the aftermath’ of the partition of Ireland in 1921 as well as the recent Troubles (Brownlee, interview 21 October 2022).

For the team at Lisburn Museum, engaging with challenging periods in local history is about ensuring the museum service is always relevant. By drawing attention to formative times, including moments in history that are not talked about because of perceived difficulties, the museum is having impact on its communities. Brownlee is convinced this is the service’s ethical responsibility ‘that has to be at our core, we have to tell all stories and we have to be there for everybody’ (Brownlee, focus group contribution, 28 April 2021).

**It’s the method that matters**

In Northern Ireland we are aware of the subject matters likely to lead to ‘difficult conversations’, and that underpinned the silences referred to in the opening of this paper. The initiatives explored in this paper are undoing the earlier practice of The Troubles not being considered in museums and heritage spaces. Further to that, innovative projects across Northern Ireland are interrogating the ‘two traditions’ model of belonging in the region, which was reflected in the Derry Girls blackboard. For instance, the exhibition *Diverse Perspectives on a Global Conflict: Migrant Voices and Living Legacies of World War One*, co-produced by researchers at Ulster University with North West Migrants Forum (McDermott, 2018), recognised narratives of the First World War and its legacies beyond that associated with nationalist and unionist communities. Co-produced panels brought in perspectives from places such as Poland, Guyana, the Ivory Coast, China and Cameroon. Thinking about new ways to represent identity and place is found in the research undertaken by Doctoral candidate Kris Reid (Ulster University), who is drawing on LGBTQ+ histories that can be told at our heritage properties and museum sites in Northern Ireland. Increasingly, such work is demonstrating the value of complicating the narrative.

In order to make these new projects work, it is not just a matter of addressing new topics in our museums, it is the qualities of those conversations had within the museum and between the museum and stakeholders. It’s not necessarily what we are talking about, it’s how we are talking about it. This is a concern about the quality of the conversation, that can bring us beyond the subject matter itself and reveal more fundamental attitudes within societies. Very often the most difficult conversation is the one that needs to take place early in the process, seeking agreement about method. Those are methods that include how we explore, when and with whom we critique, and the processes of listening and responding. An effective methodology asks about the inclusion of alternate perspectives and how they might be applied in relation to individual and community perspectives. The method explores how those contributions will be used and acknowledges that at times the conversations will be challenging and uncomfortable. Key to the success of such projects is feeling safe as individuals share their stories – confident about how their experiences will be received by those listening and how they will be used within and beyond a project.

Repeatedly at museum sector conferences and events, I hear the statement that we must be ‘comfortable with being uncomfortable’, when sharing experiences and points of view that challenge. These methodologies of using difficult conversations in a constructive matter
can only be achieved through confidence built via trust, which takes time to forge. Furthermore, these difficult conversations, and the need to build confidence, works in multiple ways – it is not just between a facilitator (funder or museum) and the community, it is also difficult conversations within the sector, including those who fund/support it, museums as not neutral spaces, and addressing the purpose, value and impact of museums and heritage.

References


