
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

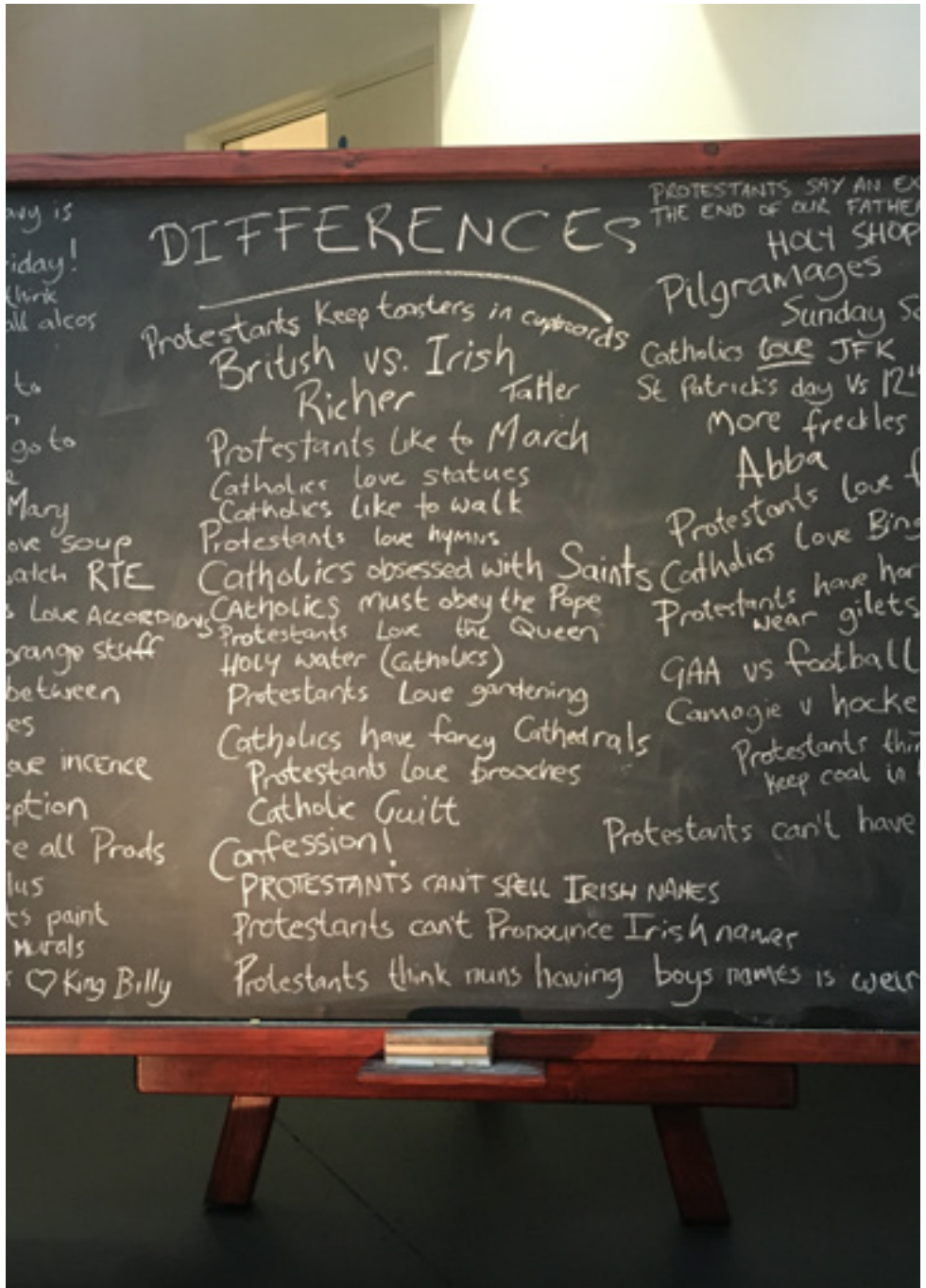


Figure 1. Derry Girls blackboard, Displayed at the Ulster Museum. Image: E. Crooke (2020).

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

supporting communities who are navigating contested histories associated with their local community. Both were selected for the insights they could bring to this conversation. Dr Paul Mullan, as Director of the National Lottery Heritage Fund in Northern Ireland, has been central to discussions on funding community projects in the region that have focussed on memory and identity work. Dr Collette Brownlee, Education Services Officer Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum, in Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, has had years of experience of working with community groups to address identity issues.

In museum and heritage settings, the community project can be presented as being part of a regeneration or inclusion project, bringing individuals together to share interest in community histories. Such projects have been enabled by decades of peace-related funding from the Special European Union Programme Body (SEUPB) as well as interventions from regeneration/social development funds such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF, now the National Lottery Heritage Fund). In the remainder of this contribution, I document the character of the difficult conversations these individuals have had with community groups seeking support for their heritage-based projects. A new dynamic arises when the key person who can enable the community project to proceed (a funder, a museum council worker, or a community outreach officer) requires community members to ask themselves challenging questions about the purpose, value and potential impact of a heritage project. This dynamic encourages the community group to work in new ways, address their histories differently, and sometimes to engage with other perspectives on their past. For the funder or heritage practitioner, that conversation may be difficult because they do not wish to alienate the community groups and would rather encourage such dialogue. For the community groups themselves, they are brought on a journey that can be challenging, both for them personally and for other community stakeholders they need to bring with them. In

the most successful of cases the facilitator is also a learner, understanding better community priorities and changing their own practice to become one of sharing authority.

Since 1994, the Heritage Fund has invested £260 million in Northern Ireland on a range of regeneration and community projects (National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2022). Initially the funder was wary of projects that focussed on community identity, for fear such projects were politically motivated (Mullan, 2018). Nevertheless, confidence grew with notable successes. One such was the HLF-funded Diamond War Memorial project, led by a community-based peace building organisation, Holywell Trust in Derry/Londonderry. As a monument to those who died serving British Army regiments, it was rejected by nationalist communities. With the revelation that as many Catholic names as Protestant were on the memorial, the monument was transformed into a site for both communities. Paul Mullan reflects that complicating a narrative might seem counter-intuitive, but instead ‘thoughtful and informed complication can be seen as desirable’ (Mullan, 2018, p. 38). The Diamond War Memorial Project, and others like it during the Decade of Centenaries (a period of 10 years marking significant historical events in Irish history) challenged master narratives that have simplified historical understanding, exposing them to more plural interpretations.

This journey to recognising the plurality of history is difficult when established versions of history are key to a sense of identity and belonging. Paul Mullan recognises the difficulty of coming to terms with such revisions and trusting the motivations of those espousing research methods that can reveal alternative perspectives on the past. Whether within communities, or initiated by a funder, Mullan reminds us that ‘no discussions are neutral’ and project facilitators need to be upfront about the potential for challenge later on in a project’s lifespan. The method is one of ‘getting agreement from the start’, that everyone involved is willing to ‘push the binaries, because that’s the only way we really

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 be 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.

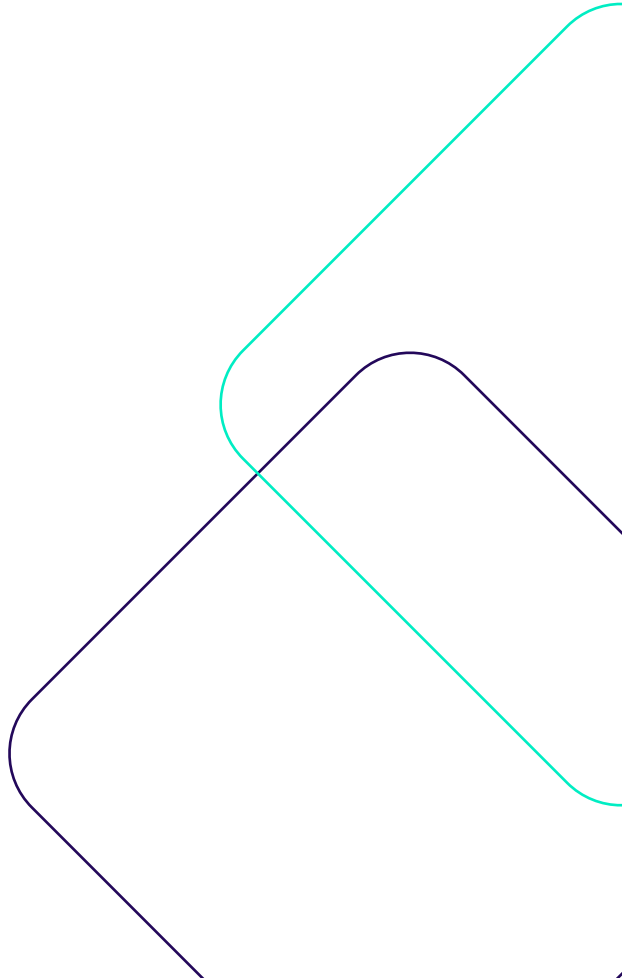
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