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Selling Conflict Heritage through Tourism in Peacetime Northern Ireland: Transforming Conflict or Exacerbating Difference?

Sara McDowell

The paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 and the ensuing peace negotiations brought to a close some three decades of ethno-nationalist violence in Northern Ireland. The conflict, colloquially termed the Troubles, cost almost 3,700 lives, and bequeathed both a tangible and intangible heritage of division and hurt. This paper considers the commodification of physical conflict ‘heritage’ such as military installations, memorials and street murals through an examination of various tourism initiatives. Such initiatives have been employed by a number of agents ranging from local councils and tourist boards to small community groups and ex-prisoner organisations. While ‘official’ agencies recognise the economic potential of this form of heritage, community-based groups often view the sites and symbols of the conflict as vehicles through which to propagate political perspectives. Those sold by the latter, in particular, are often supported by government bodies that fund such forms of tourism under the auspices of ‘conflict transformation’, a strategy that is aimed at transforming the nature of the conflict through fostering self-understanding within disputant communities. I participated in a number of these tours over the course of six months in 2005/2006.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; Heritage; Political Tourism; Conflict Transformation

Introduction

Warfare and conflict, as Grodach notes, not only reshape historical and cultural sites but also have the ability to construct new ones.¹ As such, places marked by or

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commemorating war are transformed from 'everyday mundane spaces', taking on 'heightened symbolic meaning, value and emotional significance', and consequently evolving as 'heritage'. The conflict in Northern Ireland, over the course of some three decades, has had a profound effect on cultural landscapes, manifested physically through military installations, street murals and commemorative monuments. While this heritage is overwhelmingly local, reflecting 'rival territorial ideologies'² and also pointing towards continuing ethno-nationalist tensions, in the post-conflict years, the sites and symbols of the conflict have become sensitive to external influences and interests. As Boyd noted in 2000:

Northern Ireland would do well to consider the importance of maintaining certain symbols, icons, buildings and places to reflect and commemorate the past. In essence what is being advocated here is the role that the tourism of sites of death, atrocity ... may play in adding yet another and perhaps necessary element of heritage attraction within the Province.³

The overarching aim of this paper is to question the motivations behind the commodification of conflict 'heritage' in peacetime Northern Ireland where narratives of the past are increasingly harnessed to attract tourist interest in the present by a diverse range of stakeholders. The roles played by official agencies and agents within the community in this area are intrinsically different, despite the fact that both parties play to an external audience. Official agencies such as tourist agencies and local councils often treat conflict landscapes as commercial 'products', emphasising their political nature and marketing them to outsiders. Conversely, agents within local communities such as community or ex-prisoner groups see the landscape as a political tool through which they can vie for external support and sympathy. Republican groups, for example, who aspire to a united Ireland, use their conflict heritage to communicate this objective and portray the British state as the perpetrator of violence against their communities. By contrast, Loyalist groups, who are increasingly debating Northern Ireland's relationship with Britain, use sites and symbols associated with their experience of the Troubles to accuse Republicans of sectarianism. Thus the value assigned to such forms of 'heritage' by the latter two is not purely economic. As Tunbridge and Ashworth contend, 'atrocity [is] one of the most marketable of heritages and one of the most powerful instruments for the transference of political or social messages'⁴. It is premised here that by conditioning an external audience to interpret and remember the Troubles in a certain way, the production and consumption of this type of tourism can be understood to be contributing to a broader process which effectively—and perhaps inadvertently—leads to the international legitimisation of sectarian politics and sectarian landscapes. Establishing global networks, in particular, is, in many transitional societies, as Bourdieu suggests, an important part of raising social and economic capital,⁵ as tourist visits solidify networks across continents, while photographs of conflict heritage 'spread' the experience.⁶

Support given by tourist visits, then, works to reinforce both the legitimacy of the landscape in question and the narratives being evoked. If the tourist is prepared to 'buy' into that narrative and that space, Republican and Loyalist symbolic landscapes can be sold as Republican places or Loyalist places. In this context, selling conflict heritage

must be seen as a spatial practice which, contrary to improving community relations and transforming the nature of the conflict, instead redefines and reinforces territorial politics and transforms the conflict into a war by other means. Ironically, many of these groups are funded by international or regional funding bodies that believe in transforming the conflict in Northern Ireland through fostering self-understanding and education (a point considered in more detail below).

Essentially qualitative in focus, this paper is based on research conducted in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in 2005/2006. I became a tourist in the summer of 2005 and over the course of six/seven months participated (covertly as not to diminish the 'true' tourist experience) in 11 tours of conflict heritage sold by a diverse range of groups including local councils, ex-prisoners, taxi-drivers and community groups. A small number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with some of those responsible for organising the tours. Media analysis of these tours and archival research were also employed to gain an understanding of the media's role in popularising this phenomenon. The paper begins, therefore, by discussing the importance of an external audience in societies emerging from conflict and examines the role of the tourist in that equation. 'Political' tourists, for example, are thought to act as mediators in the arena of conflict, helping externalise the political objectives of the country that they are visiting and often enjoying a level of access denied to many others from that same place. Secondly, I query the roles of official funding bodies which seek to promote conflict transformation within small communities, a strategy which has inadvertently bolstered 'political tourism' in the areas in which these groups operate. It is argued here that conflict transformation has not improved inter-community relations, but instead has reified and formalised divisions through single-identity work, as communities market their own spaces and narratives through heritage that is deliberately exclusive. Efforts to engage in single-identity work can be seen to be a major deterrent for improving relations in Northern Ireland and, as such, presents the Community Relations Council (CRC), which works to improve inter-communal relations, with a major problem. Taking various tourism initiatives in West Belfast as examples, the paper contends that the consumption of Republican places and pasts, in particular, contributes to isolationist policies and the sustenance of a 'separate' territory which serves only to exacerbate difference rather than resolve or transform conflict and division. The penultimate section examines the commercial value of political tourism and interrogates the roles of official tourist agencies in profiling it. Finally, I assess the implications of the construction and consumption of a form of conflict heritage that is directly dependent on sustaining a sectarian conflict and exacerbating difference, and which a significant number of official tourist agencies are explicitly and implicitly involved in marketing.

Externalising Conflicting Narratives

The fractured relationship between the state and sections of the population has meant that Northern Ireland has often looked to the outside for mediation, representation and legitimisation. This external audience has been particularly necessary throughout

the post-conflict years, with various groups working with outside agencies to secure political and economic support. Evidence of these 'special relationships' is apparent everywhere, underscoring the significance of the international community in assisting Northern Ireland's transition from conflict to peace. A special US envoy, for example, sits on the Independent Monitoring Commission which assesses paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland, while South African cleric and activist Desmond Tutu has initiated a series of truth and reconciliation projects among 'victims' and 'perpetrators'. The semiotics of the Northern Ireland conflict, too, has been particularly susceptible to these outside influences. In Republican areas, in particular, references to conflicts perceived to be similar are highly visible. At the foot of the Falls Road, for example, there are a series of murals commemorating conflicts in Euskadi (the Basque Country) and Palestine. This international iconography underscores how important global recognition is to Republicans and was reiterated in an interview with a leader of a community group in the vicinity:

Why do you think we put those international murals there? It was a strategic decision to place them at the entrance of *our space*. We want to *invite people in* [to West Belfast] from all over the world. We want them to know about *our struggle* and we want them to know that *we're with them* in their struggle. International solidarity is an important thing now-a-days. (My emphasis)⁷

These global murals and sites commemorating the Troubles dead have explicitly and implicitly attracted tourists. Lisle believes that this form of tourism is fundamentally political as the tourist moves beyond his/her traditional role of simply absorbing the environment that they find themselves in.⁸ Political tourism places tourists in more politically active roles than traditional forms of tourism permit. Tourists are, as Stein notes, 'staged as political actors whose bodies intervene in an arena of regional conflict'.⁹ As such, tourists can, effectively, enter into a highly contested and divisive space as people who are impartial to or, at least, detached from the conflict, thereby exercising the ability to apply moral judgements to the situation and learn from it. Sherna Berger Gluck's expedition to Palestine in 1994 as an 'American Feminist' and thus an 'outsider' allowed her to experience contested and divided spaces, spaces that normally exclude the 'other', be they Israelis or Palestinians.¹⁰ Berger Gluck enjoyed unprecedented access to localised narratives through participating in 'political' tours of community heritage conducted by local residents.

Political tourists, then, are permitted to share contested spaces and interpret conflict sites because those who control them wish to present themselves and their histories to the outside world in a certain way. Extending and externalising localised interpretations of the past is acutely important in post-conflict or transitional societies where minority or disputant groups compete for the status of victim or seek legitimisation and power. Tourists are invited to 'see for themselves' the realities of violence, to make a moral judgement about the validity of that narrative and to take it back with them, to share with others.¹¹ In post-apartheid South Africa, conflict heritage has become an integral part of the country's tourism as remembering the past is increasingly coupled with local tours of townships, memorials and sites of violence. Similar initiatives are in place in much of Eastern Europe, where political empathy

and economic support from an external audience is increasingly imperative for post-conflict reconstruction.

Many stakeholders in Northern Ireland prefer to think of their tourist initiatives as political, as they guide visitors around their communities introducing them to people who have experienced the conflict firsthand and directing attention to commemorative sites. Conversely, the type of tourism offered by other stakeholders, particularly by those who operate (official) bus tours of memorial sites, cannot be political as tourists are driven through areas to gaze upon fractured communities and their memories, never interacting with those who have lived through the conflict.

Selling the Past through ‘Conflict Transformation’

Various forms of international funding have propped up the peace process throughout its most intractable years and contributed to the rebuilding of Northern Ireland’s economy.¹² A significant proportion of this funding has been directed at ex-prisoner groups and communities that experienced acute levels of violence. The aim is to provide the financial support needed to engage in ‘conflict transformation’, a concept first coined by political mediator John P. Lederach. Conflict transformation is based on the premise that short-term resolutions or ‘fixes’ to conflict are largely unsuccessful, as divided or disputant communities do not understand their mutually destructive relationships that led to the conflict in the first instance.¹³ Rather, such communities should seek to transform or modify those relationships through what Folger and Baruch Bush term ‘empowerment and recognition’.¹⁴ This process has been interpreted by many people as a means not only of transforming and reshaping their own ideas about the origins, realities and consequences of the Troubles but also of transforming the opinions of an external audience. The attention of this audience has been sought in a number of ways, one of the most prominent being the manipulation of conflict heritage through the medium of political tourism. International funding has helped fund a variety of tourism initiatives in areas that suffered acute levels of violence.

For example, local communities in North Belfast have benefited from such funding and have, as a result, become involved in the marketing of their spaces and narratives and of their own community heritage that they have been involved in creating. Areas such as Ardoyne and Tiger’s Bay are best known for their recurrent violence and continuing division. The conflict remains defined at a local level through commemorative sites such as wall murals and memorial gardens that add to the residue of 30 years of violence, illustrated by peacelines and defunct military installations. In 2001, with an injection of funding, the North Belfast Tourism Strategy proposed using symbols that characterised the conflict to their advantage:

Visitors to Belfast are interested in our recent history as is manifested in the extremely popular murals of West Belfast and walking tours of the New Lodge and elsewhere in the city. Some form of interpretation of the violence of the last thirty years should be incorporated into any future tourism strategy for the area.¹⁵

Since the launch of the strategy, community groups and residents have undertaken mural tours and walking tours of conflict and memorial sites. They have also been

actively involved in debating the future of the Crumlin Road Gaol and taking guided tours of the now-defunct prison. This section of the paper turns to two such tours: the Ardoyne Mural Tour and Belfast Safaris, which sell memorial landscapes to tourists in an apparently uninhibited manner.

The Ardoyne Mural Tour was launched in 2004. Billed as ‘one of the best ways to visit Belfast’, it promises to give the tourist ‘an uncensored overview of community life in North Belfast’.¹⁶ Providing an insight into what the tour considers to be ‘real’ people’s experiences, the Ardoyne tour guide offers a ‘true’ interpretation of violent sites, using words like ‘uncensored’ and ‘authentic’ to imply intimacy, truth and excitement. Such histories provide partisan, selective and sometimes overtly sectarian interpretations of the past, as people’s histories are individual and localised. Giving only one personal view of the past, they cannot and do not operate as legitimate examples of group experience. I took the tour in August 2005. The guide, a lifelong resident in the community, narrated a history of oppression, violence and ongoing sectarian conflict communicated through some of the most tangible representations of memory in the area such as memorial gardens, peacelines and commemorative murals. The guide talked about the oppressive nature of the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) against the Catholic community, using a plaque commemorating civilians killed by the organisation to illustrate the point. Although the Ardoyne Focus Group is committed to conflict transformation, the principal objectives of the tour appear to be to attribute blame for the conflict in North Belfast to British oppression whilst attracting tourist interest into the area for economic regeneration.

Another tourism initiative funded under the auspices of conflict tourism was launched in May 2004.¹⁷ Billed as ‘a tourism initiative with a twist’, Belfast Safaris is a ‘pioneering’ new tourist programme aimed at promoting ‘alternative Northern Irish histories and heritages’.¹⁸ Using the increasing trend of providing a ‘real’ history, its objective is to bring visitors to North Belfast through the various neighbourhoods, ‘interacting’ with local people as they go: ‘Visitors have a huge appetite for the “real” Belfast. They’ve seen negative images on their TV screens for 30 years, and now they want to see the real thing.’¹⁹ The project was adopted from similar schemes tried in New York, Auckland, Prague, Berlin and Cape Town. Yet the word ‘Safari’ has undesirable connotations. Again playing on the notion of Belfast as a somewhat dangerous destination, the idea of taking tourists on an expedition feeds the tourism industry. Tourists engage with local residents who have experienced the Troubles firsthand, again using personal representations of memory to communicate conflict heritage. Project manager Marian Dalton argues:

The Troubles were a very dark time for Northern Ireland. But it happened, and its over, and we would like to take that negative perception and turn it round on itself, to try and create something positive for people. There may be visitors who are curious about how people in the area coped during the conflict, and hopefully there will be locals who are comfortable to talk about it to tourists, as honestly as possible, and in an objective way.²⁰

These tours are funded because they are supposed to assist conflict transformation in Belfast. Yet rather than contributing to this goal, it can be argued that they are

instrumental in sanctifying divisive, sectarian landscapes in which the debate over the authors of the conflict is all important and all consuming. The objectivity sought by Belfast Safaris clearly cannot be achieved in the arena of tourism as residents share one story, a story that is partisan and selective. In Ardoyne, the conflict is ever-present as residents clash persistently with the neighbouring Protestant community in Glenbryn. By concentrating on the injustices inflicted upon the local community by the state throughout the Troubles, commemorative icons within Ardoyne are designed primarily to reinforce the 'us against them' mentality that has not ended with the ceasefires. Tourists, in this instance, are invited into the neighbourhood in order to see representations of that injustice.

Political Tourism in West Belfast: Selling Republican Places and Pasts

Best known for the sectarian segregation of its residential space into the two opposing neighbourhoods of the Loyalist Shankill Road and the Republican Falls Road, West Belfast sustained a high incidence of conflict-related deaths (440 out of a total of approximately 3,700) throughout the Troubles,²¹ and the past is visually omnipresent in the cultural landscapes. Since the paramilitary ceasefires of 1994, West Belfast, like many other areas in Northern Ireland, has been actively marked by the construction of what many local people regard as tangible sites of suffering, hurt and loss. These symbolise the locations where lives were lost and 'actualise'²² many other deaths which occurred outside the area (this is exemplified by a range of memorials honouring Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries who 'died on active service' in spaces that are essentially 'owned' by the 'other'). Conversely, deaths that do not 'fit' the dominant narrative are concealed. In Republican areas of West Belfast, for example, sites where security forces, informers and civilians were killed by Republicans are elided from the landscape. The area is, therefore, peppered with commemorative icons such as plaques, monuments, murals and gardens of remembrance, which symbolise many but not *all* the fatalities that occurred there.

Conflict heritage in West Belfast was recognised by various stakeholders as a possible tourist selling point as early as the mid-1990s. After much pressure, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) launched an official tourism strategy for the area in February 1998, based on the argument that 'political' tourism was a 'unique selling point' and a 'major opportunity for the area'.²³ 'Fáilte Feirste Thiar', a community-led tourism initiative supported by 'Making Belfast Work' and Belfast City Council, and partly funded by the NITB, was one such project to emerge following the report, with the objective of promoting 'political' and cultural tourism in West Belfast. It has an online 'Troubles map' pinpointing peacelines and 'areas rich in murals' and advertises a number of political tours.²⁴

Fáilte Feirste Thiar recommends a number of taxi tours—one of the most popular ways to consume conflict heritage in Northern Ireland. Generally the driver belongs to a particular political persuasion or has been involved in the Troubles and is thus keen to transmit a personal interpretation of the conflict (this was true of each of the taxi tours I took). The driver, therefore, becomes a 'character', narrating and interpreting

an elusive and perhaps dangerous past. Taxi tours are billed by tourist agencies as ‘a Belfast must’, showing the tourist the ‘alternative sights’ of the city.²⁵ While some drivers take visitors to experience the heritage of ‘both’ sides (Nationalist/Republican and Unionist/Loyalist), others prefer to present one narrative. One such example is the West Belfast Taxi Association’s tours (as recommended by Fáilte Feirste Thiar) that represent the history and geography of Republican West Belfast through conflict heritage constructed in empathy with the Republican narrative. The West Belfast Tour stops at a monument to Julie Livingstone in Lenadoon Avenue, ‘a young girl who fell victim to a plastic bullet fired by an RUC/Army patrol in 1981’.²⁶ This stop, like the many others we visited, is intended to show the tourist how the Nationalist community in the area was oppressed by the state, thus legitimising the violence of the paramilitary group, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), as reactive rather than directive. Other memorials on the ‘itinerary’ include a monument to the local civilian dead, ‘most of whom were innocent victims of Loyalist death squads’.²⁷ This tour is significant because a clear distinction is made by the West Belfast Taxi Association between the perpetrators of the Troubles, that is the state and Loyalist paramilitaries, and the ‘combatants’ or ‘victims’, the ‘local dead’. This is clearly problematic. Because of the way in which the landscape is presented in much of West Belfast, the tourist is gazing upon a partisan and subjective narrative of the conflict which obscures the experiences of others who have suffered equally in that area. Instead of gaining an insight into the multi-faceted nature of the Troubles, tourists are gazing upon conflict heritage through a carefully mediated lens that frames a particular narrative at the expense of others.

West Belfast’s conflict heritage is also showcased through ‘Féile an Phobail’, a two-week festival in August established in 1988 to improve the negative and violent image of the area. Its website states that:

West Belfast, once a major battlefield between the IRA and the British Army and its people prey to Loyalist assassins, is transforming itself and *Féile an Phobail* is proud to play a leading role in that transformation.²⁸

The festival, which is claimed to be the largest ‘community’ festival in Europe with some 50,000 participants, is linked inexorably to commemorating a Republican narrative of the Troubles. The first week of August was chosen to coincide with the anniversary of internment, a policy introduced by the British government in 1972 to deal with the IRA. During its first two years of operation, approximately 1,000 people were interned, many of whom had no association with paramilitary organisations. Yet the festival’s purpose does not lie only in its efforts to project a Republican narrative of the conflict. The prime objective of *Féile an Phobail* is essentially to underline the demarcation of Republican West Belfast from the rest of the city. It is, therefore, a medium through which Republicanism can differentiate itself from the state and become politically and economically self-sufficient. The exclusive nature of the event serves to perpetuate the existence of an alternative Republican ‘state’, which welcomes external rather than cross-community participation. Many of the festival’s events concentrate on sites of conflict heritage to attract visitors. As one newspaper noted:

Belfast, in particular, has discovered that former conflict zones attract sightseers. The programme for next month's *Féile an Phobail* features more than half a dozen guided tours and walks ... Aimed at the casual visitor, they offer a vast overview of memorable murals and locations familiar from the television news.²⁹

One package offered through *Féile an Phobail* is the West Belfast and Interface Bus Tour which I took in August 2005.³⁰ This tour is particularly interesting in that it is sponsored by Citybus, which works in conjunction with Coiste na-n-Iarchimí, the national (all-Ireland) network of Republican ex-prisoners. Citybus is not just a Belfast-based bus company but is part of Translink, the state-owned public transport operator. These tours are led by Republican ex-prisoners who accompany groups of tourists around sites of 'history' in West Belfast and answer questions about 'local landmarks' (see Figure 1). 'Highlights' include: 'stops' at two memorial gardens commemorating 'fallen' IRA 'volunteers' and civilians in both the Falls Road and Clonard areas; the Republican plot in Miltown cemetery; and peacelines separating the Falls and Shankill Roads. Tourists appear to be attracted by West Belfast's conflict heritage and are equally interested in the participants' selective stories, particularly if these complement their own perceptions or preferences. This experience is made all the more 'real' by the visual reminders embedded in the landscape. One student from Washington DC who participated in a tour given by an 'IRA Maze commander' remarked: 'I thought it was great. It wasn't like he [the tour guide] was telling all the truth. It was his truth and it



Figure 1 A memorial garden on the West Belfast and Interface Bus Tour.

was really believable.³¹ Coiste recognises the advantages associated with ex-prisoners narrating conflict heritage. Project co-ordinator Caoimhín Mac Giolla Mhín, who launched Coiste's own 'political' tours initiative in March 2002, noted: '[Tourists] come to Belfast to hear and see first hand experiences of the conflict. Who would be better positioned than ex-prisoners to deliver such a message?'³²

These political tours use the Republican landscape of West Belfast, offering tourists not only the opportunity to engage with sites where people fought and died but also to meet the 'participants' or 'combatants' of the actual conflict. This is not primarily an economic initiative but a sophisticated means of re-presenting and transmitting a selective past to an external audience. The director of Coiste, Mike Ritchie, is well aware of the importance of such a message. During one of the organisation's annual conferences, he reiterated the political objectives of Republican ex-prisoners by stressing: 'It's about working locally, thinking globally.'³³ The organisation's core objective is to draw attention to the Republican message, exemplified by an extensive feature of their tours in a national Sunday newspaper—*The Sunday Times*—which attests that: 'The shooting war may be over but history remains a contentious area, albeit one where Republicans are using an ever more subtle means to propagate their point of view.'³⁴ Getting that message 'right' is crucial. When I asked why Coiste launched its own tourism initiative the guide replied: 'We felt we needed to *structure political tourism*. We need to make sure we're getting the *right message* across' (my emphasis).

These tours, which are available in Basque, Irish, Spanish and French, are 'tailor-made' to the tourist's specific needs or interests and often include co-ordinated visits to other participants in the conflict, such as Loyalist ex-prisoners, and receive funding from the Belfast Local Strategy Partnership Board because of their educational value. The involvement of a state-funded agency with this group has important political ramifications. Its willingness to sponsor and work with former paramilitaries in their quest to sell their own interpretation of the conflict indicates exactly how far the state is involved in promoting political tourism and globalising partisan narratives.

Coiste has also been actively involved in the manipulation and utilisation of other sites that symbolise the conflict, including prisons and military barracks. In 2003 the organisation submitted its ideas for the future of the Maze Prison site. Only a year earlier the prison had been handed over to the public sector under the Reinvestment and Reform initiative which witnessed the transfer of military sites to the public in order to underpin the peace process. Coiste recommended that the prison should be turned primarily into a museum. This suggestion came to fruition when in March 2005 it was announced that among a series of plans for the site, various structures would be retained as part of an International Centre for Conflict Transformation (ICCT).³⁵ In January 2005, Coiste stepped up its campaign to secure other conflict sites with the acquisition of a defunct RUC barracks on the Andersonstown Road in West Belfast, which it is planning to use as hostel accommodation for those participating in tours of conflict sites and symbols.³⁶

Republicans are not alone in producing and manipulating their conflict heritage and there is increasing evidence to suggest that Loyalists engage in similar practices (if not to the same extent). The eagerness of both Republican and Loyalist communities to

compete for the attentions and sympathies of the tourist is striking. One good example of this was comments made by a guide on the Unionjack Shop Mural Tour which uses sites and symbols that are particularly relevant to the Loyalist experience not only in West Belfast but also in the East and North of the city to transmit a Loyalist interpretation of the Troubles (see Figure 2).³⁷ One of the stops on this tour is a community mural painted in East Belfast, which traces the cultural heritage of Protestants in the area and their opposition to Republicanism. Another ‘attraction’ is a memorial garden located on the Lower Newtownards Road (again in East Belfast) commemorating Protestant civilians who were killed by the IRA throughout the conflict. Murals on the Shankill Road (West Belfast) meanwhile commemorate Loyalist paramilitaries. When I asked about the reasoning behind providing such a tour, the guide expressed his frustration at the lack of representation of the Loyalist message. He felt that the Republican narrative of the Troubles had been promoted globally and subsequently accepted. Sites of conflict, therefore, present an opportunity to contest the ‘other’, while political tours act as a vehicle through which Loyalists and Republicans can present competing claims to victimhood and contest their respective roles within the Troubles.

The Implicit and Explicit Involvement of Official Agencies

It would be naïve to suggest that the production and consumption of memorial landscapes is motivated solely by politics and a moral duty to educate the rest of the



Figure 2 The Unionjack Shop Mural Tour.

world about the Northern Ireland conflict. Heritage, and more explicitly tourism, after all, is grounded primarily in economics. Stakeholders in Northern Ireland recognise this. As one tour guide told me: 'that's why people come here: the Troubles. Why not exploit them? I'm in it for the money.' It is evident from this particular comment that conflict heritage has a clear economic purpose, which is recognised by many of those groups who engage in the commercial commodification of sites of conflict.

It is also important to note that many official agencies also recognise the commercial dimension to political tourism. Indeed, all the tours discussed here are recommended, funded or supported by official agencies, illuminating their implicit and explicit involvement in the marketing of the region's sectarian streetscape. Political tourism was initially a sensitive issue for the NITB. Both the NITB and Bord Fáilte (the Republic of Ireland tourism agency) had originally maintained a detached relationship with symbolic representations of violence, choosing to ignore the blatant manifestations of division on the cultural landscapes, and regarding mural art in particular as being potentially damaging to Northern Ireland's image. In an era when good relations and peace were heavily promoted, murals depicting a continuing struggle were held to be detrimental to the industry. A 1997 report from the Northern Ireland Economic Council (NIEC) declared that: 'tourism is an industry which depends very much on a good image for its success'.³⁸ This notion of promoting a 'good image' was achievable when the ceasefires in the autumn of 1994 had a positive and immediate impact on Northern Ireland as a centre of tourism. NITB statistics for 1997 showed a renewed interest in Northern Ireland as a tourist destination; however, the agency was still reluctant to admit that this had any direct link to the conflict: 'To conclude this section on a cautionary note, the importance of peace to the future development of the tourist industry cannot be overemphasised.'³⁹

It was not until 2004 that official tourism engaged with political tourism as a viable and fundamental part of Northern Ireland's heritage. At a heritage planning conference in March 2004, Briony Crozier, a representative of Belfast City Council, finally admitted that the Troubles comprised one of two mainstream big brands of tourist interest, the other being the *Titanic* (which was built in Belfast).⁴⁰ Illustrative of this was a headline in the *Belfast Telegraph*: 'Visitors Look for Trouble', which referred to research that Belfast's trouble spots were proving to be a bigger hit with tourists than the *Titanic*.⁴¹ Yet the NITB and Belfast City Council orchestrate a two-pronged approach to this type of tourism. While approving and marketing political tourism initiatives in other parts of Belfast, both agencies have taken great care to promote the city centre as a neutral place for the large percentage of visitors who visit Northern Ireland for other reasons such as business or leisure.

Although it is difficult to measure the success of political tourism in any real terms, the legacy of the Troubles clearly functions as a pull factor for tourists. 'Troubles tourism', the label given to the industry by one newspaper, has witnessed a marked growth in recent years and has become a central element to the economic prosperity of places like West Belfast.⁴² This is supported by statistics published in 2004. *Belfast Tourism Facts and Figures* reported a record number of visitors in 2003 with 5.3 million visitors, representing an impressive 47% increase over 2002. The statistics are

undoubtedly important. Fifty one percent were drawn to the city by the usual holiday factors such as relaxation, scenery and attractions; more importantly though, a massive 42% were pulled in by the 'curiosity factor'.⁴³

For the first time, the report acknowledged the importance of conflict heritage by recording figures for Troubles-related sites. It gave some indication of the popularity of such sites by stating that bus and taxi tours of areas associated with the Troubles were popular with 18% of overnight visitors and 12% of day-trippers to Belfast. The official tourist industry is substantially more involved in the managing and marketing of this type of tourism outside of city centres than it would care to admit. When the Belfast Welcome Centre was contacted in July 2005 to enquire about taking a tour of conflict sites and symbols, eight possible options were provided, ranging from walking tours and bus tours to taxi tours. External interest in this area has necessitated the involvement of official agencies (despite any reservations they may have). Both the Belfast and Derry branches of the NITB have comprehensive websites complete with links to political Taxi Tours and other companies/individuals who take tourists to visit contentious or notorious sites of memory and identity (see Figure 3).⁴⁴ Derry City Council, in conjunction with the Derry Visitor Convention Bureau, offers a 'Living History Tour' that offers walking tours of the conflict heritage in two opposing neighbourhoods in the city of Derry/Londonderry (which I took in August 2005), while the official tour of Belfast (as permitted by Belfast City Council), which is operated by the City Sightseeing Company, also takes tourists into West Belfast as part of their tour (I took this tour in September 2005). Yet the 'quality' of such tourist initiatives is undoubtedly difficult to supervise. Given the wide range of people involved in the production of conflict tourism, it is intrinsically complex to monitor the messages being communicated, making the promotion of such 'attractions' politically fraught.

Conclusion

The NITB *Strategic Framework for Action* is optimistic about the future of tourism: 'We live in a new Northern Ireland. There is now a unique and timely opportunity for tourism to take a lead as we go forward.'⁴⁵ The 'new' Northern Ireland is one where conflict heritage is accepted as a viable and sustainable form of tourism (at least in working-class estates where much of the conflict took place). In sum, it is argued here that sites and symbols of conflict across Northern Ireland, like in many other transitional societies, have become paradoxically a significant part of tourism in the post-conflict years. The manipulation and commodification of these landscapes for tourist consumption is, however, problematic and, as we have seen, has serious political, social and economic ramifications. 'Political' tourism has an obvious if, as yet, unquantified value, but this lies less in the revenue generated through the actual tours as in the externalisation of Troubles narratives and the consequent sympathy of an external audience. This particular dimension is not unique to Northern Ireland although there is a specificity of place. Across the globe disputant societies promote tourism to further their political goals. By conditioning outsiders to interpret and remember conflict in a certain way in places like Palestine, Bosnia-Herzegovina,



Figure 3 Driving through the Shankill Road on the Belfast City Sightseeing Tour.

Lebanon and Sri Lanka, the production of ‘political’ tourism can be understood to be contributing to a broader process of external legitimisation for localised sectarian politics and geographies. In Northern Ireland, the continued existence of a divided streetscape contributes to this idea of a continuing conflict. The ‘imagined’ conflict

needs sustenance in the construction of symbols, which remind the public that the conflict is not far away. These conflict signifiers represent continuing power struggles which symbolise contested identities and heritages and help keep the conflict ongoing. This form of tourism, particularly resonant in Republican areas, can be read, therefore, as a manifestation of the conflict by other means.

The juxtaposition of tourism and conflict transformation is perplexing in that it runs counter to Lederach's theories of improving inter-communal relationships. Conflict transformation initiatives through political tourism have arguably reified divisions rather than breaking them down. More contentious, though, is the involvement of many official agencies in the funding of tours of such landscapes. Those who engage in the manipulation of conflict heritage would argue strongly that they do so because of its educative and political value, while those involved in the marketing of political tourism appear to condone it, believing it to be an important part of Northern Ireland's heritage. Others believe that it is now time to take advantage of tourist interest in the conflict, particularly in socially deprived working-class estates, given that violence had deterred so many for so long. Yet those stakeholders (members of the community and political organisations) who manipulate conflict heritage, including official agencies such as local councils and tourist offices, are presenting a certain version of the Troubles narrative that is just as skewed as the landscape itself. While one particular site of memory may be one group's tangible symbol of cultural identity and political experience, it may equally offend or hurt another. Therefore, its commercial presentation to an external audience is problematic. State agencies, as argued by Crooke, have deliberately avoided the task of permanently presenting the Troubles in museums as their origins and meanings are a constant source of contestation.⁴⁶ It appears ironic, therefore, that other state agencies such as local councils and tourist boards can indulge in its essentialist presentation.

Perhaps the most serious issue, though, surrounding the production and consumption of conflict narratives is the ethical and moral connotations involved. The commercial exploitation of conflict sites and symbols by some groups and individuals arguably challenges the integrity of many memorial sites, and the creation of Troubles 'hot-spots' raises many questions about the morality of this type of industry. One reading of tourism is that when memory is reduced to spectacle, it constitutes the simplification and, arguably, the vulgarisation of remembering the Troubles and all those who lost their lives. On sale are people's sufferings and injustices, the places in which lives were taken. This skewed representation of narratives on offer to tourists presents a challenge to peacetime Northern Ireland, where the realities of a sectarian conflict have become even more difficult to define.

Notes

- [1] Grodach, 'Reconstituting Identity and History in Post-war Mostar', 78.
- [2] Graham and Nash, 'A Shared Future', 253.
- [3] Boyd, 'Heritage Tourism in Northern Ireland', 167.
- [4] Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*, 95.
- [5] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 288.

- [6] Grodach, 'Reconstituting Identity and History in Post-war Mostar', 80.
- [7] Interview with a member of the Falls Community Council, January 2005.
- [8] Debbie Lisle, 'Defending Voyeurism', paper presented at the Design Art History Conference, Belfast, 2004.
- [9] Luna Stein, 'Political Tourism in Palestine: Book Review', available from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/lstein.html> [accessed 15 December 2006].
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Clarke, 'Self-presentation in a Contested City', 14.
- [12] Between 1994 and 2000 the EU invested 1.2 billion ECU in Northern Ireland.
- [13] Lederach, *Preparing for Peace*.
- [14] Folger and Baruch Bush, *Designing Mediation*.
- [15] North Belfast Tourism Strategy, *Final Report*.
- [16] Ardoyne Mural Tour [accessed 15 September 2005], available from www.ardoyne.org/muralweb/page1.htm
- [17] Belfast Safaris [accessed 30 August 2005], available from www.belfastsafaris.com
- [18] Press release for Belfast Safaris, 12 May 2004 (pers. comm.).
- [19] Ibid.
- [20] Ibid.
- [21] McKittrick et al., *Lost Lives*, 1533.
- [22] Azaryahu, 'RePlacing Memory: The Reorientation of Buchenwald', 1–20.
- [23] 'West Belfast "Ready to Welcome Tourists"', *Irish News*, 28 February 1998.
- [24] Fáilte Feirste Thiar [accessed 14 September 2004], available from www.westbelfast-failte.com/MAp/map%20total.htm
- [25] *Northern Ireland's Visitors Journal*, Spring/Summer 2004, 48–49.
- [26] West Belfast Taxi Association [accessed 14 August 2004], available from http://www.wbta.net/taxi_tours_of_west_belfast.htm
- [27] Ibid.
- [28] <http://www.feilebelfast.com/ourhistory/> [accessed 14 May 2005].
- [29] 'The Path to Peace and Propaganda', *The Sunday Times*, 18 July 2004.
- [30] 'The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round the Sites of Our Political History', *Andersonstown News*, 3 August 2004.
- [31] 'A Coach Tour with a Twist: Your Guide to Belfast is an IRA Leader who Spent 16yrs in Prison', *The Independent*, 31 August 2004.
- [32] 'Coiste's Political Tours', *An Phoblacht*, 22 May 2003.
- [33] 'The Journey of Coiste na n-Iarchimi', *An Phoblacht*, 16 November 2000.
- [34] 'The Path to Propaganda', *The Sunday Times*, 18 July 2004.
- [35] Graham and McDowell, 'Meaning in the Maze'.
- [36] 'The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round the Sites of Our Political History', *Andersonstown News*, 3 August 2004.
- [37] Unionjack Shop Tours [accessed 16 September 2004], available from www.unionjackshop.com
- [38] NIEC, *Rising to the Challenge*.
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] Briony Crozier, 'Heritage in Belfast—Creating Policies for a Plural Society', paper presented at the People, Place and Heritage in Northern Ireland: Towards a Policy Agenda conference held at the Odyssey W5, 2004.
- [41] 'Visitors Look for Trouble', *Belfast Telegraph*, 1 March 2004.
- [42] 'The Trouble is, Tourists are Not as Interested in the Peaceful Side of Ulster', *The Independent*, 12 April 1998.
- [43] NITB, *Belfast Tourism, Facts and Figures 2003*.
- [44] See www.gotobelfast.com and www.derryvisitor.com, respectively, and click on affiliated links.
- [45] NITB, *Strategic Framework for Action 2004–2007*.
- [46] Crooke, 'Dealing with the Past'.

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