

The battle of the Bogside Artists in Derry, Northern Ireland

CHRIS HOLMES



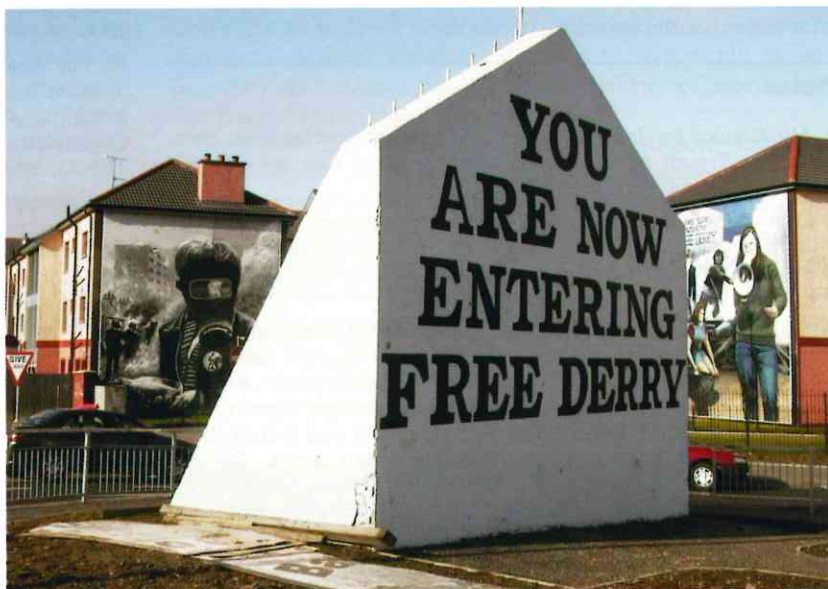
Bogside, Derry, Northern Ireland.

no community speaks with one voice; to suggest otherwise would be arrogant and patronising. The disempowered find solace in the dual pieties of national and religious certainties, along with a clinging to symbols, when the outside world is hostile. The protectors and oppressors within have both traded on any suggestion of external threat. So welcome to the crucible of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, where the decades of terror have left a void, somewhere between huge relief that the lunacy is over and a fierce hanging-on to a hard-won identity.

You are now entering free Derry. This declaration is emblazoned on a freestanding gable wall, possibly the most resilient pile of bricks and mortar in Europe. Armoured cars and town planners have attempted to demolish the Free Derry Wall, but the local Bogside residents have always been on hand to prevent its collapse and to repaint the iconic text. The words first appeared on 5 January 1969, an act of nationalist defiance by the late John 'Caker'

A taxi ride from the City of Derry airport will cost you ten pounds sterling, but the crack (or, if you must, the *craic*) is free. Local information is always welcome, but the denizens of Derry/Londonderry, nicknamed 'Stroke City', can often overwhelm the unwary with advice based on individual experiences of the last thirty-five years. The driver asserts that despite the many changes for the better, there are still no-go zones: 'Don't go in the Bogside Inn, especially with that accent ... I've lived here over thirty years and wouldn't go near the place'.

Cross the Craigavon Bridge to the west bank of the River Foyle and the *Hands across the divide* statue greets you: a symbol of friendship regardless of religion and national identity. Nearby the red, white and blue kerbstones of Abercorn Road, leading up into the Fountains Estate, indicate the Loyalty of this particular area of the city. Yet



Free Derry gable wall, 1969, with Bogside Artists' murals in background.

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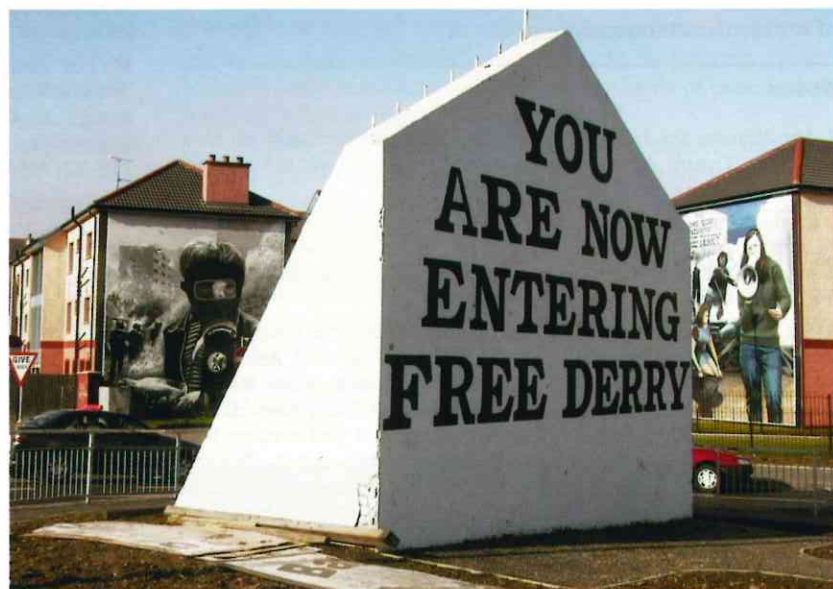
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Free Derry gable wall, 1969, with Bogside Artists' murals in background.



Bogside Artists, *The death of innocence*, mural, Bogside, Derry, original version (left) and new version, 2007 (right).

Casey. The message was a direct reaction to violent Royal Ulster Constabulary assaults on the Bogside following the non-sectarian People's Democracy civil rights march and the attack on its participants. Standing in the heart of the Bogside, Free Derry Wall became a symbol of public resistance and was captured by the world's media.

In July last year £3.3 million of government funds was allocated to a scheme involving the 're-decoration' of Northern Ireland's public spaces, replacing paramilitary images with more welcoming sights. The head of the Arts Council, Roisin McDonagh, stated that the existing imagery was about the troubled past whereas the republic was now 'a society moving forwards'. Yet might this be a case of whitewashing history along with the gable walls?

The artistic triumvirate of Tom Kelly, William Kelly and Kevin Hasson, collectively, the Bogside Artists, have produced a series of murals over the last decade or so based on the events of the Troubles that have hurt, angered or moved them. Their work is located around Free Derry Corner and Rossville Street where many residents of the Bogside, Creggan and Brandywell lost their lives during the long and bitter sectarian conflict between the unionists and the nationalists, and they are sometimes bleak testimonies. After a pint of excellent Guinness in the

Bogside Inn – not intimidating in the least, although the photos from Bloody Sunday which decorate the interior may disturb those more familiar with 'Ye Olde English Pubbe' pictures of ancient market squares and the like – I spoke to Kevin Hasson, in the process of finishing the new version of the well-known *Death of innocence* mural. This work commemorates Annette McGavigan, who was fourteen years old when she died on 6 September 1971, shot by a British soldier near her home, following a riot in the Little Diamond area. She was the first child victim of the Troubles and the 100th casualty since the violence began in earnest in 1969. In the renovation of the mural the gun is broken and the butterfly has transformed into a brightly-coloured symbol, suggesting the arrival of peace with the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement of 1998. Hasson considers it to be an anti-war mural about 'the tragic death of innocence anywhere in the world'.

The Bogside Artists grew up locally and have experienced some of their city's worst moments, but they have also travelled widely and understand the universal aspects of the conflict in Northern Ireland. They believe fiercely that certain events should not be forgotten, but 'We're artists, not propagandists. We wave flags for no-one.

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Bogside Artists, *The petrol bomber*, 1994, mural, Bogside, Derry.



Bogside Artists, *Bernadette Devlin, Battle of the Bogside*, mural, Bogside, Derry.

This is our history.' Tom Kelly quotes Desmond Tutu: 'It is the unexamined wound that festers and finally poisons'.

Their murals depict the wounds of a community, displayed in the open air rather than within the confines of a museum. Rossville Street is an open gallery, entry is free and no gift shop attached. The notorious High Flats have long gone, but the murals recall those times of careering Saracen armoured cars, barricades and rioting. There are two murals depicting the Battle of the Bogside in August 1969, a huge communal uprising against police and loyalists following a confrontation between nationalists, police and members of the (Protestant) Apprentice Boys of Derry. The rioting led to the deployment of British troops in Northern Ireland. The first mural, painted in 1994, is a stark black-and-white image of a young petrol bomber; the second is nearby, a tribute to Bernadette Devlin, a nationalist activist elected to British parliament in 1969 at the age of twenty-one (still the youngest woman ever to do so). The work celebrates the role of women in the civil rights struggle in Northern Ireland.

The Bogside Artists never intended to create a tourist attraction, but the Peoples' Gallery has become

an essential part of any traveller's itinerary in Derry. The seventeenth-century city walls are promoted by the Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau as the major tourist draw, with the Bogside murals as something of a sideshow. This desire to show the city in a positive historical light ignores the fact that the troubled recent history of Derry is itself a source of international interest. A similar situation exists in Belfast, where the consumption patterns of modern life are reflected in the chrome of flashy new bars and restaurants, and many resentfully find they cannot afford a place in this postmodern 'heaven'; yet meanwhile tourists flock to the Peace Lines and murals in the less salubrious parts of town, and organised tours of the old battle zones contribute to the local economy. Belfast may be 'buzzing', in tourist board parlance, but history cannot be conveniently forgotten.

The famous city walls of Derry are a striking feature. With the removal of the security measures from the time of the Troubles – the barbed wire and metal barricades – anyone may now amble freely along the perimeter of the old city, taking in a bit of history, ancient and modern, along the way. Glancing down over the Bogside, the walls



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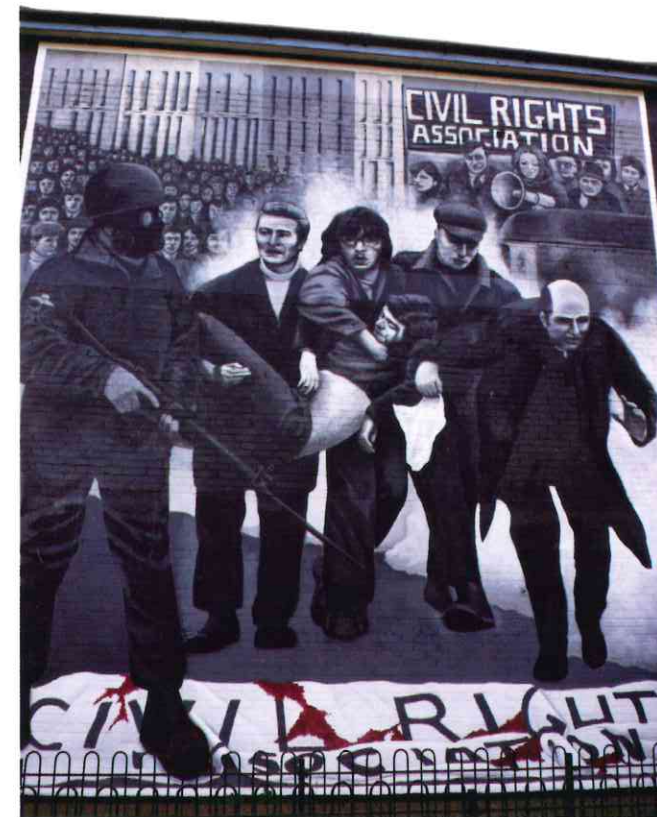
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reek of a historical time some would rather forget. But Rossville Street remains sacred ground to the living and the dead and Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972, will not be forgotten. Thirteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators were shot dead by British paratroopers, thirteen were wounded and another man died later of his wounds. The subsequent Widgery Report, produced eleven weeks after the events, was regarded as a whitewash and destroyed any nationalist shreds of faith in the British justice system by ignoring over 500 eyewitness accounts as well as photographs taken by international journalists.

The Bogside Artists painted their *Bloody Sunday* mural in 1997, the twenty-fifth anniversary of this horrific event. Depicted is young Jackie Duddy, an up-and-coming boxer, who was shot in the back. He is being carried by a group led by Father Edward Daly, who waves a white bloodied handkerchief against the bullets. In January 1999 the Bogside Artists completed their *Commemoration* mural, a circle showing the faces of the fourteen victims of Bloody Sunday; the older men form a paternal circle around the youngsters who died. The oak leaves of Derry (from *doire*, oakwood) are in evidence. Local consultation has been vital in making the murals, given the highly sensitive subject matter.

Anniversaries play an important part hereabouts. In 1981 ago ten Irish Republican prisoners, including Bobby Sands, died on hunger strike. On 5 May 2001,



Bogside Artists, *Bloody Sunday*, 1997, mural, Bogside, Derry.

the twentieth anniversary of the strike, a monument was unveiled to them, close to Free Derry Corner. The Bogside Artists had recorded the hunger strikes and 'blanket protests' in a mural unveiled in 2000, which depicts Raymond McCartney, a survivor of the 1980 hunger strike, which was called off when it appeared concessions were about to be granted to the prisoners. A photograph smuggled out of Long Kesh/Maze prison fixed the image. The three women in Armagh jail who joined the strike are represented by the watchful female figure on the left. This is not an invented past; McCartney is still alive and able to bear witness as one who experienced the 53 days of self-starvation. He was a young marcher on Bloody Sunday when his cousin, Jim Wray, was shot dead in Glenfada Park. According to McCartney this was a turning point in his life, but by no means the only one.

From the assistance of British troops to the loyalists in 1969, to the introduction of internment without trial, the collapse of Stormont (Northern Ireland Parliament) and the imposition of Direct Rule from Westminster, all happened in the space of a few years.



Bogside Artists, *Commemoration*, 1999, mural, Bogside, Derry.



RICK AMOR

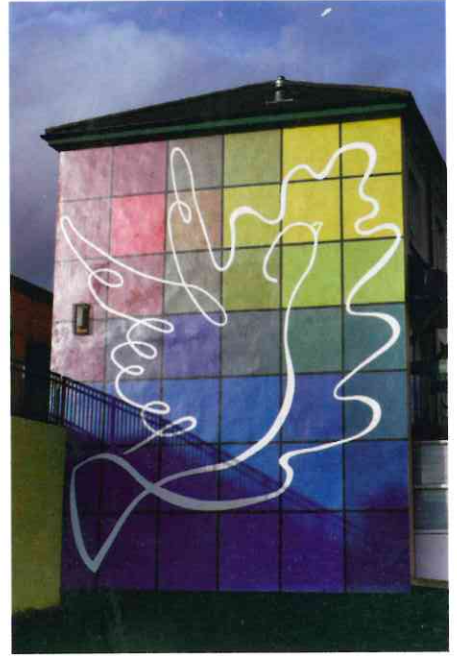
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Left: Bogside Artists, *Blanket protest/ hunger strike*, 2000, mural, Bogside, Derry. Middle: Bogside Artists, *The Saturday matinee*, mural, Bogside, Derry. Right: Bogside Artists, *The peace mural*, Bogside, Derry.

The effect on a battered community cannot be measured, but it is certainly remembered. The story unfolds along Rossville Street, the chronology fragmented. The Gallery captures moments frozen in time. What you see on the walls happened in these streets. At the killing ground of Glenfada Park, a black-and-white mural shows a rioter facing a Saracen armoured car at *The Saturday matinee*, so-called because the riots of the early 1970s were particularly commonplace on Saturday afternoons.

The last black and white image in the series goes back to *The beginning*, a time when peaceful civil rights protests seemed to offer a way forward for an essentially disenfranchised people. The mural, unveiled in the summer of 2004, recalls the seminal 5 October 1968 march, a non-sectarian and avowedly peaceful protest against gerrymandering of electorates and discrimination against Catholics and nationalists. The march ended

in bloodshed on Duke Street, when the Royal Ulster Constabulary baton-charged the crowd. The mural emphasises the non-sectarian nature of the march, at a time when both Protestants and Catholics belonged to the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, which existed in various forms until 30 January 1972, when it was effectively blown away on a Sunday afternoon. *The beginning* mural emphasises optimism and the faces of the participants appear hopeful; the marchers on Bloody Sunday also set off in a carnival mood from the Creggan, as a greater tragedy unfolded.

'Hindsight is a wonderful thing,' says Hasson. There are British army commanders and IRA leaders who have recently stated that things might have been handled differently. But big mistakes were made and ultimately it was the innocent ones caught up in the middle who suffered the most. The same old tragic tale.'

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Entries closing 14th September



Left: Bogside Artists, *Blanket protest/hunger strike*, 2000, mural, Bogside, Derry. Middle: Bogside Artists, *The Saturday matinee*, mural, Bogside, Derry. Right: Bogside Artists, *The peace mural*, Bogside, Derry.

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The last picture in the People's Gallery is *The peace mural*, which looks forward rather than backwards. It is the last mural you see on leaving the Bogside. With this work the consultation process has been extended beyond the immediate area to other communities in the city. It was launched at the Cathedral Youth Club in the Fountain area, with ideas coming from people across the sectarian divide. The Fountain is the only Protestant enclave on the River Foyle's west bank. The murals here depict a different history, recalling the Great Siege of 1689/90 and the Ulster-Scots heritage of the community.

The *Peace mural* incorporates the dove as a symbol of peace, incorporated into the oakleaf symbol of Derry, with the bird emerging from the leaf. The background of squares represent equality and their different colours emphasise individuality.' This work was intended to be the last page in this cathartic public picture book, but discussions with locals and the increasing numbers of visitors to the murals have convinced the Bogside Artists to paint 'just one more, a tribute to the people who have shaped the area'. Watch this space.

The Bogside Artists have helped to shift the perception of public art in Northern Ireland and beyond. Kevin Hasson sees the murals as telling stories in a way that edifies and instructs. The trio have exhibited and spoken around the world, a huge, unplanned stride from the early days when their clearly stated aim was 'to create a talking point for the locals'. Their 'healing through art' philosophy has travelled the globe. Hasson says: 'We like the idea of the murals belonging to the people here. The murals will stay for as long as the people here want them.'

Propagandist warnings, marking one's turf, intimidation, the mythology and symbols of a creed; out of these has emerged a vibrant art form, a demonstration

of solidarity as well as division. The current debate about the murals reflects changing perceptions. Rather than scaring outsiders, they attract tourists. How is that for an example of post-modern irony?

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Chris Holmes is a journalist and writer based in England. Thanks to Jean Ann Vernon

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