

Museums and a Divided Society: A Northern Irish Case Study

Dermot Francis

The Tower Museum

Heritage and Museum Service of Derry City Council, Northern Ireland

Preamble

It is wholly appropriate that this particular paper is read here at this conference that addresses the topics of museums, peace, democracy and governance. To many, Barbados is seen as the epitome of a stable and peaceful post-colonial society, and, curiously from my perspective, a country that seems to look back fondly at its British antecedents, and indeed appears to maintain remarkably strong links with Britain. Northern Ireland, as you will all know, does not have the same sentimental view of its colonial past (or should I say present?). Indeed, one of the greatest difficulties within the island of Ireland is the coming to terms of the various communities with their disparate attitudes, emotions and reactions to their relationships with each other and with our nearby island neighbour, Britain. In addition, our colonial past has left Ireland with serious sectarian problems which lie at the core of the seemingly intractable political situation that Northern Ireland is sadly, globally renowned for. Even as we gather here, important negotiations are under way in yet another attempt to reach a political accommodation between the various protagonists. So it is with some envy that I look at Barbados and with some hope that agreement within my divided society is near at hand.

I represent the Heritage and Museum Service of Derry City Council. The Council is the statutory local government authority for the city of Derry, or Londonderry. The name(s) of the city hint at the complex situation that our museums work under. For the sake of brevity I shall use Derry unless otherwise explained. The use and misuse of terminology and nomenclature is indicative of the depth of the problems and emotional difficulties faced within Irish society. It is imperative to understand these dichotomies in order to achieve any understanding of how the Northern Ireland 'Troubles' came about, what steps are being taken to resolve them, and how the Tower Museum has contributed to the peace process.

Derry had no civic museum provision from 1951 until 1986 when the council set up the Museum Service. All heritage and museum provision in the city is funded by the local rates payers, without any central government assistance. We are the only museum service that I am aware of to have evolved directly from, and as a result of, the 'Troubles'. In fact Derry City Council itself only came into being in 1973. The challenge that the Tower Museum faced was to present an agreed version of the past, a history that was truthful and honest but nonetheless uncompromising in eliminating propaganda, bias, ignorance, dishonesty and partiality.

Background History

Ireland is a small island on the periphery of Europe with a long and extremely complex history. For administrative purposes it is divided into 32 counties and 4 provinces. Six of the nine north-eastern counties of the province of Ulster make up the state of Northern Ireland, which is a constituent part of the United Kingdom.

The political division or partition of the island of Ireland came about after, arguably centuries of struggle against English, and later British rule. A treaty was signed in December 1921 which gave dominion status, similar to Canada, to what became known as the Irish Free State while at the same time establishing the political entity of Northern Ireland. The treaty was signed after a prolonged period of armed insurrection and afterwards, dissatisfaction with its terms led to a bloody civil war between rival republicans in the south. In 1937 the Irish Free State was abolished and Éire (Gaelic for the land of Ireland) a new ‘sovereign independent democratic state’, as it was hailed, was established. A new written constitution laid claim to Northern Ireland, a claim that has had repercussions to the present day. In 1949 Éire became the Republic of Ireland, formally free of allegiance to the British crown and withdrew from the Commonwealth of Nations.

The need or perceived need for this 1920s partition has its roots in events at the beginning of the 16th century. By then, Ulster remained the last great bastion of Gaelic Ireland. A concerted military campaign against the Gaelic chieftains culminated in what became known as the Flight of the Earls (the Gaelic leaders) from Donegal to continental Europe in 1609. This was followed by a massive colonisation scheme that has become known as the Plantation of Ulster. The plantation involved a huge investment from various British merchant companies and the relocation of British, mainly Scottish Protestant settlers on the lands previously occupied by native Irish Catholics who were forcibly removed from the land. Some would argue that in many ways the Plantation of Ulster was a successful early attempt at ethnic cleansing. However, this would be a simplistic view of the events and their consequences. The new tenancy was reinforced by the defeat of King James II by William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. William’s victory assured Protestant ascendancy and the subservient role of Irish Catholics and Dissenters for centuries to follow.

Derry/Londonderry

Derry is one of the oldest inhabited towns in Ireland. The name is derived from the Irish words Dóire or Dáire meaning oak grove. The recorded annals are in dispute over the foundation of a monastery there in 546 AD by St. Colmcille. The recorded histories, as is common elsewhere, were at various times ‘tweaked’ by the governing families to fit into whatever the preferred expedient ‘history’ should be. One could argue that this is an unchanging human trait, exemplified best by media treatment of contemporary events. St. Colmcille is however the accepted patron of the city by both communities. Derry has a long and controversial past, indeed it had been said that only its geology is not in doubt!

The coat of arms of the city reflect Norman influences from the 12th century on the lower part, and from the 17th century on the addition over the arms of the city of London, added after Derry was chartered as the city of Londonderry by King James I in 1613. Derry was the first major example of urban planning in Ireland. The planned walled city was built on a green-field site ironically because the previous garrison was destroyed in an explosion! Derry remains the only complete walled city in Ireland. With the mountains of Donegal as a backdrop, Derry is built on hills and divided by the beautiful meandering River Foyle. Many of the original 17th century cannon remain, in some cases overlooking areas like the Bogside. The municipal seat is the Guildhall, built just outside the walled area. The Guildhall was badly damaged by a series of bombings in the 1970s, most notoriously on one occasion by a man who was later elected as a Councillor. So despite its beautiful appearance, this is a city that is only now beginning to re-emerge from a traumatic, violent and divisive recent past.

Derry came to the world's notice in the late 1960s with the emergence of street demonstrations calling for civil rights. After partition, a monolithic Unionist (mainly Protestant) government in Belfast had ruled Northern Ireland. To ensure control was retained, both the franchise and the electoral wards were manipulated to exclude Nationalists (mainly Catholic) from taking power. The gerrymandering of the electoral wards was most visible in Derry. The two-thirds Nationalist majority were housed mainly in one ward and, moreover, only house owners could vote, effectively excluding the majority of working class citizens. The net result was that, despite their majority, nationalists never gained control of the Council.

Campaigns for civil rights, better housing and electoral reforms continued throughout the 1960s. Clashes between nationalists from the Bogside and Orange (Unionist) marchers and the police (Royal Ulster Constabulary) broke out on 12th August 1969. The unrest spread and with the situation hurtling out of control the British Army was deployed in Derry to separate the warring factions. Greeted initially as saviours by the nationalist community, the Army's role supporting the civil authorities soon led to resentment that eventually manifested itself in the form of traditional Republican hostility. Special Powers legislation was extended and internment without trial introduced. On 30th January 1972, a civil rights march in Derry ended with the killing of 14 demonstrators by the Army in what has become known as Bloody Sunday. The point of no return had been reached. Northern Ireland exploded in violence and the Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army) launched a massive and widely supported guerrilla campaign against the authorities. Within a year, the British government introduced direct rule from Westminster, effectively ending over 70 years of Unionist domination. Bombings and shootings continued with civilians, as always, paying the heaviest price. Various failed attempts were made to achieve a political compromise. In 1985 the British and Irish governments signed an historic agreement which created the opportunity that eventually led to the multi-party Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This process is ongoing and appears to be the best chance in over 400 years to establish normal, agreed governance to Northern Ireland.

Derry City Council

Following direct rule, a series of local government reforms led to the franchise being extended and electoral boundaries being redrawn. For the first time, Derry returned a Nationalist majority. The Council quickly introduced the concept of mayoral rotation, extending the hand of friendship to and encouraging the co-operation of local Unionists.

By the mid 1980s, Derry was showing the effects of the relentless economic bombing campaign. One third of the city centre buildings had been completely destroyed with another third extensively damaged. The city had lost somewhere in the region of 7,000 buildings as a result of the Troubles. In human costs, nearly 400 citizens had died.

Derry had a small civic museum up until the 1950s when it was quietly wound up. Despite not having a museum, the past continued to have an active and controversial role in the life of the city. So throughout the tumultuous events of the sixties, seventies and eighties, Derry had no museum in which to preserve its past. At least two government reports advocated Derry as the ideal location for a regional museum. The response from the Department of Education, which has responsibility for museums, was that it had no money and therefore no policy on regional museums. On one occasion money did become available but notoriously, the Department opted on spending the funds on the national museum, Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, outside Belfast. In the mid 1980s it was decided locally to set up a municipal museum and heritage service. This only came about as the result of the local government reform in Northern Ireland in 1973 following the collapse of the Unionist government and the transfer of power back to Westminster. Few functions or powers were left to local politicians. However, arts and culture were seen as marginal enough to be uncontentious and were deemed safe enough to leave to the locals. Derry City Council's approach to this was probably not expected by anyone. The council embraced the limitations imposed on them by pursuing a radical and expansive arts and culture policy. In 1986 the Heritage & Museum Service was set up. An important element in the philosophy here was that disadvantages should be turned into opportunities: no art gallery hang paintings from the walls; no theatre perform on the streets or hire a tent if it rains. Dedicated spaces are important but the lack of them would not be an obstacle. Although there was no public money available to set up museums which are seen as primarily educational, funds were becoming available from the European Community to establish interpretive centres as part of the tourism infrastructure. Consequently, the Council planned three new centres. One was a small cottage on the site where Amelia Earhart landed on the occasion of her pioneering solo trans-Atlantic flight. Another was the Foyle Valley Railway centre which houses exhibits and a working railway dealing with the long transport history of the city. The third would become the Tower Museum.

Simultaneously, the dynamism generated by the Council encouraged a sense of ownership and empowerment among local citizens. Paddy 'Bogside' Doherty set up the Inner City Trust, a body dedicated to the regeneration of the city. Property values at the time were at an all time low, which assisted in the acquisition of land and buildings. Among the properties available was the site on which the Tower Museum now stands. The Inner City Trust built the

O'Doherty Fort, the most visible aspect of the Tower Museum, as a monument to local confidence and pride and as an example of what was possible with the support of a willing public.

The Tower Museum provided an opportunity for the Council to develop an innovative and exciting programme for the city. The 'Story of Derry' exhibition, the first planned phase, was intended to be a comprehensive narration of the city's history. It was decided at an early stage that it should be a museum, as opposed to a 'heritage' centre. To this end, advice was sought from the Museums and Galleries Commission in London and the project adopted the standards necessary to become a bona fide museum. The 'Story of Derry' opened in 1992 to critical acclaim. The history of the city is dealt with in a chronological fashion. Several seminal events were identified and proportionate effort and expenditure invested into ensuring the comprehensive treatment of the events. In particular, the Siege of Derry (1688-89) is crucial to understanding our more recent history. Many contemporary organisations and attitudes in Northern Ireland can be traced to this event. The eponymous 'No Surrender' slogan reflects the unchanging and uncompromising attitude of certain Unionist groupings extending back 300 years. An effigy of Colonel Lundy is ceremoniously burned to this day as a lesson to all those who may be seen as 'traitors'. After his succession to the English throne, King William I invoked discriminatory penal laws, which initially forced large numbers of Presbyterians to emigrate, followed thereafter by waves of Catholic refugees. The broader Irish Diaspora had been established.

The exhibition deals with many of the more mundane and uncontentious facets of our history rather than attempt to apply socio-political analysis at every juncture. However, in this regard, one of the most successful design features is the 'Road to Northern Ireland' section which was mathematically calculated to give each interpretation exactly the same space. The road ultimately leads to a cinema where a film entitled 'In Our Lifetime' relates the tragic history of the city from the Second World War to the present day – warts and all, as described by the Reverend Ian Paisley at the opening of the ceremony. No issue was avoided nor glossed over. Extensive consultation, debate and argument dictated the final form of the narrative. Indeed at one stage, local Unionist opposition to elements of the film precipitated minor alterations. The success of the approach can be gauged by the critical acclaim the museum has received. It has won both the Irish and British Museum of the Year Awards, again indicative of our curious situation. It was a runner up to the National Museum of Denmark in the 1994 European Museum of the Year Awards and has collected numerous heritage and tourism awards.

Our approach has remained consistent throughout and our other activities reflect the successes, failures and stresses that accompany honesty. We have successfully designed exhibitions dealing with Unionist and Nationalist 'history' (as some would perceive past events). We have also had to face extreme criticism for other elements of our work, including the public withdrawal of a guidebook less than ten minutes after it was launched. The cover of the book was deemed to portray an inappropriate image of the city. Our Troubles exhibit was praised initially and then lambasted for displaying terrorist weapons and juxtaposing images of IRA men with material relating to political negotiations and statutory authorities. However, it is not the

ethos of the Council or the Museum Service to dilute the facts of history. We continue to persevere with our approach. This year we have opened an exhibition on the themes of Victorian poverty and the Great Famine, themes that run deep within the psyche of this society. It will be interesting to note the range of reactions to our interpretations in the months ahead. We are also due to release a CDROM Virtual Museum of Colmcille in the next few months. Again this is in keeping with our innovative style. Next year we hope to complete the Tower Museum with the implementation of Phase 2, the Armada in Ireland exhibition. All being well, I hope the environment in which these projects are brought to fruition will be somewhat different to the violent atmosphere in which the Story of Derry was born.

To conclude, the Tower Museum is not only a museum of the Troubles but is a museum born from Troubles. It espouses the notions of justice, peace, democracy, good governance and empowerment as the basic tenets from which it will continue to provide the objective interpretations of the past. As declared on the motto on the City's coat of arms, we will strive for 'Life, Truth and Victory'. To fail in this regard is to surrender our museums to the propagandists of the present and the future.