

07 *The Mountain*

"But most importantly, the tactic is out of state control. The mainstream media is vetted and controlled. Putting a message on the mountain breaks that near-monopoly of the state. It disrupts their message that the partition of Ireland is normal. You have to look at it and you have to think about it; whether you agree with it or not. It does what the state does not want to happen: it prompts people to ask questions."

Gerard 'Mo Chara' Kelly, 2019



Black Mountain

© Sabine Troendle, 2020

Something you can't miss on your visit to Belfast is the vast amount of murals. Some political, some militaristic, some artistic and some just genuine graffiti. It's a landmark to this day, and you can book a Black Taxi Tour to get an idea of the history of these murals. But if you happen to be in town when GAEL FORCE ART take to the Black Mountain, you'll get a glimpse of the most genius and beautiful form of public activism and art. Using huge letters and flags and emblems, all cut and stiched up by the group and its community, the message they have for Belfast and the world is towering over the city for a few hours, before it's taken down again.

It all started during the first Hunger Strikes in 1980. In a climate of a hostile government and an ignoring media-body towards nationalist views. It was a time, when a good part of the population simply didn't have a public voice, not in Stormont, not in Westminster, not in Dublin and for sure not in the British media. Not having the media on your side or worse, having a media that's working against you, is a disadvantage. The ethos of the British media was: The British army and the British government are fighting a terrorist campaign, they are the good ones, never the baddies. It's all 'democracy' against 'terrorism'. And the world was going to adapt this narrative – except for 1984 communist Albania who saw the conflict in Ireland in another perspective:

"The freedom-loving forces of Northern Ireland are responding to the savage violence of the British police and occupying forces with a resolute struggle."

The lived experience of the nationalist working-class community, the discrimination, unemployment, poverty and foremost the constant harassment by the state forces were rarely talked of. The journalists often got their information from the army's media office and only few took the effort to seriously scrutinise it. However, a member of a nationalist working-class community was not to be trusted. It had to be somebody not so 'other', a priest maybe, or a well educated middle class Catholic, if any credence was to be granted to their story. Sociologist Frank Burton, who spent several months living in Catholic Ardoyne, noted:

"In Ireland this category of the credible contains, preferably, the non-Irish and the professional classes. Thus, if allegations of British army brutality are to be taken seriously by the media, either the reporter should have personally witnessed the incident in question, or the condemnations should be voiced by an ex-British soldier living in the North, or by a doctor, lawyer or priest."

It's the colonial approach of misinformation about what's going on and silencing a community by bans and total disregard in order to keep them inferior. As a consequence, the complex voice of Irish Nationalism is trapped and represented through the outsider's distorted narrative. And as it's widely known, the media has a very strong influence on public perception.



BBC Broadcasting House

© Sabine Troendle, 2020

To not have a voice, to not being recognised, you're becoming a victim. Art is an important tool to give the silenced a voice. To express their feelings. It's the community voice. Republican prisoners understood that the struggle will continue post-prison and skills were needed to pursue a non-violent conflict. Educating yourself in arts, history and the Irish language was seen as an act of resistance. Ex-prisoner of war Gerard 'Mo Chara' Kelly taught himself how to draw whilst jailed in Long Kesh.

"The British media were never going to fairly represent our point of view. So we needed to do it ourselves, in the murals, presenting republicanism and Irish identity in a positive light, standing up to the anti-Irish propaganda we were hit with 24 hours a day, every day. You weren't in it to be an artist, you were in it to get the message out." Gerard 'Mo Chara' Kelly

It was during the first hunger strike in 1980 that nationalist Belfast saw murals in favour of the republican struggle go up. But Mo Chara wanted to reach out beyond his community. He felt that the whole of Belfast and indeed the rest of the world deserved to be informed about what was going on in the prison of Long Kesh. To highlight the hunger strike, a group went up on the Black Mountain, dug a 10 x 6 meter big 'H' – the shape of the prison-wings in Long Kesh – into the ground and filled it up with lime. The huge 'H' was telling the world that there was support for the prisoners and ultimately, that there was another story to be told than the version of official bashing news. That's how the Black Mountain became GAEL FORCE ART's recurring canvas for highlighting human rights issues in the 40 years to come.



The mountain

© Sabine Troendle, 2019



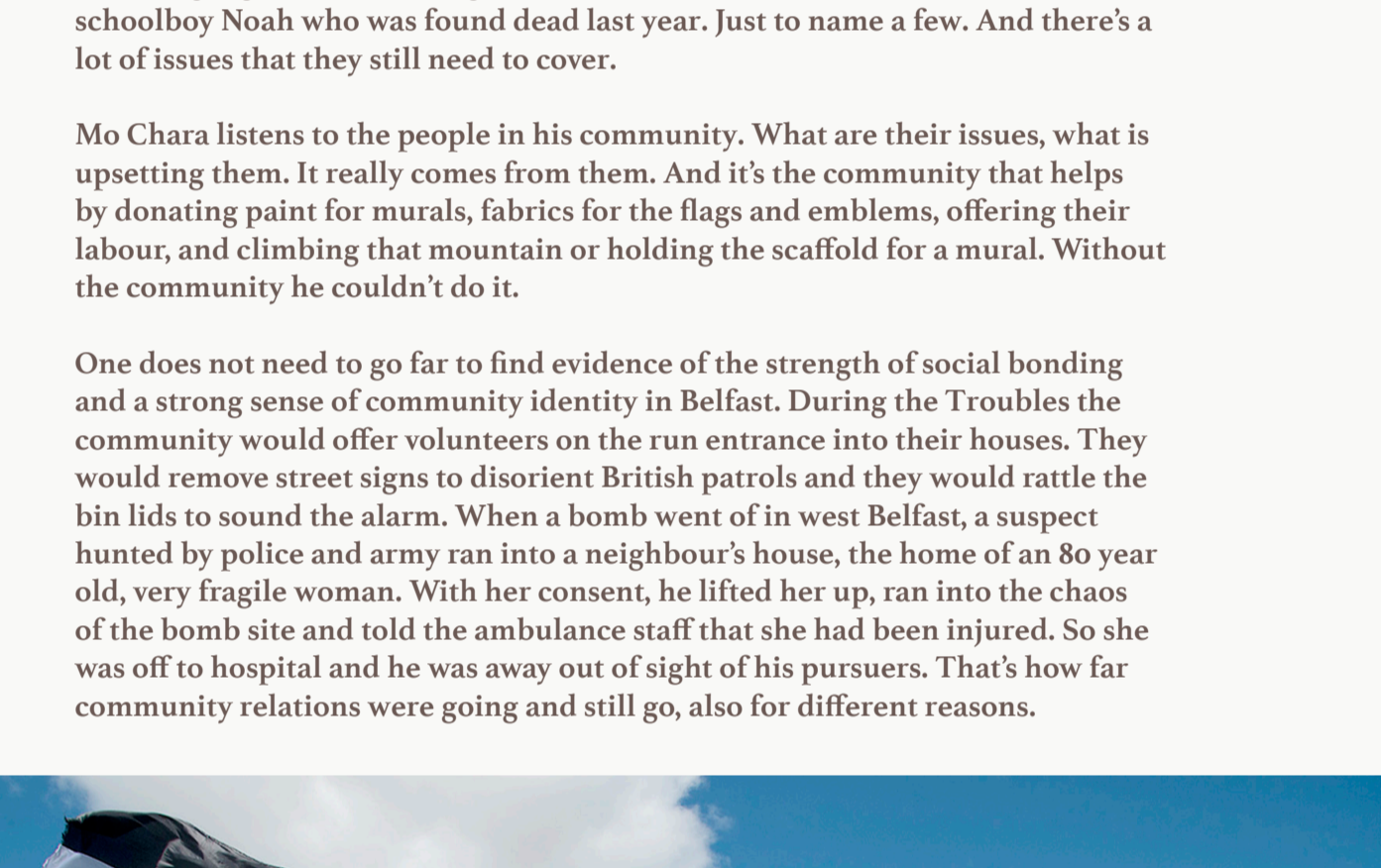
The flag

© Sabine Troendle, 2019



The gone

© Sabine Troendle, 2019



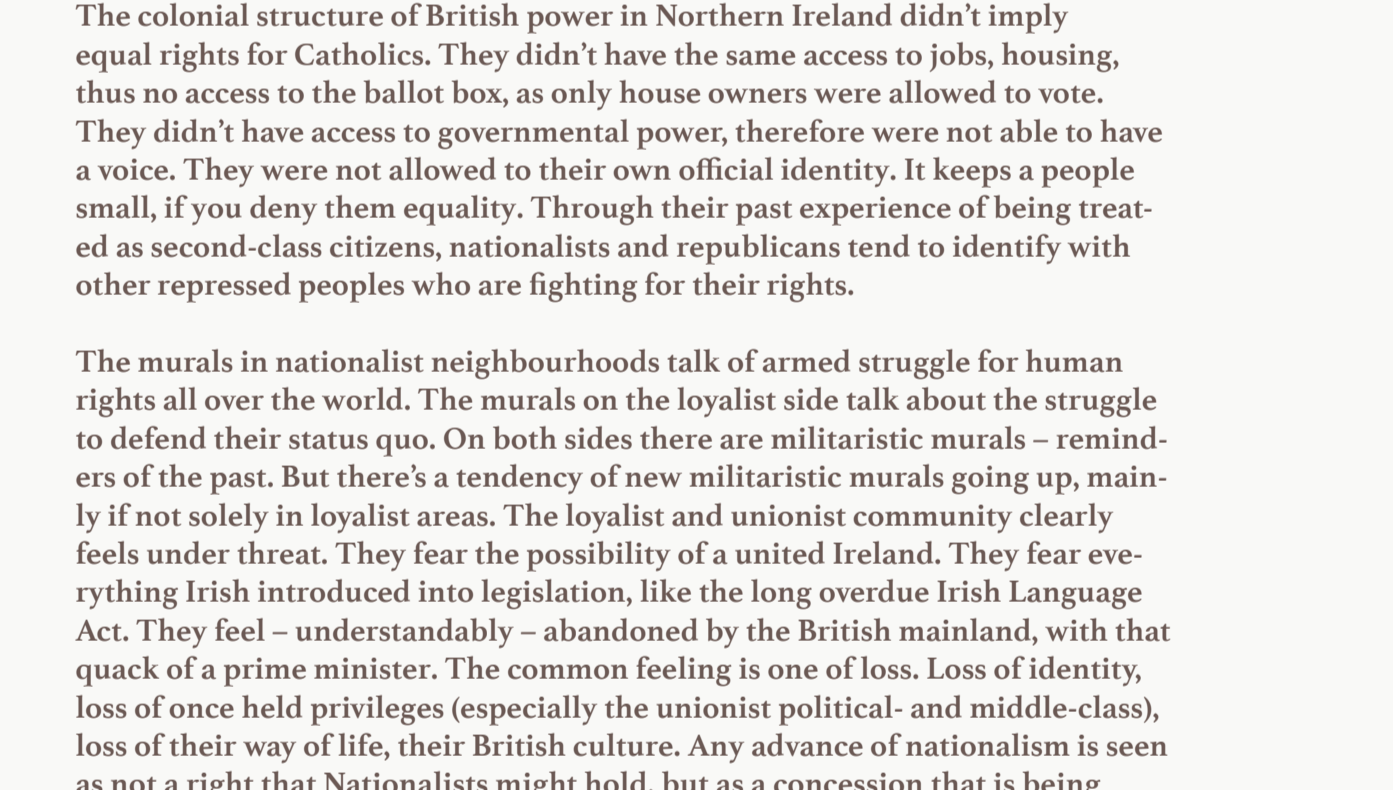
The slope

© Sabine Troendle, 2019

GAEL FORCE ART through murals and messages on the mountain, is regularly highlighting issues that affect the community. Sectarianism, military occupation, discrimination, unemployment, MI5, collusion, 'shoot-to-kill' policy, lethal plastic bullets, Diplock courts. But also Independence for Scotland, Catalonia, Irish language, Palestinian rights, the Queen, RIP Mandela and Justice for the schoolboy Noah who was found dead last year. Just to name a few. And there's a lot of issues that they still need to cover.

Mo Chara listens to the people in his community. What are their issues, what is upsetting them. It really comes from them. And it's the community that helps by donating paint, murals, fabrics for the flags and emblems, offering their labour, and climbing that mountain or holding the scaffold for a mural. Without the community he couldn't do it.

One does not need to go far to find evidence of the strength of social bonding and a strong sense of community identity in Belfast. During the Troubles the community would offer volunteers on the run entrance into their houses. They would remove street signs to disorient British patrols and they would rattle the bin lids to sound the alarm. When a bomb went off in west Belfast, a suspect hunted by police and army ran into a neighbour's house, the home of an 80 year old, very fragile woman. With her consent, he lifted her up, ran into the chaos of the bomb site and told the ambulance staff that she had been injured. So she was off to hospital and he was away out of sight of his pursuers. That's how far community relations were going and still go, also for different reasons.



UN Resolution 194 – The Right to Return

© Sean O'Carolan, 2019

The political structure of British power in Northern Ireland didn't imply equal rights for Catholics. They didn't have the same access to jobs, housing, thus no access to the ballot box, as only house owners were able to vote. They didn't have access to governmental power, therefore were not able to have a voice. They were not allowed to their own official identity. It keeps a people small, if you deny them equality. Through their past experience of being treated as second-class citizens, nationalists and republicans tend to identify with other repressed peoples who are fighting for their rights.

The murals in nationalist neighbourhoods talk of armed struggle for human rights all over the world. The murals on the loyalist side talk about the struggle to defend their status quo. On both sides there are militaristic murals – reminders of the past. But there's a tendency of new militaristic murals going up, mainly if not solely in loyalist areas. The loyalist and unionist community clearly feels under threat. They fear the possibility of a united Ireland. They fear everything Irish introduced into legislation, like the long overdue Irish Language Act. They fear a prime minister – abandoned by the British mainland, with that quack of the feel minister. The common feeling is one of loss. Loss of identity, loss of once held privileges (especially the unionist political- and middle-class), loss of their way of life, their British culture. Any advance of nationalism is seen as not a right that Nationalists might hold, but as a concession that is being made by Unionism.

The basic problem is, that the nationalist/republican community is in a struggle and the unionist/loyalist community is in a struggle. They have very different political views. They have different understandings of the past and they are promoting different ideologies. The two struggles are diametrically opposed to each other. So defining a shared vision – it's also a struggle.



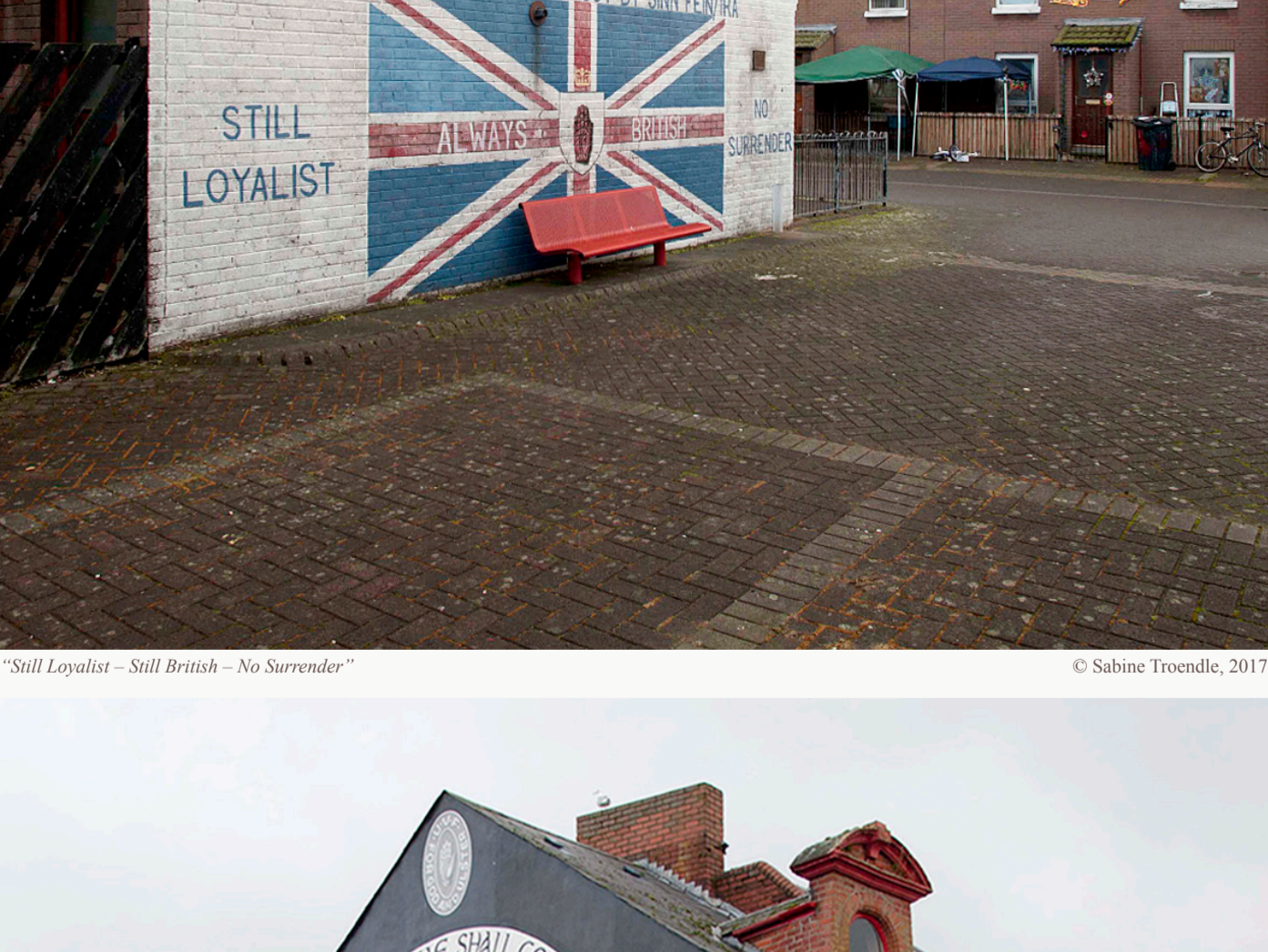
"In passing this mural, pause a little while. Pray for us and Erin. Then Smile"

© Sabine Troendle, 2020



"Still Loyalist – Still British – No Surrender"

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

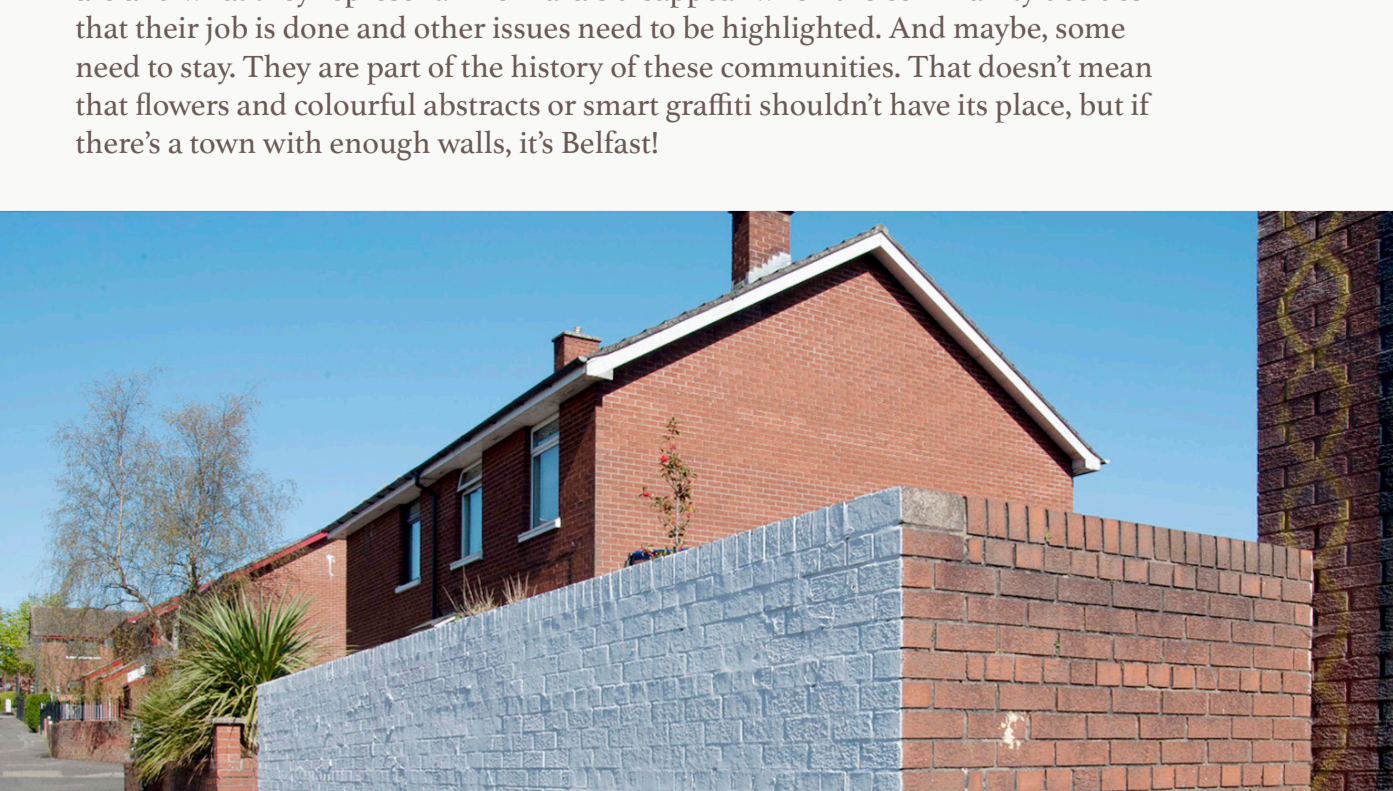


"We are the pilgrims, master. We shall go always a little further"

© Sabine Troendle, 2017

After the peace process, the militaristic murals began to be a problem and the British government started to pour large sums of money into a 're-imagining' programme: getting away with murals that reminded people of the Troubles and replacing them with pleasant, positive imagery more appropriate to a 'normal society'. Replace them with flowers, abstracts, happy school children, historical events – anything that doesn't challenge the state. Just get rid of political murals as they raise dangerous issues.

But to worry about what's on these walls is denying that there is still conflict. There is still division. And it's not only ideologies, that divide the people. It's also serious economic and social neglect as well as the failure to tackle legacy issues in a meaningful manner. You're not gonna change anybody's mindset by painting over paramilitary murals. You need to feel safe to question your attitude and the respective communities need to feel confident to stop being on the watch. People need to have a future, have a choice. They need to be accepted and respected for who they are and what they represent. The murals disappear when the community decides that their job is done and other issues need to be highlighted. And maybe, some need to stay. They are part of the history of these communities. That doesn't mean that flowers and colourful abstracts or smart graffiti shouldn't have its place, but if there's a town with enough walls, it's Belfast!



New Lodge

© Sabine Troendle, 2020

Liz Curtis, The Propaganda War, 1984
 Gerard 'Mo Chara' Kelly, A Larger Canvas, NTVU, 2015
 Savannah Mac Gille, Cahill Woods, An Párlamint, a Párlamint, 2019
 Tim Maul in Interview with Willie Doherty
 David Miller, Don't Mention the War, 1994
 Peter Shanko, Jonathan Tange, James McHugh, Catherine McClain, Abandoning Historical conflict?, 2010
 Valeri Vaughn, Art of Conflict – Murals of Northern Ireland, 2019, Youtube