

# Curating Hatred: The Joe McWilliams's Controversy at the Ulster Museum

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## ABSTRACT

Since heritage is a manifestation of how the past is used in the present, engagement with heritage is a critical indicator of how contemporary hatreds play out, both feeding and feeding off traditions and legacies. Despite its ongoing peace process, Northern Ireland remains a site of dissonant heritages, where sectarian hatred continues to be expressed in societal divisions, often resulting in outright violence. This relationship between current expressions of hatred and the uses of the past presents particular issues for heritage professionals. This essay examines a recent example in which these tensions have been made manifest, the inclusion of a painting by Belfast artist Joe McWilliams in the Annual Exhibition by the Royal Ulster Academy at the Ulster Museum in 2015. The painting depicts the performance by a Protestant Orange Order band outside a Roman Catholic Church in Belfast as part of the annual Twelfth of July celebrations. It included a small group of figures wearing white hoods, akin to the Klu Klux Klan's, and Orange sashes. The controversy that the inclusion of this painting in the exhibition sparked illustrates the ways in which the artistic representation of a performed heritage challenges institutional practice in curating dissonance.

*Keywords:* Heritage, museums, Ulster, dissonance, curatorship, performance

## INTRODUCTION

Since, as David Harvey suggests, heritage “has always been produced by people according to their contemporary concerns and experiences” (2001: 320), engagement with the past is a critical indicator of how contemporary hatreds play out, both feeding and feeding off traditions and legacies. Northern Ireland, enjoying an uneasy peace since the Belfast Agreement of 1998, continues to be a site where sectarian hatred is expressed in societal divisions over dissonant heritages, on occasion resulting in outright violence. This relationship between current expressions of hatred and the uses of the past presents particular issues for heritage professionals (Casey 2003; Crooke 2001; Dubin 1992, 1999; Watson 2014).

In this essay, I examine a recent example in which these tensions were made manifest: the inclusion of a painting by Belfast artist Joe McWilliams in the Annual Exhibition of the Royal Ulster Academy (RUA) at the Ulster Museum in 2015. The painting, *Christian Flautists Outside St. Patrick's*, depicts a performance by a marching band outside a Roman Catholic Church in Belfast as part of the Orange Order's annual Twelfth of July celebrations in 2012.<sup>2</sup> I begin by charting different dimensions of the dissonant heritages at play in Northern Ireland where, as Hartnett (2011) suggests, culture has become a battleground where dissent and dissonance are still expressed—Northern Ireland's own culture wars. Here I focus on the role of performed heritage as a territorial marker in the parading of the Orange Order and the site of the church as a critical part of a Catholic built heritage and site of memory. From there, I examine the artist's own long-standing relationship to painting Orange Order parades. This will lead to an examination of how the controversy unfolded and the response of the lead actors. In this, it is the status of the Museum as a national institution that is critical since it engages the broader concerns of Unionists at the changed relationship between the Northern Ireland state and Protestant culture more generally. Through this, I draw attention to the sensitivity required when in curating artworks that depict, express, and have the potential to provoke sectarian hatred in a post-conflict society and identify some strategies for managing such "edgy" materials and "hot topics" (Cameron 2006).

#### HATE, HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Without downplaying its fundamentally political nature, it is possible to identify sectarian hatred as a significant component of the ethno-nationalist violence that lasted in Northern Ireland for over forty years and was termed euphemistically "The Troubles." Brewer and Higgins (1998) identify the ways in which the state of Northern Ireland was constructed to ensure the hegemony of the majority Protestant Unionist population through the Partition of the island into two states in 1921 (Hughes 1998). There is a further sub-group within this majority, loyalists, whose loyalty to the British crown is conditional and whose membership is predominantly working-class and more closely associated with militancy. Within the new Northern Irish state, anti-Catholicism and anti-Irishness became central defining tenets (Brewer and Higgins 1998). These were institutionalized in discrimination against the minority population, for example, in the allocation of economic resources, access to political representation, the deployment of state security forces, and control on the representation of Irish identity: hatred made systemic. Thus, from its founding and until the peace processes of the 1990s, the state was characterized by an asymmetrical relationship

between two ethno-religious communities of identity: Protestant Unionist and Catholic Nationalist (Nic Craith 2002: 45). In Northern Ireland, each community of identity has justified itself repeatedly by recourse to competing understandings of the past expressed in largely separate heritages (Crooke 2010: 17). The forty years of conflict only further increased the polarization of community identities. Appeals to separate heritages to exercise territorial claims (Graham and Nash 2006: 253) have been reinforced by the heritage of the violence itself through what McDowell has termed “both a tangible and intangible heritage of division and hurt” (2008: 405).

Although the provisions of the Belfast Agreement have acknowledged that the state has to accommodate both British Protestant and Catholic Irish cultural identities, it has struggled to come to terms with the legacies of the past. In detaching public institutions from their historic role in protecting and preserving Protestant-Unionist dominance, the peace process has seen the removal of symbols of that culture from public sites and institutions. Where post-Partition Northern Ireland was acknowledged to be “a cold house” for Catholics, after the Belfast Agreement, the phrase has been used routinely to describe the changing status for the majority population in Northern Ireland since 1998. I will discuss this later as a key part of the context for the controversy. In this next section, I examine the ways in which these dissonant heritages have been articulated as a context for the specific events depicted in Joe McWilliams’s *Christian Flautists Outside St. Patrick’s: Orange marches and the site of St. Patrick’s church*.

#### PARADING, PLACE AND DISSONANT HERITAGES

The Orange Order, or more properly Loyal Orange Institution, is named in honour of the Protestant William of Orange who defeated the Catholic King James II in 1690. It was founded in County Armagh in 1795, during a period of intense sectarian violence, as a Protestant fraternity, men defending their country, their loyalty to the Crown and the Protestant faith by opposing Catholicism and Popery. Their first parades were held in 1796 and from that time parades have constituted a significant tradition, a performed heritage, shared as the Order spread to Britain and internationally. Today, the 2,000 or so Orange Parades that take place in Northern Ireland annually are enjoyed as part of the intangible cultural heritage of Northern Ireland’s Protestants, a public celebration of identity that roots them in place and time.

Such marching relies on the repetition of specific practices, ritualized over time, and passed from one generation to the next. From the earliest occasions, the routes selected had a very public dimension in territory marking. With a long history of opposing and contesting the marches within

the newly formed Northern Irish state, Catholic Nationalists have regarded them as an expression of triumphalism, by which their continued subjugation within a sectarian state was emphasised by the claiming of public space as territory. We can see in parading, then, an example of “heritage dissonance,” that is “a condition of discordance or lack of agreement and consistency as to the meaning of heritage” (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996, 21). The dissonance of these different attitudes toward parades in Northern Ireland is articulated at key contested sites in expressions of sectarian hatred, often extremely violent.

Parading is such a contentious issue in Northern Ireland that one of the measures set out in the Belfast Agreement was the creation of a Parades Commission under the Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998. The Commission is required by the Act to issue guidelines on the conduct of parades and public protests and to rule on issues where marchers and residents cannot resolve their differences. One of the informing principles of the work of the Commission is that anyone exercising their right to free assembly by parading should “take account of the likely effect on their relationships with other parts of the community and be prepared to temper their approach accordingly” (Parades Commission 2005: 2). The Commission in effect is charged with arbitrating between competing rights based on heritage claims. One of the first and most contentious decisions taken by the Commission in 1998 was to ban a march along the Catholic-Nationalist Garvaghy Road in Portadown by Orangemen attending the Drumcree Church (Hughes 1998). While there had been a history of violence around the parade as early as the 1800s, it escalated from 1995 to 2000 in stand-off between residents and marchers, as a focal point for disputes between the rights accruing to each community of identity. At its height, it prompted a significant joint operation by the police and British Army, with a violent intensity that appeared to threaten the peace process.

Just as with Portadown’s Garvaghy Road, the area around St. Patrick’s Church in Belfast has repeatedly been a flashpoint between marchers and residents as a contested heritage site. The church has a distinctive history and place within Belfast for Catholics and Nationalists. It can be regarded as one of Pierre Nora’s *lieux de memoire* to which heritage is attached within both a physical site and in non-material ways such as celebrations, spectacles, and rituals (Nora 1989). The site was occupied initially by the second Catholic church to be built in the city, dating back to 1815, with the current Romanesque building founded in 1877. The church accommodates the Shrine of Mary of Comfort and a shrine to St. Anthony of Padua that houses a first class relic of the saint. In addition, the church holds important relics of St. Patrick and in 2012 opened a columbarium to accommodate urns containing the ashes of deceased parishioners. Thus, as a

religious site it is a sacred space and a material construction that commemorates the history of Catholics in the city.

Its inner-city situation marks its function as heritage further. The parish at which it is the centre serves the working-class Nationalist communities of Carrick Hill, North Queen Street, and the New Lodge. As the parish website notes, “The death toll of parishioners during that 30-year-period of sectarian strife known as ‘The Troubles’ stands at 100. Some of the worst atrocities of that conflict were committed within the parish bounds, and its people still bear the physical and emotional scars of that traumatic chapter in Ireland’s recent history.” That location makes it also a site of heritage contestation. The church’s front portal opens onto Donegall Street, a major thoroughfare connecting the north of the city to the city centre. It has formed part of the traditional route for Orange bands passing from the loyalist Crumlin Road into the city centre, often in forms of feeder parades to and from the main parade there. The attitude shown by bandsmen to the church is perceived as a test of respect for their religious heritage by residents, while the marchers see any challenge to their marching as an attack on their cultural heritage. Both marchers and residents then each make appeal to their heritage in support of their competing claims on the space around the chapel.

McWilliams’s painting pictures a Twelfth of July parade, which celebrates William of Orange’s victory at the Battle of Boyne and the beginning of the Protestant Ascendancy, in 2012 when an Orange marching band, the Young Conway Volunteers, played “The Famine Song” outside St. Patrick’s Church on Belfast’s Donegall Street as they marched in a circle. The song is regarded as racist and sectarian by Catholic-Nationalists. It has been the target of action by the Scottish Premiere League, for example, in its attempt to stamp out sectarianism at soccer matches there. Thirteen members of the Young Conway Volunteers were subsequently convicted of playing a sectarian tune outside a Catholic church provocatively. The judge rejected their testimony that they were actually playing The Beach Boys’ “Sloop John B” and in his judgment clearly regarded it as an expression of sectarian hatred. Here, the work being done by a painting representing such a contentious event thrusts it into a maelstrom in which heritage claims are put into conflict with each other. As Mitchell argues, “the intractability of offensive images stems from their tendency to take up residence in the front lines of social and political conflicts” (2001: 116). Yet, while this was a particularly notorious case, McWilliams’s treatment of Orange parades had a much longer lineage. In the following section, I suggest that his biography and oeuvre may share some of the characteristics that give rise to hatred but that his attitude was much more complex than that. The argument is that

while exhibiting the work had the potential to activate some hatreds, it was not motivated by McWilliams's personal hatred.

#### THE ARTIST AND HATE

It is clear from McWilliams's (1996) own account that his attitudes toward the Orange Order are rooted in his personal experiences, his background, and his community identity, in ways that might have generated antipathy to the Orange Order. He was born in the New Lodge area and attended St. Malachy's College a short distance away on the lower Antrim Road. He attended and, from 1973 until his retirement in 1989, taught at the School of Art in Belfast's York Street a couple of hundred yards from its junction with Donegall Street. His first job on graduating was teaching in St. Gabriel's secondary school on the Crumlin Road. He was rooted in north Belfast, living and founding a gallery with his wife on Cavehill Road. Geoghegan has commented of the area, "Having witnessed some of the most brutal excesses of 'the Troubles', North Belfast is still divided along sectarian lines at the very micro level and remains prey to eruptions of violence at 'interfaces' between Catholic and Protestant communities" (2008: 178).

For McWilliams, that experience of sectarianism and systemic hatred stretched further back. In 1958, he won a place to attend Belfast College of Art but had to work part-time to support his studies. He explained that his inability to access state support was rooted in sectarianism: "You had to apply for a further education grant and further education at that time was totally and utterly dominated by unionists so Catholics in Belfast didn't get grants" (Burns 2010: online). In the same interview, he recalled how a summer vacancy in the Sirocco Works was advertised only to Protestant students, ruefully commenting that anyone recalling "the good old days" was referring to a time when Catholics knew their place.

While his early work was predominantly landscape, at the outbreak of The Troubles, McWilliams turned with some urgency to the violent conflict as a subject matter. He painted scenes from the local area including, for example: *Barricades & People*, New Lodge (1971), *Riots and Barricades*, New Lodge Road (1971), *Saracens and Orangemen*, Carlisle Circus (1972), *Belfast Youth* (1974), and *Peace line*, Ardoyne (1980). While by background he was a Catholic nationalist, he was suspicious of political orthodoxies, and one extended series of works focused on icons of the different political ideologies of Irish Nationalism and Unionism, including, *Green Icons* (Pearse) (1982) and a portrayal of Republican leader Gerry Adams as a one-eyed cyclops. There were occasional works on nationalist parades such as *Irish National Foresters* (1994) and *Republican Parade Falls*

Library in the same year, but his oeuvre recurrently features depictions of the Orange Order. He reported that he had painted the Twelfth of July parades on almost an annual basis since 1958 (Little 2015).

These depictions of Orange parade feature both Drumcree and Donegall Street, including outside St. Patrick's and the nearby offices of The Irish News, the city's Catholic newspaper, for which McWilliams contributed a column in his later life. Titles include *The Orange Parade Passing St. Patrick's Church* (1989), *Orangemen Passing the Irish News* (1994) *Beating Drums in Donegall St. No.2* (1995), *Orangemen Passing St. Patrick's Church* (1996) and *Drumcree Sunset* (2003). In 1996, in a catalogue introduction to a solo exhibition, he accounted for his repeated return to parades as subjects:

My Orange Parades are not folk parades. My Tartan Drummers are not musicians at garden fetes. There is aggression in their playing and this underlying violence is suggested by the fury of their drumming and the pixilated anonymity of their faces. But the Twelfth of July Parade is also a marvellous, colourful spectacle, whatever it's [sic] political or religious base. The simple mechanics of this event appeal to me as a painter. The movement of colour on the streets becomes the textural movement of paint which develops a life and language of its own and hopefully extends and invigorates the subject. (online)

While many of his paintings are unflattering (including marchers urinating in the street, for example) some of the paintings were bought by prominent Orangemen. These included William Craig, a Unionist politician who formed the Ulster Vanguard Movement in 1972 (Burns 2010:). Moreover, McWilliams had already included images of the Klu Klux Klan in a number of paintings on the Drumcree Stand-off on the Garvaghy Road during the 1990s. There would seem to be no reason to anticipate that the inclusion of his painting within the RUA Annual Exhibition would cause offence. Indeed, following McWilliams' death on October 7, 2015, an obituary for the News Letter included a comment from Progressive Unionist Party politician, Dr. John Kyle, who noted, "We recognise that he would not always have agreed with us but we would like, at this time of his passing, to record that his artistic endeavours were appreciated and that the people of Belfast should be proud to have had such an artist among them" (2015: online). Immediately after his death was announced but in advance of the exhibition, RUA President Denise Ferran wrote in the Irish Times, "Joe's prize-winning painting *Christian Flautists Outside St. Patrick's* will be silent testimony to the man and his craft" (2016: online). As I will discuss in the next section, the inclusion of that painting would give rise to a response that was far from silent.

## THE 2015 CONTROVERSY

The Royal Ulster Academy was founded in 1879 and is the largest and longest established body of practicing visual artists in Northern Ireland (RUA online). The Academy had its origins in a local Belfast organization, The Belfast Rambler's Sketching Club, changing its name in 1930 to the Ulster Academy of Arts, becoming the Royal Ulster Academy in 1950. The Academy's Annual Exhibition includes work of merit by members and non-members, and artists might submit a maximum of three works in any medium for selection by a short-listing panel.<sup>3</sup> There is no over-arching theme for the exhibitions, and the 2015 exhibition, consisting of 310 works, was as diverse as its predecessors, including pieces in a wide range of media, about diverse subject matter and contributed by many different artists. Christian Flautists Outside St. Patrick's was displayed alongside and in precisely the same way as other works. Neither the RUA nor the Ulster Museum had anticipated controversy. McWilliams's work featuring Orange parades was well-known and he was well-regarded by at least some sections of the Protestant community, as the discussion above indicates. Previous exhibitions by other artists engaging with the Troubles, including works by artists such as Rita Duffy, Noel Feeney, Jack Pakenham, and Paul Seawright, for example, had not attracted any negative attention.

In 2015, the exhibition opened on October 16, two days after McWilliams's funeral. On November 4, representatives of two political parties and the Orange Order demanded that McWilliams's painting *Christian Flautists Outside St. Patrick's* be removed from the exhibition, issuing critical press releases, appearing on local media outlets, and staging photo-ops in front of the painting. Democratic Unionist Party politician William Humphrey was quoted as saying it was "a subtle but absolutely apparent sectarian slur and the museum should not allow itself to be used in that way" (BBC News 2015: online), while Traditional Unionist Voice vice-chairman Richard Cairns said that it was "deeply insulting, offensive and downright inaccurate to suggest that there is some sort of parallel between the Orange Order and the Ku Klux Klan" (Houston 2015: online). Their complaint concerned the inclusion in the image of a small blurred group of Orangemen who appeared to be wearing Klu Klux Klan hoods. The group occupies less than a square foot of the 7 x 5 feet painting. In demanding the removal of the painting, the Order made much of its world-wide racially diverse membership, including its lodges in West Africa. A press release issued by the Order stated that, "Members of the Orange Institution are entitled to feel outraged that a major publicly funded facility should display such artwork, which is deeply offensive to their traditions and the ethos of one of the

largest community organisations on this island” (cited Dudley Edwards 2011, 21).

The inclusion of these figures was being read as an expression of hatred. While there have been historic linkages between certain forms of loyalism and right-wing British fascist movements (McDonald 2011: online), there is no evidence of any such figures appearing at the actual events outside St. Patrick’s. Race hate attacks in Northern Ireland have increased massively since 2001, and newly arrived immigrant communities have been co-opted into a sectarian binary as either Catholic-Nationalist or Protestant-Unionist, irrespective of their origins, as Geoghegan has observed (2008). He provides evidence too of a greater concentration of attacks on ethnic minorities in working class loyalist areas (2008: 188). Geoghegan, however, also draws attention to initiatives within loyalism to combat racism. Any equation between the ideologies of sectarianism and racism will of course have to account for its presence within Catholic Nationalism too.

Such political representatives might be considered within the category that Dubin terms “professional ideologues” who contribute “to how these public tussles are scripted and how they are ultimately played out” (1999: 14). The response of the RUA was dismissive, perhaps recognizing that in such disputes “the struggle is not only over what is to be represented, but over who will control the means of representing” (Pieterse 2005: 169). It refused to remove the painting, rejecting calls for it to do so as an attack on artistic freedom: a defense of the RUA’s curatorial autonomy. This was in line with at least two of the strategies for museums to manage controversy recommended by the United States’s National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) in support of First Amendment principles:

1. Public Statement Affirming Commitment to Artistic and Intellectual Freedom of Speech (“Freedom of Speech Commitment”);
3. Procedures for Addressing the Press or Complaints from the Public after an Exhibition or Special Program Opens.

The RUA’s appeal to artistic freedom brushes aside objections to the inclusion of the painting as offensive. This contrasts with fears expressed by curators in other contexts considering the exhibition of controversial topics that inclusion would bring “hate into the museum [or] allow extremist views to be portrayed” (Ferguson 2006: 7). As a concession to the complainants, a notice was erected at three entrances to the exhibition on November 4, noting, “Visitors may find some images in this exhibition thought-provoking, controversial and potentially offensive.”

The conception of an artwork as offensive is far from straightforward,

of course. Barrow (2005) teases out a generalized sense of something as “offensive” as a signal of disapproval, from more specific and distinct meanings and uses. He focuses on the importance of individual and group beliefs that find offence in the action or speech of another. He proceeds to unpack variations within this, noting differences among “being offensive in the sense of 1) meaning to offend; 2) actually giving offence, and 3) behaving in a manner that is likely to cause offence (or, of course, any combination of these)” (2005: 268). What is critical is that offensiveness is what is perceived and is not intrinsic to an image. Within such an understanding, the notice placed at the entrances to the exhibition makes sense and is both a common curatorial strategy (Harper 2004: 59) and one recommended by Ferguson (2006) in managing potential controversy. What it does not do, however, is address the affective power of feelings aroused by images and objects in the experience of heritage as hate (Schorch 2014).

The placing of the signs outside the exhibition demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the broader contextual issues that fed into the attitudes of the Orange Order and the Unionist politicians that explain why the controversy arose at this specific time. As Mitchell writes, rather than asking what is in the image that is offensive, “A better question might be, what is it about people that makes them so susceptible to being offended by images?” (2001: 115). He draws attention to the ways in which “offending images are radically unstable entities whose capacity for harm depends on complex social contexts” (2001: 119). Certainly its contours conform to many of the features identified by Dubin as common to arts controversies as far back as 1969 in the United States: “the acute breach between groups occurring along racial, ethnic, generational, and ideological lines, the dig-in-the-heels, take-no-prisoners bombast, and the demands for accountability in the use of public funds as a way to leverage control over content” (1999: 20). I focus here on two factors that made this image offensive to the Orange Order at this time. The first is the place in which the work was being shown, the Ulster Museum; the second has to do with specific changes in the Northern Irish state under the terms of the peace process. I will deal with the first factor, the site of the exhibition, in the following section.

#### THE ULSTER MUSEUM

One of the designated National Museums of Northern Ireland, the Ulster Museum’s roots were in the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery that opened in 1929. As Bigand notes, however, the extension of the scope to a national institution following World War Two was politically motivated to secure a separate sense of a Northern Irish identity: “The Northern Irish Government was not long in granting support to the project, not to fall out

of step with developments in the South, and mainly for fear of Ulster being included in the Southern project, thereby losing its specificity” (2011: online). It was made a national museum under the 1961 Museum Act (Northern Ireland). Bigand observes that “from its creation the museum had to deal with the reputation of being strongly Protestant/Unionist-biased” (2011: online).

This reputation was confirmed in 1978 when attendants refused to hang a number of pieces in a travelling show from the Whitechapel Gallery in London, Art for Society, in a performance of Unionist solidarity. The attendants were supported by the museum’s trustees, and the work was refused display. One of the pieces excluded was an artwork by Cumbrian artist Conrad Atkinson, *Silver Liberties: A Souvenir of a Wonderful Anniversary Year*. The piece is made up of four panels: three in the green, white and gold of the Irish tricolor; the fourth, in black, includes the figure of a dead man. The first panel includes photos of the 13 people who were murdered on Bloody Sunday when British soldiers opened fire on a Civil Rights March in Derry and a blood-stained banner carried on the day of the march. Other elements include a graffito of a British soldier, street scenes in a Protestant part of Belfast, and a beaten IRA suspect. It was subsequently displayed in Wolverhampton Art Gallery in England, which has a large permanent display dedicated to Northern Ireland, away from the immediate frontlines of The Troubles and its current culture wars. Atkinson termed the Ulster Museum trustees “cultural paramilitaries” (BBC 2011: online) for their action, and when the museum was nominated for the Art Fund Prize in 2010, he campaigned against its inclusion (Jones 2010: online). The Museum was awarded the prize, nonetheless.

Another piece to be excluded was Joe McWilliams’ *Community Door 2*, featuring a petrol-bombed door from a community center, blistered and blackened from repeated attacks, woven through with a rainbow motif that spills down steps onto the floor. The piece both documented the effects of the violence and, in the rainbow motif, suggested an invitation to a more hopeful prospect on the other side. In 2012, Brian Ferran, Deputy Head of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland at the time of the controversy, recalled that,

I think the people who were to blame were not the attendants of the Ulster Museum but the trustees at the time . . . Interestingly two years before, we held an exhibition of Conrad Atkinson’s work in an Arts Council gallery which, I thought, was infinitely more controversial and nothing was said about it . . . . The museum was then a totally unionist dominated environment and they thought it was sympathetic to the IRA. (Burns 2012: online)

Indeed, the museum had been criticized for its unwillingness to engage directly with the conflict beyond its walls (Crooke 2001; Jones 2010).

Nevertheless, the museum has not been impervious to the pressures across the museum-world to become more inclusive of the different communities of its society (Dubin 1999; Ferguson 2006); to the political changes in Northern Ireland; or funding imperatives to support cross-community dialogue (Nic Craith 2002). Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires National Museums Northern Ireland to comply with two statutory duties: broadly, “to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity” and “to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.”

In 2001, its temporary exhibition *Icons of Identity* juxtaposed the display of objects from each of the main identity blocs in ways that sought to challenge historical certainties (Greene 2006: online). After a major refurbishment in 2009, the museum included its first permanent gallery dedicated to the Troubles. Even then, at the last minute, potentially contested relics and artefacts of the conflict were replaced with text-based panels (Meredith 2014a: online). In 2014, it staged a temporary retrospective exhibition, *The Art of the Troubles*, that included the previously excluded work by Atkinson and McWilliams. In 2015, Colin Davidson’s *Silent Testimony* exhibition comprised eighteen portraits of victims of the violence, registering the emotional impact on the sitters, and bearing testimony to the ongoing suffering caused by the conflict.

It is noteworthy that when it has engaged with *The Troubles*, the Museum has frequently had recourse to exhibitions of art works rather than objects to do so. This practice, taken alongside the response of the RUA President to the controversy cited above, raises questions about the positioning of the museum’s art gallery as a space somehow removed from the world from which its artefacts emerge and with which its exhibits engage, articulating a distinction between aesthetic and political values (Harrington 2004). Duncan (1994, 1995, 2005) draws attention to the ways in which the experience of galleried spaces is ritualized more generally within Western cultures of display to produce a specific kind of absorption in the works themselves. In the specific context of Belfast, performance artist André Stitt explained his turn to the streets of Belfast in the mid-1970s as the site for his artworks precisely because “conventional practice separated art from everyday experience by operating in traditional terms, in neutered spaces such as art galleries and institutions” (2015: 95). In 2014, commenting on the *Art of the Troubles* exhibition, the Belfast Telegraph’s Fionola Meredith suggested that a double distancing of artistic rendition and galleried display

was being used as a tactic to defuse (or refuse) the potential dissonance of the heritage depicted:

I have a sneaking suspicion that the museum thinks that approaching the Troubles obliquely, through the medium of art, is a safer way to get to grips with it. Less controversial, less politically risky (though it clearly still scares the bejaysus out of it to mention the ‘T’ word at all; a friend in the media who phoned the museum to inquire about the show was informed that it was keeping it low-key because it was perceived to be sensitive). (2014b: online)

Even if this was an implicit or unconscious assumption, it ignores the long history of art controversies that demonstrate that no exhibition space can be impervious to the society outside its doors (Dubin 1992, 1999; Woolf 1993; Rothfield 2001; Casey 2003; Harper 2004; Ferguson 2006).

What this account demonstrates is that the museum has a highly politicized contested heritage. As Duncan notes, “[T]o control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths. It is also the power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community” (2005: 79). Thus, the status of any museum as an institution with the power to endorse perspectives merely by displaying them in public is often at the heart of controversy. For example, when in 1994 the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened its exhibition of photographs taken during the Balkan War, *Faces of Sorrow: Agony in the Former Yugoslavia*, it became embroiled in a dispute with both Jewish and Serbian-American groups, accusing it of taking sides by depicting Croats as victims, despite a history of atrocities committed by them (Holmes 1994: online). This general authority accruing to museums is intensified when the museum is a national museum. Traditionally, national museums have a role “to present a definitive picture, a unified vision of national identity – ‘the’ national identity” (Ferguson 2006: 26). When that traditional role has shifted, under pressures of democratization, moves toward pluralistic understandings of identity, or revisionist historiography, for example, have not always been appreciated by the general public. Thus, the 1990s debacle over the Smithsonian’s plan to exhibit the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* on the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima discussed by Dubin (1999) illustrates issues at stake when a national institution is perceived to fail to fulfil a function to “portray national history in a positive light, create a shared national identity and provide civic lessons” (Cameron 2006: 6).

For the Ulster Museum, the “national” history it had been entrusted with preserving had been almost entirely Protestant and Unionist for most of its existence and had been policed and protected by its trustees and

attendants as the Art for Society debacle demonstrated. The inclusion of the McWilliams's painting within its walls as a national museum caused the radical changes in the wider political dispensation of the peace process to resonate all the more loudly. For the museum as a physical expression of the Ulster state and Northern Irish nation, the inclusion of this offensive representation was perceived as a manifestation of the broader "cold house for Protestants" syndrome: art being used to claim territory.

There is no small irony in this. McWilliams was overtly critical of what he saw as the crude propagandizing of wall murals to mark territory in unsophisticated displays of identity (2000: online). He argued vociferously that gallery walls were not to be confused with the gable walls of working-class estates where murals and graffiti are used to demonize the Other (McWilliams 2000: online; Hartnett 2011). Nonetheless, the inclusion of this painting was being perceived as an expression of an anti-Orange territorial claim on the national museum space. One newspaper quoted North Belfast DUP MLA William Humphrey, a member of the Orange Order, stating that, "This painting conveys a message no more sophisticated than some of the offensive graffiti daubed on gable walls" (Houston 2015: online). The place of the exhibition was one crucial factor then in the controversy. In this next section, I examine the second key contextual factor: timing.

#### PROTESTANT HERITAGE UNDER ATTACK

The unfolding of the peace process, particularly in accordance with Section 75 and Schedule 9 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, has seen the removal of a number of markers of Northern Ireland's British and thus, Protestant-Unionist, identity from the public realm (Hughes 1998), producing a reflexive defensiveness on the part of political and community leaders. As Dubin argues, timing is a crucial factor in any controversy: "the outbreak of conflict occurs when power is shifting and the relative status of different groups is in flux" (1999: 4). By 2012, the year of the Young Conway Volunteers incident, loyalist resistance to this process was gaining a critical momentum that would be sustained over subsequent years. In December 2012, a decision by Belfast City Council to limit the number of days on which the Union Flag would be flown from City Hall provoked widespread street protests across Northern Ireland, in some places leading to violent clashes between protesters and police that would continue across the following year. This would coincide with the revival of parading as an issue of contention in 2013 when the Parades Commission banned the return leg of an Orange parade from passing a particular section of the Crumlin Road in North Belfast. After violence at the blockade of the road

by the police, a protest camp was set up in nearby Twaddell Avenue and the site quickly became a magnet for discontented loyalists to vent their fury, with no resolution at the time of writing. Policing the site was estimated to have cost more than £18 million by 2016.

This violence has created difficulties for mainstream unionism, for politicians wishing to connect with their loyalist constituency and for the Orange Order whose membership and leadership have seemed split in reacting to events on the streets. In response in part to the images of violence at Drumcree that were disseminated around the world, the Orange Order had tried to reform, remould, or, at least, reimage parading, seeking, for example to rebrand the Twelfth of July celebrations as Orangefest. One online tourist information site has commented:

Belfast Orangefest showcases aspects of Ulster's rich heritage and culture such as Orange Lodges, marching bands, fife and drums, flute music and the resonant sound of Ulster's unique Lambeg drum. The Belfast "12th of July" celebrations are a magnificent spectacle of tradition, colour and music that can be enjoyed by all locals and visitors alike. (Culture NI, 2015: online)

These attempts to reframe parading as a celebratory and potentially inclusive heritage tradition were confounded by these disputes. Politicians and Orange Order leaders then needed some way to demonstrate leadership in defense of unionist culture against attacks on its heritage from without. A letter to *The Down News* elaborated the broader sentiment:

I do not believe this picture is freedom of expression at all. I believe it is a Quasi-political broadcast of the views of Irish Republicans toward the Orange Order. When the Orangemen walk the public streets to celebrate their culture is this not freedom of expression? When the Loyalist bands march the streets is this not freedom of expression and performing arts? Yet we are restricted at every opportunity and charged with criminal offences if any of the ridiculous restraints and restrictions placed on us and the bands are broken. Orangeism and Loyalism seems to be the only demographics in Ireland you are allowed to say and do anything to without the fear of consequences. (Brennan 2015: online).

This speaks to Mitchell's view that some images, "offend because they degrade something valuable or desecrate something sacred" (2001: 120)—here, not just the specific band, but that band as a metonym for the whole of Orange cultural identity at a critical moment of vulnerability. In this next section, I outline why and how a greater sensitivity to this timing might have been demonstrated.

## CURATING CONTESTED HERITAGE

As Crooke has noted, “[T]he act of interpretation and presentation of the past carries a certain amount of risk: interpretations can be accused of misrepresentation, over-simplification or neglect” (2007: 98); thus curators and the institutions with which they work have a central role in managing risk and controversy. Under Section 75, the Ulster Museum has a statutory responsibility as a public space into which visitors with disparate identities and dissonant heritages come, and National Museums Northern Ireland have developed a range of equality procedures in response. The museum may function as a shared space (Komarova 2008) or a contact zone (Pratt 1991); what it cannot be is a neutral space. It has responsibilities to engage with dissonance to maintain both fairness and good relations. In the following section, I explore the alternatives that the curators might have adopted in presenting this painting as part of the exhibition.

In approaching the exhibition of this painting, I am not going to suggest that it should have been removed at the behest of the ideologues. As the Conflict in Cities and the Contested States project found, “Suppression of partisan events and sites is often unrealistic and ineffective; rather events and sites expressing multiple points of view need to be considered” (2012: 1). Accepting this means that curators have to take account of the subjective experience of heritage. Doering, Pekarik, and Kindlon (1997) found that,

Even when an exhibition is clear, focused and well understood by its audience, the meaning that it holds for a particular visitor is primarily dependent on that person and is not something “found” or “received” or “communicated” in the exhibition itself. Individuals invent their own responses, juxtaposing all the elements of the exhibition— its perceived messages, its contents, its design—against the background of their own lives and experience. Out of that creative, unique confrontation they establish, in some cases, a personal meaning.

This may mean limits to how any curatorial strategy might avoid offending. Dudley Edwards goes so far as to assert that, “artists should be free to express themselves freely and, indeed, to give offence” (2015: 21). Barrow suggests that in some instances individuals and groups have a moral obligation not to take offence in the sense that their dislike of something should require action by others (2005: 274). The politicians here might have engaged with the museum to defuse, rather than initiating or inflaming controversy. Alternatively, the painting might have been exhibited within a context that acknowledged the potential for offence as a means to opening up a discursive space for the issues it raised. Indeed the second strategy advocated by the NCAC is “Preparation in Advance of Upcoming Programs

and Potential Controversy, through agreement on clear curatorial procedures, feedback mechanisms, and educational plans” [online].

The museum had already developed such curatorial practices in handling other works. As Greene notes, during the 2001 *Icons of Identity* exhibition, a cooling off room was provided where staff and visitors could write out their responses on cards that were then pinned to a board, becoming an extension of the exhibition: “All comments were carefully collected by the museum, including those that alleged bias on the part of the staff: some visitors thought they detected a Republican bias while others suspected that the staff were pro-Unionist” (2006: 3). The 2014 *Art of the Troubles* exhibition was supported by an extensive programme of events, including talks, lectures, film showings, and an international academic conference. In 2015, the museum released its evaluation of the re-development of its modern history gallery that had used both formative and summative evaluations with key stakeholders and the general public. One finding was that “[a]ll the interviewees said that the right balance has been achieved between the ‘Orange’ and ‘Green’ stories and welcomed the inclusion of other themes such as ‘the gender story’ and disability” (NMNI 2015: 4). In its handling of the current Decade of Centenaries that includes the anniversaries of World War One, the Easter Rising, and Irish War of Independence, for example, the Museum has adopted many of the recommendations made by Ferguson (2006) that might be adopted by any museum exhibiting potentially controversial material. These advocate, for example, consultation with stakeholders in the development of the exhibition, including through formative and remedial evaluation. This demonstrates a growing experience of and confidence in handling “‘hot’ interpretation whereby the emotional engagement with heritage is acknowledged and forms the basis for representation and interaction with the audience” (Johnson 2013: 585).

The curatorial team for the Exhibition might also have looked elsewhere for examples of the handling of difficult topics. Johnson provides an account of the choices made by the Westfries Museum in designing an exhibition around the statue of the controversial figure of J.P. Coen in the Dutch town of Hoorn. Her conclusions were that, “[r]ather than seeking to support visitors in their attempts to negotiate difficult heritage, the museum explicitly avoided a moral judgement on Coen and took the role of facilitator of the public discussion allowing visitors to form their own opinion” (2013: 595). The inclusion of this opinion forming within the context of the museum aligns with the strategy of the *Icons of Identity* exhibition: dissonance is expressed and managed as part of the curatorial process. A second group of strategies proposed by Ferguson (2006) is to find ways to incorporate a range of perspectives into the exhibition itself. This would have been more difficult in that the painting was to be included within the

Annual Exhibition, rather than given a specific prominence on its own. The plurality of work on display might itself be seen as a broader artistic context for the painting.

A further set of recommendations proposed by Ferguson operate at a meta-level, whereby the processes by which history has been made and un-made might be laid bare within an exhibition or through associated framing devices, talks, and symposia. While there are talks by artists exhibiting at the Annual Exhibition hosted by the Museum routinely and an active program of talks and discussions across the year, no such provision was made in relation to this issue, in advance or in response to the controversy. McWilliams's own ill health and death may have meant that these were not considered appropriate.

In their responses, both the RUA and the Ulster Museum missed these kinds of opportunities to explore the representation of hatred in the painting and the ways in which the painting itself was regarded as a display of hatred by those offended by it. Moreover, they could have anticipated that there would be a heightened sensitivity when the McWilliams's painting was on display. As cited by Dudley Edwards, the Orange Order Press release calling for the removal of McWilliams's painting argued that "[t]his inaccurate and negative portrayal of the institution comes only months after the Ulster Museum was accused of republican bias due to the lack of Ulster-Scots and Orange-related literature in its bookshop" (2015: 21). In this context, the RUA and the museum might have paid greater attention to the broader social context outside the doors of the museum and anticipated the sensitivities of the broader unionist population and its loyalist communities.

#### CONCLUSION

In tracing the controversy around the McWilliams's painting, I have outlined a context in which sectarian hatred and heritage in Northern Ireland have been and continue to be imbricated within everyday experience and institutional values and practices. Following the Belfast Agreement of 1998, the Northern Ireland state has sought to rebalance itself to accommodate both communities of identity, expressed symbolically and publicly through the state's treatment of key heritage sites, objects, and practices. Sectarian hatreds still flare up in violence as communities contend with evolving political power structures or settle old scores. The Ulster Museum's inclusion of the painting within the RUA's annual exhibition in 2015 occurred within a context of that site as a national museum at a point in time at which the sense of attack on the hegemony of Ulster Protestant-Unionist identity was felt most acutely. All the necessary conditions were in

place for a controversy. The presence of political leaders willing to seek out and express offence within the media provided the necessary impetus.

For the Ulster Museum and the RUA, such a controversy might have been anticipated with sufficient alertness to the wider political context to allow the adoption of measures in the display of the work to frame it within a dialogic space. What this controversy illustrates is that consideration of the ways in which any potentially controversial work is exhibited and curated does not mean removing an image that might cause offense. Rather, acknowledging the potential for offensiveness places an onus on the institutional practices of heritage professionals to develop mechanisms for dissonance to be expressed. Creating discursive spaces for dissonance may itself allow it to be contained rather than erupting into violence. While Duncan (1994, 1995, 2005) has argued persuasively for the ways in which the ritualized aspects of art museum display have been put to specific work of civilizing the citizen, there is the potential for a different approach. Instead of approaching civilizing as manufacturing consent toward single national narratives, one might see it instead as an approach to providing a discursive space for dissonance. Bishop, for example, develops a concept of “relational antagonism” through an understanding that, “a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased. Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order—a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy” (2004: 66). For her, the art gallery can become a space in which disagreement can be discussed in the development of a society where civility rather than violence or territorialism provides a discursive framework. Viewed like this, curating hatred may be a key function for museums and galleries in societies emerging out of conflict.

#### NOTES

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2. The painting can be seen online on the RUA’s website at <http://www.royalulsteracademy.org/work/157/christian-flautists-outside-stpatrickrsquos?modal>.

3. The current guidelines for submissions can be found at: <http://www.royalulsteracademy.org/annual-exhibition>.

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