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Collecting the Troubles and Beyond: The role of the Ulster Museum in interpreting contested history

Abstract The representation of contested history within the context of a divided society presents both significant challenges and opportunities. In response National Museums Northern Ireland has begun a new initiative entitled *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond*, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The aim of the project is to widen the scope of the collection through greater academic and community engagement and to ensure that the collection can be used to support a full and inclusive narrative.

As well as material relating directly to political developments and conflict, collecting activity is being focussed on wider social, cultural and economic themes thereby enabling more nuanced and inclusive engagement with this complex period of history. We are working with community groups and representatives to establish the significance of events and objects through workshops and dialogue resulting in an important element of co-production within the project.

This case study will illustrate that despite the inherent challenges in interpreting contested history, the museum can play an important role in building understanding and in helping to address the legacy of the past. It can offer a shared space in which to explore controversial issues through critical narrative and interpretation which presents multiple perspectives and offers the opportunity for dialogue and debate.

Keywords conflict, legacy, dialogue, engagement, interpretation

Introduction

The decades of civil and political conflict commonly referred to as ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland claimed over 3,600 lives and affected almost everyone who lived here and many others from further afield. There are obvious challenges and sensitivities involved in interpreting such recent, and still unresolved, conflict in a museum setting as the history of what happened continues to be contested. This article will outline the role the Ulster Museum has played in encouraging dialogue, building understanding, taking a critical approach and representing multiple perspectives in order to facilitate audience interpretation of our recent past, and the relevance that has today in the context of a divided society emerging from conflict. This represents a new approach taken by the Museum, which builds on previous experience and contributes to a new understanding of the role and purpose of museums in relation to social impact.

When the Ulster Museum in Belfast re-opened in 2009 following a period of refurbishment, an exhibition entitled *The Troubles* was launched as part of the new History galleries. Consisting entirely of black and white photographs and text, the impact of the exhibition was limited by the absence of original artefacts and alternative viewpoints. The perspective was comparable to that of a photo-journalist and little or no interpretation was offered. Journalists at the time described it as “bland, safe and strenuously non-controversial” (Meredith 2009) and “the past defeating the present ... for fear of giving offence [or] causing controversy” (O’Connor 2009). While in general the public, and particularly international visitors, found the exhibition interesting and well balanced, the lack of social history was apparent and visitor feedback called for the inclusion of objects and personal stories.

In 2015 a successful application was made to the Heritage Lottery Fund to address the limitations of the *Troubles* exhibition through its Collecting Cultures Programme. A new initiative entitled *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond* was established and it received £370,000 of funding. The aim of the project is to widen the scope of the collection, supported by greater academic and community engagement, in order to enhance our interpretation of our recent past. Research into the existing collection and a thorough assessment of its strengths and weaknesses informed the collection development plan. Its focus was on going beyond the political narrative to represent broader social, cultural and economic history as well as exploring the impact of conflict on everyday life, people and communities. A modern approach to social history

curatorship was adopted, emphasising the importance of documenting the personal and community context of objects. Time was invested in establishing a network of contacts and liaising with relevant groups as well as delivering outreach activities and workshops.

A cyclical approach to interpretive design was established whereby collections development, supported by consultation and engagement, informed interpretive planning which was then subject to evaluation and review and then the cycle would begin again in response to that feedback. This process remains ongoing and it is important that the Troubles and Beyond gallery remains dynamic and offers a platform for engagement. Northern Ireland remains in the transition from conflict to peace and in this context there are significant opportunities for National Museums NI to take a more proactive role in dealing with the legacy of the past. In reference to the *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond* project, within which the Community Relations Council is regarded as an important stakeholder, Programme Director Deirdre MacBride stated:

As work continues on developing The Troubles and Beyond gallery the Ulster Museum has a unique opportunity to create a space in which dialogue and understanding about The Troubles can occur, which is situated in the context of Northern Ireland's continuing emergence from years of conflict and violence and in which we are building peace and democracy.

This paper will outline the role of the Museum in relation to such opportunities and how the framework of the project was designed to support academic and public engagement with contested history, whilst being mindful of the ethical considerations involved.

2. The role of the Ulster Museum

The role of museums is changing. In his book *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century*, Professor Graham Black argues for a profoundly different, much more participatory experience – one that involves creating more meaningful opportunities for engagement with collections (Black 2011). In a national context the Northern Ireland Museums Policy (2011) states that museums have an important role in a shared and better future for Northern Ireland as they can “help us understand our diversity and our

interdependencies” (Department of Culture Arts and Leisure 2011). Taking these objectives together and being more proactive in engaging its audience, National Museums NI has delivered a significant programme of collections access and engagement in recent years. This has involved reaching out to new audiences and engaging with difficult subjects through exhibitions such as *Art of the Troubles* and *Remembering 1916: Your Stories*. Most recently, a new vision, mission statement and set of values have been identified for the organisation which aims to celebrate who we are: telling the stories of our past, challenging our present and shaping our future. With this remit curators can pose questions and challenge ideas, enabling visitors to be more critical in their analysis and to communicate their views to the Museum and each other. It is hoped that this will afford opportunities to shape our future through dialogue and shared understanding as visitors reflect on sensitive and contentious issues curated responsibly and in context.

There are a number of inherent challenges in ensuring the ethical representation of a conflict which claimed thousands of lives. From the outset of the project a strong ethical framework was established, guided by the principles of ethical remembering, those outlined by the Community Relations Council and the Museum Association’s Code of Ethics for Museums (Community Relations Council 2011; Museums Association 2015). There are responsibilities in terms of editorial integrity, providing and generating accurate information for and with the public, engaging with new and existing audiences and treating everyone equally and with respect (Museums Association 2015). In addition, there is a significant duty of care to victims and survivors. In consultation with the Academic Advisory Group for the project, and in particular Dr Kris Brown from the Transitional Justice Institute at Ulster University, a set of key principles was established that underpin the project and inform the Museum’s approach:

- » To recognise key aspects of the Troubles period and chart their development and evolution.
- » To provide context to the Troubles period by examining wider social, economic, and cultural activity and their interplay with the Troubles.
- » To allow a range of interpretations of, and from, the period to be displayed.
- » To facilitate reflection on our historical understanding of the period, and commentary on the exhibition.

- » To engage with a wide range of communities and constituencies in Northern Ireland and beyond.
- » To incorporate information drawn from scholarship and apply best museological practice.

These are aligned with the principles of ethical remembering and are intended to address the challenges of interpreting sensitive and contested history by emphasising context, pluralism and critical reflection. The following sections describe how these principles have been put into practice through the *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond* project in order to better position the Museum to fulfil its role in interpreting, and addressing the legacy of, our recent past.

2.1 Encouraging dialogue

Poulot (2012) suggests that museums can provide a forum for discussion on issues of memory and history. Rightly so, however, effective dialogue that promotes openness and sharing, while acknowledging hopes and fears, has much greater transformative potential (Hardy and Hussein 2017). There may not always be agreement, but reasoned disagreement can build more authentic and stronger relationships and addressing difficult questions directly and respectfully can build trust (Hardy and Hussein 2017).

A phased approach was taken to the development of the *Troubles and Beyond* exhibition, which provided a platform for consultation and engagement. Time was spent working with community groups and representatives to establish the significance of events and objects through workshops and dialogue, resulting in an important element of co-production within the project. Audience involvement was encouraged through events and touring exhibitions that brought collections out to local venues. This both raised awareness of the project and offered members of the public the opportunity to comment on, or contribute to, the proposed content for the exhibition. Press releases and gallery notices made an open call for contributions and the response was measured but significant, spanning a wide geographical area and representing a range of perspectives. At all stages participant and visitor feedback was collated and an open conversation continues to be encouraged.

In order to align with best practice and promote discourse from a museological perspective, seminar days were held to explore themes of diversity

and pluralism and the sensitivities involved in interpreting conflict. An Academic Advisory Group was established to advise on overall approach, context, accuracy, inclusiveness and balance. The development of the exhibition was informed by these processes of academic and community engagement and the result affords new opportunities to encourage dialogue within the space. Lisle (2006) describes how experiences of the sublime (a powerful and potentially destabilising response to terror or awe) are often regulated or resolved within conflict exhibitions. The *Troubles and Beyond* exhibition is not focussed exclusively on war and extends into post-conflict Northern Ireland, yet the violence of the Troubles and its impact is left unresolved. As a result, there are numerous entry points to continued and effective dialogue in terms of sharing lived experience and building mutual understanding within, and between, communities.

2.2 Building understanding

The Museums Association's flagship campaign *Museums Change Lives* has demonstrated the social impact museums can have and how that can be augmented through a reciprocal relationship with museum audiences. Conducting research into collections and engagement with them helps people to make sense of the world and their place in it (Black 2011) and important opportunities exist to build understanding around difficult subjects. While the previous *Troubles* gallery presented a factual description which Cameron (2005) would class as a surface level of interpretation, the new exhibition aims to offer a deeper interpretation, a critical and challenging representation that links intersecting narratives. For example, a bomb disposal robot used by the British Army in response to the security situation is displayed alongside a metal bin lid that residents in nationalist communities would have rattled on the ground to warn of soldiers entering the area.

There is a responsibility to accurately communicate key information about the Troubles in a clear and effective manner. However, this is contested history and numerous interpretations exist, both in the historiography and research into the conflict as well as in terms of communal understanding and collective memories. In that context the aim is not to achieve consensus, but to encourage narrative hospitality. Integrative complexity offers a way of recognising and coding the intricacy of human thought and personality, individual or collective (Savage and Boyd-Macmillan 2010). There are seven levels

of integrative complexity from seeing only one point of view to understanding the integration of many points of view. Individuals move up and down this scale according to situation and/or stimulus. Conflict and the contestation of our history can begin to be resolved through ascending these levels. By interpreting diverse perspectives, in context, alongside original artefacts and information drawn from scholarship, it is hoped visitors gain a greater understanding of the history of Northern Ireland and how different narratives intersect.

The facilitation and interplay of diverse narratives can be further promulgated in a structured way to promote understanding. For example, gallery-based learning resources and activities have been developed for school and university groups as well as self-guided visitors. As part of a parallel project *Voices of 68* (Reynolds and Blair 2018), a series of student conferences have been delivered during which pupils take part in thought provoking lectures, engaging activities, gallery tours and interactive panel discussion with key figures from 1968. The amalgamation of academic research, museum interpretation, and direct engagement has proved a successful model which could be applied more widely to building understanding around contested history.

2.3 Taking a critical approach

In response to visitor feedback the new *Troubles and Beyond* exhibition is structured chronologically and within each decade there are three integral themes: i. political developments; ii. conflict; and iii. life during the Troubles. The latter provides social, cultural and economic context as well as reference to employment, education and the impact of the Troubles on everyday life. Consideration is given to the nature of the conflict, its causes and its legacy both locally and internationally. The visitor is presented with a curated selection of objects and a range of perspectives including individual testimonies and must draw together their own interpretation. The approach is intended to challenge ideas, debunk myths, to demonstrate the integrative complexity of the conflict. A new interpretive device called ‘Stop and Think’ was designed to deliberately punctuate the narrative with short points of reference or statistics that again would challenge visitors’ thinking. For example, in December 1971 the British Home Secretary, Reginald Maudling, discussing the situation in Northern Ireland referred to “an acceptable level

of violence” (McVeigh 2015). During that year 180 people lost their lives (McKittrick et al. 2007).

There is a risk that placing an emphasis on the trauma of events results in personalisation, psychologising and the production of emotion, which makes it difficult to interpret and understand the underlying factors more comprehensively (Poulot 2012). In challenging existing perceptions we can demonstrate that the violence of the Troubles was not inevitable. Conflict can be seen as a series of processes which evolves over time through periods of latent conflict, the emergence and escalation of conflict, stalemate and the subsequent de-escalation of conflict, negotiation and peacebuilding (Lund 1996). Examining these processes in more detail enables us to give greater consideration to the causes of conflict and the requirements and conditions for peace and reconciliation. If the Museum is to have a role in peacebuilding it is to challenge visitors to be critical in their understanding of history, to introduce a degree of complexity that ensures multiple perspectives are given consideration.

2.4 Representing multiple perspectives

The traumatic events of the years after 1968 touched almost everyone who lived in Northern Ireland and many others from further afield. Inevitably the interpretation of these events is contested in terms of significance, meaning and responsibility. While we have a shared past we do not have a shared memory. Different perceptions and interpretations exist and the museum should present pluralism without bias. The previous *Troubles* exhibition lacked both original artefacts and alternative perspectives so from inception the *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond* project was designed to focus on collection development to ensure the collection could be used to support a full and inclusive narrative. A diverse range of groups representing different sectors of the community, ex-combatants and ex-service personnel were invited to contribute to discussions around contemporary collecting and to inform and oversee inclusivity. This involved representatives from groups that National Museums NI actively seek to work with including women’s groups, the LGBT community, and ethnic minority groups as well as targeting areas that have been particularly adversely affected by the Troubles (identified for priority interventions by the Northern Ireland Executive).

Lisle (2006) points out that the new language of inclusion adopted by museums in assimilating all possible points of view can limit the audience's capacity to be critical or subversive. Yet to tell one part of the story but to exclude another would limit the potential for peacebuilding. Visitor feedback called for the inclusion of personal stories, however, these also present challenges in terms of editorial integrity. How do you judge the authenticity of one account or another? There are inherent risks in presenting memory and reflective opinion, the subjectivity can destabilise the narrative and it can be as much about forgetting and self-censoring (Walkowitz and Knauer 2009). That said, the power of individual perspectives and personal responses is in evoking a recognitive response from the audience based on personal truth (Powers-Jones 2014). The decision was taken to present individual testimonies explicitly in a dedicated feature within the exhibition composed of rotatable frames that incorporate a photograph on one side and a short account of the person's experiences, written in their own words, on the other. This enabled the Museum to present broader narratives counterpoised with individual voices, introducing a degree of criticality and subversion whilst maintaining inclusivity.

3. Contemporary relevance

The Troubles and Beyond exhibition does not end with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, but extends to the present day. The inclusion of material relating to a 'post conflict' Northern Ireland enables greater exploration of continuity and change within local society and this is enhanced through the chronological structure of the exhibition. The Museum has an important role in the transition from conflict to peace in enabling visitors to reflect on sensitive and contentious issues in context and in helping to promote narrative hospitality.

It is understood that political change and uncertainty can act as a trigger for renewed struggles (Walkowitz and Knauer 2004). In the context of the current political stalemate in Northern Ireland and the failure of the government to meaningfully address the legacy of the past, there is an opportunity for the Museum to provide leadership and direction on legacy issues. Many of the issues commonly cited around culture and identity can be explored constructively within the museum context. To date a number of events have been held to examine symbology, cultural traditions and community relations and



Fig.: The exhibition *Collecting the Troubles and Beyond* ©National Museums NI, 2018

the Museum can go further now the exhibition is in place to work directly with groups and community representatives.

During the development of the exhibition the Community Relations Council, WAVE and the Commission for Victims and Survivors were consulted to ensure that important issues of representation were addressed in an appropriate and sensitive manner. The exhibition content is clear on the sources and impacts of harm and refers to legacy issues in terms of ongoing inquiries, allegations of collusion and many of the factors that result in the Troubles being described as a ‘dirty war’. By bringing these accounts together there are opportunities to build understanding around the impact of the Troubles and to facilitate the development of narratives which welcome complexity. McNally (2019) advocates a social peace process as opposed to a political process and perhaps that is where the role of the museum should be rooted as part of a wider programme of peacebuilding and psychosocial support. Furthermore, McNally (2019) suggests this process should be based on a socio-ecological framework which situates individuals within wider social,

political and cultural contexts and recognises the interaction of four different levels – individual, family, community and society. The Museum can provide both context and a space for individual interaction, inter-generational and familial exchange and community group visits.

4. Conclusion

Subsequent to the ICOM Conference *Difficult Issues*, the Troubles and Beyond exhibition opened on 31 March 2018 and represents an important step forward by National Museums NI (fig., p. 175). Journalist Fionola Meredith, who was one of the main critics of the 2009 exhibition, described it as a “brave move” and a “vast improvement” on what went before (Meredith 2018). The response from visitors has also been positive and encouraging with a sense that such an exhibition was expected and overdue. The importance of objects is apparent in the feedback as is the value of personal testimony and the impact of the more poignant aspects of the exhibition. One individual said: “I experienced a mixture of emotion – sadness at all this community has gone through, relief that we are past the worst, but disappointment at our faltering peace process”.

So, what is the role of the Museum in interpreting contested history? Acknowledging that addressing our violent past is difficult and painful, but necessary, Meredith (2018) goes on to state that the Museum has a special duty to provide a space for visitors to “reflect on the complicated, cataclysmic events that happened here and how those experiences have shaped us”. Absolutely, and this paper has demonstrated that the Museum has a significant role to play in offering space for reflection and an opportunity for visitors to examine contested history through critical narrative and interpretation, within which multiple perspectives intersect. However, it is argued that the role of the Museum can go beyond this and a much more proactive approach can be taken to engaging with difficult history with a view to transformative, rather than reflective, experiences. In partnership with academia, community representatives, support groups and others, the Museum can continue to encourage dialogue, build understanding and support efforts to address the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland.

The Troubles and Beyond exhibition at the Ulster Museum has been designed as a dynamic space which offers a platform for engagement and will continue to evolve in response to dialogue and feedback. It is no longer

limited by the absence of artefacts, critical analysis or multiple perspectives, if anything it is now limited by the physical confines of its space and there is the potential to extend it further or to inform the development of other exhibitions. The process continues, and the Museum understands that the pace at which the public is ready to address the past varies. In response to the question “do you have a story to share?” more than one visitor has written “not yet”.

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