Dealing with the legacy of the past: oral history and museums in Northern Ireland

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Abstract: This article contributes to ongoing debates around the role of oral history in dealing with the legacy of the past as part of the Northern Ireland peace process. Drawing on work at the intersection of the museum sector and academia, it endorses the importance and value of oral history to future strategies. However, in setting out the need for an effective delivery model, it explores how methodologies are currently understood and deployed in this context. The authors propose the development of a model anchored around a central archival hub with local spokes, acknowledging that this is a distributed story requiring extensive collaboration. Drawing on methods being prototyped by National Museums Northern Ireland, it sets out an approach that combines the merits of oral history set within broader interpretive and educational frameworks that utilise the concepts of agonistic memory and slow memory.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; peace process; legacy; museums; agonistic memory; slow memory; memory activism

This article aims to contribute to the ongoing and important discussions related to the legacy of the past as part of the Northern Ireland peace process. Almost twenty-five years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), and despite the undoubted progress made to date, Northern Ireland once again finds itself at an impasse. Several factors have contributed to the current political stalemate, but one of the most prominent and challenging is that related to the debate on legacy. As will be discussed below, while there is growing consensus on the need to address this challenge, agreement on how to do so has proved elusive.

We begin with an overview as to how and why legacy has become such a contentious and difficult issue. We will then demonstrate the growing recognition at government level as to the importance of developing a strategy on addressing the legacy of the past. Amid the debate and controversy that has ensued, the deployment of oral history, as we will argue, is one of the few areas where a degree of consensus has emerged regarding its role and importance. Just why this methodology has gained such prominence will be explained before offering an analysis of the issues and limitations surrounding its deployment, which have arguably prevented any genuine progress. We will then outline a proposed strategy grounded in the deployment of oral history via the optic of agonistic memory, and channelled through

established networks with the museum and cultural sector at its core. Such a blueprint, we will argue, provides a potentially effective response to the intricacies, complexities and sensitivities associated with the past in Northern Ireland. It also reflects on and responds to the need for a carefully considered model that foregrounds oral history as the core methodology and sets the context for genuine participation, engagement and impact.

The legacy of the past in Northern Ireland

Almost a quarter of a century since the signing of the GFA, there can be no doubt that the overall social, cultural, political and economic landscape of Northern Ireland has changed for the better.[1] In the years since 1998, much progress has been made as Northern Ireland has transitioned from the internecine conflict commonly known as 'the Troubles'. Gone is the pervasive backdrop of violence and destruction, and in its place new generations and a more diverse society have emerged that have benefited from the 'peace dividend'. This can be seen in economic and social progress that would have been unthinkable during the 1968-1998 era.[2] However, it can also be viewed as a 'cold peace' with little real progress towards building empathy and mutual understanding, let alone reconciliation.[3] Significant social and economic problems remain, often disproportionately affecting the communities most adversely impacted by the conflict. Indeed, many communities feel bypassed by the 'peace dividend' and consequently feel disenfranchised and alienated.

The GFA of 1998 was the outcome of a political process, yet the years since it was signed have arguably lacked the same dedicated emphasis to 'peace building'. Managing 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland requires the same courage and application. While the GFA did indeed bring an end to the endemic violence that characterised the Troubles era, it did not actually address fundamental issues that-underpinned the conflict in terms of cause and responsibility, which continue to play a significant role in fostering divisions across Northern Irish society.[4] There are of course nuances, and one must be careful to avoid over-simplifying what is becoming an increasingly complex picture. Northern Ireland is largely divided between two main political blocks – those who primarily identify as 'Irish' (Catholic Nationalist Republican, CRN) and those who primarily identify as 'British' (Protestant Unionist Loyalist, PUL). The development of a growing third constituency, inadequately described as 'other', has been a significant development over the last two decades and it is this non-aligned section of society that could ultimately determine Northern Ireland's future. However, with this caveat in mind, the core fault-line that exists today is the same as when

the Troubles began. Both unionists and republicans hold fast to their own versions of history, and both maintain political ideologies that take little account of the other's sense of grievance. Both have tended to overestimate the power and influence of the other; both have contributed to the conflict through their intractable positions and actions; both have a deep sense of hurt and injury. However, neither are inclined to hear different perspectives when it comes to understanding the causes and legacies of the conflict. The GFA did not solve this divide and, in the years following 1998, several highly sensitive and challenging issues that were the direct consequence of almost thirty years of conflict (decommissioning, prisoners, new political structures and institutions) had to be managed with this ongoing division in mind.[5] That such sensitive obstacles have (to an extent) been overcome without a return to violence reflects both the success of the GFA and the unquestionable desire of the Northern Ireland population to turn the page on the dark days of the conflict.

Nevertheless, peace remains a process. One only has to consider the current context of instability in relation to the impact of Brexit to understand the fragility and tension that still exist.[6] One could also point to perennial debates on issues such as parades, bonfires, language, heritage and cultural rights to underscore how traditions and identity continue to be weaponised on the political landscape and help explain why peace very much requires continued nurturing.[7] Most fundamental among the range of issues that continue to require careful management is legacy. The term legacy refers here to the challenge that the recent past represents for a society that is coming to terms with the hurt, loss and deep sense of injustice left by the conflict.[8] As will be discussed in some detail in the following section, there is a growing consensus that devising a coherent strategy on how to manage contested perspectives, memories and experiences of the conflict is a prerequisite to building a genuinely stable society. In order to understand why this is such an urgent, difficult and highly sensitive issue, we must return to the basic fact that Northern Ireland remains very much divided.

The sensitivities are not difficult to understand. The conflict was one that touched the lives of almost everyone in Northern Ireland during that time and many others further afield, and people continue to live with the consequences of what happened, with many still demanding answers and accountability for their loss and suffering.[9] As people have justifiably sought the truth and justice in relation to a whole range of historical incidents that took place during the conflict, there has emerged a very thorny and potentially hugely divisive judicial element to

the legacy debate.[10] Indeed, and as has been evidenced by some very high-profile cases such as the Ballymurphy massacre, Bloody Sunday and the Kingsmill massacre, determining accountability and seeking justice has and will continue to present enormous challenges.[11] Depending on the processes followed, the views expressed and the outcomes achieved, these pursuits have the potential to promote healing and reconciliation, but also run the risk of re-awakening tensions and exposing the unquestionable fragility of peace.[12] Such judicial aspects are not to be ignored and arguably lie at the heart of why legacy has become such a significant stumbling block in recent years.[13] However, legacy does not begin and end with those aspects related to judicial issues and the question of how to deal with historic prosecutions. Indeed, this article does not seek to propose any direct solutions to that specific issue. Instead, it is focussed on the broader question regarding the memorialisation of the past in Northern Ireland and how establishing creative, constructive mechanisms to deal with it can help society move forward, and perhaps in so doing begin to unlock some of the answers to how the judicial aspects can indeed be handled.

Collective memories of how the conflict was experienced across the divide remain contested and the source of tension.[14] As a result, parallel and disputed narratives of the past persist between communities, underscoring and perpetuating divisions. A basic appreciation differs across communities in terms of what happened during the Troubles, why and the consequences today.[15] Only by finding a way to confront the past in a constructive manner will it be possible to learn from what happened and help future generations avoid the same mistakes which caused such damage and left deep and enduring scars. Addressing this dilemma requires a sensitive curation of diverse experiences and multiple perspectives, and ultimately bringing them together in safe, shared spaces to promote greater empathy and mutual understanding. Recognising the importance and urgency of this need explains why legacy has emerged as arguably the most compelling challenge facing the peace process today.

Oral history as 'post-conflict' public policy

If the early days of the peace process saw little or no real attention afforded to the question of legacy, the same cannot be said of more recent years. That such a sensitive and difficult issue was effectively avoided in the immediate aftermath of 1998 is not that surprising.[16] Attentions were (to an extent justifiably) focussed on the very pressing and tangible hurdles of establishing political institutions, handling the issue of decommissioning and charting a

path through the delicate question of managing the early release of prisoners. Confronting such a divisive matter as legacy in the fledgling years of the peace process would have undoubtedly run the risk of undermining the tentative progress made by the GFA.[17] It is therefore a mark of its maturity that it has now become such a prominent concern.

Such maturity is evident in the recognition by the respective governments in London and Dublin of the need to address legacy. As a result, recent years have seen the emergence of policy initiatives aimed [at] instigating conversations and developing approaches to overcome this challenge.[18] Since the 2014 publication of the Stormont House Agreement (SHA), there have been several attempts at UK government level to establish a model that sets out a way forward. However, despite recognition on the need to make headway, and the intervening eight years since the SHA, progress has been slow.[19] The judicial aspects have unquestionably been a major block with a widespread view that that 'nothing can be agreed until everything is agreed'. In addition, one must take into consideration the political and social instability of recent years from the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scandal of 2017 through to the fallout from Brexit.[20]

While the legacy debate has been challenging, it has been characterised by one persistent common denominator – the deployment of oral history.[21] Central to this has been the consistent call for the creation of an oral history archive that will provide the people of Northern Ireland with a means to share and record their experiences and memories of the conflict. To make sense of why this offer has been such a constant, one needs to briefly reflect on the increasingly accepted role oral history plays in post-conflict societies as well as why this approach appears to be such an appropriate fit for the specific case of Northern Ireland.

Debates about the general effectiveness of oral history are nothing new[22] and, as will be detailed in the next section, certain criticisms are not without merit. However, in recent times, the rise to prominence of oral history as a key mechanism in helping post-conflict societies (in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sierra Leone or South Africa, to name but a few) transition to peace has seen this methodological approach gain increasing credence, respectability and sophistication.[23] Through its inherent ability to challenge top-down, dominant narratives on the past, oral history encourages a broader base of the affected population to express how they remember the past and the emotions it evokes. Affording agency in this way permits

post-conflict societies to build constructive and inclusive approaches to the highly sensitive and difficult issue of the past as they transition away from violence and division. As a result, narrow, exclusive narratives are replaced and challenged with a much more constructive model where marginalised voices are brought into the conversation. Not only does this create a bottom-up method with embedded agency for a wide cross-section of society, it also helps ensure a much more complex, complete and empathetic gathering of stories.[24] That oral history has become such a valued methodology in post-conflict societies cannot have gone unnoticed by policymakers in Northern Ireland. However, one can also point to a range of factors specific to the case of Northern Ireland that may explain why it has become one of the few areas of consensus in this fractious debate.

Throughout time, oral traditions have featured heavily in identity formation and as such are deeply embedded in how Irish society reflects on the past and passes it from one generation to the other.[25] In this sense, there is nothing new in singling out oral history as a central feature in how the peace process can and should confront the difficulties of the past. More specifically, one can also point to the prominence of grassroots oral history practices and their successes in filling the void left by the absence of government-led initiatives in the early years of the peace process. Indeed, in the years following the GFA, and in the absence of any structured, official approaches, there has been a plethora of local initiatives that have set out to collect testimonies on the past.[26] There are many examples of community-based projects that have provided an outlet for their communities to recount their experiences of the conflict.[27] Projects and bodies such as Healing Through Remembering,[28] the Corrymeela Community,[29] the Dúchas Oral History Archive[30] and the Prisons Memory Archive[31] have been able to tap into the benefits of a model that places oral history at its core. As such, they have been very successful in demonstrating how to create platforms that engage local communities, providing them with a sense of agency in a manner that offers an alternative to top-down initiatives that all too often leave large sections of communities without a voice. Such projects have not only provided an outlet for the voiceless, but they have also been hugely important and strategic in enabling people to engage with their own histories in a systematic and critical manner. This has involved projects providing a mechanism for the gathering of stories as well as involving local actors in the very processes. As such, they have helped communities become cognisant of the difficulties, complexities and benefits of taking such a creative and critical approach.[32]

Indeed, here one can point to recent work on the notion of memory activism.[33] Memory activism, it is argued, entails activities related to the past that seek to challenge dominant narratives via alternative, often grassroots-led, initiatives. Such activism emerges in a context where state-led endeavours risk generating narrow, exclusive narratives with the inevitable marginalisation of accounts that do not fit the consensual majority view. The objective of memory activism is, in the first instance, to provide an outlet for the voiceless, a platform where official narratives can be questioned and a more inclusive, complete picture pieced together and brought to public attention. Such activities are considered successful and effective in relation to their popular appeal, how they shape public debate and the manner with which they are able to gain traction and engagement at local levels.[34] Their ultimate success crystallises when they have a direct influence on official policies and help shape new, critical perspectives on the past. It is therefore perfectly possible to view the wide-ranging spread of oral history-based projects and initiatives that have emerged post-GFA as examples of memory activism that has been facilitated by a convergence of cultural, political, economic and global factors. As Dybris McQuaid has argued, 'multiple and intertwined' factors relating to the local context, the funding landscape, technological advances and the growing popularity of storytelling are just some of the elements that have come together to cultivate a favourable terrain for a whole range of grassroots projects whose growth and sustainability over this period have been unquestionably significant in helping place oral history in the foreground.[35]

This convergence of factors goes a long way towards explaining why so much currency is currently invested in oral history. However, and as will be discussed in the next section, despite its positive attributes, the impasse over the question of legacy remains and, unless a more considered course is taken, it is difficult to see an obvious way through. Before outlining a potential response, let us first of all pause to consider the general limitations of oral history, as well as those of the Northern Irish proposals currently on the table.

Who's talking, who's listening?

The positivity outlined in the previous section regarding the merits of oral history are not universally shared.[36] For example, there are those that caution about personal testimonies and their subjectivity, particularly when dealing with sensitive and divisive areas such as those pertaining to post-conflict societies.[37] One must also be cognisant of the motivations of interviewees and the shifting nature of contexts that shape contemporary readings and

memories of the past. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, the deployment of oral histories is genuinely challenging, especially when dealing with difficult pasts.[38] It is inherently slow; relationships with interviewees require careful, respectful development so that they are at ease when providing their testimonies. Detailed consideration is required to ensure a representative sample and diversity of voices. In addition, and again when working on sensitive pasts, some people may not feel that they are ready to speak; their experiences are often traumatic, and this may preclude them from having their say, with all the implications in terms of ensuring the establishment of an accurate and sufficiently representative landscape of experience.[39] Having conducted the interview, the time-consuming and painstaking task of generating a transcription is required before moving to plan and execute exactly what one can do with such material. It is not difficult to see how the slowness, complexity and resource implications of such a methodological approach can present barriers for such a model to be effectively implemented.[40]

Additionally, many successful oral history-based projects have been established and have flourished within and for the benefit of their specific communities. There can be no question that they have provided a valuable outlet for local people to have their say on their past. However, there remains a risk that such projects confirm and perpetuate inter-community divisions.[41] Without cross-community engagement, they can potentially consolidate a singular narrative that expresses a sectional community perspective but does little to broaden an appreciation of alternative experiences and views.[42] As a result, the past may entrench stereotypes and divisions instead of providing a basis for dialogue and engagement. A further criticism questions the motivations of placing oral history at the heart of any future plans. McGrattan has argued that the prioritisation of this approach, instead of providing a mechanism for society to constructively come to terms with its past, will instead lead to the deferral of a genuine investigation with accountability and justice pushed to the side.[43]

All of these criticisms are valid. However, while remaining mindful of the limitations of oral history, its effectiveness in large part depends on the robustness of the methodology guiding it.[44] The theory and practice are constantly evolving, and numerous case studies demonstrate that its inherent subjectivity should not be seen as a limitation but as a strength. We all have the truth of our lived experience and that must always be respected. However, the key to presenting oral testimonies is to create broad contextual frameworks within which they can be engaged with and understood. As to the potential of community-based oral history projects

further entrenching inter-communal divides, the response must be to ensure that such ventures challenge insular perspectives and facilitate the integrative complexity of contested narratives. In the case of Northern Ireland, successful initiatives from bodies such as *An Crann,* Healing Through Remembering*,* WAVE and the Duchás Oral History Archive have set out to do just that.[45] By breaking free from insular community narratives to bring together voices from across the divides, such projects have successfully provided platforms that build greater empathy and foster mutual understanding. Finally, while McGrattan's note of caution regarding the motivations of a strategy with oral history at its core is certainly valid, it does, as is the case with the broader debate on legacy, allow judicial aspects to act as a block on how all areas of this question can be addressed. This element of the legacy provisions will continue to be debated, and rightly so. However, the broader need to forge a social peace process within which people feel their voice is being heard remains. Indeed, building a foundation based on a constructive engagement that respects the truth of lived experience and the need for recognition may provide a form of acknowledgement that helps the process of healing. For too long, the divisive task of assigning responsibility and securing prosecutions has served to block progress on how the past should be handled more broadly. Decoupling these judicial aspects from a genuine process of building trust via a strategy that will lay the foundations for a more creative and constructive model is a necessary step and one where oral history can and should have a vital role to play.

However, for this potential to be fulfilled, further limitations of what has been proposed in Northern Ireland to date must be addressed. While widespread consensus persists on the deployment of oral history, little discussion around the detailed delivery mechanism has taken place.[46] There must be a genuine consideration of the true complexities, pace and resources required. Two specific questions require consideration. First, who's talking? In other words, how to ensure there is a wide range of perspectives that reflect the true diversity of experiences beyond the traditionally dominant voices. Mechanisms and strategies must be put in place to ensure that everyone is provided with an opportunity to contribute. Only then will a truly representative body of experience be captured. Second, who's listening? Once this representative collection of perspectives has been gathered, the challenge will be unlocking its potential as a resource for peacebuilding. There are of course great benefits to be gained for those that participate: a sense of agency in telling and owning their own story. However, for this archived material to be valued and understood, it must be accompanied by an engagement and publication strategy. The notion that all such testimonies will be collected

and made available via a loosely defined oral history archive to anyone interested is much too passive.[47] Oral testimonies are inherently long and often difficult to listen to. Unless they are edited and contextualised they are unlikely to appeal beyond specialist researchers.

The following section sets out the contours of a strategic response to the limitations discussed thus far and argues that a potential way forward is through the emergence of new local networks with a shared interest in conflict and legacy and its interpretation. We focus in particular on approaches being prototyped by National Museums NI through its Troubles and Beyond programme.

Strategic approach: a 'distributed story' via a 'coalition of the willing'

Implementing an approach with oral history at its core requires an integrated strategy based on partnership, engagement and education. The basic principles of the SHA proposals can certainly be delivered: the question is how. Any future implementation strategy must be underpinned by an ethical approach that recognises the importance of multiperspectivity and the need to move beyond dominant narratives to create space for marginalised voices. In essence, the development of an oral history archive should be framed and resourced as a long-term project, with agreed outputs and outcomes. It needs to be instilled with a sense of purpose that can build trust and, over time, momentum. The ugly truth that must somehow be overcome is the level of cynicism and distrust that currently characterises the debate around legacy. The only effective way to address this is through an approach based on partnership and collaboration, one that is neither simply top down nor bottom up but that enables a broad constituency of organisations and groups to undertake meaningful, outcomes-focussed work. The Troubles is a distributed story; it can never be centrally owned or controlled, but it can be effectively collected and cohered in ways that open new perspectives and encourage dialogue and mutual understanding.

Looking forward involves building on some key learnings from recent initiatives, specifically, in the context of this article, the evolving practice of National Museums NI. Museums across the world have developed an increasingly important role dealing with contested history and difficult legacies that continue to impact contemporary society.[48] As a publicly funded organisation, National Museums NI has an important role to play in place making, community relations, and building a united and shared society in support of New Decade, New Approach and its priorities for the restored Executive from 2020.[49] Its approach

is based on the principles of inclusion and diversity outlined in New Decade, New Approach in that it actively represents and reflects different perspectives, acknowledging the right:

> to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, while fully acknowledging and accommodating those within our community who define themselves as ‘other’, and those from our ethnic communities and newcomer communities.[50]

This work is also guided by the Section 75 statutory duties, which aim to encourage public authorities to demonstrate measurable positive impact on the lives of people experiencing inequalities.[51] These duties align with National Museums NI’s ethical responsibilities, both those specific to the museum sector and those relevant to its role and purpose as a public organisation within Northern Ireland. Numerous research studies show that the public at large recognises museums as trustworthy, authentic and credible.[52] They can constructively challenge assumptions, stereotypes and myths, and counter one-sided, selective versions of history. This affords the opportunity to explore the relationship between the past and present and can engage communities in debates about the future.[53]

The principal focus for National Museums NI in this area is an initiative called Collecting the Troubles and Beyond, a programme of collecting supported by events, workshops and seminars funded by the UK National Lottery Heritage Fund through its Collecting Cultures programme.[54] This is showcased in the development of a gallery in the Ulster Museum that originally opened in 2009. This gallery received much criticism at that time, particularly for the absence of original objects and personal narratives. It was described by local critics as ‘bland, safe and strenuously non-controversial’[55] and ‘the past defeating the present: good intentions inhibited […] for fear of giving offence, causing controversy’.[56] Since 2015, further changes have been introduced to the gallery culminating in a complete refurbishment in 2018, and this has been accompanied by an open invitation for visitors to contribute to its ongoing development. The title of the project, Troubles and Beyond, is significant as it has moved beyond a purely political narrative and instead locates politics within a broader context of social, economic and cultural change.[57] Collecting activity and interpretive planning have been focussed on wider social, cultural and economic themes thereby enabling a more nuanced and inclusive engagement with this complex period of history. The timeline of the new gallery does not end with the signing of the GFA 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.

In doing so, the aim has been to allow a richer interpretation to emerge that reflects how society adapted and responded to conflict, placing a greater emphasis on everyday life during the Troubles. The goal was to create a dynamic gallery which offers opportunities for people to respond and contribute their own stories. In that sense the gallery is essentially a forum for ideas, a process of exploration that rests on an open-ended conversation with its visitors:

> This gallery seeks to provide a platform for conversation and debate about our recent past. It seeks to explore not only our political history, but also the important social, economic and cultural changes that were taking place.
>
> Museums approach the past through their collections. Exhibitions can be very effective, but they are also limited by space and the objects that we can present.
>
> We are very aware that this is a challenging subject to deal with. For younger generations this is history, but for most people it is their lived experience and personal memories, both good and bad. The impact and legacy of the events of this time is still painfully felt in the present for those most directly affected.
>
> As you look around this gallery, what do you feel is missing?
>
> Can you help us to broaden the story we tell through sharing your objects, photographs or experiences? If so, we would be pleased to hear from you.

Its approach to dealing with the Troubles has been strengthened by developing robust collaborations with academia. This has provided an important external challenge and offers valuable insights based on critical thinking. This in turn stimulates new museological thinking and practice within the museum. To support the Troubles and Beyond project, an Academic Advisory Group was established along with a set of principles to guide the discussions. These were to:

- recognise key aspects of the Troubles period and chart their development and evolution
- provide context to the Troubles period by examining wider social, economic and cultural activity and their interplay with the Troubles
- allow a range of interpretations of, and from, the period to be displayed

- facilitate reflection on our historical understanding of the period, and commentary on the exhibition
- engage with a wide range of communities and constituencies in Northern Ireland and beyond
- incorporate information drawn from scholarship and apply best museological practice.

The response to the newly developed Troubles and Beyond gallery overall has been very positive, from the media, sectoral critics and, most importantly, from visitors. The same journalist who described the 2009 gallery as the 'past defeating the present' wrote that the new exhibition was 'a brave move by the Ulster Museum after its previous insipid effort'.[58] Graham Black described the original gallery as dire, but said the new approach 'is of international significance in that it is tackling the wider question of "how on earth do you respond to the contentious histories?"'[59] In a subsequent review in the UK *Museums Journal*, Gannon stated:

> The Troubles and Beyond gallery asks all the right questions: what caused a protracted, internecine conflict in Northern Ireland? How did people live with political violence? When, in the 21st century, can we begin to speak of "after"? These and other debates will continue within, and beyond, the Museum. But those seeking solution will inevitably return to this exhibition. Its voices and visitors, together, have the answers.[60]

Most importantly, however, the response from visitors has been positive and encouraging, as demonstrated by three examples:

> The personal stories included in their own words helped me humanise the conflict and understand its impact on everyday life.
>
> 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.
>
> I thought it excellent, profound and thought-provoking especially for those of us who grew up with the Troubles. It is respectful of differing narratives and the exhibits told their own story.

Over 600 visitor responses have been gathered thus far and these have been systematically analysed as part of the wider independent evaluation of the gallery and other key elements of the Ulster Museum's Troubles programming, including the Art of the Troubles (2014), Colin Davidson's Silent Testimony (2015), and Voices of '68 (2018).[61] The key findings from this evaluation have evidenced significant outcomes, highlighting how partnership, co-production and collaboration are all key to reflecting diverse voices and interpreting contested history. Crucially, it has confirmed that people are engaging more deeply and are gaining new perspectives.

The Museum is defining a significant role in offering space for reflection and an opportunity for visitors to examine contested history through critical narratives and interpretations, within which multiple perspectives intersect. However, its vision is to go beyond this and to support 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. Collections provide a powerful stimulus for oral history and the Ulster Museum seeks to ensure its collections can be used to support a full and inclusive narrative. They serve as a collective memory bank and provide a potent platform for engagement and discussion.

This has been amply demonstrated through recent stakeholder engagements with the prison service collection. The current impasse regarding the development of the Maze Long Kesh (MLK) site, since the collapse of consensus in 2013, has become powerfully symbolic of the limitations of the peace process. Yet the prison service collection – extensive, complex and multi-faceted – provides a new route into prison heritage in the absence of political agreement regarding the future of the MLK site itself. Engaging with diverse stakeholders, whether it be prison service staff, prisoners or victims and survivors, is essential to unlocking the meaning and significance of the collection.

Amplifying work in this area is linked to implementing a new masterplan for the Ulster Museum, expanding the footprint for Troubles and Beyond within the history galleries and making collections more publicly accessible through purposed collection stores in the building. It will also, crucially, rest on the creation of a wider network of museums and sites within Northern Ireland linked by a shared commitment to interpreting conflict and legacy. This embryonic network is being built on shared values and ethical principles. By working

together, the opportunity exists to tell a distributed story of the Troubles that respects the importance of community ownership and the diversity of experience.

While established publicly funded institutions like the Ulster Museum and the Public Record Office for Northern Ireland can serve as lynchpins for such a proposed strategy, developing reach and impact requires a wider programme of engagement across society. Any future programme must learn from the oral history projects that have already demonstrated the value of this methodological approach. To that end, the various community-based groups behind such projects must be brought in on conversations and included in the emergent network as it sets out its approach, outputs and activities. Not only will such involvement ensure that this valuable work is given further exposure, but those involved also have much experience and expertise to contribute. Credibility can only be built through careful groundwork and effective grassroots engagement. To further consolidate the local engagement that is fundamental to the success of this approach, the community sector should be proactively engaged. Organisations such as the Community Relations Council[62] and The Junction[63] have long-established programmes and successful track records in engaging with local communities in work around the question of peacebuilding and as such are a conduit to achieving broad-based participation and engagement, across both rural and urban areas. Finally, the education sector needs to be at the core of planning from the outset. Young people in Northern Ireland can study the Troubles as part of the GCSE History curriculum; it forms an optional part of the GCSE history specification in Northern Ireland, under the section 'Changing Relations: Northern Ireland and its Neighbours, 1965-98'.[64] A study of the period at this level demands close examination of sources, the development of empathy for both sides of the conflict and an analysis of the reliability of sources. Museum collections, including oral histories, therefore represent unique teaching tools to be valued by teachers in Northern Ireland and further afield. As such, there is an opportunity (if not an obligation) to focus on this sector of the population as the most valuable recipients of any constructive model on how the past is considered.[65] The post-Troubles generations that have grown up in an era of peace have many questions about the past and evidence suggests they are keen to understand how and why the legacy of the Troubles continues to impact lives and politics to the extent that it does.[66] There is a genuine opportunity via collaboration with bodies such as the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the History Teachers' Association of Northern Ireland (HTANI) to develop learning and assessment that

embeds a critical approach which utilises oral history for the benefit of the generations that will be the future custodians of peace.

The effectiveness of any future such network with oral history as its core methodology can, we argue, be further enhanced by a theoretical underpinning rooted in the concept of agonistic memory.[67] This relatively recent departure in the field of memory studies, drawing on the writings of Chantal Mouffe,[68] calls for a new approach to mnemonic practices that is particularly applicable to the challenges of post-conflict contexts.[69] Agonistic memory is underpinned by the removal of the predication of consensus. The cosmopolitan quest to find some sort of agreed narrative on the past is not only unrealistic, agonists argue, but also generates antagonism by marginalising communities whose memories are not perceived as fitting the dominant narrative. The past in such a model is the source of tension with its capacity to perpetuate divisions exacerbated. In addition to removing consensus from the table, agonistic memory encourages radical multiperspectivity that brings contested memories into dialogue with each other via an enhanced focus on setting the socio-political context and making space for the expression of passions.[70] Such an approach facilitates a genuine recognition and acceptance of contested perspectives and the benefits of showcasing them.[71] The narrative hospitality that is generated by such an approach enables engagement and contributions that reflect the complexities of conflict and the diversity of strongly held views that exist.[72] Embedding agonism as the core theoretical underpinning of our proposed network, outputs and activities taps into its inherent symbiosis with oral history, a relationship that has been shown to generate effective and genuine impact.[73] Having set out these conceptual and ethical parameters, we propose a two-pronged sense of direction in its specific application to the context of Northern Ireland.

The first concerns what could be described as key turning points. The story of the Troubles is punctuated by pivotal moments that defined the evolving nature of the conflict. Such moments (such as 1968, 1974, 1981) are important, not only as they serve as focal points in people's experiences and memories but also because they provide a structure (strengthened through the ritual of commemoration)[74] that defines how the story of the Troubles is passed on to the next generation. We propose creating bespoke projects focussing on key moments starting with the collection of oral testimonies from people active at the time in question and impacted by the events themselves. To ensure diversity of voices, existing networks would be purposefully engaged to recruit participants. Such testimonies will then form the basis of

exhibitions, events and other relevant outputs to be hosted and publicised via the network of partners. These archive materials will also be used to develop resources in collaboration with our education stakeholders that align the critical approach to the needs of the curriculum. An example of a successful collaboration that deployed such a multi-faceted and interconnected approach was the Voices of '68 project (2018).[75] This was grounded in oral history and agonistic memory, and was developed and disseminated via a collaborative network with National Museums NI as the lead partner. Voices of '68 told the story of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement based on oral history testimonies that explored the contested nature of memories of this vital period. The testimonies were curated into a series of physical and digital exhibitions and launched to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary in 2018. The examples of visitor and stakeholder feedback below speak to the recognised effectiveness of this project and its innovative approach in relation to the broader challenge of confronting the challenges of the legacy issue:[76]

> The exhibition at the Ulster Museum is unsettling – being confronted by some narratives about '68 that you believe are wrong. But that is the point, and it is quite discomforting. […] One has to be prepared to listen to other viewpoints. I think that the material should be the start of a critical debate as to what did happen.[77]

> Voices of '68 has made a valuable contribution to increasing understanding of the crucial time period leading into the Troubles. Opening up multiple narratives through video interviews was an extremely effective model of encouraging audiences to engage with perspectives that may have been far from their own. The more marginalised and 'lesser known' voices were, in particular, interesting and enlightening to hear.[78]

Further Voices of '68 outputs included a bespoke set of educational resources aligned to the requirements of the GCSE History curriculum, which, as evidenced in the feedback examples below, proved to be successful in generating constructive conversations and debates:[79]

> The inclusive, multi-perspective approach […] helps teachers take the inherently difficult issues back into the classroom and delve deeper in a much more constructive fashion […] Given the importance of education to our future in Northern Ireland, I believe that this project offers up significant lessons in terms of the ongoing and very difficult debate around how we deal with the legacy of the past as part of the peace process.[80]

> Projects such as this underscore just how important it is for our young people to make sense of our past and understand how it is that we find ourselves in our current predicament. The 1968 project goes a long way towards helping enhance the level of understanding of what was such pivotally important moment. […] The wide range of often opposing perspectives that are presented in the various facets of this project has had an immeasurable impact on our pupils. It is so vitally important that our young people improve their understanding of all sides in the debate.[81]

Voices of ’68 highlighted how it is possible to critically and constructively confront potentially divisive moments in Northern Ireland’s contested past. Its iterative development, expansion and success have directly influenced the blueprint outlined here, and plans are in place to extend the model to other such pivotal moments.

The second proposed area of focus would extend this approach to relevant themes. Clearly it is important to consider more long-term factors in terms of how the conflict was experienced and is remembered and recounted. Beyond the political flashpoints, understanding the day-to-day, slow-burning experiences of life during the Troubles is a vital area for exploration.[82] This explains why such everydayness has been stitched into recent developments of the Troubles and Beyond gallery and its approach as outlined above. However, while exploring inclusive themes such as how the Troubles impacted everyday life (including home and family), additional focussed areas can similarly be developed on the same principles, whether this be prisons during the conflict or how political thinking evolved and changed over time. Exploring subjects that have evolved over a span of years or decades will encourage broader perspectives on the conflict.

The concept of slow memory adds a further element of innovation to this approach.[83] A emergent concept in the field of memory studies, it argues for the need to develop new angles via a more reflective understanding of the past that prioritises nuance and slow evolution of change and how it impacts our present and future. We have, it is argued, become adept at treating and communicating pivotal, sited high points in our past with sophisticated approaches often channelled through commemorative opportunities. However, while such key moments are unquestionably important as building blocks in the construction of our collective memories, an over-emphasis on them has tended to be to the detriment of any in-

depth appreciation of slower, less spectacular developments and changes that are also part of how the past was experienced. The slow memory concept sets out to develop approaches and mechanisms that will enable us to take stock of and effectively capture the slow-moving transformations that are arguably just as important as the high points that have come to dominate how we remember, treat and communicate our understandings of the past.[84] Slow memory is equally concerned with reflecting on the pace of our methodological approaches to research. As such, it provides fruitful terrain for the inherent slowness and complexities in the deployment of oral history as discussed above. Much work already exists on thematic approaches to the Troubles that converges with some elements of the slow memory approach and there is certainly scope to harness this within the aspirations of the proposed strategy.[85] A distinctive opportunity exists to deploy this thematic approach within the combined methodological and theoretical context outlined above, and in collaboration with the proposed networks and programmes.

Conclusion

The blueprint outlined here seeks to address important aspects of the legacy debate in Northern Ireland while recognising its scale and complexity. This strategic model has the potential to establish a new pathway and lay the foundations for an approach that is both constructive and sustainable. It recognises the inherent challenges of the deployment of oral history and offers practical responses to the associated issues. It acknowledges the lack of consensus but seeks to navigate progress within that context. It is based on practice and informed by evaluation and lessons learned through this practice. It places oral history as an evolving methodology through which a diverse cross section of society can be offered opportunities to tell their story in their own words and to have their voices heard.

Overall, this approach seeks to move beyond an abstract goal of deploying oral history in support of peacebuilding and provides renewed sense of purpose and direction. The outputs from diverse interconnected projects can be progressively cohered in an oral history archive that will provide a powerful resource for society as we work towards the overarching outcome of a shared, stable and equitable future. By placing people and communities at the centre, it offers hope that people will want to participate, will want to talk and be willing to listen and learn.

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