

'Outreach or Over-reach? A Consideration of the Ulster Museum/Magni History  
Outreach Initiative 1997-2002

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In 1998 the Ulster Museum's exhibition, 'Up in Arms! The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland' commemorated the bicentenary of the 1798 Rebellion, an event which saw the birth of both constitutional nationalism and the concept of the armed struggle in Ireland. The hostilities of 1798 bore all the hallmarks of a civil war, with an estimated 30,000 dead, 5000 transported or exiled, leaving long memories in the Nationalist community and a cultural amnesia among the Unionists (even though the United Irishmen were originally largely Protestants).

From 1997, funded by the European Programme Peace & Reconciliation Funds, administered by the Northern Ireland Community relations Council, the Museum appointed an Outreach Officer to develop greater community participation in and visits to the exhibition. The Outreach Programme associated with the 'Up In Arms! The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland' exhibition was awarded the Gulbenkian / Heritage Council 'Best Museum Education Project' here in this museum in November 1999.

The award was an acknowledgement of the extent to which the Initiative had raised awareness of the legacies of the 1798 rebellion for communities throughout Northern Ireland. Under the programme some 1500 members of community groups visited the exhibition out of a total figure of 22,500. A programme of linked activities and resources for community-based projects on 1798 involved more than 7,000 members of community groups throughout Northern Ireland and the Border Counties of the Republic.

One of the central issues then in a consideration of 'Scholarship and Populism' is: did a more informed understanding of the past, available through the 'academic' approach evident in the exhibition contribute to the fragile but on the whole positive steps towards a greater communal understanding that has been taking place in our bitterly divided society? I am not going to answer that directly( or at least, just yet) other than to say that in 1999 continuation funding was provided by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council for a similar outreach project (which has just come to an end) on the impact of war and conflict on twentieth-century Ireland. As with the 1798 scheme, this included a series of lectures, workshops and musical events held in the Ulster Museum, by now more widely recognised as an accessible, safe and neutral environment where communities could meet in a non-threatening atmosphere. Its principal feature was a travelling exhibit on the theme of 'War and Conflict in Ireland in the Twentieth Century' which was displayed in some 12 venues including border areas such as Donegal, Louth and Monaghan. This was curated by Jane Leonard who in fact has been the Outreach Officer from the inception of the Initiative in 1997 and through whose energy we have been introduced to a largely new audience.

The main features to emerge from the five years of the Outreach Initiative may be summed up thus

1. MUSEUMS & PUBLIC HISTORY The Museum was faced with the challenge of representing a widely-acknowledged divisive event in Irish history in a way that would incorporate revisionist writing on the topic and at the same time make it accessible to the general public, to the extent that the two major traditions would visit it in generally equal numbers or at least commensurate with their share of the population (60 per cent Unionist – 40 per cent Nationalist). The failure of the rebellion in 1798 had led directly to the Act of Union of 1800, the *raison d'être* of the Unionist community. Yet the popular conception among the Unionist community was that '1798' was 'their' (meaning the other side's, the Nationalists') history. Public participation in the travelling 'War and Conflict' exhibition was facilitated in cases which could be filled by locally-interesting artefacts produced by the host museum or by individuals, with particular local relevance, a development which will continue to feature in the consultation process we are currently engaged on.

2. MUSEUMS AS NEUTRAL TERRITORY The extent to which the museum was seen by community groups to be neutral territory where they could learn something of the other side's version of the history they had been taught. And it has to be said in some cases each sides learned something of their version as well. It was also something of a shock –indicating perhaps how sheltered our professional lives have been – to hear the frequent responses of people whose visit to the Ulster Museum was their first to any museum. 'Do you mean anyone can just walk in here?' (access to the museum is free) was an often-repeated observation which served as a reminder that we were meeting first-time visitors on a significant scale. Most striking of all however was the extent to which these community groups found in the Museum a relative safe haven, free from any hint of confrontational vibes. It became for the great majority of groups from both traditions a neutral area, a great rarity in Northern Ireland where the territorial imperative ensures that almost any geographical location is measured by visitors in terms of 'them or 'us. In this respect visits to the exhibition not only provided a more than useful facility for the groups but also met one of the principal objectives of the Community Relations Council's Peace and reconciliation Programme which provided the funds for the Initiative. The role of the Museum as a neutral venue was particularly evident for those groups who came not from a single-identity background but who used the visit to the exhibition as a means of bringing together two traditions who co-existed in the same general neighbourhood but who had had traditionally little contact with the other.

A WHOLLY NEW CONSTITUENCY For the museum, the most immediate concern was the realisation that that the marginalised community groups to which the outreach initiative had literally 'reached out' would also visit the exhibition. By virtue of the sectarian geography of Belfast, the Museums' catchment area is predominantly Protestant and middle-class. By the same token, our warding staff have been drawn traditionally from the one tradition, the local Protestant community. Visits by groups, most notably the Garvaghy Road Residents Association. Still at the centre of the impasse with the Orange Order over their respective rights of who should and should not walk in procession along the self-same Garvaghy Road, brought the staff and the Museum in closer contact than ever before with apparently marginalised groups whose influence on our society, indeed the unravelling of the problems that lie at the heart of 'The Troubles', has increased.

HISTORICAL 'RELEVANCE' The exhibition opened on 2 April 1998 and the process of liaison with groups and their visiting the exhibition took place in the context of the Good Friday Agreement of 13 April 1998. This was followed up by a referendum of 22 -23 May when over 71 per cent of the population of Northern Ireland affirmed their support for a power-sharing locally elected government. Coincidentally, it was on that day 200 years previously that the insurrection had first broken out, in County Wexford to be followed by the Ulster counties. This clearly heightened interest in what is generally a question avoided by the historical community –comparisons between then and now. Issues such as the effectiveness of the concept of 'the armed struggle', the enlistment of foreign intervention and importation of arms from abroad, the extent to which the strongly radical Presbyterian community of the late eighteenth century quickly became 'more Unionist than the unionists themselves' all featured prominently enough in the affairs of 1798 to invite purposeful discursive comparisons. I must say that an historian I felt comfortable enough with only providing the means of making an historical comparison: I was on the other hand initially discomfited by the prospect of entering into a consideration of, say, did the fact that the 'armed struggle' had *bone fide* historical precedents make it less or more acceptable in a twentieth century context.

Some of the visiting groups contained former prisoners who had been convicted of crimes associated with the post-1969 phase of civil unrest and one issue which absorbed the attention of a number of groups was - what happened to the prisoners taken during the rebellion? As this audience will be aware, one of the most controversial features of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was the phased release of practically every loyalist and republican prisoner convicted of terrorist-related crimes up to the date of the Agreement itself. The prospect of prisoners convicted of painfully recent and well-remembered atrocities being released back into the community in which they carried out their actions, to co-exist with those whom they had injured or the loved ones of those for whose deaths they were held responsible, has since become a reality. The general restrained response has been, until the next atrocity is committed cynics might say, very much along the lines of 'no pain no gain' and is seen either as a necessary evil or as the acknowledgement that their crimes were indeed politically motivated (which was, after all, the cause for which Bobby Sands and nine other Republican prisoners starved themselves to death in 1981).

Considerable interest was generated by the penitential existence for three years of some 20 of the leaders of the United Irishmen in Fort George in Aberdeenshire in Scotland. Isolated they may have been, but they were also entitled to the trappings of a gentleman's life in the late eighteenth century: they each received a bottle of wine and a bottle of port per day. When they were released after three years, some gave undertakings of good behaviour and returned to Belfast to resume their professional and business careers. Others refused such undertakings and were taken for release to the Free City of Hamburg, from when they migrated initially to France which they had continued to regard as their natural democratic home. Most however became so appalled by the version of democracy they found there that they moved on, mostly to the United States, where in the word of Thomas Addis Emmet, who was to go on to become District Attorney of New York State, they found a 'happy country where Liberty is triumphant'.

The fate of prisoners in the middle and lower ranks of the United Irishmen is just one of the features that have recently received more considered and better-researched

attention in the extensive revisionism that has been evident in the historiography of the rebellion. The exhibition and the illustrated catalogue that accompanied it incorporated the essence of the new understandings which research has brought to the topic. From the point of view of 'public history' our preoccupation was to tell the story of the rebellion which took account of the traditional interpretations while incorporating a strong sense of the new and developing understanding which of course are themselves subject to the revisionist process - nothing dates so quickly as revisionism, as Prof Thomas Bartlett of University College Dublin has observed.

**HISTORICAL BALANCE** From the point of view, however, of satisfying the expectations of our more academic audience –including some one hundred local historical societies throughout the ancient province of Ulster –it was important to construct an exhibition that was as academically respectable as it was publicly acceptable. And this, so it seems to me, lies at the bottom of a museum's role in interpreting historical events and themes to a public audience. There is nothing particularly new or insightful about this except insofar as it is imperative that the public history in Northern Ireland is politically correct in terms of accommodating both main traditions. This does not mean telling two sides of the same story to suit the culture of each community. It does however assume that sensitive matters are sensitively handled. The contribution that this might make to the reconciliation process lies in the fact long-held historical grudges can prove in the end to be negotiable. For example Protestants have continually pointed to the burning of over one hundred Protestants in a barn by rebels in Wexford at the outbreak of the rebellion. The new understanding is that there were Catholic loyalists among the victims of the atrocity. This does not make it any more palatable but it does provide a leavening of understanding for those minded to look for it.

**CURATORIAL REACTION** From the perspective of a museum curator, there are two additional pressure points that are worth of consideration. The first is – how did fellow curators, not only in the history-related disciplines such as archaeology and ethnography, respond to this exercise in trying to make history somehow more 'relevant' to the visiting public, and a largely new public at that. By and large there was approval for the general principle of addressing new audiences, but a certain reservation about the apparent readiness to abandon the traditional curator's interpretative role in handing down the tablets of stone from Mount Sinai.. It was not without significance that the 1999 Gulbenkian Foundation prize won by the exhibition was for 'Best Museum Education Award'. This may be seen as a reminder that the exposition of public history inevitably takes the curator further along the education route, as interpreter, interlocutor and facilitator.

**PARTNERSHIP** The other potential pressure point of course lay in the fact that the funding for the Initiative came from the Community Relations Council, administering the funds of the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. In point of fact the Council's experience in liaising with community groups far beyond the museum's usual market was crucial in extending the outreach initiative in any meaningful sense. Ideally, having introduced the museum to this surprisingly extensive network of community groups in urban and rural area throughout Northern Ireland.

**CONTEMPORARY HISTORY** From the museum's point of view, the public history route appears to be taking us inevitably towards a removal of the distinction

between 'current affairs' and 'history'. Visitors arriving in Northern Ireland expect, not unreasonably, to be provided with an historical context for 'The Troubles' which does not stop short at the 'Thirty Year Rule' barrier but which brings the story right up to, say, the first IRA cease-fire of 1994 or even the last great atrocity, the Omagh bomb of 15 August 1998, or the latest suspension of the Legislative Assembly in September 2002.

#### THE WAY AHEAD

Funding for the Outreach Initiative has been approved for the next three years (2002-5) under the Peace II European Funding. This will enable the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland to refine further the association with public perceptions of museums and exhibitions, and will contribute to the constructive attempts that have been made to develop meaningful links with the sizeable percentage of the population who have yet to visit our museums. This is a major component in the programme of temporary history exhibitions over the next three to five years, The People's Story.

Our evaluation of what we have done and what might be done in the near future has just begun and will continue. What is clear, as I hope I have been able to demonstrate, is that historical interpretation at the museum level can become more closely involved in social and political issues without undue risk to the integrity of the historical discipline or to the curator.