

# “IS IT ALWAYS GOING BE THIS WAY?”: LEGACIES OF THE TROUBLES AND THE HOLY CROSS GIRLS PRIMARY SCHOOL DISPUTE

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## Abstract

This article examines the embedded nature of memory and identity within place through a case study of the Holy Cross Girls Primary School ‘incident’ in North Belfast. In 2001, whilst walking to and from school, the pupils of this primary school aged between 4-11 years old, faced daily hostile mobs of unionist/loyalists protesters. These protesters threw stones, bottles, balloons filled with urine, fireworks and other projectiles including a blast bomb (Chris Gilligan 2009, 32). The ‘incident’ derived from a culmination of long-term sectarian tensions across the interface between nationalist/republican Ardoyne and unionist/loyalist Glenbryn. Utilising oral history interviews conducted in 2016–2017 with twelve young people from the Ardoyne community, it will explore their personal experiences and how this event has shaped their identities, memory, understanding of the conflict and approaches to reconciliation.

KEY WORDS: *Oral history, Northern Ireland, intergenerational memory, reconciliation*

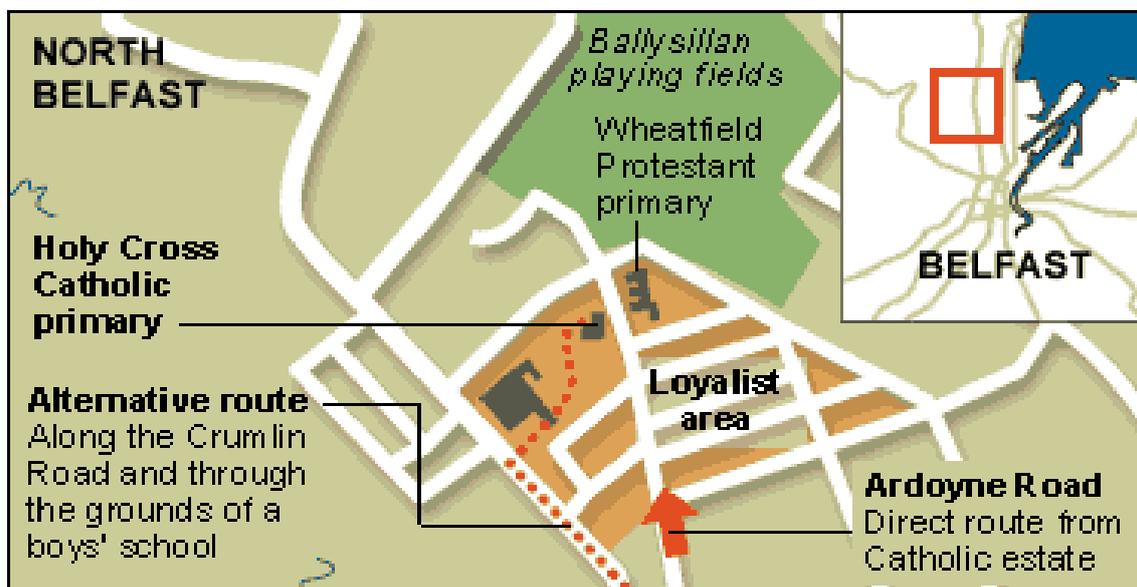
## Introduction

Legacies and memories of the past are engrained within territorial boundaries, sites of memory and cultural artefacts. Maurice Halbwachs (1992), the founding father of memory studies, believed that individuals as a group remember, collectively or socially, with the past being understood through ritualism and symbols. Pierre Nora’s (1989) research builds and expands on Halbwachs, arguing that memory ‘crystallises’ itself in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. Memory instils remembrance within the sacred; it takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects. For Northern Ireland (NI), memory is embedded in its streets, commemorative events, murals and a range of images and symbols.

Paul Connerton (1989) focuses on the social role of remembrances and recollections and highlights that Halbwachs neglects the trans-generational transmission of memories. According to Connerton, there is a transmission of memories, down the generations, building on this Thompson (2009, 195) characterises intergenerational memories as, ‘accounts of past events or people that are passed on from one generation to the next in a family, nation or community. They do this by means of stories, which are told by parents, teachers or community elders.’ In the NI context, Cairns and Roe (2003, 41) emphasise the concept of social, collective or ethnic memory, highlighting the importance of shared memories of injustices, atrocities and heroism in conflict. Bar-

Tal's (2003, 89) work building on Nora's *Sites of Memory* discusses rituals, ceremonies, music and displays that are presented in a particular time and place for communicating meanings relating to conflict. Bar-Tal argues that in conflict and post-conflict times, rituals and ceremonies contribute to the persistence of the conflict and express attitudes towards it. His research echoes Connerton's analysis that the past continues to impact on the present. This body of work provides the theoretical and conceptual framework applied in this article to make sense of place, memory and legacies of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The research methodology relied on Oral History as the primary medium. This was effective in facilitating the often hidden and unheard voices of young people to be documented and provided the space to recount the impact of one of the most widely reported sectarian 'incidents' in the history of the NI conflict. The sample included twelve participants; five females who attended Holy Cross Primary School at the time of the dispute, five males who grew up in Ardoyne, one female who did not attend Holy Cross and one female who walked with the girls from Holy Cross Girls School in solidarity, but did not attend Holy Cross.<sup>1</sup> All are residents of Ardoyne. The interviews were recorded in 2016–2017, then transcribed and thematically analysed.



*Fig.1. The Guardian Newspaper online, 'Violence returns to disputed Belfast School, 4th Sept 2001.*

## Background: The 'Dispute'<sup>2</sup>

Before the Troubles, Alliance Avenue in North Belfast was a mixed street of both Catholic and Protestant residents, bordering the nationalist/Catholic Ardoyne and the Protestant/ unionist Glenbryn. By 1971 the British Army had erected a makeshift peace line and by the 1980s the peace wall stood 40-foot-high cementing the division (Heatley 2004). These shifts in population constructed sectarian enclaves and modes of physical segregation of communities that became sites where tensions frequently erupted. Ardoyne Road (which links onto Alliance Avenue) remains an interface area, a contentious site bordering both Ardoyne and Glenbryn communities.<sup>3</sup> Holy Cross Girls Primary School (hereafter Holy Cross) is situated on Ardoyne Road, 300 meters beyond where the territorial boundaries of Catholic/nationalist Ardoyne end at Alliance Avenue (Figure 1). For the duration of the dispute, the pupils of Holy Cross had to walk 300m along Ardoyne Road to get to school through the Protestant/unionist community of Glenbryn, the site of unrest.

According to journalist Anne Cadwallader (2004) in her seminal work *Holy Cross: The Untold Story*, the reasoning behind the initial rioting is contentious, but it can be said that the dispute began on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 2001, one week before the end of term for the pupils of Holy Cross. Brent Never (2010, 467) suggests that a group of young men from Ardoyne confronted a group from Glenbryn as they were hanging British flags along Ardoyne Road. This contentious encounter brought large numbers of fractious community residents on to the streets. This left the pupils of Holy Cross trapped in the school by angered Glenbryn residents. Over the next three days the walk to school was confronted by turbulent protests of angry Glenbryn residents, punctuated by verbal abuse and hurling missiles. The fourth day reached a 'dangerous crescendo' with a blast bomb being thrown at the parents and children (Never 2010, 469). Community worker Jim Potts in a contemporaneous interview stated that the entire dispute was around 'territory' and called for the school to be closed as 'this is a loyalist community' (Cadwallader 2004, 308). The protest continued into the new school year in September with daily protests and in the evening riots between the two communities and spilled over into confrontation with the PSNI. The dispute ended in November 2001 with the promise of tighter security and a redevelopment scheme for the Glenbryn community.

Pierre Nora, (1996, 3) one of the principal theorists of place and space argues that 'memory is always embodied in living societies' and place becomes significant when memory attaches itself to it. As discussed shortly, the place or site of memory becomes the object to which other attributes are assigned, such as emotions of fear. In the context of the case study of the Holy Cross dispute, a site of traumatic memories lies in the 600m stretch of road from the Ardoyne shops to the gates of the Holy Cross School. As Shirlow and Murtagh (2006, 4) argued, violence around housing, the location of schools and other territorial conflicts highlights the 'paucity of a peace process' which covers the reality that sectarianism has remained embedded within the society. NI hosts

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2. The terminology for the events that took place is contested, however, for this article both dispute and incident are used interchangeably.

many sites of tangible memory, according to Hoelscher and Alderman (2004, 349) such as prisons and bomb sites, but taking the Holy Cross dispute as an example, I want to focus here on the 'invisible' nature of this memory, as not all boundaries and interfaces have physical manifestations of territory.

### **Boundaries and emotions**

Connolly and Healy's (2004) research in NI, indicates that by the age of ten years old, children have a strong sense of boundaries and express fear of venturing beyond their local areas. Many parents set geographical boundaries to ensure safety, but this restriction or articulation of the restriction becomes the first experiences of the conflict for many young people. As one interviewee put it, 'it's like Ardoyne... is its own wee bubble and that's where I had to stay because that's where I was safe' (Int 4:M). Another reflected, that his family still say, 'don't be going up that road now' (Int 3:M). An explicit articulation of the embeddedness of boundaries as a continued part of everyday life in Ardoyne.

As noted, five of the oral history participants had attended Holy Cross during the dispute and all expressed fear when discussing boundaries. One interviewee described how she was 'terrified of what was across the boundary' (Int 8: F) and said that her fear was based on lived experience of what she had undergone daily during the Holy Cross dispute. Similarly, another participant commented that when seeing Union Jacks, 'you have this innate response to (pause) I dunno... you were raised in a way to... sort of almost fear it' (Int3:M). Interviews with parents are detailed throughout Cadwalladers book, detailing the manifestations of fear and anxiety 'they [their daughters] were frightened to leave Ardoyne with their school uniforms on. If they were out in the car, they would duck down on the floor in the back if they saw a Union Jack flag.' (2004, 132)

What may be drawn from this is that even at such a young age the participants had a heightened consciousness of flags and colour symbolism correlated with the different communities and territorial boundaries, and this was associated with fear. This reinforced the fear that existed outside of their 'safe space' of Ardoyne. Leonard notes how children can play an active role in constructing a sense of place within divided spaces, whilst simultaneously being influenced by social structures (2010, 329–330). These memories of the walk to school and the fears associated with that space had the ability to manifest sectarian-based associations of space within these young children. Peter Shirlow (2001, 69) argues that the creation of illusionary spaces or peace lines enforce a perpetual search for the safety of spatial enclosure. This argument is reiterated by Leonard (2008, 476) who discusses the salience of localism which she argues is intensified by the creation of peace walls and lines that reinforce the perception of safe or unsafe areas. Flags act as boundary markings, indicators of safety, the young pupils of Holy Cross understood their school was situated in a 'non safe' space, resulting in the manifestation of anxieties and fear.

### **Silence and intergenerational memory**

Marianne Hirsch (2012, 5) when discussing intergenerational trauma (or postmemory) in Holocaust survivors, argued that a connection to the past is mediated through representation, projection and creation, which is often based on storytelling, oversharing or silence. The research I conducted found that NI has a prevailing culture of silence, akin to what Angela Connolly describes as 'deathly silence' (2011, 609). It was also clear throughout the interviews that particular deeply traumatic events – such as Holy Cross - or topics relating to the Troubles were shrouded in silence. Hirsch discusses how silences are acted out through over 'protectedness' or in the case of NI, as demonstrated above, boundary control. When discussing the dispute one interviewee said, 'I don't really talk to anyone about this, it's the elephant in the room sometimes. We [family] wouldn't necessarily bring it up, so you're not really used to dealing with the emotions of it' (Int8: F). She went on to say:

'My mummy didn't really go into it and I think she was afraid to go into it, when we have kind of spoke about it briefly since then, she said [mother] she didn't want me to know too much, and she definitely didn't want my brother to know too much.'

This interviewee then explained that due to the silence, fear and confusion her younger sibling stopped speaking for a few months. With no guidance on how to deal with such a traumatic experience some parents, like the previous interviewee, did not talk about or explain the situation, believing that this would reduce the lasting effect on their daughters. This mechanism of silence has also been used when dealing with the trauma from the Troubles itself according to both Graham Dawson (2007, 63) and Cheryl Lawther (2013) in her research on transitional justice in NI. As indicated in the report from the Commission of Victims and Survivors in 2011, around 61 percent of the NI adult population have experienced a traumatic event within their lifetime, and these individuals are more likely to suffer from a 'post-conflict' disorder or mental health issues ranging from PTSD to mood swings to substance abuse.

Within the interviews some participants talked about the detrimental impact of silence:

'So, I think having them actually sit down and talk to me and tell me honest and logical reason for it, it helped to make it logical in my head... Kids make their own assumptions why they were getting beat up going to school '(Int 1:F).

Another interview reflected:

'I didn't really like understand what was happening, I just thought if this is the way I have to go to school this is the way I'll just go. Adults weren't telling us about the politics behind it..... so we were just like "why is everyone fighting?" And that was probably before they threw the blast bomb in and after that, then after that

(pause) "oh maybe it is us." (Int 2:F).

The following quote is demonstrative of the detrimental effect of the dispute itself, compounded by the subsequent lack of dialogue within families:

'I was in denial for ages, all the way through Holy Cross, all the way through secondary school, like I talked about it as if it was nothing to me. It wasn't until I moved away to university, I had a breakdown and I was diagnosed with PTSD because of Holy Cross' (Int 2:F).

The act of reinforcing boundaries, through continued reminders of 'don't be going up that road now' from Int:4's family, coupled with the silences or lack of explanation of the dispute helped to create an unknown form, or 'other' beyond their safe space. Reinforcing within these young girls an 'us and them' mindset, continuing for the 'ceasefire generation' sectarian divisions which have existed in some form since the Ulster Plantation but amplified throughout the Troubles.

Reflecting on Halbwachs (1992) concepts of the collective (or social) character of memory; I want to focus on how our experiences of the present world connect us to the past, and that the past influences the present. Building on this, Connerton (1989, 2009) argues that the collective memory of a society gains legitimacy through two interlinking social activities; commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices. By using the Holy Cross 'dispute' as an example, the catalyst for which was raising a flag, but imbedded with deeper connotations drawn from the past and contentiousness of boundary clarification. The dispute highlights that post-conflict tensions remain bubbling beneath the surface in communities like Ardoyne and Glenbryn which are easily ignited. The summer of 2001 was particularly contentious, there were difficulties with the Power-Sharing Executive; and violence was at its highest levels in North Belfast for some time, with 1,700 incidents of sectarian disorder (Jarman 2005, 18). The Good Friday Agreement (GFA), gave the promise of hope or an enduring peace and shared future. Three years later the memory of the conflict remained alive, not only through the physical architecture of peace walls, or cultural artefacts of flags and murals, or the political system, but manifested in the day-to-day lives and embedded sectarianism illustrated by the Holy Cross dispute. Former chief constable Alan McQuillan said: 'I think Holy Cross did an immense amount of harm to the peace process. It was a catalyst that kept the violence going at interfaces across the north of the city for twelve months' (Cadwallader 2004, 310).

For those that I interviewed, the memory and legacy of trauma is ingrained in the geographical space and place of Ardoyne Road. The lasting memory associated with this space is one of conflict, territory, boundaries, sectarianism, and the horrors of the Holy Cross dispute. This evokes Doreen Massey's (1995, 188; 2005; 2013) concept of the 'envelope of space-time'; where memories in space and place are not static but fluid,

they exist for a moment until that space is re-purposed for a different memory. The Ardoyne Road is a space that continues to signify trauma and conflict. From the Troubles orientated memories of the older generations to the Holy Cross dispute memories of the 'ceasefire generation', both resonating connotations of sectarianism. This she argues is memory layering, for our case study, the act of memory layering is a solidification of sectarian divisions, moving away from active reconciliation.

### **Moving forward**

Perhaps surprisingly, the interviewees expressed optimism and an active feeling of hope for a new peaceful future. Brandon Hamber and Grainne Kelly (2004; 2016) define reconciliation as developing a shared vision, acknowledging and dealing with the past, building positive relationships, significant cultural and attitudinal change and substantial social, economic and political change. Many of those interviewed talked about the work of community groups and youth clubs in assisting the process of reconciliation. Some reflected on the various difficulties in setting up cross-community programmes that a lingering fear of the past presented, often informed by older generation's narrative of the conflict. One interviewee felt that young people should lead by example.

'They (younger people) are able to challenge older people's stereotypes. I think within the next two generations we will see dramatic changes here if young people can progress and if they are given a voice.' (Int 5:F)

Highlighting the extent of work being done by community groups such as the youth clubs in Ardoyne (the Ardoyne Youth Club, John Paul II Youth Club and the R City programme) she continued:

'It has literally brought two communities together, Hammer<sup>4</sup> and Ardoyne, the relationships and the comfortability young people from that youth club feel walking in here [Ardoyne], vice versa. You see them in town with each other, sectarian violence has kind of stopped between our two communities because of these relationships that are built, they're seeing them as people now, not the 'them and us' and I think if more groups and programmes were run like that we would break down those barriers and fears that people seem to have' (Int 5:F).

However, in order to achieve reconciliation as Hamber and Kelly (2004; 2016) suggest, there is a need for societal change, aimed at all levels of society. The small cohort of participants articulated a desire for change but questioned how this will be achieved by the older generation who suffered during the Troubles, or by those severely impacted by the trauma of intergenerational memory. Intergenerational trauma needs to be recognised and addressed in a systemic, fully resourced way at policy level and not

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4. The Hammer is the name given to a small area in the unionist/loyalist Shankill Road, which has its own youth clubs.

consigned to local voluntary organisations to tackle.

## **Conclusion**

This article argues that memory and legacy are embedded within place and space. Legacy of the past can be found within the territorial understandings of space, memories, recollections of events, acts of violence and ongoing tension. The Holy Cross dispute for the ceasefire generation, represents their first tangible experience of the ongoing, if under-lying, enduring tensions. Memory for many in this generation is derived intergenerationally, from stories, photographs or indeed silences, and from physical representations including murals, flags and conflict architecture, such as peace walls or barricades. Other elements of intergenerational memory are intrinsic to understanding this concept but given the space restrictions, are outside the scope of this article. A fuller argument would include peace walls and the impact of conflict architecture, alongside commemorative events such as marches and parades, coupled with music and songs.

Evidenced in the cross-community work engaged in by youth groups, there is a promising reflection that reconciliation might be possible through youth-led community-based organisations. However, this requires full funding from governmental bodies. As found within the interviewees' optimism for cross-community developments and youth engagement in new public spaces of the North, we can see the pendulum of radical segregation begin to swing in the opposite direction.

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