



Eleanor Burnhill

Weeds and wild flowers

Political tourism in west Belfast

During the Troubles in Northern Ireland, it was mostly journalists who would jump into taxis and ask to be taken to where the fighting was going on. Now it's political tourists searching for the scenes of past battles. As Belfast's tourist industry begins to flourish, Eleanor Burnhill asks what role political tourism should play in Northern Ireland and whether taxi drivers are the proper tour guides. After numerous interviews with representatives from political parties and tourist groups, as well as with taxi drivers, Burnhill finds, "Given the freelance nature of taxi driving, you might not get the most knowledgeable guide, but you will certainly be told a story; 'weeds and wild flowers' can be much more enthralling than manicured lawns."

And there are other, less highly organized individuals, storytellers, musicians, dancers, "local characters", etc, who are occasionally called upon to give performances. All such people act effectively as curators or custodians of the culture on behalf of the wider ethnic group.¹

As those studying tourism marketing note, most research shows that fear and insecurity are major barriers to travel.

For years Northern Ireland, and its capital Belfast, was a tourism wilderness filled with "anxiety and journalists" but, like weeds and wild flowers growing out of cracks in a pavement, a tentative tourism industry that recognized the "curiosity" factor of the Troubles began to grow in the early 1990s. Much of this was led by local community groups in areas most affected by the conflict. Perhaps uniquely in a European city, taxi drivers adapted their businesses to take tourists on political tours.

Nowadays, however, a much wider tourism industry in Belfast is thriving, despite years of underfunding, and visitor numbers have returned to a level not experienced since the late 1960s. Ten years after the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which signalled a period of tentative peace for Northern Ireland, and in the two months before the March 7th elections for a new Legislative Assembly, I interviewed representatives from each of the four main political parties: the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), who traditionally represent unionists, and the main nationalist parties Sinn Fein and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). I also interviewed those involved in community tourism and taxi drivers themselves to find out what role they thought political tourism should have in the future.

Most agreed that the Troubles do have a role in Belfast's tourism product, but

unsurprisingly for a state so divided by political tensions, there are divergent opinions about how this should be presented and marketed as a draw for visitors. The DUP's Diane Dodds, the first unionist to represent west Belfast, where many political tours take place, is keen to emphasize that these tours are just a miniscule part of the city's tourism and sees the way ahead in development such as the Titanic Quarter. Lord Mayor of the city and SDLP councillor Pat McCarthy expresses the concern that so-called "terror tours" concentrate tourism in the hands of the very people who spent a lifetime destroying the city he loves, while Councillor Paul Maskey from Sinn Fein sees political tourism as a way to bring much needed employment to areas that suffered greatly during the Troubles and thinks taxi drivers struggle to give a balanced view to tourists. Meanwhile, Bob Stoker from the UUP believes taxi drivers are uniquely placed to give political tours, which he thinks promote understanding of the conflict and could form part of the city's healing process — in their study of "Dark Tourism", Lennon and Foley argue that tourist interest in disaster and atrocity is a growing phenomenon dating from the late twentieth century, a kind of pilgrimage or way of memorializing death.

According to figures from the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, in 2006 Belfast hosted 6.4 million visitors, with a turnover of £285 million to the economy of the city. In the same year, in Northern Ireland as a whole, 66 per cent of visitors were from Britain, which was bombarded during the thirty-year period of the Troubles with media images of the conflict. In his study of Northern Ireland's tourism image since the Troubles, David Wilson argues that whilst these images initially deterred visitors, particularly to inner city trouble spots, a "curiosity" factor eventually began to creep in. Figures for 1986–87 show that tourist numbers began to increase despite a rise in the level of violence and the fact that horrific incidents such as the Milltown Massacre of 1988 took place right in front of the television cameras.

This increase was recognized in the 1992 corporate plan of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB): "Many people around the world have heard of Northern Ireland but often for the wrong reasons. They may be motivated to visit simply to see why there should be such a conflict in a modern society. The opportunity to harness this curiosity factor should not be overlooked..." This statement was described as "disgusting beyond words" by the then Ulster Unionist MP Ken Maginnis, who said NITB was cynical to suggest that "the suffering of the people of Northern Ireland can be packaged as a tourist attraction".

A consultation document on Cultural Tourism for the NITB in 2006 demonstrates even greater confidence in harnessing this curiosity:

It could be argued forcefully that heritage is the compelling proposition for a visit to Northern Ireland — our recent "troubles" and the historical and community context from which they arose would play to the general perspective and still allow the visitor to take in castles and houses. However, this presents issues for the rest of the community not engaged in tourism and trying to come to terms with the "hurt", and it probably has a limited shelf life.

Like ex-combatants and ex-prisoners, some of whom have been employed in community work and tourism since their release under the Good Friday Agreement, many taxi drivers now conducting political tours can lay claim to a personal role as storytellers of the conflict. Some taxi drivers were specifically

targeted as victims during the Troubles, the first being Catholic Edward Campbell, who was found shot dead at a quarry on the Upper Crumlin Road in Belfast in 1987. Many others have since died in tit for tat killings, for their political affiliations or simply because they were easy targets.

Pat, who declines to give me his surname, but whose leaflet is among the taxi tour information at the Belfast Welcome Centre, is aware of this: "The best training, I suppose, is to have been there and earned the T-shirt as the saying goes... I've always lived in Belfast and I've grown up through the Troubles."

Taking me on a tour of the murals of west Belfast, which vividly depict the past and present of both loyalist and republican communities, he says: "I suppose at a certain period there may have been a problem for either a Catholic driver going into the Shankill or a Protestant driver getting into the Falls, but taxi drivers were always in the firing line anyway... It was always easy to basically go down the phone book, pick out a taxi company, see what area it was based in and [be] pretty sure that you were going to have a Protestant or a Catholic driver and quite a few drivers paid the ultimate price for that."

Another taxi driver, Billy Scott, who is a Blue Badge Guide, sees the tours as a natural evolution from shuttling journalists around the city during the Troubles — up until 1998, Belfast was a tourist wilderness: "A lot of journalists would be here and they'd come along and they'd jump into a taxi and they'd say, 'Take me down to Drumcree', or something — there's trouble down there... he'd be filing his report to the *Tokyo Times* and he'd be saying 'informed source in Belfast has explained to me', and maybe that's a taxi driver... Since they signed the peace agreement, it's becoming more and more popular: it probably started off with the likes of the backpackers. We used to get a lot of conflict resolutionists in the early days who would come and spread peace dust about the place... but this year alone there's twenty-six or twenty-seven cruise liners called into Belfast."

People are often offered a tour as soon as they are picked up at the airport or ferry, and Scott points out the advantage that a cab provides an enclosed and comfortable environment where passengers can ask questions they might be afraid to ask on bus tours without knowing the political persuasions of the other passengers; and of course, taxi drivers "will certainly tell you a story, so they will..."

In 1994, Citybus began operating a tour around some of the sights of west Belfast, entitled "Belfast, A Living History". The current Belfast "hop on hop off" City Sightseeing bus takes in the wall murals of the Falls and the Shankill as part of a wider tour, but Scott says, "The bus tours only go around the main arterial routes so they do, and they don't go into areas. In the taxi tours we encourage people to... ask us questions, so it's more sort of personal."

Paradoxically, whilst the taxi environment may make it easier for visitors to relax and ask questions, there is little that tourism agencies can do to control and monitor the answers.

Tourism is now a major money spinner for Belfast and in order to protect this precious source of income, politicians from all the major parties are keenly aware that the industry has to be regulated to provide a quality product.

The Fifth Report of the Independent Monitoring Commission noted as recently as April 2005 that taxi firms were among a number of legitimate businesses

being used by paramilitaries to move significant amounts of cash outside "normal accounts". While the taxi drivers themselves may not be members of paramilitary organizations, "they may find themselves obliged to undertake tasks... such as the delivery of drugs or illicit tobacco".

Taxi drivers are a wide and diverse group and there is no suggestion in the IMC report that the drivers involved in this kind of activity are the same ones conducting political tours, but clearly they could be.

There are many anomalies in the Belfast tourism product, but to iron out all of its idiosyncrasies, especially when it comes to presenting a topic as divisive as the Troubles, would take some of the personality and truth out of the experience. In future generations, taxi drivers will no longer have direct knowledge and will have to rely on history books or handed-down stories and tour scripts.

Discussions are currently underway about setting up a museum of the Troubles but the NITB's consultation paper on cultural tourism notes:

Furthering the idea is, of course, fraught with political and moral sensitivities and in order to be successful, will need to "buy in" across the community. Both the Maze and Crumlin Road jail sites have been mooted as possible locations for such a museum while others are keen to see it established in a new building, which is devoid of political associations.

For communities in west Belfast, to be branded "Living History" is both a blessing and a curse. Diane Dodds, who chairs Belfast City Council's Tourism and Promotion of Belfast subcommittee, says that "monkey in the cage" tourism can create a false impression that certain areas are dangerous. However, the drivers I interviewed say they are happy to drop tourists off anywhere they want to go, whether to have a cup of tea, buy a souvenir, or walk around.

Across the peace line, on the Falls Road, Sinn Fein's Paul Maskey says his community is working to encourage tourists to do exactly those things: "We would see political tourism as a massive draw to bring people into other parts of the city... the ones which have suffered the most throughout the war years in Belfast." He works closely with organizations like Coiste, which look after the needs of republican ex-prisoners released under the Good Friday Agreement, many of whom have struggled to get jobs post-release.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Mhín of Coiste takes educational groups, and sometimes interested tourists, on political walking tours, explaining the history of the Troubles from a republican viewpoint. He believes ex-prisoners provide a more authentic and honest experience than a taxi driver can. In more recent times, at the infamous peace lines which divide west Belfast, the tours have been handed over to loyalist ex-prisoners, who give a different side of the story.

"There are some small difficulties around the fact that people driving the black cabs come into the Falls, don't know the history of the Falls, they're giving a very, very sort of biased viewpoint of their unionist history, for example... so our theory and our reason why we linked up with loyalists is that they would not attempt to tell republican history and republicans would not attempt to tell loyalist, unionist history."

Noel Large, a former UVF man who served sixteen years of a life sentence at the Maze prison for four murders he committed as a loyalist gunman, takes tourists around his community.

"As soon as the people on the tours know that you're an ex-life-sentence prisoner and you've spent that long and that you're now involved in peace building work, they perk up... if you get a republican ex-prisoner and then a loyalist ex-prisoner doing the tour, what you'll get is both sides but it again will be biased either one way or the other..."

He is a passionate painter of murals which continue for both communities to communicate and commemorate the past. He says ex-prisoners should not have a monopoly on tours about the Troubles and believes taxi drivers are well placed to conduct tours, as they can adapt their routes to reflect changes in the community.

"I have facilitated the painting of a mural on Lanarkway security gates, which is part of the peace wall between the republican Springfield and the loyalist Shankill Roads, and while young people were painting it there were actually taxi drivers coming up and bringing tourists who wanted to see a painting in progress. So, yes, I think in some ways the taxi drivers have helped to promote the art on the walls. But at the same time I think that needs to be organized properly too, because you could be a street cleaner one day and a taxi driver the next, and then you're gonna bring people along who don't know anything about the area, and then you're gonna explain about a mural that you mightn't know too much about yourself."

There is general agreement among the people I interviewed that the wall murals, which have been painted in Northern Ireland for almost a century, should be preserved for posterity. Some have become more militant since then, but many now depict historical scenes encapsulating political arguments and some display messages of peace, such as one in a traditional unionist area that reads, "Can it change? We believe".

According to UUP councillor Bob Stoker, "Murals actually show the social history of a place... I'm not saying we should be celebrating the violence and the murder, but we certainly shouldn't forget it and we shouldn't dilute it. Any community that had murals in them, it's part of their culture, it's part of their ethos, and the violence that was associated with it is part of that particular area and particular culture."

Dodds says of the tradition, "One of the things that people like me and my community get distraught about... is that murals in Protestant areas are meant to be sectarian whereas murals in nationalist areas are portrayed as being somehow part of the cause. The reality is if you go up to the top of the White Rock and you stand there... you will see pictures of twelve hunger strikers as you drive up the road, you will see pictures renouncing collusion and so on. Nationalists and republicans have used murals to dominate areas and to portray an anti-British and sectarian message in those areas, just as much as they have been used the other way round... So there is nobody who's whiter than white..." She points out that in areas like the Shankill, many murals now reflect significant historical events and "less that purely, nakedly sectarian intimidating thing."

Belfast's lord mayor Pat McCarthy is perhaps the most sceptical about political tourism: "I think it's being fed by... paramilitary linked groups who have spent

a lifetime trying to destroy this city and murdering people on both sides of the divide, and I think it's just another money-making enterprise for them. When we embarked on our Peace Process, there was something like nine or ten peace walls in this city. At the last count there was twenty-odd, so maybe we're going in the wrong direction."

He says, having come through thirty years of mayhem, the city now needs to heal: "Do we all come from Belfast or do we break it down into little fiefdoms?... Belfast is one city, with one people." However, Bob Stoker believes that telling the story of the Troubles is part of the healing process: "We need to tell that story and we can't do it if it's sanitized. People just wouldn't understand the complexities..."

According to *Lonely Planet*, Northern Ireland is one of the "must-see" places of 2007:

Freed from the spectre of the gun by cease-fires and political agreement, it's abuzz with life: the cities are pulsating, the economy is thriving, and the people, the lifeblood that courses through the country, are in good spirits. Go anywhere in Northern Ireland and you won't be short of someone to talk to.

Given the freelance nature of taxi driving, you might not get the most knowledgeable guide, but you will certainly be told a story; "weeds and wild flowers" can be much more enthralling than manicured lawns.

¹ Buckley, Anthony and Kenney, Mary. "Cultural Heritage in an Oases of Calm: Divided Identities in a Museum in Ulster". *Culture, Tourism and Development. The Case of Ireland*. Ed Ullrich Kockel. Liverpool University Press, 1994.