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# Encounters of a Conflict Tourist: Concept and a Case Study of Northern Ireland

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# Encounters of a Conflict Tourist

## *Concept and a Case Study of Northern Ireland*

**by Kenneth Elvig**

INTERNATIONAL TOURISM IS A BROAD AND DIVERSE INDUSTRY that caters to several kinds of tourists. Traditionally, international tourists travel to “must see” destinations, and go through rituals of tourism such as snapping pictures, touring museums, and buying souvenirs. In recent years, newer forms of tourism have emerged such as ecotourism, community-based tourism, and other “alternative” or non-traditional forms of tourism. One new, but uncommon, form of tourism is based on conflict. Conflict tourism is a form of dark tourism (tourism relating to death, disaster, destruction, etc.) where the tourist travels to current conflict areas or areas where conflict has occurred. In Northern Ireland there has been surge of conflict tourism (locally known as political tourism) following the end of The Troubles. The Troubles, which I will later describe in depth, was a time of politically and religiously motivated violence that happened in the latter half of the 20th century in Northern Ireland. This essay will examine what conflict tourism is, and I will recount my experience with it in Northern Ireland in 2009.

In conflict tourism in Northern Ireland, and all around the globe, there are several reoccurring motives and purposes. The most common theme is a construction of history that tells “the truth.” Other themes include the commoditization of violence, the tourists’ gaze and the local population’s self image. I will also discuss these themes as well as the social, moral, and ethical concerns of conflict tourism, with a particular focus on political tourism in Northern Ireland.



## Conflict Tourism

First off, what exactly is conflict tourism? It is a broadly defined category that overlaps with other kinds of tourism, especially dark tourism (Brouillette 2006: 343). Conflict tourists may visit a country exclusively for conflict tourism or they may include a conflict tour as just one part of a much larger itinerary. The most common form of conflict tourism is historical battlefield tourism. Generally, in historical battlefield tourism, the actual conflict that caused the battle is over. Civil War battlefields in America are a classic example of this form of tourism.

**Conflict tourism is a form of dark tourism (tourism relating to death, disaster, destruction, etc) where the tourist travels to current conflict areas or areas where conflict has occurred.**

While individuals living near these historic battlefields may still identify themselves as “Yankee” or “Rebel,” they no longer kill each other over their disagreements. The distinguishing feature of historical battlefield tourism (all over the world) is that the extreme tensions that caused the historical conflict are almost non-existent today. On the more extreme

end of conflict tourism, tourists can visit current war zones and low intensity conflict areas where actual fighting is still happening. Examples of this could include trips to war torn Afghanistan or Libya, or extremely dangerous and volatile places like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Northern Mexico.

Many conflict tourists, however, choose to travel to slightly “safer” destinations where the major fighting has recently subsided, but tensions still exist. These areas are known as “flashpoints” because conflict could “ignite” there at any moment. Flashpoint tourism can include (as of 2011) countries like Honduras, Angola, South Africa, Israel/Palestine, the former Yugoslavia and the focus of this research, Northern Ireland. In former conflict areas where the belligerents have recently laid down their arms, the locals are still understandably tense and sensitive about what they have endured. They may or may not be able to tolerate the ways which tourists come into their communities and point, take photos, gawk and stare (sometimes called the tourists’ gaze). Considering this, flashpoint tourists often choose to tell customs officials and locals that they are visiting the country for other reasons. In Zimbabwe, the ruling party, the Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), is highly sensitive about the political violence and turmoil that has plagued the country. Because of this, when I



traveled to Zimbabwe in August 2010 as a conflict tourist, I told the customs officials there that I was interested in nature tourism at Victoria Falls. As a conflict tourist in Zimbabwe, I had to lie to enter the country, in contrast to other places, such as Northern Ireland, where conflict tourism is actually encouraged.

One of the main concerns of conflict tourism is safety. The level of safety a conflict tourist has is relative to the particular destination, the tourist's country of origin, race, and religion. For the historical battlefield tourist, the greatest danger they may face is mosquitoes and sunburns. On the other end of the spectrum, there is very little or no safety in traveling to an active war zone. This is especially true in areas like Afghanistan where there is still contested ground between the belligerents. In flashpoint tourism, where there is still high tension, there is always the very real danger that hostilities will be reignited. For example, the tense but currently peaceful situation is a concern of border tourists in the Israel/Palestine region. For many years, this area was considered unsafe for tourism. However, progress has been made in terms of border crossing cooperation between Israel and her neighbors, and has thus increased tourism in the area. Despite state on state tensions decreasing, terrorism is still a concern in this region. Many of the border sights in Israel/Palestine are targets of terrorist organizations that are opposed to the peace process (Gelbman 2008: 197; 202). In other former conflict zones, the only real safety concerns are related to standard travel precautions such as the need to drink clean water and watching out for crime. Despite its reputation, Northern Ireland is considered a relatively safe place by the standard of Western Europe, regardless of its conflicts. Ironically though, there has been a slight increase in crime in the years following The Troubles (Van Dijk 2008).

The Troubles were a time of great political and religious turbulence in Northern Ireland that lasted almost three decades. The conflict was between Irish nationalists (mostly Catholics) and the Ulster loyalists (mostly Protestants), while the British security forces tried to keep the peace. The Troubles lasted from 1968 to 1998 when the major factions participating in the fighting signed a peace agreement known as The Belfast Accords. The conflict resulted from many years of Irish unrest due to British rule.

Ireland was Great Britain's first colony. The British began to heavily colonize Ireland in the 16th century, and since then almost every generation has resisted



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their rule in one way or another. On Easter Day, 1916, Irish nationalists made a serious attempt at overthrowing British rule. The leaders of a group that called itself the Irish Republican Army seized the General Post Office (GPO) in downtown Dublin, and declared an independent Irish Republic. A bloody siege ensued, the evidence of which can still be seen in the bullet holes all over the building's façade. The uprising (which happened in the middle of World War I) was a failure, and the leaders were executed by firing squad. The rebellion did, however, encourage other Irish nationalists to pick up the Irish Republican Army banner and continue the fight. By 1921, the conflict had turned into a nasty guerilla war. However, in 1922 a compromise was reached. The 26 counties in the mostly Republican/Catholic south would become an autonomous region known as the Irish Free State and the six, mostly Loyalist/Protestant counties in the north, would remain part of the United Kingdom. Eventually, the Irish Free State would gain full independence as the Republic of Ireland. Many of the Irish nationalists (particularly those in The North) were never satisfied with the partition, and by 1968 a new Irish Republican organization, calling itself the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) emerged. Their enemies were (and still are) the Loyalists and the British security forces. The following conflict, The Troubles, lasted three decades and is characterized by countless bombings, shootings, kidnappings, torture, and "terrorist-like" violence. A ceasefire agreement was reached in 1998, but by this time over 3,500 lives had been lost. Since then, with the exception of some actions on the part of a few militant splinter groups, Northern Ireland has remained relatively at peace.

IN SEPTEMBER 2009 I TRAVELED TO NORTHERN IRELAND as a flashpoint tourist. This was the first time I had toured a country specifically for conflict tourism of any kind. Visiting Northern Ireland was part of a larger family trip to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Initially, when I asked my parents if they wanted to go with me on a "little excursion" to Northern Ireland, they were understandably hesitant. This is not usually something that tourists do. After doing some independent research, they cautiously agreed and booked a room in Smarmore Castle in Ardee in The Republic of Ireland. From our castle in "The Republic", as it is called, we planned to make excursions into "The North."

As a conflict tourist's luck would have it, the morning of our first trip into Northern Ireland there was a paramilitary action. On September 8, 2009, members



of the Real Irish Republican Army, a PIRA splinter group that refused to sign the Belfast Accords, planted a command detonated improvised explosive device (IED) near the border. The IED was placed near Forkhill, Northern Ireland, and the cord and detonator were strung across the other side of the border in The Republic. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and the British military discovered the IED, and it was diffused before it could be detonated. Because the detonator was located in The Republic, the PSNI could not pursue the paramilitaries (McDonald 2009).

On the drive north, I thought that we would have been stopped at some kind of PSNI or British military checkpoint at the border; but to my surprise, we didn't realize we were in the North until the GPS we were using switched from the Metric System to the Imperial one. I thought to myself "this can't be right," but after seeing a Sinn Fein political poster (Sinn Fein is commonly seen as the "political wing" or the PIRA), I was finally convinced I was in the North. As we drove through the suburbs into the town of Armagh it was clear that we were in IRA territory. We began to see graffiti that read "CIRA" for Continuity Irish Republican Army and saw wooden Irish tricolor stencils that read "IRA." I was very excited. Here I was in Northern Ireland in an IRA neighborhood.

When we entered the town of Armagh proper, we saw no signs of paramilitary support or activity. We got out, walked around, ate at a small dinner, and even did some shopping on Thomas Street. After my parents became comfortable, I told them that there were several deadly attacks on British security forces in the town of Armagh, and that two members of Royal Ulster Constabulary were killed on the very street we were standing; though, this peaceful town was not the former war zone that I had imagined. As we were leaving, I hit a curb and blew out a tire on our Ford Focus. A young Irish woman kindly guided us to a tire repair shop nearby. They were in the middle of closing shop, but they decided to stay open to help us. Irish hospitality! It's hard to believe that this friendly, surprisingly quiet Irish town was once a hotbed of paramilitary activity.

After the tire incident, we headed back toward The Republic. On the way we decided to visit the little village of Crossmaglen. Crossmaglen can be somewhat deceiving to tourists who are unfamiliar (or even unaware) of the partition of Ireland. It is just a few minutes drive north of the nonexistent border. There were no Union Jacks in sight. On the contrary, Irish tricolors and Irish language were



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everywhere. In the windows of the various businesses in the village were signs with metric and Euro symbols. The only real hint that you are in the North comes from the paramilitary murals and monuments.

After wandering around town for a while, we wandered into Murtagh's Guest House, a pub on the edge of the village, and ordered some beers. The bartender was reading a newspaper whose headline mentioned the attempted IED bombing of the previous day. He saw that I was looking at the headline and quickly covered it up with an apology. He said, "Don't get the wrong impression; it's not always like this." I went out on a limb and told him that we were interested in The Troubles. That got him going. As it turned out, the bartender, Aidan Murtagh, was more than willing to talk about it. He said that they (the locals) do not start conversation about The Troubles with tourists, but if the tourists show interest in the subject, they are more than happy to tell their side of the story. As a conflict tourist, I began to realize that the local people in the village thought it was very important for me to hear the "truth" about what happened. They wanted me to understand the violent history of the area from their perspective. A taxi driver who walked in overheard our conversation and asked Murtagh if he had shown us "the bullet hole." He said a sniper right outside the pub killed a British soldier in 1993. I looked at the taxi driver and asked "The famous South Armagh Sniper?" Both the taxi driver and Murtagh nodded and gave me a wicked grin.



**"The Bullet Hole"**

As we walked around the side of the building, I saw a bullet hole bigger than my fist. Despite that The Troubles had been over for several years, this bullet hole served as a reminder of the bloodshed.

Similar memorials exist in other conflict tourism destinations. In Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are several spots in the city where mortar shells landed. These spots have been painted red and are called "Sarajevo Roses" (Bridge 2010).



The bullet hole in Crossmaglen and the Sarajevo Roses are ghastly reminders to the locals (and conflict tourists) that human beings died at these places.

When we reentered the pub, Murtagh had a copy of *Bandit Country* out, a famous book about the PIRA in South Armagh, and had me read aloud a passage that described the incident. Murtagh was in the pub in 1993 when the attack occurred and heard the bullet go through the British soldier, Danny Blinco, and thud into the wall. Murtagh went outside to see a group of British soldiers standing around Blinco who had a massive pool of blood swelling around him. One of the soldiers was shaking Blinco and yelling “Keep your fucking eyes open Danny! Keep your fucking eyes open!” Another soldier ordered Murtagh to go back into the pub, and he quickly complied. After I put the book down, Murtagh told us that the British thought the sniper was almost a kilometer away but it was “probably closer to 300 meters.” The way he said that, so matter-of-factly, gave me a slightly uncomfortable feeling, especially coming from a man who appeared to be so well connected as he did.

Murtagh asked me if I would be interested in going on a “political tour” in Belfast. I eagerly expressed my interest, and he told me he had an old PIRA contact name Kieran who gives political tours with his taxi service. Political tours in taxis are very popular in Northern Ireland (McDowell 2008: 407). This, however, was no ordinary political tour with a taxi service; this was the old PIRA’s “Black Taxi” service. The Black Taxi Service got its start in the early days of The Troubles when paramilitaries blocked off the Republican/Catholic areas of Belfast. The roadblocks cut off normal bus and taxi service to the area, but members of the PIRA quickly capitalized on this by buying old, traditional style Austin FX4 taxicabs from London and bringing them into “Free Belfast.” There are several Black Taxi services that are still owned and operated by former “volunteers” of the PIRA. Murtagh offered to contact Kieran and let him know we were coming.

Political tours in Northern Ireland are specifically designed for outsiders in that they paint a picture of a community that is repressed. The point of this is to legitimize paramilitary violence as a response to oppression (McDowell 2008: 412). The tour operators also charge money for this. Some might consider this a commoditization of violence. Perhaps it is, but it is also important to keep in mind that these tour operators need to make a living just like anyone else. In the case of taxi drivers in Belfast, if they are not driving around tourists, they are driving



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around regular customers. The next day we met up with Kieran at the central train station in Belfast. Kieran did not look like a "terrorist." To me, he looked like any other redheaded Irishman in Belfast. As we rode in his taxi, he described the situation in Northern Ireland as a British occupation and repeatedly made references to the British as invaders and occupiers. I asked him what he thought of the Loyalists' claims that Ireland is a part of Great Britain. He bluntly said, "If they want to live under a British Government, they can move to England."

Our first stop on the political tour was the Catholic neighborhood of The Falls Road. Irish Republicanism is generally associated with left-wing politics, and is expressed in the Solidarity Wall that is located at the beginning of this neighborhood. The Solidarity Wall has murals dedicated to various left-wing revolutionary icons like guerilla warfare leader Che Guevara, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and slogans that are anti-globalist. As we were taking pictures of the Solidarity Wall, Kieran's Loyalist/Protestant counterpart pulled up in their taxicab with some tourists. Kieran pointed them out to us and then started speaking very loudly about British occupation and police brutality. At one point he even exclaimed in the direction of the other group "And I don't care if I'm speaking too loudly because they need to hear the truth!" This effort to teach us, the outsiders, the "truth" became a reoccurring theme throughout the tour.

Past the Solidarity Wall, is the heart of Catholic West Belfast. Murals depicting symbols of Irish Nationalism and armed PIRA paramilitaries can be seen in every direction. It is the murals and memorials that are the main attraction for tourists on political tours (McDowell 2008: 408). Every main street in the Falls Road area seemed to have a monument or memorial dedicated to PIRA or Sinn Fein members who were killed during the conflict. Kieran said that many of these memorials are especially dedicated to the fallen members who lived on those streets. People who have studied several political tours throughout Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast, noted that the murals and monuments in the various communities only record the dead who were involved in political and the paramilitary organizations. Places where informants or British security forces were killed remain unmarked. The Irish Republican tour guides, in particular, use this to reconstruct a version of history that is empathetic to their cause in order to teach the curious conflict tourist the "truth" about what happened (McDowell 2008: 411-412).



I asked Kieran if he had ever personally been involved in any attacks on British forces or Loyalist paramilitaries. As per the Belfast Accord, any action he took as a PIRA volunteer against British security forces or Loyalist paramilitaries before 1998 is considered legitimate warfare, and he could talk about it openly. Despite this, he and other former PIRA volunteers still do not trust the British, so they will never actually say they shot at soldiers and police. They will only hint at this, which is exactly what Kieran did.

Many tourists who go on political tours want authenticity. They are interested in seeing the “real” Northern Ireland (McDowell 2008: 410). As a conflict tourist, I was no different. While Kieran was recommended by Murtagh and he drove a Black Taxi that is stereotypically PIRA, I still did not know how authentic he and his stories were. All doubts were removed when we went to Sinn Fein Headquarters. The Sinn Fein Headquarters is one of those high security buildings with bullet and bomb resistant glass that has large men guarding the front with suspicious bulges under their jackets. We exited Kieran’s taxicab and approached the front of the building simply to get a picture. One of the guards said, “Hey Kieran” and reached for the door. As he reached for it, it buzzed and opened. The fact that he called Kieran out by name and “buzzed” him in indicates, at the very least, that Kieran is well connected. Kieran told the guard that we were only there to take a picture of the front of the building, so we took our pictures and got back on the road.

Our next stop was the Irish Republican History Museum; this museum was located in a small building and was full of original artifacts relating to the Republican/Catholic side of The Troubles. The artifacts included everything from political posters to uniforms and weapons. One of the critiques of political tourism in Northern Ireland is that it commoditizes the violence that happened in that society (McDowell 2008: 406). Some critics might describe museums like this as a form of commoditization because they charge money to enter. The museum I was at did not charge but there was a donation box at the door. Because The Troubles recently ended, there are not many museums in Northern Ireland dedicated to it. While some might argue the museum makes the whole experience commodified, I disagree. These privately run museums are the only museums in Northern Ireland relating to this conflict.

However, I wasn’t entirely comfortable with some aspects of my experience at



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the museum. For example, this museum had decommissioned weapons that tourists were handed to pose with. Kieran knew the people in the museum and he, along with the curator, pulled several decommissioned weapons (including a Soviet made AK-47) out of a closet and handed them to me one at a time. As I stood there, flabbergasted at the whole idea, my father snapped away with his camera. This is not an unusual occurrence. The Tower Museum in Londonderry (Derry) has an AK-47 for the tourists as well (Brouillette 2006: 343). As I was posing with the decommissioned AK-47, I felt a sense of guilt. Until this point, I had no problem with



being a conflict tourist. I, like many people visiting conflict areas in Northern Ireland, was motivated by innocent curiosity (McDowell 2008: 417). Was this particular experience ethical both for the tourists and the tour operators? It's difficult to determine but it still made me feel as if we were all making light of The Troubles. It

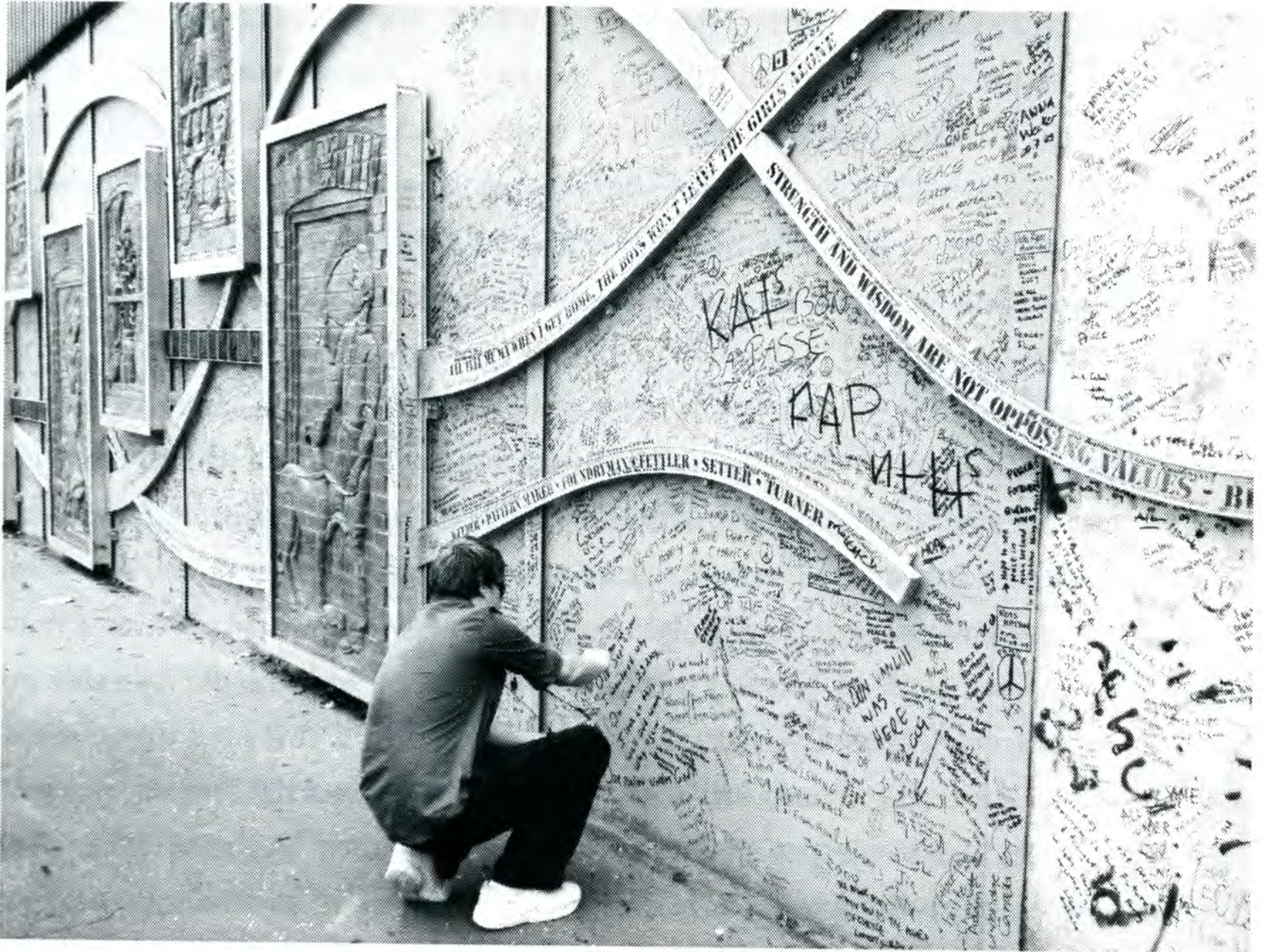
### **Come to the north, play with our guns!**

felt like it was set up to be part of a "tourism" experi-

ence, especially as the museum operators pointed out the donation box as we left.

Continuing on with our taxi tour, we made our way to the dividing line between the Nationalist and Unionist neighborhoods. Despite the major decrease in violence since the Belfast Accord of 1998, sporadic and unorganized sectarian violence still occurs. One countermeasure to this unorganized violence is the construction of the so-called "Peace Wall" which runs between the Nationalist and Unionist neighborhoods. It has recently become popular for visitors to sign the Peace Wall, so Kieran brought out some felt pens when we reached the wall. I signed it on the Loyalist/Protestant side. The whole idea of a wall to separate the two communities seemed rather negative to me. It symbolized a state where conflict had been so intense and so deep-rooted, that a wall had to be erected to





## The Peace Wall is a constant reminder of The Troubles

separate the two communities involved in it. While walls may reduce crime and random or spontaneous violence, it also serves to make reminders of the conflict (and the resulting wall) a permanent part of the landscape.

As I signed the wall I began to notice how nervous Kieran was. He said that he still had enemies on “this side” that knew him and he did not want to provoke them. He insisted that we were safe though. As we drove further along the Loyalist/Protestant side, I started to see where his nervousness came from. On the Loyalist/ Protestant side, the murals seemed to be more violent and many were meant to serve as a warning to the Republican/Catholic side. One mural in particular had a sniper depicted in it, and it was painted in a way that the sniper seems to follow the viewer with his rifle. Needless to say, we did not spend much time with Kieran in the Loyalist/ Protestant area.

At the end of the tour, Kieran dropped us off at the train station. He thanked us for coming on the tour and said that he hoped we had a better understanding



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about what really happened in Belfast during the Troubles. The “truth” or getting the message “right” is a big part of this kind of tourism. Kieran really emphasized this point with us. Throughout the taxi tour he conducted, he presented his side, the Nationalist/Catholic side, and had nothing positive or moderate to say about the other side in the conflict. He wanted us to hear the “truth” from his perspective. This one sided “truth” is not exclusive to the Nationalists/Catholics and is a common theme in political tours in Northern Ireland (McDowell 2008: 414).

As conflict tourists, we wanted to see more of the Protestant /Loyalist areas. We talked to one of the workers at the train station, who happened to be American, and he called one of his taxi driver friends who could take us on a tour. Patrick was a young man in his mid twenties who drove a more modern Toyota taxi. Like many younger people I talked to he said, “I’m not into politics... but I’m Catholic.” The people of Northern Ireland may not be diehards for one side or another, but they still identify with one. We told him how we wanted to see more of the Loyalist/ Protestant community, so we immediately headed toward the now Loyalist/Protestant community of Shankill Road and Sandy Row. Patrick spoke of The Troubles more neutrally than Kieran. He spoke of it as a ridiculous and pointless conflict in which atrocities were committed by both sides. As we stood by the famous “YOU ARE NOW ENTERING LOYALIST SANDY ROW” mural, which depicts a masked paramilitary bearing an AK-47, I asked Patrick if he felt safe. He replied, “I’m standing here aren’t I?” He said that for the younger generations, the conflict is not as real. Patrick felt that many of the “older people” who lived through that time period cannot get out of the old mindsets and move on. He said that they have simply seen too many horrible things for them to move on. As we rode the train back to the “safety” of our castle, we discussed what we had seen. My parents both said that they felt this was highly fascinating and worth the time and money. Like many conflict tourists, we described our experience as both “exciting” and “humbling” (Bridge 2010; Telegraph 2009).

In looking back on my experiences as a political tourist in Northern Ireland, I began to reflect on many things. Is conflict tourism ethical? Is commodification of violence ethical? The answer is just as broad and complex as the definition of conflict tourism itself. There is the whole question of a former warzone into a tourist attraction itself. Tourists can visit as neutral parties who can observe and judge independently. Based on this, they can draw conclusions and use



their own moral code to judge a local population. There is also debate on whether or not this form of tourism continues to promote the conflict. A mentality can emerge of “our sites vs. their sites.” Both sides look to outsiders for legitimacy, and as long as this happens, there will be tensions in Northern Irish society (McDowell 2008: 406-408). The locals know that tourists come to Northern Ireland for political tourism and some locals have no problem exploiting the situation or the tourists. The government of Northern Ireland has also done its part to promote political tourism in its state-owned tourism business (McDowell 2008: 415-416). Perhaps the real ethical issue, in the case of Northern Ireland, is how conflict tourism may dominate the identity of a place and people. If conflict tourism in an area becomes too mainstream, then people will only associate the area with that violence. Patrick expressed this to me as we were leaving by saying, “Next time you come to Belfast, you should see some of the other sites.” Perhaps he is right. Belfast, from a tourist’s perspective, is a booming city complete with luxury hotels and nightlife. Northern Ireland itself is rich in history besides The Troubles. Unfortunately, its reputation has been scarred by more than three decades of political violence, hopefully, with time that will change. In the meantime, conflict tourism in Northern Ireland and other areas will continue to fascinate and draw tourists.



## Conflict Tourism

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