



Painting the Past: How Derry Remembers Bloody Sunday

When walking through Derry in Northern Ireland, you initially feel the quaint charm of a small town. The shops and pubs are bustling with locals, who all seem to know each other. But upon reaching the Bogside neighborhood, you are immediately confronted with larger than life depictions of the town's complicated past. Murals, featuring political figures and scenes from the violence of Bloody Sunday cover the sides of houses. The shockingly vivid images have sparked debates about the effect of their presence on the town.

Bloody Sunday refers to the 1972 attack on a civil rights protest in Derry by British forces that resulted in the deaths of 14 people. Although the families of the victims have accepted the apologies of the British government, every year there are still marches to commemorate the event. The marches and murals uphold the emotional response to the tragedy, even 47 years later.



These visceral reactions have supported the tourism industry in the town. Derry's tourism organizations are now promoting what they call peace tourism; telling the story of the conflict and the progress that has been made since. Paul Doherty, a local tour guide, takes groups of visitors through the Bogside neighborhood to view the murals and hear his personal connection to Bloody Sunday. In an interview, he said, "I do think the Bogside is a sleeping giant in terms of Derry. Political tourism, peace tourism - it's just going to grow. You don't need to run after people to drag them to Derry any more,

they're coming in their droves, and they're going to keep coming." Doherty also explained the pride he takes in his work and that he is "very proud of Derry as a city which has developed brilliantly in the last 20 years."

However, some people in Derry feel that the murals keep the tensions alive in the community. Among the murals are images of children, such as the Petrol Bomber Mural (pictured below), which shows a boy wearing a mask and holding a bomb. Recently, there have been talks of painting over the mural because some feel it glorifies violence, but ultimately the decision was made to keep the painting. The Bogside Artists, the organization of muralists who create and maintain the images, supported this decision. In an interview, chairman Emmet Doyle said, "This mural, along with the others that form the People's Gallery, is the narrative of the history of the Bogside and to suggest part of that is removed is to deny what happened. It is not a glorification of violence, it, along with the rest of the murals, depict our story and they are going nowhere."



While the degree to which the murals increase hostility in Derry is debatable, the tendency towards violence is definitively still present. In January 2019, the town experienced an act of terrorism with a car bombing that was suspected to be linked to the New IRA. While no one was injured, the attack demonstrated that sectarian violence is still a threat in Ireland. Additionally, with Brexit negotiations quickly approaching that could have a detrimental impact on the region, the presence of the controversial images might face greater scrutiny.

For now, the Petrol Bomber Mural will stay. However, there have been efforts to use the murals to highlight more positive events in Derry. At the end of January, the popularity of the television show, "Derry Girls," brought about a new mural depicting the main characters. A local man, Frankie McMenamin said of the painting, "Derry Girls is a great advertisement for Derry and the mural has created a big talking point and attraction for local people and for tourists." The new mural was created by UV Arts, an organization working to utilize Derry's history of street art in a more peaceful way.

by Maddie Burbridge