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## Dealing with the Past: Museums and Heritage in Northern Ireland and Cape Town, South Africa

Elizabeth Crooke

The experiences of post-apartheid South Africa have often been used to open dialogue about Northern Ireland and the possible approaches to dealing with the legacy of the conflict. People in Northern Ireland have, for example, looked towards the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and policing in South Africa for further insights. This comparison of South Africa and Northern Ireland has now moved beyond being concerned predominantly with conflict resolution and has come to bear in the consideration of how we should present the history of the Troubles in Northern Ireland's museums and the value of preserving the built heritage of the Troubles. This paper uses the example of the 'transformation' in the South African heritage sector that came with the end of apartheid as a means to raise areas of concern that have resonance for Northern Ireland. It shows that for both Northern Ireland and South Africa it is important to think further about the impact of display, the power dynamics embedded in the construction of heritage, and the complexity of building a shared narrative from a contested past.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; Heritage; Museums; Community; Representation; Contested History; South Africa

On 27 May 2004 the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Paul Murphy, declared that Northern Ireland must find ways of dealing with its past in a way that both recognises the pain, grief and anger associated with it and that enables the people of Northern Ireland to build a better future for the next generation. With this declaration he announced the beginning of a 'programme of discussions', which would take the form of a public consultation that would aim to find a method to achieve these aims.

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Immediately after this announcement he travelled to South Africa to talk with groups who deal with the memory of apartheid. For Murphy the visit to South Africa was a means to broaden discussion. 'In South Africa', he stated, 'I will be looking at different ways in which we can possibly deal with the past. I've got an open mind on what it might be but I want the debate to start.' Murphy's interest is nothing new, and many people and agencies in Northern Ireland have long been engaged in attempting to find a way to deal with the region's history in a more constructive manner. It is significant, however, that yet again the Northern Ireland experience is linked to that of South Africa and, for those concerned with heritage, that the Secretary for State's trip included a visit to the District Six Museum, one of South Africa's premier museums that tells the story of apartheid.

This paper uses the experiences of South Africa and Northern Ireland as an opportunity to explore the representation of difficult histories in museums and as heritage. In order to make clear the various issues of concern for the Northern Ireland heritage sector, the first section considers characteristics of the various new initiatives that have been proposed to tell the story of the Troubles. The proposals are diverse and come from a range of sources, some of which can be linked to established museums and the majority that represents new voices within the heritage field. The experiences of museums and heritage in Cape Town, and what is emerging from Northern Ireland, share a number of characteristics: the challenge to the established representation of history in museums; the emergence of new heritage voices; the difficulties of representing a contested history; and ongoing issues concerning the legacy of their past. They are also very different places: some resolution has been achieved in South Africa—this is still to be attained in Northern Ireland. Despite these differences, the issues revealed and debates raised by the attempted transformation of museums in post-apartheid Cape Town provide useful insights for Northern Ireland. The second and third sections discuss how the Cape Town heritage sector was changed since the end of apartheid and relate the insights it provides to the Northern Ireland experience. This is then used in the penultimate section to provide some ideas about how Northern Ireland might deal with its past in museums.

#### **Telling the Troubles Experience**

The idea that Northern Ireland should finally dedicate a museum to telling the Troubles experience has received widespread acceptance amongst a diverse range of stakeholders. From a heritage perspective, a key stakeholder is the established museum sector, which is contributing to the validity of the idea through a number of temporary exhibitions. The Ulster Museum, for instance, is using temporary exhibitions as a means to test various interpretation methods before reinstating its permanent history galleries that will, unlike in the past, consider the Troubles period. Another stakeholder is the governmental and non-governmental agencies that are dealing with the legacy of the Troubles. Many of these institutions have used exhibitions and other visual formats to communicate their message. An example is the Community Relations Council, funded by government sources, which has long used one-off exhibitions

to explore themes of identity, diversity and equality. Another is the independent body Healing Through History, established in 2001, which is exploring the idea of the formation of a permanent museum of the Troubles story. Public consultation undertaken by the group raised the idea of a 'Living Memorial Museum' that would contribute to memorialising, remembering and representing this history. A third stakeholder involved with the construction of heritage from the Troubles experience is the community group, and a number of proposals have come from this sector. One such is the idea that the Maze Prison should become a museum; other groups have proposed the establishment of local museums in former flashpoints; and a group of private individuals has proposed a 'Museum of Citizenship', inspired by the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.

Each of these stakeholders will approach the legacy of the Troubles in a different way and has a different relationship with it as heritage. The established museum sector in Northern Ireland has, in general, taken a cautious approach to displaying the troubled political history of the region. In 1993 the Tower Museum in Derry/Londonderry opened with the first, and still the only, permanent museum display to be mounted in Northern Ireland dealing with the Troubles period. Instead of using their permanent spaces to comment on Northern Ireland's political history, the established museum sector has attempted to reflect on this history through various temporary exhibitions. Some, such as the Symbols in 1994 as well as Icons and Local Identities in 2000, explored the complexity of aspects of Northern Ireland life. Others, such as Troubled Images mounted by the Linenhall Library in 2000 and, most recently, Conflict at the Ulster Museum have taken a more archival approach by displaying the material culture of the Troubles with minimal interpretation, commentary or personal context. Whether or not these exhibitions are thought successful contributions to telling the histories and experiences of the Troubles depends how one thinks such a story should be narrated. For some a chronology of events and displays of the images and material culture of the Troubles, with minimal interpretation, is most appropriate. In such a case people can bring their own interpretations to the display. For others the exhibitions that explore the contradictions, paradoxes and myths of our history and identity might be thought more useful. The themes explored in the latter may well expose the inconsistencies that prejudices are often built on. For now, however, the exhibitions that have been developed by the Northern Ireland museum sector must be praised for attempting to engage with the complex and contested history of the region—a history that many feel illequipped to interpret and represent.

The state museum sector operates within the limits of accepted practice, procedures and protocol. These standards exist for good reason, but they may also impede fresh exploration of our history in novel and innovative ways. Established practice within the museum sector is not a concern for the many community groups that have begun to embark on heritage initiatives. The heritage committee of Falls Community Council (FCC), for instance, has proposed two flagship projects—the 'West Belfast Living History Museum' and a 'Conflict Resolution and Peace-building Learning Centre'. The FCC was established in the 1970s to represent the needs and rights of people living in the mostly nationalist Falls Road area of Belfast and this new proposal is to contribute

to the overall goals of the organisation. The museum is to be built upon the personal experiences and stories of the people of the area and is to include open access to an oral history archive, a personal reminiscence photographic archive and an exhibition programme. In the City of Derry the proposal to create the 'Museum of Free Derry' in the Bogside area of the city is gaining momentum. The museum proposes to present the experiences of the local area as 'a microcosm history of the entire troubles and the background to the troubles and the causes of the troubles'. The museum is to take its name from a mural that indicated the Bogside was a 'no go' area for British forces and will, according to the project coordinator, 'provide a positive legacy out of the whole issues and damage that has been done to the city'. The museum is presented as a community project, as an opportunity for the people of the area to tell their own story, and for the project coordinator this is 'the first step towards getting [each side] to understand each other'. The proposal that has had the greatest media attention, however, is the suggestion that the Maze Prison outside Belfast, the place where many were imprisoned for terrorist activities, should be developed as a museum. The proposal is coming from Coiste na n-larchimi, a group established to represent exprisoners. Members have already begun collecting oral histories as material for such a museum and are developing a media profile through debates and publications. Coiste sees the proposed museum, which it refers to as 'an icon and microcosm of the conflict', as having potential for tourism, an educational tool, and a place for learning about difference and reflecting on conflict resolution.<sup>3</sup>

Displaying the Troubles as heritage in museums is taking two forms: inclusion within the displays of the established museums and by the creation of new museums, which are being proposed by a number of different stakeholders. The 'transformation' in the Cape Town heritage landscape can also be thought in these two ways. As in Northern Ireland, the established museums of Cape Town are attempting to forge better relationships with broader communities. In addition, like the proposals to develop museums in the Bogside and Falls areas, new museums have developed in Cape Town based around community groups and their personal experiences of 'the struggle'. Both of these new forms of engagement provide insights that improve our understanding of how heritage is shaped and encourages us to think further about the power dynamics involved in the creation of heritage.

#### Changing the Established Notion of Heritage

The representation of the past in museums must always be considered within the political and cultural contexts. European museum development, for instance, can be tied directly to the development of national consciousness and the need for new nations to assert a national past. Success lies with the ease at which the national past can be presented as permanent, enduring and almost inevitable. In order to convey its political message, it is essential that the state can influence representation in museums. This was the case in the museums of Cape Town where the established notion of heritage was one that neglected the history of black South Africans; avoided certain aspects of history, such as slavery; excluded black history from the categories of cultural history

and art; and today has led to an almost complete absence of black people in middle and high management in South Africa's museums.

Some of these characteristics of the apartheid version of history are clearly demonstrated by the example of the South African Cultural History Museum, which was established in 1965. The building, previously the Slave Lodge of the Dutch East India Company ca 1652–1806, was used to display Greek and Egyptian antiquities, European costume, silver and furniture, as well as Japanese ceramics and costume. These items were formerly held in the South African Museum (SAM) and, as a result of the movement of these collections to the newly formed museum, the SAM then specialised in natural history and the Bushmen<sup>4</sup> people of the early Cape. With collections of European origin in a cultural history museum and those of African origin exhibited alongside natural history collections a clear message was conveyed. Culture, art and history came from Europe and the history of native people was much more closely aligned to archaeology and natural history. In the context of the political regime of the time, this division has been interpreted as an expression of apartheid<sup>5</sup>— of the belief that high attainment and ability was of European origin, whereas black history was undeveloped. In Cape Town the past decade has seen the notion of the supremacy of white heritage slowly breaking down. The SAM is reinterpreting its presentation of Khosian culture, most notably by removing a display of Bushmen casts taken in the 1920s. In the South African Cultural History Museum attempts have been made to exhibit the slave history associated with the building, starting with renaming it as the Slave Lodge in 1993. Such alterations, however, have been painfully slow. For instance, in 2001 still only one room of the thirty-two available in the South African Cultural History Museum was given over to slave history and the principal exhibitions were still those of Classical, Asian and European origin. The complexity of the issues hinders the transformation. How should the established museums include histories of slavery, colonisation and apartheid in their displays? What is the relevance of the European style of museum and its collections in contemporary South Africa? And can the sector develop a common will and shared vision to reinterpret its museums' spaces? Ten years after the end of apartheid in South Africa these questions are still being debated and negotiated within the museum and heritage sectors.<sup>6</sup>

The questions being tackled by the Cape Town museums are global issues; museums worldwide are considering the relevance of their collections, the legacy of former regimes under which they were collected, and how the collections communicate today. What is also evident from the example of Cape Town museums is the ability to censor history and selectively communicate the past in a way that will conceal some aspects and give prominence to others. We can represent our history in a way that celebrates our best achievements and makes less of that of which we are least proud. History can also be told in a way that denies the past, manipulates the truth and deliberately misleads. In an environment where culture and identity is highly contested, exclusion from the canon of the established notion of history can be interpreted as a deliberate act of suppression. This is evident in the example of the Cape Town museums discussed above; one could also argue that it has also been the case in Northern Ireland. The lack of interpretation of the history of the Troubles, in almost all the museums in Northern

Ireland, denies a significant aspect of the experience of the region. The exclusion of this history may have been equally deliberate; ascertaining whether it was as sinister as the instances of exclusion in Cape Town would trigger much debate. In both Cape Town and Northern Ireland, the state museums have a difficult relationship with the new histories and communities they wish to represent. The established museums of Cape Town still need to build bridges between the institution and the black communities to overcome mistrust and break down prejudices in both parties. In Northern Ireland museums such as the Ulster Museum and the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum have to consider how their status as state museums influences perceptions of how they operate and the version of history they endorse. In the past, both institutions have been thought of as places where largely a British and Unionist perspective is presented, and for some this viewpoint continues. It is possible that the success and momentum associated with community-based heritage initiatives in both Cape Town and Northern Ireland may be partly explained by this perceived distance between the state and the community. The new initiatives are establishing themselves as independent from the established or accepted notion of the museum, how it should communicate, and what history it should present.

#### New Histories and New Voices

Post-apartheid South Africa has seen the development of many new museums that have challenged the established idea of the museum and what should be placed on display. The Robben Island Museum and the District Six Museum, both in Cape Town, are both dedicated to telling the experiences of apartheid. Heritage experiences have also been developed around the townships. In Cape Town this has taken the form of township tours and the development of the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum. Each of these new initiatives has been linked with public purpose that relates to developing understanding, reconciliation and lessening intolerance. Developed by a resident of the Lwandle Township, the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum saw itself as a resource that would explore the history and experiences of the people of the area positively. The role of the District Six Museum is to secure the story of District Six, to allow people who previously have been ashamed to be victims to repossess their history, and, through this candidness, foster reconciliation. The Robben Island Museum has set itself the task of being a location where people can 'explore the triumph of non-racialism over bigotry and intolerance'. 8

Of the three examples, the District Six Museum is the clearest demonstration of the power and importance of a museum; the issues involved in its development, and success, both challenge and endorse the museum as a concept. District Six is an area of Cape Town that was defined as white only under the Group Areas Act of 1966. As a result of this Act, 60,000 people were forcibly removed from the area and their homes were demolished. With this move, people were distanced from their friends, family, jobs, schools and churches, and the community they had developed was broken. For many this was deeply traumatic. In the 1980s a campaign, 'Hands-off District Six', which aimed to protect the land from unsympathetic redevelopment, raised the idea of

the creation of a museum as part of this process; and in 1994 the District Six Museum emerged. In 2000 the original building, a former church, was restored and a new permanent exhibition *Digging Deeper* opened. It is not simply the fact that a museum of District Six opened that is relevant; what is far more interesting is *why* a museum should have emerged. The museum was, and is, very much considered as an engagement with contemporary issues; it is a mode of expression and has an active part in the reuse of District Six. The development of a museum was an opportunity to recapture the character of the area and generate support for the campaign. A museum was considered appropriate to this process because of the particular characteristics of what a museum is, and what museums are associated with.

In a book of essays published by the District Six Museum Foundation, and written by people involved in various aspects of its development, their interest in the museum project is outlined. Since its opening, former residents of District Six have seen the museum as: 'a place to memorialise the history of the struggle' against apartheid, 'a living museum', and a space 'where stories can be told, where the layers of memories can be uncovered in an ensemble of hope'. 10 The museum was to 'engineer a collective spirit and a camaraderie'11 and it was to be 'a community museum, an open museum, the people's museum'. 12 The sense of belonging, implied by these assertions, is achieved by placing emphasis on oral histories and sharing memories, rather than material evidence labelled in glass cases. In the words of Prosalendis, they are not trying to pursue the 'official history' of District Six, nor even a history that is factually correct in its detail. Rather, the people's memory becomes the museum's truth, the exhibitions emerge from what people remember. The space is provided to give visitors an opportunity to share their past, and the museum will not dispute an individual's memory. <sup>13</sup> This acceptance of how people remember challenges ideas of 'truth' and 'history', which are both highly subjective concepts. Valuing memory in the public space of a museum has had a major impact on visitors. District Six was a place where people were made to feel ashamed to come from. When former residents saw themselves and their area remembered in a museum space it gave them a sense of pride; before, they didn't think they were important enough to have a place in a museum.<sup>14</sup>

The faith in this museum is remarkable; why has it accomplished so much? Again we must return to how we understand museums. According to Peggy Delport, one of the exhibition curators and a trustee of the museum, the idea of a museum was relevant because the term 'suggested solidity, a continuity and a permanence that could withstand even the force of a bulldozer and the power of a regime committed to the erasure of a place and community'. The notions of solidity, continuity and permanence that are associated with museums are the values that needed to be recaptured and evoked in District Six. By drawing on the sense of permanence generally associated with museums the campaigners could hope to re-create it in the District and thus return it to the pre-1960's community. The museum was the most appropriate vehicle for this political agenda. The concept of a museum was ideal; but the group had to revisit the idea of a museum, in order to amend it for their purpose. The traditional trappings of museums were avoided: classifications, glass cases, curatorial authority and 'finished' exhibitions. Emphasis is put on the museum space as 'living' and

changing; all visitors to the museum (former residents, South Africans, and tourists) are encouraged to contribute to the displays by writing their reactions on the exhibition panels, alongside the museum text. Feedback has sometimes been profound and illustrates the success of the museum. Visitors from Ireland, for instance, have written: 'without a museum like this it would be so easy to forget the effects of injustice'; 'an education'; 'Never forget the past', 'Cape Town and Ireland have so many similarities in love and hate. Help to reclaim the spirit of one community'; 'we can understand and identify with it, keep the memory alive'. <sup>16</sup> When the former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, visited the museum she wrote 'this is a living museum in a true sense, remembering and valuing people'. <sup>17</sup>

In 1998 the Deputy Director of the SAM declared it was time to face the 'burden of its history', which would mean exploring how past prejudices have been encapsulated in the classification, display and staffing systems used by the established museum sector. 18 In the case of the District Six Museum the events of the past are not a burden; instead, they represent an opportunity. The example of the District Six Museum conveys very well the values associated with museums and, in turn, their power. The public and shared recollection of events in a museum space empowers and changes how that past is understood. What caused people to feel shame now evokes pride; closed memories have now become open and shared; and a fragile people have now become a strong community. There are numerous ways that the example of the District Six Museum is of significance to Northern Ireland. The museum initiative has not changed what happened in the past; rather, it has altered what the past has been used for, and thus what it symbolises. The display of the past in museums transforms the impact of that past; the move from private to public changes its purpose. This was true of museums in the 19th and 20th centuries and is still evident in museums today.

#### Dealing with the Past in Northern Ireland

The Cape Town example provides a number of insights into the representation of difficult histories in museums and as heritage that are relevant for Northern Ireland. The representation of an apartheid version of art, history and archaeology in Cape Town's museums reveals how museums can be shaped by the points of view of one particular group, to the exclusion of another. This aspect needs to be investigated in Northern Ireland's museums, both the long-established and those currently in planning. For instance, given the segregated and sectarian nature of parts of both Derry City and Belfast is it realistic to expect reconciliation and healing to emerge from the proposed new museums in the Bogside and Falls? One should not isolate these initiatives; the same question could be asked of any of the heritage developments in Northern Ireland that claim to have an impact on healing. Critics of the Cape Town heritage sector have accused the so-called 'transformation' as sometimes piecemeal and perfunctory. In Northern Ireland, as each community produces its own heritage initiatives we may well find ourselves falling victim to the old stereotypes and prejudices of two separate and different communities. It is important, then, to assess the nature of the possible

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contribution to the heritage landscape and to ask how history is being told and what impact the telling of it is likely to have.

The Cape Town example also provides food for thought on the issue of linking heritage and museums with community regeneration. The Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum opened in 2000 as a low-budget heritage centre based at the Lwandle Township telling the story of emigration and labour movement with the aim of improving the community experience. The example of this museum raises issues concerning ownership, purpose and sustainability. At the time of its opening some residents objected to one of the township buildings being converted into a museum when the area had many other more pressing social and economic problems. The museum went about improving its sense of community ownership by developing oral history projects and enhancing sustainability by attempting to establish itself on the township tour route. <sup>19</sup> The emphasis placed on the sustainability issue depends on the underlying purpose of such heritage initiatives. In Northern Ireland, a number of initiatives based on the Troubles story have been proposed and in the long term they may not all be sustainable; but is sustainability crucial for these initiatives to have a valuable impact? Given the nature of the Troubles experience, one could argue that it is important that each community is given the freedom to develop its own museum, even if the sheer quantity threatens sustainability. It is likely that a short-lived heritage initiative may well make a contribution to community regeneration that has long-term value. In Northern Ireland, consideration of the value of community-based heritage initiatives also needs to look further at how the community is defined; whether the proposals have community ownership; and the cultural and political context of the public purpose often claimed. When the expression of community is so closely linked to the construction of heritage it is essential to ask what sort of history is being exhibited. The history on display may be meaningful only to a select few; and others may find the exhibitions exclusionary, intimidating and isolating.

For the new museum initiatives in both Cape Town and Northern Ireland the importance of being a museum, rather than any other form of cultural venture, is paramount; the reasons for this help us reflect on the role of public display, collections and the idea of being a museum. The creation of a museum brings confidence and security to a community. The display of community history in an exhibition gives a community voice and validation. Allowing histories and experiences to be heard in public spaces is one of the principles underpinning the increased value placed on oral histories. In Northern Ireland numerous initiatives have collected oral testimonies of the Troubles and made them publicly available via the Web<sup>20</sup> and linked their collection to the idea of establishing museums or other cultural venues. The use of oral history in the Cape Town museums raises a number of issues relevant for Northern Ireland. The heavy emphasis on oral history in the Digging Deeper exhibition in the District Six Museum serves a number of purposes. It increases the value of the spoken word, in a place where written accounts of history were often not trusted. It also allows the people whom the museum represented to speak for themselves, rather than be spoken to by curators. The use of this new medium does, however, have its risks. Although oral history is justified as being the people's history, it is still exposed to the same partiality as established

forms of history. Decisions still have to be made about whose oral history is most valid, which statements should be reproduced, and how the context changes the impact of what is being presented. A further point for the Northern Ireland heritage sector, raised by the District Six Museum in particular, is the consideration of the primary purposes of the museum. The District Six Museum is not only about display; the museum is a spin-off of a group campaigning for land restitution and redevelopment, and the museum is open about this political purpose. In the words of one of the founding members, the museum is a catalyst; and, on the experiences of apartheid, 'we are trying to keep a balanced position, not an apolitical position'.<sup>21</sup> This notion of the museum as political activist would not find a united audience in Northern Ireland, and therefore would have to be approached with caution.

#### Conclusion

It is the nature of the material or places that are being called to be reconstructed as heritage in Northern Ireland which seems to mirror South Africa: a former prison; centres of urban conflict; personal histories and memories of conflict. Although such links can be found between the two examples, finding lessons from other places is not necessarily about mimicry. Instead, it is more about looking into the cases and revealing the essential values that have built success. In the case of the heritage developments in Cape Town, which have been referred to in this paper, the essential values that are significant for Northern Ireland can be approached at three levels. In the first place, the recent changes in the museum and heritage sector in Cape Town have shown a very particular understanding of the purpose of the past. Secondly, they illustrate a certain approach to harnessing the impact, and hence potential, of exhibitions and museums. Thirdly, in Cape Town there seems to be a clear acknowledgement of the public value of museums. The approach to three elements, the diversity of 'the past', the impact of exhibitions, and the 'place' of the museum, is of major significance and is worthy of consideration for the Northern Ireland heritage sector.

In each of the heritage initiatives discussed above, the concept of being 'a museum' is important. The idea of having the history of a group of people on display in a public space is valued. However, in all cases careful consideration and critique of such initiatives is necessary; they cannot simply be encouraged because they sound appropriate and use the right language. In every case there is a need for in-depth review; this process will reveal both the strengths and any weakness in these community projects. From the perspective of public history, the creation of collections and the definition of culture and heritage, careful critique should be used to expose any partisan or political tendencies and force us to ask what the consequences are for the meaning of history, museums and heritage.

For many the past is not the 'official' or dominant history; rather, it is more about the intangible relationships people have with their families, neighbours and local spaces. These are the stories revealed through oral histories—and it is the value given to this which is striking in Cape Town. In Northern Ireland an exhibition on the Troubles that is a dateline of our history is not likely to meet with success. More useful would

be the provision of an unattributed and inspirational space where people can bring their own histories. Taking encouragement from this, museums must find ways to cease being seen as 'other'—telling other people's stories, in another person's language, or from somebody else's perspective. This is linked to the investigation of the 'place' of museums—their role and relevance for people. The creation of this 'place' is a collective process. If museums are going to engage with contemporary issues they need to relate to a broad spectrum of people, and these are people inside the museum as well as those on the outside. Furthermore, as the sector sees new forms of heritage enterprises, it has to support analysis and review. If such development goes unquestioned this can undermine the constructive foundations on which it was conceived.

This paper has illustrated the complexity of museums. This complexity reflects the diversity of human endeavour: it represents the beliefs, assumptions, prejudices, expectations and desires of the people who build museums, form collections and, to the same extent, of those who visit. Just as in South Africa, the Northern Ireland heritage sector needs to identify its burdens and turn them into strengths, all the while being aware of the risks involved in interpretation. Fundamentally, the issue for Northern Ireland is not so much how to forget the past but how to put its memory to a better use. This type of transformation is one that must also happen outside the museum, if it is to succeed within it.

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