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Hedonistic Belfast finds a new use for relics of Troubles

By David McKittrick, Ireland correspondent
Monday, 7 July 2008

The Northern Ireland troubles may be over, but heavily armoured Saracen military personnel carriers still trundle through downtown Belfast.

Their look-out points and emergency doors no longer house British troops with high-powered rifles, wary of sniper and rocket attack. Instead they feature high-spirited young women whooping at pedestrians. This is party time in post-troubles Belfast and those in the vehicle are clutching not lethal weapons but alcopops. It is uproar of a different kind, one of celebration rather than commotion: the hazard has been replaced by the hen night.

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The armoured wagon is just the most visible, and frivolous, example of a Belfast phenomenon of holding on to relics of the conflict. Researchers have just completed an "artefacts audit" and found, to their amazement, no fewer than 424,000 mementos. The findings lend weight to the argument for establishing an official museum – or museums – explaining the troubles.

The artefacts are held in 79 public and private collections in Northern Ireland, Britain and the Irish Republic. Until now, no one had realised just how memorabilia had been retained.

The range is remarkable, encompassing the military and the paramilitary, the political and the civilian. Most of it is modern but there are five ancient cannonballs, handed down through the centuries, as well as material related to the Black and Tans. There are defused bombs and grenades, as well as improvised devices which, though built into coffee jars and soup tins, were deadly.

The various stashes include battered helmets, riot shields, tear gas canisters, truncheons and plastic bullets, together with the bin lids that used to be rattled in warning and in defiance. There are mugs, badges, fridge magnets, insignia, photographs, films, posters, manifestos and threatening letters. There are chess sets in which Ian Paisley confronts Gerry Adams; republican banners forecasting victory; and loyalist T-shirts proclaiming "Proud to be Prod".

One Sinn Fein election poster solicits votes for Denis Donaldson, later shot as an informer. There are berets which signified support for highly dubious organisations: some of those who wore them are today government ministers.

Some of the equipment is in official military museums, some is held by republican and loyalist groups, but much has been squirreled away by enthusiastic individuals and small groups.

Down on the border, a refurbished mechanical digger, known in its day as a "borderbuster", which locals would use to reopen frontier roads dug up by the Army, has been placed on display.

Belfast's Linenhall Library has amassed a quarter of a million documents, which Gerry Adams calls "a vast history book" and which Ian Paisley describes as "indispensable". Thousands of items made in prison remain stashed away, including at least two illicit alcohol stills. Prison officers have held on to bolt cutters, signalling flags and tunnelling equipment as well as dummy guns constructed for escape attempts. Someone has even kept a cell door.

Celtic harps, drums and other symbols fashioned behind bars are commonplace in republican areas. And there are many descriptions of prison lore. Mr Adams, for example, recalls panicking when the man in front of him in a tunnel broke wind. Another IRA leader still bears the nickname of a well-known ballpoint pen, in tribute to his capacity to secrete contraband about his person.

Republicans in particular are assiduous collectors, one commentator describing their material as "practically erupting from the ground".

The huge number of artefacts has been uncovered by Healing Through Remembering, one of the groups grappling with the thorny problem of what might commemorate the conflict while helping bind up society's wounds. It includes former IRA members, extreme loyalists and ex-members of the security forces. One of its leading members is Alan McBride, who lost his wife and father-in-law in an IRA bombing. On the subject of establishing a museum, he said yesterday: "There is no consensus on whether or not to gather all this material together, or on how to do it.

"But young people in particular should have access to it ... as a contribution towards peace-building. There is a growing interest in addressing the legacies of division and using the material culture of the conflict to tell stories, hold memories, commemorate or learn lessons from the past."

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