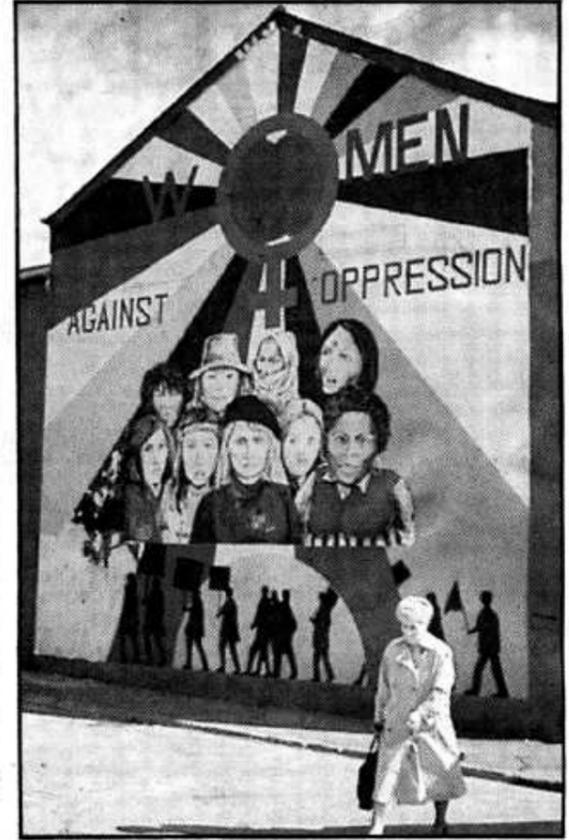


Victoria White talks to Belfast-based mural painters from the nationalist community, as the West Belfast Mural Group exhibits in a Dublin gallery

Murals without the masks



Left to right: King Billy Crossing the Boyne, a Donegall Road, Belfast, mural painted originally in the 1920s. Working on a mural by Gerard Kelly. Women against Repression, also by Gerard Kelly, in Waterford Street, Belfast.



I TOOK the hoods off. I think hoods and guns are intimidating. I don't see anything intimidating in my murals.

Your average Belfast Protestant, driving down Seavastopol Street, might feel differently about Gerard Kelly's mural of the smiling Bobby Sands with his yellow halo, and his words: "Everyone, Republican or otherwise, has his/her own part to play in the struggle." But there's no doubt that it's a hell of a lot more easy on the eye than images of balaclavas and armalites.

Described in Bill Rolston's 1992 book on murals, *Drawing Support*, as "the most prolific and the most accomplished" of republican mural painters, Kelly has been credited with breaking the mural mould by opening up the squares and rectangles and moving over whole walls. He was the first to move mural art into its mythological phase, having been strongly influenced by Jim Fitzpatrick's illustrations of Celtic mythology while in prison for what he terms a political offence: "I called across to the other wing to John Nixon, who was one of the first hunger strikers, and asked him did he have anything on Celtic mythology and he gave me the *Book of Conquests*," says Kelly, "and that was the start of it. I decided when I got out I would do cultural and political murals."

Why does he think the imagery

had such a strong effect on him?

"Because it was taken away from us," he says. "If people take something away from you, you want it." Kelly made some Celtic-inspired crafts when he was in prison, but he was not allowed to send them out, ostensibly because they had the words "Long Kesh" and "H Block" on them.

"Reading books on Celtic mythology, I realised that all the people in Ireland were Celtic people," he goes on. "I said to myself, someone has it wrong here." He sees his mythological murals as reconciling images: "My murals are never, ever, destructive or sectarian. They have expressed what my community felt."

Murals can be painted legally on the wall of a person who consents — but they also belong to that person, rather than to the artist. When Kelly, also known as "Mo Chara", came out of prison, he found a wall and set about his work: "I gave it two or three coats of outdoor masonry paint. We only had a three-foot ladder and we put a bit of scaffolding onto it. We went around asking for any old colours people had, and then we started to see the differences between the paints — the matt started to run in the rain." Now he plumps for vinyl silk which dries well on a good day.

From the beginning, local kids helped him: "When you come out of prison, the kids look to you for leadership and they'll go to the

ends of the earth for you. The kids where I began working on the Springhill Road have nothing, just to try to stay alive and not be killed by plastic bullets." Kelly traces the image onto the wall, and the kids help him colour it in, by numbers.

He says he is not paid for the murals, but there is community funding and Arts Council funding for non-sectarian mural art, and the going rate is about £300 to £500.

PHOTOGRAPHS of Gerard Kelly's murals are on display in Dublin until the end of the month as part of an exhibition of the work of the Féile an Phobail Mural Group from West Belfast at the Stoneleaf Gallery in Stoneybatter.

"The murals are part of the struggle, and if people can't express themselves on a wall, what can they do?" asks Kelly. There is, however, a move away from militaristic images. Fellow exhibitor Rosie McGurran, who would not call herself "republican", says the murals are changing. "We're sick of sun-glasses and balaclavas. We have to grab the opportunity to enrich the murals."

McGurran is an atypical mural painter, a Belfast College of Art graduate from middle-class South Belfast. Her best known work was for the Famine mural project on Cavendish Street, which was painted as part of Féile an Phobail

last year. Cavendish Street now hosts an "open-air art gallery", in which there are to date five murals, celebrating Irish culture, which includes work by McGurran and Margaret McCann, who is also exhibiting at the Stoneleaf.

McGurran, who has lived in Glasgow and is influenced by contemporary Scottish figurative painting, as well as by Rita Duffy and Alice Maher, paints murals which do not immediately yield up their meaning. Scenes from Irish history — a blank-faced Queen, surrounded by distressed, Famine women, for instance — are really only propaganda to those who believe the event is not historical: "I don't agree with violence for any reason," says McGurran. She adds, however: "If people have violent feelings I'd prefer they'd put it on a wall than throw a petrol bomb."

What is most striking about McGurran's work is that, unlike most mural art, it barely represents men: "It's all women, whether the UVF or the IRA. How many republican songs do you know

about women? It's all, 'The boys got shot.' Her charcoal drawings at the Stoneleaf return to her obsessions, the strictures within which a Catholic girl grows up in Belfast: one pictures a young girl being stitched into an angel dress, another shows a woman diminished by her huge wedding veil.

Hilary Robinson makes the point, in her catalogue essay for *Crossing Borders*, a San Francisco-bound exhibition of projected images of murals, with the work of Rita Duffy and Alisdair MacLennan that mainstream visual art in the North deliberately turns its back on the concerns and images of the mural painters, partly because art college is a "mixed" environment. McGurran enjoys the impact which mural art has and doesn't mind that murals deteriorate, but Rita Duffy, who has painted murals in the past, says she is getting "too precious" about her art to trust it to the elements again. Once, painting a mural in a Protestant area off the Lisburn Road, she had to paint a little King Billy in the scene to stop the graffiti.

Gerard Kelly is a more typical mural painter, not having been to art college: "I used to like art at school," he says, "but we were mostly out rioting. You can imagine school in the middle of a war."

THE mural tradition in the North was originally Loyalist, and iconic images of King Billy are recorded as early as the 1920s. Nationalist muralists tend to say that the cultural dimension which exists in republican murals does not exist in Loyalist murals: "They're painted in the spirit of 'Not an inch, what we have, we hold, kill all Catholics'," says Kelly. Hilary Robinson writes that Loyalist murals are more static, being copies of original paintings of King Billy, but they have included a mythological image of Cuchulainn — although this, too, is a copy, taken, amazingly, from Oliver Sheppard's 1912 sculpture which has been subsequently used to commemorate the Easter Rising in the GPO.

There are images of murals from both communities in the San

Francisco-bound exhibition. Rosie McGurran has painted a non-political mural for the Shankill Womens' Centre, and she would support any valid cross-community mural-painting scheme: "I'd love to see that happen in the future," she says. But for the moment, murals have three main purposes, as Robinson writes: "To provide a visual identity for the community; to comment on particular events; and to warn others away."

Meanwhile, Rita Duffy still argues strongly for murals: "We have a very low gallery-going population and it's all middle-class, even though they'd prefer to buy BMWs here. Other people wouldn't dream of going to a gallery, and their idea of visual art is a little boy crying or a horse galloping along a beach. The murals are art in their own communities speaking to them about things they care about."

Members of the Féile an Phobail Mural Group will talk about their work at the Stoneleaf Gallery, Stoneybatter, on Monday September 16th at 7.30 p.m.