



Black CAB Tours

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If you are in Belfast, ‘The Troubles’, ‘Peace Walls’, ‘Protestants’, ‘Loyalists’, ‘Unionist’ ‘Nationalists’ are the first things you hear about the city and its people. As you acquaint yourself with the city, it slowly dawns that each space is marked by a symbol. Once you are able to identify these symbols you also acquire a sense of spaces being either ‘safe’ or ‘dangerous’. Through this photo-essay on ‘Black Cab Tours’ I present the memoir of my stay in the city of Belfast and my understanding of the ‘Troubles’. During my tenure in Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) as a Charles Wallace Fellow in the year 2019, I had the opportunity of visiting these spaces lined with graffiti’s that had for long played on my evocative memory. The visual images of the struggle and life thereafter urged me to pen this photo-essay which was not a part of my proposed research activity while in Belfast. I thus, contextualize my work within the framework of ‘short-term ethnography’ (Pink: 2013) reflecting on the symbolic interactions with the images to bring forth deep and valid ways of understanding.

Beginning a tour that takes you into the heart of Irish history ‘The Troubles’

The story begins with searching for a Taxi company that provides a tour of the ‘Peace Wall’. The ‘Walking tours’ and the ‘Black Cab Tours’ along the ‘Peace Walls’ have attracted tourist from all over the world. The tour commonly known as Black Cab Tour of Belfast is about the history of the conflicts that has marred this part of Northern Ireland since 1969 that is etched in the ‘Peace Walls’ to this date and have divided the city into two halves. At this juncture I have to thank Edward Cooke, a research scholar in the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics, QUB, who offered to accompany me in my first ride and also look for an appropriate tour service provider for the same. The tours can either be booked online or offline at the office in the City Centre. There are also many private companies and individuals that provide

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Fig. 1: Black Cab Tour the Journey

this service. But as I was interested in riding the traditional black cab, some providers use white vehicles also, so we went to the City Centre to book our tour. Thus, our journey began from the city centre to the West Belfast Peace Wall, where we visited specific places—Falls and Springfield Road (The Republican Falls Roads Murals) and Shankill Road (mural of Queen Elizabeth II) up to the Lanark Way Peace Wall and back.

What and where is the ‘Troubles’?

The earliest records of the ‘Troubles’ in Belfast goes back to 15 August 1969 that was marked by heavy firing and rioting which started at the lower end of the Falls Road a day before. It slowly moved up to the Cupar Street, Kashmir Road and Bombay Street which were residential areas.

The history of civil unrest rouses out of disagreement on the question of identity and affiliation among the population of Northern Ireland that divided it into two distinct groups. One of the groups is the Nationalist/Catholics who prefer to seek unity with the Republic of Ireland and a separation from the United Kingdom. While the other group referred to as the Unionist/Protestant/Loyalist community supports the unification with the rest of United Kingdom along with the Scottish, Welsh and English, (Hargie, Dickson and Nelson



Fig. 2: Fighting for a cause

2003:11). Be it the 'Protestant' or the 'Catholic', I borrow these terms from Bryan (1996: 374) to describe the two ethnic communities, where each group claims to be an Irishmen, and strongly disassociate themselves from any affiliation in terms of religious beliefs.



Fig. 3: In the firing line... when you belief in a cause

Some images speak for themselves, it doesn't need a narrative. Fig. 3 is one such picture that speaks volume and one is engulfed by the passion, love and dedication of the person holding the Flag high instead of running, who is right in front of the firing line. An evocative image in itself.



Fig. 4: Hall of Fame: a tribute to the heroes who dedicated their lives to the cause they believed in...

Many young lives were lost since 1969. The Irish National liberation Army (INLA) was formed in the year 1974 on 10 December, by Irish Republican Socialist Paramilitary group, who seeks to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom. Since the past thirty years over 3700 people have lost their lives (Hargie, Dickson and Nelson 2003) and over 40,000 injured (Smyth and Hamilton 2003). However, the marginalisation of women and their representation is strongly felt as the Peace Wall that is a major tourist attraction failed to portray the women comrades who fought and laid their lives for the cause. During my walks I found a poster on the Ormeau road that is near to the University Street and another one way down Falls road (these spaces are not included in the Black Cab Tours).



Fig. 5: This mural is not part of the Black cab Tour; I had clicked it during the Parades on Falls Roads.

As the 'Troubles' brewed and intensified among the people living in the 'Catholic' Falls and Springfield Road, and the 'Protestant' Shankill Road, the thirty-foot long wall came up in three phases from 1969. The 'peace line' or commonly known as the 'peace wall' has a few entry and exit gates that are locked at night from 10 pm to 6 am in the morning. The locked gates, cuts off Falls and Springfield Road from Shankill Road clearly demarcating and dividing the city of Belfast. No movement is allowed along these lines at night and people from either side would say '*don't cross over to the other side at night, it is dangerous*' thus, creating an atmosphere of fear and uneasiness. One late evening, as I was walking down to University Street after an interview with Mr. Gerald (full name withheld) an ex prisoner of war (P.O.W) on Falls Road I felt an eerie feeling and the words haunted me '*don't cross over to the other side, it is dangerous*'. That was one of the exceptional days when I took the bus, instead of walking down. This was the same street I had walked around many a times, but the evocative memory played its part at night and I felt 'unsafe'.

The 'Troubles' besides losing its citizens to the fight, had left many injured and maimed for life, while some are serving jail terms. Prisoner of Wars, some after having served jail terms for years are now being rehabilitated, others



Fig. 6.1: One of the gates between 'Catholic' Falls and Springfield Road, and the 'Protestant' Shankill Road

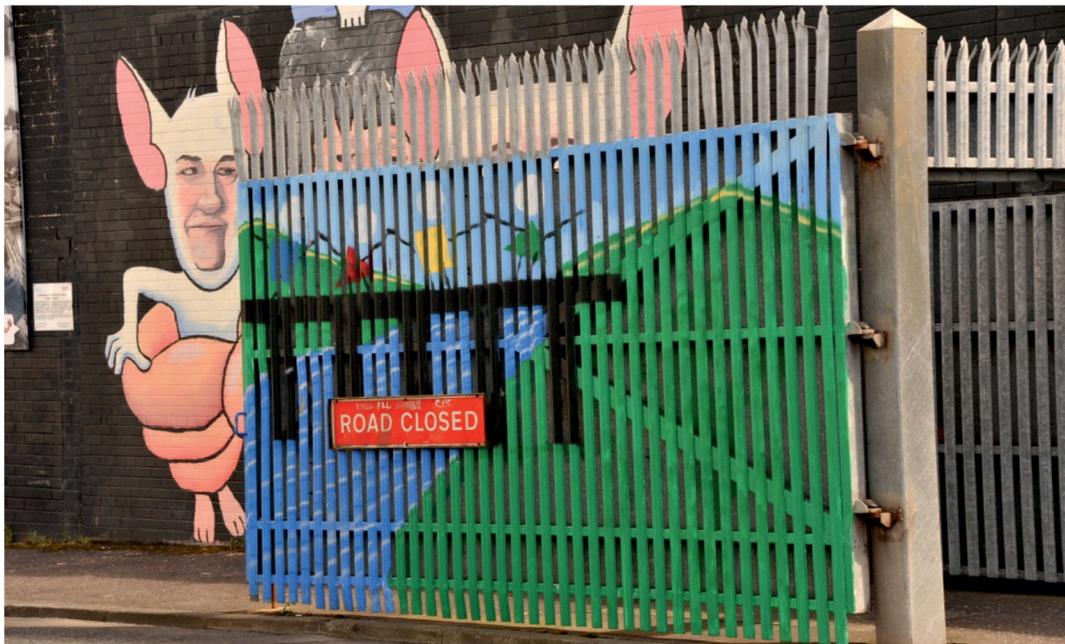


Fig. 6.2: Symbol of demarcation: one of the 'gates' that stands testimony to the ongoing troubles

are still waiting for their turns. The above image is yet another symbol that resonates 'Hope' for the people who are still in jails.



Fig. 7.1. Power to the Prisoners of Wars: Nelson Mandela inspiring the prisoners of war (P.O.Ws).



Fig 7.2 Solidarity for the Prisoners of War.

We are with you

The 'peace wall' is not just a space for the 'Troubles' but the artists have contributed meaningfully by bringing in representation of suppression and oppression from across the globe.



Fig. 8: The cause of Palestine

Appeal for 1 International Peace



Fig. 9: This space is symbolic ... what Belfast hopes for...

On retrospection, “President Trump Welcome in Belfast. No Surrender” has much deeper symbolic meaning. During President Trump’s visit in 2019 to UK and Ireland, the communities of Belfast came out on the streets protesting against his visit ‘Belfast says no to Trump’ was one of the popular placard. The migrant communities were more vocal and their placards during the protest march voiced their deep regrets and discontent, ‘without immigrants Trump would have no wives’, ‘callous, racist, sexist’ www.belfastlive.co.uk/news/belfast-news/gallery/belfast-trump-protest-14907454



Fig. 10: Photo Credit: Edward Cooke

On my first black cab tour, like any other tourist I too had penned my wishes on the peace wall on Lanark road. This space is unique in itself as we find notes from across the globe wishing for peace not only for Belfast but for the world at large. This is one tourist activity that everyone on a Black Cab tour indulges in.

Alex armed with his first-hand experience as a witness to the conflicts that has gone down in Irish history explained the history of the ‘Troubles’ and the ‘Peace Walls’. As we moved along the peace wall, he explained the various graffiti and images. His voice was much fervent as he remembered his childhood and shared a few incidents. The Black cab tour is an immensely emotional journey both for the tour and the guide, where the tour guide takes us down history and his memory lane, sharing incidents from his childhood days, as he had seen and experienced the troubles. This plays with the emotions



Photo Credit: Edward Cooke

Fig. 11: With Alex (imaginary name) the Black Cab tour guide.

of the tourist as the as the guide weaves a story through his evocative memory. At the end one needs to be cautious as the Black cab tour guide represent a part of the history (what we hear is his lived experiences) that omits the anguish and turmoil on the other side. What we saw that day was the Republican views as the tour was for a short one-hour duration, wherein we missed Loyalist murals on the Beverly Street.



Fig. 12: Edward Cooke, my lens captured the photographer at work.

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