

# **Past or Place? Exploring the relationship between violence and commemoration in the 'new' Northern Ireland**

Principal Investigator: Dr Sara McDowell (University of Ulster)

Co-Investigators: University of Ulster - Dr Cathy Gormley-Heenan; Dr Maire Braniff; Dr D Morrow; Dr Jonny Byrne; and Dr Joanne Murphy (Queen's University of Belfast)

## **SUMMARY**

On June 27th 2012, the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and former IRA commander, Martin McGuinness shook hands with Queen Elizabeth II for the first time at an event in Hillsborough. For many the gesture symbolised the consolidation of Northern Ireland's transition to peace, the meeting of cultures and traditions, and hope for the future. Only a few weeks later however violence spilled onto the streets of north and west Belfast following a series of commemorative parades, marking a summer of hostilities. Outwardly these examples present two very different pictures of the 'new' Northern Ireland; the former of a society moving forward and putting the past behind it and the latter apparently divided over and wedded to the past. Furthermore they revealed two very different 'places', the public handshake in the arena of public space; the rioting and fighting occurring in spaces distanced from the public sphere. But why does this juxtaposition exist?

The overarching aim of this exploratory proposal is to consider the complex relationship between the sporadic and choreographed outbreaks of violence that can sometimes accompany commemorative practices within specific geographies. Incorporating multidisciplinary perspectives on the meaning of 'place' it investigates why, after almost fifteen years of peacemaking and the introduction of a range of government-led initiatives that have sought to address issues of memory, identity and victimhood, the past can evolve into violence in some parts of Northern Ireland.

The project focuses on the interconnected questions of 'where', 'why' and 'who'. In mapping this violence spatially over a fourteen year period (1998-2012), we aim to open up a discussion about the nature of those spaces in which it occurs. We can then begin to unpack the characteristics of place, unravelling its many layers and exploring its connections to the past. Because of the importance of place in Northern Ireland and the symbolism attached to demarcating difference, we ask if there is any leverage in the argument that commemoration and memory is simply a tool to bring people together in 'vulnerable' spaces? Is it the geography and not the memory being evoked that is fundamental to the violence? In questioning why violence occurs and who is involved in its production, we hope to explore the relationship between place, agenda and motivations. Is there a sense of custodianship over either the past or the place; is there an intergenerational impetus to protect and maintain the memory of the past or is the past relatively unimportant for a new generation and a smokescreen for deeper issues surrounding the place? Or is rioting and violence legitimated through the memory of the event being evoked?

As Northern Ireland embarks upon a decade of pivotal and potentially divisive anniversaries leading up to the centenary of its birth in 2021, this cross-institutional and multidisciplinary proposal is timely. Commemorative-related violence cost an estimated £7.4 million in 2012 alone, with some £6.1 million spent on policing and security between April and September. This figure does not include the macroeconomic costs of lost tourism and inward investment. It is of course not just about economics. Rioting throughout the year resulted in scores of injuries, damage to property and impacted negatively on the psychological well-being of communities. It also presents a challenge for the future. In exploring the very complex relationship between violence, memory and place, the research seeks to identify ways in which it can support public bodies especially educational institutions and community and

voluntary organisations in managing commemorative celebrations during the next decade and beyond.