‘Storytelling and the Past’
WAVE Conference

educate future generations
cathartic ‘shared history’
blurring the line between myth and reality

Sarah Jankowitz, March 2014
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Storytelling exhibition at the Duncairn Centre, March 2014
When I started to work for WAVE some fifteen years ago, I was given the onerous task of clearing out an old storeroom at the WAVE House. As I set about this task with a limited amount of enthusiasm I came across a series of children’s drawings, neatly piled up in the corner. The drawings were from an exhibition that the WAVE Trauma Centre had put on at The Old Museum Art Centre some years previous. Each picture depicted a parent who had been murdered during the ‘Troubles’. I knew this because my own daughter was one of the participants but there was no write up, nothing to tell me what had happened, or who was in the picture or indeed anything about the young artists.

This got me thinking about the purpose and usefulness of such projects. I think it was good for the kids that got involved, good that they were able to use the painting to talk about their trauma and good that they got to see something they produced hang in a gallery. Sadly, that’s where the benefits end because there we were, a few years later and the pictures were merely gathering dust in that old storeroom. That doesn’t negate the benefits that were had at the time, but the project could have delivered so much more, if only others could see the potential.

For storytelling, or oral history as some prefer to call it, to be useful as a tool for addressing past traumas it has to operate on two key fronts;

1. First of all, on a personal level for the person ‘telling’ the story – this can be a somewhat therapeutic process as the incident is recalled and the individual develops an understanding of what life was like before the event and how they have coped since.

2. Whilst the influence of this on personal healing should not be underestimated. Perhaps of greater importance is the impact of the story on those who ‘hear’ as it can alert wider society to the devastation violence causes, not only to the individual but also its ripple effect on family and friends, sending out a powerful message that these things must never be allowed to happen again.

The ‘telling’ aspect of storytelling was very much alive in that early WAVE project but the ‘listening’ didn’t happen for some years later when the children’s drawings, complete with narrative was reproduced in the book *Every Picture Tells A Story*. That book was published in 2005 after some work was carried out retrospectively by the Youth Department and Marie Therese Fay (now

1 *Every Picture Tells A Story*, WAVE Trauma Centre, November 2003.)
O’Hagan). Since then WAVE has gone on to produce around 20 books documenting people’s experiences of loss and trauma. The books have been distributed widely both at home in Northern Ireland and further afield in places like America, South Africa and Bosnia.

WAVE believes passionately in the potential of storytelling to address the legacy of the past, however, it is not a standalone mechanism but should form part of a menu of options established to help bring redress to victims and survivors and to make a contribution to the building of a peaceful and shared future. Storytelling is regarded by some as a ‘soft’ option and whilst it’s less complicated and therefore easier to deliver than something like a ‘truth recovery’ process, to say that it is ‘soft’ is to underestimate all that is involved.

Today’s conference shines a light on storytelling, highlighting both the advantages and the limitations of the process. Delegates will hear from Dr Robert Ehrenreich from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum based in Washington DC, who will bring an international dimension to bear. Dr Ehrenreich has published widely on the subject of oral testimony and his expertise will be of immense benefit to the debate.

The debate will also be informed by presentations from three local projects. The Aftermath Project, facilitated by Diversity Challenges and based in County Louth – this project documents the experiences of those impacted by the ‘Troubles’ in Louth but also along the border. Nurses Voices from the Northern Ireland Troubles, a new book that brings together a collection of accounts from those who nursed many of the victims and survivors, and finally Stories from Silence – this is an online archive setup by the WAVE Trauma Centre. The archive is in two sections, the first one looking at the experiences of older people and the second looking at parents who lost children in the ‘Troubles’.

The conference will be used to launch WAVE’s latest storytelling project, Everyone is my People, written by members of the WAVE Injured Group and facilitated by Teya Sepinuck from Theatre of Witness. This project deals exclusively with those injured through the ‘Troubles’ and in particular highlights the stories of those who have been psychologically traumatised.

A number of themes are explored in the workshops after lunch, including the use of storytelling as ‘art’, ‘education’, ‘campaigning’ and ‘performing’. Each workshop will have a facilitator and a scribe and in order to set the context will include a short address from an experienced practitioner who has been involved in each area of activity. Finally, the conference will conclude with a panel
discussion on the issues raised throughout the day. The panel will include Dr Ehrenreich, acclaimed Playwright Martin Lynch and WAVE Chair Professor Jean Orr.

WAVE would like to acknowledge the input from all of the speakers, especially the keynote address delivered by Dr Robert Ehrenreich.

*Alan McBride*

1. SUMMARY

On 9 April 2014, WAVE Trauma Centre held a conference entitled Storytelling and the Past at Duncairn Centre For Culture Arts and Heritage.

WAVE Trauma Centre has undergone a number of projects since its establishment in 1991 that utilise elements of storytelling in order to support those bereaved as a result of the conflict. The intention behind the conference was to explore the potential of storytelling to contribute to ‘dealing with the past’ in Northern Ireland.

1.1 Objectives

This conference was organised with the purpose of exploring the potential of storytelling to address the legacy of the past and to promote peacebuilding. A number of current and completed projects informed discussions throughout the day, as participants were encouraged to think critically about both the importance of the ‘telling’ and ‘listening’ aspects of storytelling. There was also a conscious effort to uncover the limitations and possible pitfalls associated with storytelling projects in such a context. The keynote speaker, Dr Robert Ehrenreich, and other presenters, were selected to ensure their contributions would provoke meaningful discussion in the workshops as well as subsequent debates on storytelling following the conference.

1.2 Attendance

Upwards of 50 participants from a wide range of institutional, academic and personal backgrounds attended the conference.
keynote speaker, Dr Robert Ehrenreich
2. CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

The day began with an hour to register and view the exhibitions displayed in the gallery space at the Duncairn Centre for Culture Arts and Heritage.

Mid-morning, Professor Jean Orr, Chair of WAVE, opened the conference and underlined the main purpose of the conference – to explore the potential, as well as the pitfalls, of storytelling in addressing the legacy of the past and promoting peace. She encouraged participants to keep this in mind throughout their interactions for the rest of the conference.

Professor Orr then introduced the keynote speaker, Dr Robert Ehrenreich, Director of University Programs at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

After the keynote address, three presentations were made on projects underway in Northern Ireland that use storytelling as a key element in their engagement with addressing the legacy of the past.

A brief recording by Theatre of Witness was also played before a lunch break.

Following lunch, conference participants broke into four simultaneous workshops to discuss different aspects and outcomes of storytelling. The four workshops addressed:

☐ Storytelling as Art;
☐ Storytelling as Campaigning;
☐ Storytelling as Performance; and,
☐ Storytelling as Learning.

Each workshop began with a brief contribution by a presenter (or presenters) with specific experience in line with the chosen topic. Informed by these presentations, participants were encouraged to discuss their feelings, impressions and own experiences of the issues at hand.

After the fruitful discussions that took place within the workshops, a follow-up panel discussion was assembled, which included Dr Ehrenreich, Joe Blake, Martin Lynch and Yvonne Naylor, and was chaired by Professor Jean Orr.

The conference was closed with remarks from both Professor Orr and Alan McBride. They thanked those who participated and contributed to the conference and its planning, and struck a hopeful note that what had been discussed that day would make a meaningful contribution to the debate on the past and processes of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.
3. EXHIBITION

The location of the conference, the Duncairn Centre for Culture Arts and Heritage, presented a wonderful opportunity for organisations to showcase their various storytelling programmes and projects that have already taken place across Northern Ireland and to a lesser extent the Republic of Ireland. These displays included photographs, books, DVDs, artwork, oral recordings and online storytelling archives.

The projects on display in the exhibition were from an eclectic mix of organisations and backgrounds, resulting in a room that housed very diverse narratives and perspectives on the conflict. Their side-by-side, almost casual, presentation allowed these competing perspectives – a project that collects stories from ex-prisoners and a book by RUC widows, for example – to be presented without judgement or assumptions of moral equivalence. Instead, it provided a remarkable opportunity for stories and ideas about the conflict to co-exist.

The exhibition included displays from the following projects:

- Healing Through Remembering’s ‘Everyday Objects Transformed by the Conflict’;
- Aftermath;
- WAVE’s various publications including The Disappeared, and Injured... On that Day;
- Relatives for Justice quilt;
- Border Roads to Memories and Reconciliation;
- BBC Legacy Project;
- TEAR;
- Glòrtha Aduaidh (Northern Voices); and,
- The Royal College of Nursing, Nursing through the Troubles.

After the conference, those who had contributed to the exhibition were asked to keep their displays up for another several days so that others coming into the Centre would be able to view them. Despite the different, and often opposing, perspectives represented in the exhibition, it received overwhelmingly positive feedback from attendees.
The 'Disappeared' book, told the stories of 15 people that were disappeared through the 'Troubles', 2012, (this book is now in its second print run).
4. KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Dr Robert Ehrenreich was invited to speak at the conference to share his expertise through his work on projects involving the collection of stories and oral histories from World War II and the Holocaust. A graduate of both Oxford and Harvard Universities, Dr Ehrenreich has made invaluable contributions in the field of storytelling. He currently holds the position of Director of University Programs at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, a ‘living memorial’ commissioned in 1979 by US President Jimmy Carter. It was intended as a teaching tool for society, established with the idea that museums cannot just look at the past, but must also look to the future.

Dr Ehrenreich’s presentation centred upon the perspective of Holocaust studies to storytelling, and in it he made a number of linkages to Northern Ireland and the need to capture the experiences of people who were affected by the conflict.

On the subject of language, he noted how the term ‘storytelling’ can often be seen to diminish peoples’ memories. ‘Survivor testimony’, which in Holocaust studies evokes images of Eichmann’s trial and Nuremberg, may also be problematic because ‘testimony’ has a legalistic connotation implying what is shared must be factually correct. He was quick to point out that inaccuracies should not negate the entire testimony, especially when used for the purposes of preserving memories of the past. ‘Oral history’, then, is his term of choice, and he pointed to the wonderful oral tradition in Northern Ireland as the starting point for a comprehensive storytelling and/or archiving project.

Looking specifically at the context of the Holocaust, Dr Ehrenreich spoke of the early years, and even decades, following the atrocity as characterised by slow progress in addressing what had happened. At that time, it was thought the trauma was still too close and too great to dig deep into the distressing memories of the survivors.

By the 1980s and 1990s, there were a number of projects, films and television programmes that drew in the interest of new generations around the world who had not directly experienced the Holocaust. One such project was the Shoah Foundation that gathered testimonies from those involved in or affected by the Holocaust. These
included experiences of perpetrators and bystanders alongside those of victims, leading many to fear it would humanise these actors. Dr Ehrenreich, however, emphasised the importance of including these voices in understanding the complex responses and motivations behind such atrocities. Only so much, he said, can be interpreted from official documentation alone.

Humanising the victims and making them more than mere statistics and numbers is something testimony can accomplish. It helps us as a society to understand the victims as voices that were cut off early in life.

Despite earlier challenges or objections, oral history work is now common. Especially in various exhibitions, victim, perpetrator and bystander testimonies are presented side-by-side. They are used extensively in teaching and learning exercises, and have the potential to make significant impact on students and younger generations who have no experience of such events.

There is an urgency involved in collecting these testimonies and oral histories, Dr Ehrenreich emphasised that as the survivors’ numbers are rapidly diminishing, it is therefore imperative to collect as many stories as possible before the voices are gone.

Perhaps most importantly, he used his knowledge and experience in dealing with the aftermath of the Holocaust to lend some poignant advice for Northern Ireland. The main lesson he highlighted was that stories function as a warning that such violence is possible. Youth and future leaders need this information and need to see it all, he stressed, because upcoming generations do not know just how normal the abnormal was and have no experience of the gruesomeness of conflict.

In setting guidelines for Northern Ireland, he said it was important not to privilege any one story over another; we cannot talk about one side and not the other. People need to hear the full, complex story in order to understand.

Responding to questions, Dr Ehrenreich re-iterated this point and made several other poignant observations for Northern
Ireland. He spoke about the importance of complicating the issue rather than oversimplifying, and making people think about the different roles they played, not only as ‘victim’. He encouraged those involved in exploring narratives of the past to embrace the complexity and to use it as much as possible.

When asked how best to deliver the information to younger generations in a positive way, he said there might be no way to do such a thing. Instead, we have to show what problems are caused by hatred and how bad it can be if it is allowed to continue, again articulating that storytelling can be used as a teaching tool.

His final message distinguished the potential of storytelling over legal testimonies and proceedings to contribute more to understanding of context. Storytelling and oral history is interested in the whole person and the whole context – before, during and after an event. He emphasised that ‘doing it right’ is difficult.
The "Injured" book documented the stories of some of those who were injured during the "Troubles" (2009, 2nd edition was printed in 2011).
5 PRESENTATIONS

5.1 Nurses Voices from the Northern Ireland Troubles

In the first presentation of the conference, Professor Jean Orr and Margaret Graham shared their experiences compiling the stories of nurses, midwives and health visitors in the book Nurses Voices from Northern Ireland Troubles. Professor Orr opened the presentation by reading a vivid testimony of a junior nurse that was included in the book.

Margaret then detailed the process behind the project, which was undertaken on behalf of the Royal College of Nurses Historical Society. They had been gathering stories for years but they wanted to collect more recent narratives relating to the Troubles, especially from the student nurses and employees of colleges who provided the most care.

The project team consisted of women who were nurses themselves, and the stories they collected reflected many of their own experiences. Many of the stories were gathered through focus groups where participants shared as much as they could remember: being caught in crossfires, witnessing injuries and deaths, and how especially difficult it was to see the deaths of people their own age.

Many who participated noted that no one had ever asked them what it was like; their families did not want to hear what was happening and student nurses especially did not want to disturb their parents. Because they helped everyone – “Everyone bleeds to death the same way, everyone was our patient no matter which side they came from” – they often faced threats from their own community. They recalled how although they suffered, there was an attitude that the patients and their families suffered more.

Because members of the team were nurses themselves, the recollections were difficult to take in at times because they brought back old memories they had often forgotten. The stories were often emotive, sometimes told in whispers. Despite the sadness, however, there were lighter moments in the focus groups.

The book has been seen as a highly successful project, both as a resource for others as well as a cathartic process for those involved in writing and contributing to it.
5.2 Stories from Silence

Journalist Susan McKay presented the project Stories from Silence.

She spoke of the struggle and pressure behind bringing out peoples’ stories, and recalled coming up against attitudes that people should just get over it. Victims groups and others, however, have prevailed over the silence. She echoed the point made by Dr Ehrenreich that there is an urgency in gathering these stories because people are getting older and stories are getting lost.

She identified a number of obstacles to the process, including the absence of justice and truth as contributing to the struggle around collecting these stories. Another barrier is that others have used stories in irresponsible or manipulative ways, making those with stories to share wary of their ultimate use.

With funding from the Victims Service, journalist Laura Haydon began a project to capture voices of older people and to house those recordings on the WAVE website. Last year, Susan herself was invited to do a series of stories with people whose children had been killed in the conflict.

For the conference, she played excerpts of three of these interviews, all of which can be accessed online. The first featured Kathleen Duffy, whose 15 year-old son Seamus was killed by a plastic bullet fired by the RUC in Belfast. She recalled how no one informed the family of his death and how they faced taunts by police until she made a complaint to the detective in charge of the case. No one has been held accountable for his death.

Next was a recording of Linda Molloy, whose 18 year-old son was killed in Belfast by loyalists. She spoke of how he had friends on both sides of the community, was generous and popular and never took part in any organisation. The police treated his death as a ‘weekend blunder’. She read a story that she had written to cope with her trauma after deciding to stop treatment with anti-depressants and having to move house because passing the site of her son’s death on a daily basis was too painful.

Finally, Susan played a recording by Countess Mountbatton whose 14 year-old son Nicholas was killed by the IRA along with her father, husband and mother-in-law. She recalled how Nicholas was an identical twin and how she feels that loss is the worst anyone can sustain, since the twins had lived their entire lives together after nine months sharing a womb. She could not imagine how someone was capable of such an act, since their attackers clearly saw women and children in the line of fire.
To provide a brief summation, Susan identified the immense complexity in the stories of the three women, and how they all had overlapping themes of loss and finding ways to cope with trauma. She said there was a huge amount that we can learn from these three stories: implications of plastic bullet use, lies told about victims, lack of accountability, issues of collusion, sectarianism and the social and psychological affects of such trauma.

5.3 Aftermath

The last formal presentation was by Lawrence McKeown and Maura Maginn, and highlighted two projects: Green and Blue: Across the Thin Line that dealt with the RUC, Garda and issues around the border, and Aftermath that worked with victims of the conflict and their families, especially those who were displaced by the violence.

Maura started by discussing the practical guidelines involved in storytelling projects. As part of the ethical principles guiding their work, they held up the idea of ‘beneficence’, which means ‘to do good’, not merely to do no harm. Their projects involved voluntary participation, psychological and social support and the principle of informed consent.

Above all, there was the need to ensure justice, respect and dignity for the storyteller, which included putting them in charge of the process and making it clear that they own their story. It is also very important that the process must operate within the framework of the law.

Lawrence then presented his work on the Aftermath project. It utilised several forms of media including photography, filming and music and ran several residential sessions to record peoples’ voices. Its final product has been exhibited in a number of public spaces including Dundalk Museum, Belfast Exposed, Newry and several others.

The project was able to incorporate archival materials and new materials by presenting them in artistic, modern ways, and included those from all backgrounds.

5.4 Theatre of Witness

The last presentation was a six-minute recording by Theatre of Witness, delivered by Teya Sepinuck. She spoke of the need to search for the ‘medicine’, or potential for healing, in the stories. The recording featured interviews with six men who had been involved in the conflict.
The 'Jigsaw' project created a large floor puzzle to tell the stories of 16 children aged 6 - 11 that were bereaved through the 'Troubles', the project was facilitated by WAVE in partnership with the Ormeau Baths Gallery, 2001.
6. WORKSHOPS

6.1 Storytelling as Art

This workshop was facilitated by Yvonne Naylor and featured presentations by Alan McBride and Liam Hamill.

Alan McBride

Alan began by sharing how he first became involved with WAVE as a volunteer with a group of children who were bereaved as a result of the conflict. The group encouraged them to use painting as a tool to remember their parents and was first and foremost about hearing the children’s stories.

Out of this project, he had the idea for the book Every Picture Tells a Story. When pictures from the book were then displayed in a public gallery, he began to realise that as important as art is to help people express their feelings and share their stories, there also has to be care around how this is done to avoid further trauma or damage.

One example he used was a picture contributed by a child whose father had been killed. The picture showed the father lying dead on the street and was accompanied by other pictures of the same street at different times. The father had been married before, however, and his other family came to the exhibition ill equipped to see this picture of him. The question that arises from this scenario is whether safeguarding the audience from potential trauma is more of an imperative than allowing the people the right to share their stories the way they want them shared.

Finally, Alan said he is mindful that using art and storytelling in this way can also reinforce victimhood. Participating in such public projects may lead an individual to be seen as a ‘victim’ and they may indeed take that on as part of their identity. Alan said he is unsure whether or not this would be healthy.

Liam Hamill

Liam has also been involved in a number of art projects through WAVE, mostly as a participant. He sought out the organisation because he was struggling to cope with the effects of his trauma, and therapy was not helping. He had become verbally violent and had developed a destructive relationship with his family.
He was also involved with the book *Injured... on that day*\(^5\), though it was through his art that he was able to tell a different story. One stained glass project in particular had a profound effect. In it, he portrayed two tangled wedding rings, which represented how he had treated his family. That project set him back on the right path and helped him to regain a focus on his family which he had lost sight of as a result of his trauma.

The most difficult aspect of that experience, he said, was explaining the meaning behind the stained glass piece at the launch of the project, but through the men’s group at WAVE he has ultimately found it therapeutic to share his story, as the group are quiet and listen respectfully rather than questioning or judging.

**Discussion**

The presentations by Alan and Liam provoked further discussion on a number of themes. Not only was the potential of storytelling through art explored further, but the group also identified several ways that art can be problematic. For example, there is a risk that art will be misused. It may blur the line between myth and reality, or it may be used to perpetuate romanticised notions and ‘Hollywood obsessions’ with the conflict.

There was agreement that art can mean different things to different people. The act of creating art itself can be therapeutic and calming. It can help individuals to explore their own creativity and parts of themselves they had not accessed previously, and it can also open doors for interactions with people from other backgrounds in contexts that avoid political overtures.

The singular message the workshop agreed was that art can be used as a communication tool to help deal with the past.

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\(^5\) *Injured, on that day*, WAVE Injured Group, WAVE Trauma Centre, May 2011
6.2 Storytelling as Campaigning

This workshop was facilitated by Joe Blake, and featured presentations by Peter Heathwood and Bobby Clark, both members of WAVE’s Injured Group.

**Peter Heathwood**

Peter was severely injured in the conflict. He was paralysed in a loyalist gun attack and his father died of a heart attack after witnessing the aftermath of the attack and assuming Peter had been killed. In the report published by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, We Will Remember Them, Peter noted that there were many promises made to help those severely injured by the conflict, though little came of it.

He, along with others, started the ‘Recognition for All’ Campaign, looking for some way the State can recognise those left seriously injured by the Troubles. The campaign went across Northern Ireland, gathering signatures to lobby politicians, who he often found to be patronising; they said all the right things but did nothing. Finally the Commission for Victims and Survivors supported the idea, and what was once an aspiration about receiving a pension gathered greater momentum.

The campaign has at times sought to utilise the media to draw attention to their cause, however he has found that to be difficult because the media can twist the message. For example, in the BBC documentary Memory Man about Peter’s archiving work, they glossed over the campaign, instead portraying it as a human interest piece.

Another way they have drawn attention to the campaign is with the book *Injured... on that day* that tells their stories and how they came to be casualties of the Troubles.

**Bobby Clark**

Bobby is also a member of the Recognition for All Campaign. He spoke about his experience in gathering signatures for the petition. He then shared the story of how he was injured in Ballymurphy in 1971.

Bobby grew up in a private estate off the Springfield Road in Belfast, an interface area where the communities of Springmartin, Ballymurphy, Moyard and New Barnsley meet. He spoke of how internment night destroyed the harmony that existed between those communities. Although his family had been burned out of their home, he returned to the area to see if anyone needed help. When trying
to bring a group of women to safety, he was shot through the back by two soldiers. Father Hugh Mullan, a priest, came to his aid only to be shot and killed himself.

With the help of a solicitor, he claimed and received a mere £534 for his injuries. Some time later a shop he owned was blown up and he received £6,000 for the damage.

With encouragement from his daughter-in-law, Bobby wrote his story and published it as The Bobby Clark Story, which was featured on the BBC. As he had never received counselling, the BBC gave him a few numbers to ring for post-traumatic stress support, and that is how he first became involved with WAVE.

**Discussion**

Several important ideas emerged out of the discussion that followed the presentations. Some were hopeful and some seemed to indicate deeper issues outside the scope of storytelling that made the workshop at times somewhat hostile.

There was debate over whether statistics could help campaigns by supplementing the storytelling aspect. Peter believed that initial estimates that there were over 80,000 injured became a contentious issue for the campaign since the number seemed to scare away politicians. A participant representing the New Lodge 6 campaign said that statistics did not seem to help their cause either, and that all they could do to draw support was to tell their stories. People went on to agree that stories can never be replaced by a dossier of facts, and that the stories need to be there to make it human. Nevertheless, some argued that the power of a story might need to be backed up by facts and figures to make more of an impact.

There was a danger that the discussion would be dominated by the friction in the room between those who were associated with the security forces and those who represented the New Lodge 6 campaign. It seemed the mere presence of the campaigners in the room sparked disquiet for the others who were quick to assert their views on ‘innocent victims’ and that ‘terrorists cannot be innocent victims’.

This confrontation seemed to demonstrate two things. Firstly, it highlighted the complex issue of finding a way to house divergent and opposing stories within one storytelling project. One woman spoke as a representative from the University of Ulster project collecting 1,000 stories from the conflict and noted that many people do not want their stories presented alongside certain others. Secondly, the fact that the issue of ‘innocent victims’ arose in a situation where the topic was not in any way being judged underlines the pervasiveness of the contested issue of victimhood and its potential to derail meaningful and productive discussions.
The final points that characterised the discussion were that stories are important for those who have not grown up with the conflict, and they have a place beyond Northern Ireland for knowledge on how to prevent such violence from happening.

6.3 Storytelling as Performance

This workshop was facilitated by Kate Fletcher and featured a presentation by Martin Lynch.

Martin Lynch

Martin began by talking about his job facilitating shows and theatre workshops in several cross community settings, and his background growing up in the docks where he picked up the tradition of storytelling from the ship workers that he eventually turned into a passion for performing arts.

He talked about how performance allows people to express stories and views without being offensive. Such a medium for storytelling, he said, has a way of evoking emotions and empathy, especially for the person sharing their experiences.

One of his recent plays, *Meeting at Menin Gate*, has been used to start WAVE workshops because it had such a resonance with the audiences in terms of its subject matter of reconciliation and peace. In it, a man and a woman meet on their way to Menin Gate and develop an unlikely relationship; they soon realise he was involved in her father’s death. The participants in the WAVE workshops used what they learned from watching the performance to write moving plays about their own experiences. Two men who had been injured in the conflict worked together to write a play about living in hospital and the jokes and mutual realities they shared there.

Discussion

Following Martin’s presentation, most of the discussion was around acquiring funding and spaces for such performances and storytelling projects. Especially for plays that are intended to be cross community events, it is important that the spaces used are neutral and open to people of all backgrounds to come and explore the themes being addressed.

In terms of funding, Martin shared that he has been able to find centres and funders that understand the healing potential of performing stories, and the necessity of challenging audiences on cross community or cross cultural aspects of the stories.
Most importantly, he said that there is nothing better than the arts when it comes to talking about hard or divisive topics. Through art you can convey your message and concerns without it seeming like an attack on one group or another. The audience can choose to interpret the project how they see fit; they can choose to take it for a few laughs and cries or they can look deeper and reflect on the performances’ meanings within their own lives.

6.4 Storytelling as Learning

This workshop was facilitated by Roger McCallum and featured presentations by Mark Kelly and Jean Orr.

Mark Kelly
Mark is the Vice Chair of WAVE. He is also involved with Queens University as a Citizen Educator on both the Social Work Degree and Nursing Degree. Mark lost both his legs in an UVF Bomb at the Glen Inn in Glengormley.

Professor Jean Orr
Jean has acted as Patron of WAVE for many years, and is now the Chair of the Management Board. She spoke of WAVE’s experience in facilitating courses on ‘the past and the effects of trauma on the individual, family and society’ trauma through Queens University departments of Social Work and the School of Nursing and Midwifery. Professor Orr pointed out how such courses often utilise the first hand stories of WAVE members to help students understand in ways that simply reading information from PowerPoint presentations cannot.

There is a need to ensure the storytelling is appropriate to the learning. Whilst it is important for people to share, there is a careful balance that must be struck because re-telling one’s story over and over can lead to re-traumatisation. Therefore it is paramount that there are safeguards in place for both the storytellers and their audiences in such courses.

Above all, learning, training and education are important to generate understanding for issues involved in conflict. Professor Orr’s particular objective is that through these stories health professionals can consider the possible effect of trauma as part of a client assessment.
Discussion

There were a number of themes the group explored throughout the workshop. In terms of understanding the relationship between storytelling and education, they spoke of how stories are important to get all aspects of what happened and to bust myths about events.

Stories can be a way to learn from the ‘Other’; they can offer access to different perspectives and learning from other cultures to garner respect and understanding between communities. This can also function similarly to share learning between generations. Learning from history and past mistakes can help those who never experienced the conflict to break down fears and prejudices so there is no return to violence.

To educate younger generations about the past, there may be ways to collate stories into an interactive website or use social media like Facebook and Twitter to draw their attention and participation. The stories make it impactful and have greater potential to hold their interest, which is often difficult to do.
Spiral of images from projects used in ‘Every Picture Tells A Story’, 2003.
7. LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout the conference, there were a number of themes that arose consistently across the workshops and presentations. The fact that they featured so centrally across topics and discussions, calls for their further articulation here.

Storytelling can be used as recognition, as a way of welcoming and empowering voices that were silenced.

Stories can be used to educate future generations and impress upon them the damaging effects of continued divisions and hatred.

Storytelling projects can function as part of a healing process for those sharing their stories. Many find the act of sharing to be cathartic in its own right.

Stories have to be told for our loved ones to ‘live on’. This reminds us of the human cost of violence and compels us to find ways to remember the victims.

Storytelling has the potential to develop understanding and respect between communities and cultures. Listening to others’ stories makes people realise they are not the only ones to have suffered pain and sadness, and generates a better understanding of the complexities involved. It helps satisfy a need for a ‘shared history’.

The listening is just as important as the telling. Storytellers need a respectful audience to feel that their voices are being heard, and safeguards need to be in place to ensure listeners are prepared for the impact of the stories.

Despite its positive contributions, there are dangers present in storytelling for both the person sharing the story and the audience. There is the potential for re-traumatisation in storytelling projects, especially those recounting stories of traumatic lose and injury.

Equally, stories may be misused. This can involve blurring the line between myth and reality, and can perpetuate romanticised notions of the conflict that are upsetting to those who were involved and damaging to future generations.

In contexts of division, there is concern over how to capture diverse stories in one place. Some do not want their stories alongside others’ conflicting stories. Finding a neutral space in which to house such stories may be an important aspect of cross-community projects.
Storytelling through art and performance both have the capacity to **handle difficult issues and topics in a different package**, because these projects are more **open to interpretation by the audiences** – “If you’re offended then you didn’t understand it, and if you understand it you won’t be offended”.

Liam Hamill works on ‘Glass of Peace’, this book used stained glass to recount the stories of those bereaved and/or injured through the 'Troubles', 2007.
8. CONCLUSIONS

The conference intended to touch on a range of aspects affecting storytelling and its potential to deal with the past. It facilitated a conversation on both the potential successes and limitations of personal storytelling to the legacy of the past, both on an individual level and within communities.

Conference participants widely agreed that storytelling can be used in a number of ways with a wide range of outcomes, but recognised that there are limitations and potential pitfalls associated with the process and dissemination.

In the act of sharing one’s story, there is great potential for healing and catharsis. Storytelling through art, performance, oral histories and so on provides a route through which those who have lived through the conflict to share their experiences. Often this healing is accompanied or directly affected by a sense of empowerment, especially when those sharing their stories have previously been silenced or gone unheard.

The sharing of one’s story can not only be therapeutic for the individual, it can also be used to affect change and shifts in attitude in wider society by breaking down divisions and exploring common experiences. Telling, and just as importantly listening to, stories about individuals’ and groups’ experiences of the conflict can contribute to a ‘shared history’ for Northern Ireland. By listening to stories from people with differing perspectives, a greater understanding and respect can be developed between communities. This can generate a deeper realisation of the complexities in human experiences around the conflict. In this way, the listening is just as critical as the telling.

There is also a utility to storytelling beyond its therapeutic and transformative potential for those who have actually experienced the conflict. Lessons that emerge from peoples’ stories can be used to educate future generations about the human cost of violence. These stories can impress upon those who have not experienced the violence just how important it is to ensure such violence does not recur.

Art-based storytelling projects are incredibly useful as well, in that they re-package difficult issues and allow audiences to interpret based on their own meanings and experiences. This means that those who would be closed off to either sharing or listening to a person stand up and tell their story or their experience might be more willing to watch a play or view artwork that represents such stories. Similarly, those who struggle to verbalise their experiences often find that they can access the feelings or memories they wish to convey through painting, photography, art and performance.
Despite its advantages, storytelling may also have unintended outcomes that must be recognised. The potential is high for re-traumatisation if ethical principles and guidelines are not followed (and occasionally even if they are), both for those who are sharing their stories and those who are listening to them. Stories that carry a great deal of emotion or re-visit times of pain and suffering are difficult to share and must be treated with a great deal of respect and care. The audience, too, may be troubled by what they are hearing if they were not expecting or prepared for stories that contain trauma and violence.

Stories can also be used to perpetuate romanticised notions of the past depending on how they are packaged. Many Hollywood movies, for example, portray the conflict in certain ways that can be seen as simplistic and/or damaging. In this right, storytelling can blur lines between myth and reality.

From a practical standpoint, large archives that intend to reach across boundaries face issues around storage and how to present the stories. Many, even among those at the conference, did not want their stories to be presented alongside certain others. There is the concern that presenting stories in such a way implies a ‘moral equivalence’ between all stories. In order to house diverse stories side by side, projects would need to find a space that is neutral for participants.

Several noteworthy comments also emerged from the panel session at the close of the conference.

**Dr Robert Ehrenreich** was welcomed back, and emphasised that societies should never draw a line under history and move on, but instead there is always a need to discuss and think about it. He struck a hopeful tone, remarking that although there is a realistic expectation that any way of dealing with the past will be messy and will take time, no one is saying that it cannot be done.

**Professor Jean Orr** followed on by saying, that although we understand that ‘history is written by the victors’, the history in Northern Ireland should be the peoples’ history. That is what is so important to her about storytelling; everyone who is involved has a story to tell and we need to respect those stories.

**Martin Lynch** talked about how he found a new political and human perspective on society by becoming a playwright; he learned how to ‘make the other man’s argument’. He said that the hardest thing in the world is to change what we think, but that we are all human beings and until we accept that our differences are quite small and move into a higher level, we will not go anywhere.
Joe Blake acknowledged the opposition many vocalised during the conference about not wanting their stories placed alongside someone with a contrasting perspective. He emphasised the importance of ethical principles around storytelling and to give people the choice of how their stories are shared. The alternative is that we fail to collect all the stories and messages before they are gone.

Yvonne Naylor revisited the idea of art as a tool to communicate stories in ways that words fail. Sometimes people will not or cannot speak about certain experiences, but can put together a piece of art that others may then interpret. A range of meanings can then emerge beyond what the artist him or herself might have intended.

Throughout the day one question became the underlying theme of discussion: Could, or perhaps more importantly should, Northern Ireland have a national storytelling project as part of a process to deal with the past? Peter Heathwood expressed a hope that 100 years from now, the true stories of ‘the Troubles’ will be housed in a massive, diverse archive of oral histories that will not revolve around the politics. Peter felt the stories are the true history of the conflict, and they should be recorded and preserved for future generations.

Others expressed the opinion that people have to in some way look for common bonds in stories, even if they are from different backgrounds.

Others still were not yet at the point where they are comfortable sharing their own story or with their story being presented alongside stories by those with differing perspectives.

Though there have been many disagreements on how to move forward and address the legacy of the past, the one thing everyone can agree is that it must not happen again.

Storytelling is not a standalone project. So much more is needed to address the generations of hurt that have been inflicted on this society. The ability to share experiences, and to listen to the experiences of others should, at the very least, increase our understanding of the ‘Troubles’.