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Why the last thing we all need is a National Museum of Troubles

8-10 minutes

I so admire my colleague Liam Kennedy that I dedicated my 2009 book of essays, *Between Shadows*, to him. But on the idea of a Museum of the "Troubles" we are poles apart. "Troubles" is in scare quotes because I reluctantly use that euphemism, originally applied to years of vicious two-sided violence down south in the early-20th century.

Instead, I call our three decades of violence the Years of Disgrace, so the notion of a National Museum of the Years of Disgrace staggers me. In certain respects, we need to disown, not "own", the Troubles.

The premise is that the Troubles are over and thus a fit subject for retrospect and also for profit ("export earner") and entertainment ("visitor attraction").

If only. Our conflict has entered a new, cultural phase while we are still at loggerheads politically, which puts into question the lesson of reconciliation, the history lesson the museum would apparently teach. Indeed, if the campaign for an imminent united Ireland is ramped up, we will regress.

Even today, if reconciliation were proclaimed, the divisions in our society would give the lie to that claim. There is self-segregation

even at the educated levels and still only about 15% of our registered marriages are "mixed".

What yet have we to teach the outside world about harmony? Is a non-violent, but fragile and contentious political co-existence enough? In turn, a museum would belie our day-to-day rubbing along. We are a society in progress in Northern Ireland and hearteningly so. A Troubles museum would by definition petrify our differences.

Besides, many of us suffer from "Troubles fatigue" and the thought of being immersed in it all again would deter many of us from buying a ticket to our recent inglorious past.

Museums in divided societies work only when history can be turned into heritage, which nowadays means shareable history. We are a long way away from that where the Years of Disgrace are concerned.

I'm afraid the offence of those 30 years is too deep and raw for business consultants to remove with an entertaining money-spinner.

Titanic Belfast is the model for an even bigger museum. But it took a century for the tragedy of Titanic to become a Belfast visitor attraction. When Michael McCaughan and I were first publishing on Titanic in the 1990s, we were alone in Northern Ireland where, because of sectarian interpretations, silence and suspicion surrounded the ship and its fate.

But for Titanic, history did eventually lend itself to heritage. And it did so because there was much that was in the ship's memory that we could all take retroactive pride in - we once built great ships. "She was all right when she left Belfast," as the T-shirt boasts.

A locally-themed visitor attraction must have pride as its motivation. What is there to be proud of in our Years of Disgrace? There were, of course, gleams in the darkness - the bravery and dedication of firefighters, doctors, nurses, peace-making men of the cloth, anti-violence politicians. Unlikely, alas, to be the stars of the proposed museum.

The chief lesson of any commemoration of the conflict should be the wickedness of gratuitous violence - hardly the stuff of visitor attraction.

That leaves the tourists. Titanic Belfast is not primarily about tragedy: it is about a world-famous event with glamour amid the tragedy. I hope it is self-delusion to think that our vicious little war is, or should be, of global fame. As for glamour of a kind, I can think only of the legend of Bobby Sands - and that is hotly contested.

Because of the glamour of greatness, heroism and America, Titanic Belfast is not really what is called dark tourism, in which the places or occasions of tragedy or horror are revisited literally or virtually.

Black taxi tours of the neighbourhoods of conflict are a form of dark tourism and I for one have doubts about their morality.

On a more serious scale, Holocaust museums are possible because the cruelty and the suffering are one-sided. Rightly, they do not afford equal, or even any, space to Nazi justifications of their behaviour. Only a Nazi could be offended in such museums.

But in the proposed museum, the voices of the violent would have to be heard. That will pose difficulties that will, in my own small experience in this matter, prove insuperable.

As sure as gun's iron, every display case, every voice-over, every

virtual link, every material object, every caption, every "site-specific" history will be scrutinised and probably contested. Once, funded museums could operate without public input and oversight. No longer.

The proposed museum would approach international foundations and the EU for funding. They will demand the fair-mindedness and intellectual integrity that Professor Kennedy assumes will be on tap. He himself is one of the fairest-minded scholars it has been my privilege to know, but he is a rare bird in that.

Besides, fair-mindedness when it comes to violence in a divided society often translates as parity of culpability, which I for one reject, though certain others do not. The Years of Disgrace were a moral event, or they were nothing.

Then there are our politicians, whose parties and councils have to be consulted and petitioned for funding. I co-researched and co-wrote the permanent Belfast City Hall exhibition on the history and culture of the city. Three hundred and fifty years went almost swimmingly. And then came 1969.

It became apparent that a narrative of the three following decades acceptable to the committees of all the political parties was a mirage.

Our solution was a Reflection Room, displaying only heartbreaking statements by those who had suffered pain and loss. To me it was, in any case, preferable to an endlessly challenged story of who did what to whom - the Mobius Strip of whataboutery that we tread in Northern Ireland.

My inspirations were *Lost Lives* (perhaps the saddest book in the English language), certain poems by Michael Longley and the

Reflection Room of the early RMS Titanic artefact exhibitions, devised by the late George Tulloch.

The proposed museum could circumvent the contentiousness of the Years of Disgrace only by replicating the total complex reality. Virtual reality and digital technology encourage this illusion.

Professor Kennedy's vision of the digital museum threatens to re-create virtually (in both senses) the entire conflict. Among other things, visitors could "tune into significant events", including "killings, bombings".

McGurk's Bar could be virtually rebuilt, obviously to revisit the atrocity. Are other atrocities to be retrieved by the visitor? La Mon? The Shankill Butchers? There are obscure atrocities that haunt me to this day and I doubt if digital revisiting would exorcise their dark spirit.

It seems to me to be an invitation either to nightmare or to history emptied of its flesh-and-blood reality. The medium would be the message: we could certainly learn much from the museum, but we would also be there for a good time, to enjoy using interactively the marvellous gadgetry that shrinks the world and retrieves a past that was horrible, but not so horrible in controlled simulation.

The lure of amusement, I'm afraid, is hardwired into the digital screen technology of visitor attractions. And pair that with the certainty that the museum would have to centre-stage violence, the malign heart of the "Troubles".

The inevitable temptation is that of trivial pursuit. LoveBelfast beckons to me: "Come and experience Belfast's thrilling new escape room adventure, TITANIC: THE FINAL HOUR", one of Timescape's live escape games, 20% off all bookings.

There are many existing resources for trying to understand the conflict, including PRONI, Linenhall Library and the CAIN archive. There is a display in the Ulster Museum and there are tours of the peace walls and murals. Falls Community Council is curating an exhibition in the former St Comgall's school of the conflict's impact on the neighbourhood.

These are localised, discreet, even tentative representations of those 30 years, which is the way it should be.

A "mega-project" of the kind proposed would institutionalise the Years of Disgrace and, because it would be a "National Museum", establish them as the central inheritance of two generations and the dominant cultural heritage of the past.

Visit these diverse resources by all means. And read Liam Kennedy's brilliant and aptly-titled book, *Unhappy the Land*.

But give a thumbs-down to a National Museum of Unhappiness.

John Wilson Foster's *Between Shadows: Modern Irish Writing and Culture* was published by Irish Academic Press

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