Greeting History and Negotiating Peace

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Greeting History and Negotiating Peace

During a recent visit to Northern Ireland, I met representatives from different sides of the long standing political troubles. This essay represents one method for understanding their world and the problem of creating peace in Northern Ireland. This narrative is designed as a travelogue, a highly individualistic form of ethnographic writing. The purpose of such writing is to offer contemplations that are not normally congruent with more structured observational techniques nor typical political processes.

To begin, this essay addresses my personal expectations about a trip to Northern Ireland, the semiotics of expectation, and the inflation of the violent fantasy of what to expect once I arrived. Next, we meet three characters that represent the divisions that are normally associated with the violence in Northern Ireland. Lastly, this essay details the socio-spatial nature of fear and terrorism. The point of this essay is to highlight what the actual experience of visiting the locale, and talking to the people of the conflict area, can reveal to those seeking peace in locations characterized by persistent violence and political unrest.

Travel as Enlightenment

What did I expect when visiting Northern Ireland? Would I witness blood splattered victims running from the latest atrocity? Was it possible I was going to have to face the unpleasant reality of a child dying in the arms of its mother while a helpless soldier stands over them, his eyes to the rooftops, awaiting another burst of gunfire?

Many of these types of images plagued my thoughts as I was planning my trip. I constantly asked what was I going to see once I got there and could I handle it? The fear of what I feared would happen was greater than the northern situation itself.

This became clear as I entered the airport for my departure. The line at the airline counter was backed up against the wall behind the ticketing area.

Did you pack your bag?
Did you leave it for a period of time?

Hey, I never saw the need for all that fear must be everywhere in Northern Ireland does it? Dogs and guns? Do we need so much security? Should just visit Dulles?

If my cozy hometown was like these things, why as of now do I know trouble is happening?

After receiving my plane ticket and boarding pass towards the departure area, I passed through security and the mental process before bothered me was heightened expectations. I was acutely aware of every key, every gate, every procedure, I routinely ignored.

Ironically, an older gentleman of the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, security procedures was the security procedures that dreadful act. I am as the line crawled across the counter, chatted, changed, keys, and other items and put them in this bag that I plopped this bag onto the plane and strolled through the security wand and ran back to the plane and continued through the security wand and was able to board the plane and continue on my journey. I will never forget the look on my face as I boarded the plane and continued through the security wand and continued on my journey.
Northern Ireland, I ran different sides of troubles. This essay understanding their creating peace in making is designed as a fictionalistic form of ethnographic of such writing that are not normally unurer observational processes.\\\\Presences my personal northern Ireland, the inflation of the expect once I arrived.\\\\Visions that represent the associated with the mental. Lastly, this essay is to highlight visiting the locale, the conflict area, can in locations characterized and political unrest.\\\\Visiting Northern Ireland splattered victims reality? Was it possible the unpleasant reality of its mother while a them, his eyes to the burst of gunfire?\\\\Images plagued my trip. I constantly see once I got there and could I handle it? Funny, but what my mind feared would happen transpired much earlier than the northern shores of the Irish mainland. This became clear when I first arrived at the airport for my departing flight to London. I was in line at the airline counter and saw a sign on the wall behind the ticket booth.

Did you pack your bag?

Did you leave it alone for any extended period of time?

Hey, I never saw that before! Terrorism and fear must be everywhere! What is it going to be like in Northern Ireland? Strip searches? Guard dogs and guns? Do I want to do this? Maybe I should just visit Dublin and forget about Belfast. If my cozy hometown has to be warned about these things, why am I going to a place where I know trouble is happening?

After receiving my boarding pass, I walked towards the departure gate for the eventual loading of the plane. First, everyone had to go through security and the metal detectors. This had never before bothered me when traveling. With my heightened expectation of terrorism, I became acutely aware of every delay, every watchful eye, and every procedure normal passengers would routinely ignore.

Ironically, an elderly couple behind me talked of the Oklahoma City bombing and maybe that is why the security procedures were slower because of that dreadful act. I wondered about this myself as the line crawled forward. I took all of my change, keys, and other objects out of my pockets and put them in my carry-on baggage. I plopped this bag on the conveyer belt and strolled through the metal detectors.

"BUZZ"

"Do you have any coins in your pocket sir?"—

"No"

"Step back through again." —"BUZZ"—

"Please step over here."

God, what was this? I did not have any metal on me and the machine was still screaming terrorist. Was I ever going to get on the plane? As the security wand passed over me, the elderly
couple walked past. They were safe for boarding, but I was a suspect. Suddenly, I felt like I was born under a bad warning sign. Why me and why now? I soon learned it was my boots that made the machine scream. They had heavy metal eyelets and these had set off the machine. Great! What had I done? These were the only shoes I packed and now I was going to set off metal detectors everywhere. I was doomed to spend hours talking to airport security across the world and maybe even having guns pointed at me.

After boarding the plane, I settled in and started writing my journal notes. The signs, the buzzing of the security forces, it had all been a bit much for my taste. I decided that I had better calm down and settle in for the fourteen-hour trip ahead. I asked myself what I knew about Northern Ireland. Trying to remember my grade school European history class and various readings on Ireland, I remembered that Henry II took control of Ireland in 1172. Afterwards, the English Tudors took command of large tracts of land. They encouraged immigration of English and Scottish settlers into the far northern counties of Ireland. The six northern counties where the majority of these immigrants settled began to be called the “Orange State.” This name would become more politically charged after the separation of the northern counties from the other twenty-six counties of Ireland in 1922.

I also remembered that Irish writers had talked about the infamous “Era of the Black Act.” During this time, Irish culture was systematically suppressed and massive social changes came about as a result of the replacement of traditional Irish Law (Brehon Laws) with English law. Lastly, from the Act of Union in 1800 to the actual separation of the northern counties, numerous political decisions were made, and policies like the Coercion Acts were enacted by the English. Many of these decisions were, and are, seen as oppressive by Irish nationals.

I knew that many scholars thought the “troubles” in Northern Ireland only started during the late nineteen-sixties. In fact, considerable political violence had transpired between the separation years and the fifties, a rash of IRA, both Protestants and Catholics in the early sixties, the Ulster Protestants and Ulster Catholics responsible for a concerted effort against Catholics. The British Parliament in 1972 passed the Terrorism Act. British reactions related to terrorism and the call for equitability between dominantly Catholic and Protestant.

The expectations of what Northern Ireland would be like, and what it would be like in that environment, required some experiences. If we have terrorism in the streets, we expect terrorism. If we expect that terrorism, we find signs of such actions. These expectations are our media images, our societal discussions. They can be fueled by the advice of friends, and by the unjustified preconceptions we arrive in the area with.

Were the fears I had real and I suspect we are considering the expectations of others. I asked myself if my expectations change the way we visit in Northern Ireland. Arriving in the United Kingdom, tight security that surpasses for departing flights, the armed guards, walls, and the extra procedures dedicated for travelers who are considered for travel. Many of these manifestations of my fears are the violent image held in the violent image that settling in my temporary home. The expectations are that to visit Northern Ireland, they are considering a horrible experience. My idea was unwise.
I felt like I was going to set off the machine. They had heavy security across the country, guns pointed at me. I settled in and mentioned to my fellow researchers that I was going to visit Northern Ireland. Some asked, "Oh, you are considering a holiday are you?" as if such an idea was unwise. Still others said, "You are going to Northern Ireland?" as if to question my sanity. They all felt this was a dangerous decision. They reinforced my prejudices, phobias, and fears. It was clear that others shared whatever I was feeling about Northern Ireland. We felt that the trip was dangerous, risky, and potentially ominous events could occur.

What interested me most about the situation was that this advice was given to me unsolicited. I began to suspect that ethnocentrism was the root of some of these fears and no actual experience was behind our trepidation. Regardless of these slight misgivings, I was fully engaged in the violent fantasy of terrorist-induced mental chaos. Each night I worried about my trip before drifting off to sleep and during the next day I debated changing my plans to include a visit to Paris instead. After some soul searching, I decided to just go, see what it was like, and test the edge of my own fears. After all, if I did not like it I could retreat to Dublin.

Arriving

Arriving in the United Kingdom, I noticed the tight security that surrounded the ticket counters for departing flights to Northern Ireland. I saw the armed guards, special instructions on the walls, and the extra check-in procedures dedicated for travelers heading into "trouble." I saw manifestations of my fears and signs related to the violent image hysteria I had ingested. After settling in my temporary post in Scotland, I mentioned to my fellow researchers that I was going to visit Northern Ireland. Some asked, "Oh, you are considering a holiday are you?" as if such an idea was unwise. Still others said, "You are going to Northern Ireland?" as if to question my sanity. They all felt this was a dangerous decision. They reinforced my prejudices, phobias, and fears. It was clear that others shared whatever I was feeling about Northern Ireland. We felt that the trip was dangerous, risky, and potentially ominous events could occur.

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carry a military duffel bag into Northern Ireland), and American accent were enough signs that I was not exactly one of them. My new buddies included Richard, Dennis, and Alan. Richard was a single traveler. Dennis and Alan were returning from a holiday in Liverpool, England. They were football fanatics and were still excited about the defeat of the all powerful Manchester United team the day before.

We chatted about our trips, the score of the game, and about how rough the trip across the Irish Sea would be. A deep undercurrent of fear was here. In my case it was an extension of my expectations. In Richard's case it was because he had been away from home for five-and-a-half years and could not wait to see his family and friends. The two football fanatics were worried about being too drunk to be admitted by the customs inspectors.

The bar soon filled with the mothers, children, and fathers of Northern Ireland. Richard was the first to break for the bartender and asked “What would you like?” I said “A pint o' Guinness.” Dennis and Alan went with him to get drinks and I stayed at the tables and with the luggage. God, what had I done? Are you nuts I asked myself? What was I doing watching someone's luggage— “Your pint.” “Thanks, Cheers!” Richard looked at me funny and said that was not the Irish greeting for beer, it was British.

As the beer flowed, the stories gushed forth. After a three day binge, the two boys were more than full of who drank what and how much. I learned they were factory workers, had large families, worked hard, and once a year got to shed their responsibilities and cut loose. I quickly recognized the symptoms of acute work-induced self-indulgence. Once, during this discussion, I saw a sign of depression on Alan’s face. I asked what was wrong when Richard and Dennis went to the head. Forgiving my cultural forthrightness, he told me how he and his wife had a fight over this trip. He was sure she was going to be mad when he got home. He was not even sure he had a home to go to. Dennis remained very withdrawn. “I react differently to tattoos,” Dennis said, “see the tattoo to another tattoo he has had, and the names of everyone not the tattoo that fills his blank spaces. His life not go accordingly, so does the thing else in those blank spaces. His tattoo and another interested in. Three simple and to the point of the outlawed UVF. Simple and to the Protestant group known as terrorism activities and the terror inhabiting religion.

Richard rolled up his T-shirt and admired his wonder and fantastic colors. He talked about how, when he was a few years in Europe, they had begun to amaze him. As a magnet them helpful in getting few ducats at street corners. He had begun to amaze a lad in Derry.

Soon after, Richard and Dennis leaned over and whispered, “What? Huh? Did I understand.” “He is from Derry.” I was stunned. It seems so normal. However...

In the space of a few months in the Northern Ireland close. They did not mean violence should be. F
Northern Ireland, it was enough signs of recent violence. My new buddies were Dennis and Alan. Richard and Alan were relatives from Liverpool, England. I was still excited to meet the helpful Manchester lads.

Richard on the other hand was silent. He watched us and looked preoccupied. He was of the IRA. He also had little money and was hungry. The two friends knew what he was and fed him anyway. In spite of the knowledge these two fanatics shared, they did not create problems for Richard. Maybe it was the fact that he was going home after five-and-a-half years. It could be the recent cease-fire agreement at work. Then again, maybe it was a willingness to forgive and forget. These were thin lines between love and hate. Maybe the lines were thinner from their perspective.

Later, I got the chance to talk to Richard about the "troubles" in Northern Ireland. In the last few minutes of the trip our two friends went looking for a quicker route off of the ship. Richard and I were left alone. I asked about them and he told me they were just working men and nice enough guys. I asked about the bitter sweetness of coming home after so long. He told me that it would be nice to see his family, visit with his long lost cousins, and see the many children who were born since he left Ireland years ago. It was clear that he missed his family and was looking forward to a reunion. He also talked about the possibility of this reunion being short lived. "I'll pay for my mistakes." I figured he was talking about what prompted him to spend five-and-a-half years away from his home, family, and

a home to go to. Dennis returned, saw his friend's face, and assured him that it was going to be all right.

Richard had a fight over something I said, "I don't understand." "He is IRA ... He said he is from Derry." I was stunned. Is it this simple? Richard seems so normal. How can a juggler be political?

In the space of a few pints I had met both sides in the Northern Ireland tango and seen them up close. They did not meet my expectations of what violence should be. How could they be so friendly and still represent such violence? We still ate and drank together even after it was clear that Richard was at least a sympathizer of the IRA. He also had little money and was hungry. The two friends knew what he was and fed him anyway. In spite of the knowledge these two fanatics shared, they did not create problems for Richard. Maybe it was the fact that he was going home after five-and-a-half years.
country. He was glad for the cease-fire and hoped for lasting peace.

After that, I sensed tenseness in him and said my goodbyes. I walked quickly away from his two member family greeting party. I had just seen people on the edge walk the thin line between love and hate successfully. Maybe it is our fear of the unknown that keeps us from such acceptance.

**Peace and Change**

What is it about political violence that holds us so fearful of the world? What quality of terror continues to hold sway once we have met the “enemy” and found them to be very much like us? The next morning I boarded a train for Belfast. I wondered what was over the next hill and where I would be that night. I had read my travel guide and picked out a place to stay, a cheap Bed and Breakfast near downtown. It was close to the train station. This proximity made for easy access if a quick get away was needed.

Downtown Belfast was described in my guide in unflattering terms. The guide said the downtown shopping area had been blocked off to vehicular traffic because of terrorist car bombs. In my mind I saw thirty square blocks of guard dogs, armed patrols, and riot police. This image was reinforced by the fact that there was no loo in the train station. I guess past incidents taught security officials not to let people hide packages in public places. On the bus trip into the downtown area, I also noticed that video surveillance and barbed wire were present on some buildings, but not to any greater extent than say, Los Angeles or New York. One four-block area of government buildings had a high wall around it and this seemed a bit unusual.

Once I actually got downtown, what struck me most was what I did not see. There were no guard dogs, no riot police, and no trouble. Belfast was a teeming center of commerce. The thirty square blocks of but this city was: conspicuous consumers scurrying back and forth.

I sought a resting place and called others in the guide. The tourist office told me to try the restaurant across the street—the room was available. Even on a Tuesday night, it was not hard to find a room. Even on a Tuesday night, it was not hard to find a room. Perhaps the peace was not an illusion due to large numbers from the south. It was not a dark city, nor was it not terror or talk, encouraged by the fact that there was no loo in the train station. I guess past incidents taught security officials not to let people hide packages in public places. On the bus trip into the downtown area, I also noticed that video surveillance and barbed wire were present on some buildings, but not to any greater extent than say, Los Angeles or New York. One four-block area of government buildings had a high wall around it and this seemed a bit unusual.

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All Drug Dealers Will Be Killed
After 25 Years Fighting Republicans
Drug Dealers Are Next

Falls Road is where many working class Catholics live, shop, and work. These are the poorer neighborhoods of Belfast. The two main roads (Shankill and Falls) run roughly parallel. Between parts of the two roads runs a wall. On that wall one can find a visual history of the troubles. A history not told by our popular cultural inflamed expectations, but clearly one sometimes still written in blood. The wall was constructed to keep both sides away from each other.

Reading about the wall before visiting, I visualized Berlin, complete with Soviet land mines and armed Comrades. What I saw were more graffiti and automobile body shops. I was unsure of how to feel about all of this, since on the Falls Road side of the wall the political graffiti was somewhat different.

Remember Bobby Sands
Drug Dealers Out
Demilitarize Now, Disarm The R.U.C.

In both parts of town the memory of the “troubles” was still fresh. The scabs had not healed and much of the collective memory was trapped by the past. Just as the Loyalists saw a world full of British pride and one where the sun never set on the Empire, the Republicans saw never ending oppression. The

...square blocks of downtown not only had traffic but this city was jumping. Quality goods, conspicuous consumption, and thousands of people scurrying back and forth. What was happening here?

I sought a resting place but my B&B was closed. I called others in my travel guide but to no avail. The tourist office told me the reason I could not find a room was that the city was full of visitors. Even on a Tuesday, hotel rooms were scarce because large numbers of tourists were visiting from the south. It seems now that a peace accord was in place, tens of thousands of Irish citizens came north to visit relatives and friends. Business was booming. Belfast was jumping. With the help of the Tourist Office, I found a place to stay. I left the tourist office and caught a bus to the burbs and my Ravenhill Road home in Belfast.

I spent days exploring the city by bus. I rode the trains to nearby cities and deep into the countryside. Everywhere I saw signs of what a wonderful place this was: clean, dynamic, and thriving. Northern Ireland was teeming with life. It was not a dark and gloomy place to visit. It was not terror on the hoof.

People wanted to talk, encouraged you to explore, and were exceptionally nice.

Along Shankill Road is where some of the Protestant working class neighborhoods are located. Growing up I had lived in housing projects very much like these. This part of the city was typical suburbs interrupted by large multi-storied public housing projects. During visits to these buildings, I noticed the poverty but also the flower gardens, children at play, and elderly women enjoying the day from their park benches.

What did strike me the most were the overt symbols of nationalism and the interesting political graffiti on the walls. Union Jacks were everywhere. British flags flew in front of buildings, were painted on the side of pubs, and displayed in store windows. In many places I saw graffiti with a new message:

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business leaders of the city visualized hope and the wall spoke an uneasy peace.

The complexity of the situation does not give up quick and easy answers. The fears that people carry and that are transmitted from one generation to the next are very real. For example, my preconceptions of what this place would be like and your reading of this essay are part of that same process, one culture removed.

Regardless of how I felt, both sides have lost many people in this struggle. The social costs of twenty-five years of trouble can be measured in many ways. Businesses see the loss of tourist dollars. Everyone is affected by the fear factor one must feel while living in Belfast. It is hard for us to imagine the degradation in the quality of life for Belfast residents caused by such constant tension. Nevertheless, one could see the resilience of this city and its people. This is a city of life, not fear, as an outsider might imagine.

Who Is Mining The Trouble

On this trip I did not have the time to gain entry into the everyday life of the people in Northern Ireland. Interestingly, I encountered some resistance from the structures of power to my most casual questions about the development of the peace process. They wanted to know why I asking. For example, in the Linen Library I was denied access to the special collection regarding the troubles. The reason expressed by the librarian was that every essay written by an American was pro-Catholic; he was clearly not amused by this history. This governmental bureaucracy was not prepared for the costs of peace, costs like free access to information and even polite questioning of authority.

Maybe it was ethnocentric to think that the power brokers should be interested in my questions. What I am sure of is that the fear I felt prior to visiting Belfast was alive and well in the halls of power. I was also sure that the “facts” of social life in Northern Ireland were different from the “reality” that I found when contacting those social structures of power. Fear was there; it smelled up the halls and made rank any interaction one had with the government.

What does one learn from such a journey? We learn that we can not easily overcome our fears and that peace is dependent on just this type of social action. If you have a fear of the unknown, if you fear turmoil, and if life is frightening, then peace has its drawbacks. You can’t romanticize what happens, but engagement with the issues, even at this casual of a level, offers a chance for peace and a chance for a transformative moment. The journey is sometimes brutal, sometimes gentle, and most times different from your everyday experience.