



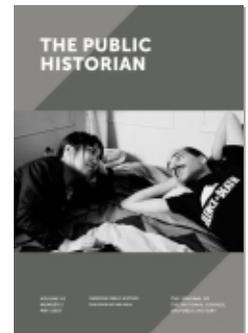
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Gay Life and Liberation, a Photographic Record of 1970s
Belfast: Exhibiting Private Photographs and Oral Histories

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Gay Life and Liberation, a Photographic Record of 1970s Belfast

Exhibiting Private Photographs and Oral Histories

Rachel Wallace

ABSTRACT: In March 2017, the first LGBTQ+ history exhibition to be displayed at a national museum in Northern Ireland debuted at the Ulster Museum. The exhibition, entitled “Gay Life and Liberation: A Photographic Exhibition of 1970s Belfast,” included private photographs captured by Doug Sobey, a founding member of gay liberation organizations in Belfast during the 1970s, and featured excerpts from oral histories with gay and lesbian activists. It portrayed the emergence of the gay liberation movement during the Troubles and how the unique social, political, and religious situation in Northern Ireland fundamentally shaped the establishment of a gay identity and community in the 1970s. By displaying private photographs and personal histories, it revealed the hidden history of the LGBTQ+ community to the museum-going public. The exhibition also enhanced and extended the histories of the Troubles, challenging traditional assumptions and perceptions of the conflict.

KEY WORDS: oral history, photographs, Ulster Museum, LGBTQ+, the Troubles

“I don’t think homosexuality is normal sexual activity,” declared Jim Allister, the leader of the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV), a hardline unionist party, and member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) for North Antrim, in 2017.¹ In another interview he stated, “It is foolishness to rewrite history.”² These remarks referred to the possible extension of the “Alan Turing Law” to Northern Ireland, which if approved, would grant a retrospective pardon to queer men who had previously been convicted of consensual same-sex relations before the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1982.³ By the same token, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the largest political party in the Northern Ireland Assembly, repeatedly blocked any

¹ Steven Nolan, *The Nolan Show*, BBC Radio Foyle, February 15, 2017.

² “Jim Allister: Retrospective Gay Pardons May Be Illegal in Northern Ireland,” *The News Letter* (Belfast, Northern Ireland), October 31, 2016.

³ “Alan Turing law: Thousands of Gay Men to be Pardoned,” BBC News, December 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-25495315>.

attempts to extend equal marriage rights to Northern Ireland.⁴ Thus Northern Ireland holds the peculiar position of being the only place in the United Kingdom and Ireland that does not allow marriage between committed couples of the same sex. In contrast, the other parts of the United Kingdom legalized marriage equality in 2013, and in 2015 the Republic of Ireland notably legalized same-sex marriage by public referendum. In 2015, a survey found that 68 percent of adults in Northern Ireland supported same-sex marriage, but a controversial veto, known as the petition of concern, thwarted any attempts to introduce legal changes in Northern Ireland.⁵ A petition of concern, initially created to safeguard power-sharing between nationalist and unionist parties, insists that a proposal presented in the Assembly can only pass with the support of a majority of both nationalist and unionist members, rather than by a direct count. Motivated by conservative evangelical religious beliefs, these two unionist parties used the petition of concern to block the extension of same-sex marriage. It is against this contentious backdrop and polemic contemporary debate that an exhibition entitled “Gay Life and Liberation: A Photographic Record of 1970s Belfast” opened at the Ulster Museum in Belfast, Northern Ireland from March 14 to April 23, 2017.

Displaying a collection of previously unseen private photographs, accompanied by excerpts from oral histories, this exhibition used personal experiences to raise public awareness about the wider history of the gay liberation movement during the Troubles. In Northern Ireland, the Troubles (1968–98) were a thirty-year long ethnosectarian internecine conflict between unionists/loyalists who were mostly Protestant and nationalists/republicans who were mostly Catholic—a division fostered by separate neighborhood enclaves with their own schools.⁶ The outbreak of the Troubles was preceded by a civil rights campaign seeking to end discrimination against the Catholic minority. Threatened by the perceived rise in militant Irish republicanism, unionists with an ardent zeal to remain part of the United Kingdom also became militarized.⁷ Attacks and reprisals perpetrated by republican and loyalist paramilitaries rapidly resulted in a province that became mired in violence and community division. Everyday life in Belfast was fundamentally transformed from the late 1960s as citizens faced bombings, army checkpoints,

4 “Gay People Don’t Really Want to Get Married, Claims Northern Ireland’s First Minister,” *Pink News*, October 28, 2016, <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2016/10/28/gay-people-dont-really-want-to-get-married-claims-northern-irelands-first-minister/>.

5 Claire Cromie, “Gay Marriage Now Has Overwhelming Support in Northern Ireland—Poll,” *The Belfast Telegraph*, July 6, 2015.

6 See for example, Bob Purdie, *Politics in the Streets: The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1990); Simon Prince, *Northern Ireland’s ’68: Civil Rights, Global Revolt and the Origins of The Troubles* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007); David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: A History of the Northern Ireland Conflict* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 2002).

7 The historiography of the Troubles is hotly contested with frequent disagreements over the causes, motivations, and consequences of the struggle. See for example: Jim Smyth, ed., *Remembering the Troubles: Contesting the Recent Past in Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

and curfews. The Troubles accelerated an already existing focus on sectarianism above all other social issues, and the tensions between Catholics and Protestants, unionists and nationalists became paramount. Even after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, tensions remained and continue to permeate Northern Irish society. With limited resolution in post-conflict Northern Ireland, the difficulties of representing its contested history and dealing with the legacy of the past continue to plague all of those engaged in public history of the Troubles.⁸

There is no doubt that the unique social, political, and religious situation in Northern Ireland has had a fundamental impact on the establishment of a gay identity and community. The exhibition publicized how gay men and women forged a community amid sectarian conflict while also facing arrest, police harassment, religious discrimination, and societal condemnation. Alongside the photographs, it displayed excerpts from oral histories that provided personal stories of gay life during the Troubles, revealing not only negative experiences of discrimination, fear, and suffering but also the poignancy of romance, kinship, and triumph. Consequently, by highlighting the robust and resilient spirit of the gay community despite all obstacles, this exhibition challenged the established historical representations of 1970s Belfast. In exhibitions, films, art, and literature, 1970s Belfast has been depicted as an intensely violent city dealing with civil unrest and sectarian conflict with limited interactions between the Catholic and Protestant communities.⁹ The exhibition claimed a legitimate space for the gay community in the history of Northern Ireland and offered an original and alternative insight into the well-documented history of the Troubles. Furthermore, it demonstrated the value of sharing individual personal experiences in a public forum to create a broader understanding of gay life.

In the words of one interviewee reflecting upon life in Belfast, it “would [have made] a massive difference if gay people were just commonplace.”¹⁰ However, being openly gay in 1970s Belfast was less than commonplace; in a city ruled by terrorist threat, the violation of neighborhood norms could elicit deadly consequences. This exhibition exposed the nuances of life in a city riddled with sectarian conflict, where Catholic or Protestant identifiers separated the populace and identifying as gay often resulted in rejection from both communities. A holistic and well-rounded consideration of the Troubles is enhanced by adding detail to the broad brush strokes of religious dichotomy and providing access to the content of this hitherto private collection provides rich insight into the complexity of latent societal divisions in Northern Ireland at the time.

8 Elizabeth Croke, “Dealing with the Past: Museums and Heritage in Northern Ireland and Cape Town, South Africa,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11, no. 2 (2005): 133.

9 See for example: Brian Cliff, ed., *Representing the Troubles: Texts and Images, 1970–2000* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004); Michael L. Storey, *Representing the Troubles in Irish Short Fiction* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004); and Jim Smyth, ed., *Remembering the Troubles: Contesting the Recent Past in Northern Ireland* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

10 Anonymous, interview by author, February 2, 2017, Belfast.

Ulster Museum and Representing the Troubles

Designated as a national museum by the 1961 Museum Act (Northern Ireland), the Ulster Museum initially only featured art and natural history exhibitions. Exhibiting historical collections was not a priority and exhibiting LGBTQ+ history was unthinkable. A local history section opened in the museum in 1978, with exhibits covering the history of Ulster from the seventeenth century.¹¹ Curators struggled to present exhibitions that would not offend the nationalist or unionist communities, often opting for temporary rather than permanent displays. The shadow of the Troubles even impacted unrelated exhibitions; for example, curators of the prehistoric Ireland exhibit feared criticism due to the name “Early Ireland” rather than “Early Ulster.”¹² In 1978, Protestant museum workers successfully thwarted the acquisition of artwork by Conrad Atkinson that depicted Bloody Sunday, a major attack in 1972 against nationalists by the British army.¹³ In response, the museum was criticized for prioritizing a unionist viewpoint, particularly within the historical collections. One critic, Anthony Buckley, former curator of the Ulster American Folk Park, claimed that the Ulster Museum represented the “ideals of the new Protestant semi-independent state [representing] the somewhat aggressive triumph of Protestantism, Capitalism and the British Empire.”¹⁴ Before the temporary closure of the museum in 2006, curators attempted to renovate exhibitions to reflect both unionist and nationalist viewpoints.¹⁵ Historical displays aimed for neutrality, often avoiding the contentious contemporary past, a decision that frustrated visitors.

The refurbished Ulster Museum opened in 2009 with a completely new open-plan layout and five zones that addressed different aspects of history, nature, and art.¹⁶ As the Ulster Museum evolved, curators endeavored to portray unionist and nationalist perspectives in all appropriate collections and exhibits. The newly opened Ulster Museum included the Troubles gallery, consisting of black-and-white displays focusing on key moments during the thirty-year struggle. The Troubles exhibition emphasized newsreels and photographs to address the history and legacy of the conflict. A hyper-awareness of the need for neutrality in objects, labels, and interpretation led to criticism of an “over-sanitized approach.”¹⁷ In 2010,

11 Noel Nesbitt, *A Museum in Belfast: A History of the Ulster Museum and its Predecessors* (Antrim: W. & G. Baird for the Ulster Museum, 1979).

12 Ibid. Unionists often referred to Northern Ireland as Ulster and emphasized that it was a part of the United Kingdom. They disliked any reference to Northern Ireland as being part of Ireland as they felt that this did not recognize the partition of Ireland and British sovereignty.

13 Jonathan Jones, “Belfast’s Ulster Museum and the Trouble with The Troubles,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2010.

14 Gemma Reid, “Redefining Nation, Identity and Tradition: The Challenges for Ireland’s National Museums,” in *Ireland’s Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity*, ed. Mark McCarthy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 213.

15 Karine Brigand, “How is Ulster’s History Represented in Northern Ireland’s Museums? The Cases of the Ulster Folk Museum and the Ulster Museum,” *E-rea* 8, no. 3 (2011).

16 “Ulster Museum Back in Business,” Northern Ireland News, BBC, October 22, 2009.

17 Karine Bigand, “Peace in History and Heritage: Some thoughts on a Museum of Peace in Northern Ireland,” *E-rea* 10, no. 1 (2012).

one museum reviewer stated, “it would be a futile exercise to comment on this particular exhibition. The museum itself acknowledges that this is recent history with conflicting interpretations of these years.”¹⁸ In contrast community groups unsatisfied with neutrality or sanitized displays have grappled with representing the complex history of the Troubles by presenting their own exhibitions in their own spaces which concentrated on one viewpoint or neighborhood.¹⁹ The “Collecting the Troubles and Beyond” project acknowledged critiques and will eventually transform the Troubles gallery using the new acquisitions. Although previously hesitant, the Ulster Museum is embracing and incorporating the tension between national histories and personal memories.²⁰

Gay Life in the 1970s

The laws regarding homosexuality in Northern Ireland differed from the rest of the United Kingdom in the 1970s. Although the 1967 Sexual Offences Act decriminalized homosexuality in England and Wales, it remained illegal in Northern Ireland throughout the 1970s. Northern Ireland, although officially part of the United Kingdom, operated under a devolved government that allowed control over domestic affairs between 1920 and 1972. Due to the sectarian violence, Westminster imposed Direct Rule in 1972 which divested the Northern Ireland Assembly of any major political or legislative powers. Despite the introduction of Direct Rule, the law criminalizing homosexuality in Northern Ireland remained unchanged as the British government focused their attention on the conflict rather than other social issues. Jeff Dudgeon, a prominent subject in the photographic exhibition, initiated a case against the British government at the European Commission of Human Rights in 1975. This eventually resulted in the decriminalization of homosexuality in Northern Ireland in 1982.²¹

The enduring laws against homosexuality in Northern Ireland did not exist in letter only. The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) enforced the laws throughout the 1960s and 1970s, arresting and jailing men for homosexual offences no longer illegal in England and Wales.²² Many of the activists featured in the exhibition faced police harassment and interrogation. In 1976 the RUC launched an investigation into the activities of gay liberation groups in Belfast, questioning at least twenty-two men. Michael Workman angrily recalled the RUC raids and policemen’s threats to reveal his sexuality to his employers. He explained, “It was

18 Tony Canavan, “The Ulster Museum,” *History Ireland* 18, no. 2 (March/April 2010): 53.

19 Elizabeth Crooke, “Putting Contested History on Display: The Uses of the Past in Northern Ireland,” in *(Re)Visualizing National History: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium*, ed. Ostow Robin (University of Toronto Press, 2008), 98–101.

20 Susan A. Crane, “Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum,” *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (December 1997): 44–63.

21 *Dudgeon v. United Kingdom*, European Court of Human Rights, September 23, 1981.

22 See for example: “Homosexual Case: Man (66) Sent to Jail,” *Belfast Telegraph*, October 13, 1967.

Gay Liberation Society Dinner, Midland Hotel, 1975

Commenting on the gay social scene, Stephen Birkett said *'I never felt that the sectarianism that was rife in the rest of Northern Ireland was evident on the gay scene. LGBT people didn't seem to worry too much about what community you came from. It was a very integrated scene...because they were sort of like outcasts almost—or felt outcast—or felt rejected—by their own communities in a way. They had more in common with each other than they had differences with each other.'*

Exhibition label with oral history excerpt. (Image courtesy of author)

unbelievably terrifying,” and “I felt quite vulnerable at times.”²³ The repressive laws attempted to limit gay organizing and push bold activists back into the closet; the exhibition publicly accorded recognition to the resilience of the gay community in 1970s Belfast.

The religious conservatism of both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland led to vigorous opposition towards anything promoting the legalization of divorce, homosexuality, or abortion.²⁴ The increase in nationalism (both Irish and British) during the Troubles also contributed to societal disapproval of homosexuality. The ethnosectarian nationalism of the Troubles valorized patriotic masculinity and condemned homosexuality as effeminate, weak, and unpatriotic, and as a result, both the nationalist and unionist communities rejected and condemned homosexuality.²⁵ In the late 1970s, amid the sectarian conflict, the DUP launched a large anti-homosexuality campaign called “Save Ulster from Sodomy.” The campaign opposed reform of anti-homosexual laws in Northern Ireland, concurrently being debated at the European Court of Human Rights. The

²³ Michael Workman, interview by author, December 8, 2016.

²⁴ See for example, Karen Conrad, “Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish National Identity,” *Cultural Studies* 15, no. 1 (2001): 124–37.

²⁵ Rob Kitchin and Karen Lysaght, “Sexual Citizenship in Belfast, Northern Ireland,” *Gender, Place and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2004): 85; Catherine Nash, “Embodied Irishness: Gender, Sexuality and Irish Identities,” in *In Search of Ireland*, ed. Brian Graham (London: Routledge, 1995), 108–27.

petition received 68,431 signatures and was endorsed by the Catholic Church and numerous Protestant denominations.²⁶

Gay liberation activists defiantly established a counterprotest “to expose the ludicrousness of the ‘Save Ulster from Sodomy’ campaign.”²⁷ One photograph in the exhibition shows activists Doug Sobey and Jeff Dudgeon smiling side-by-side in front of a “Save Ulster from Sodomy” poster. In 1973, Sobey, a native of Canada, had moved to Belfast for a job at Queen’s University Belfast.²⁸ He quickly became involved in the only gay group active in the city, the Gay Liberation Society (GLS), founded in 1972 at the university. Alongside many of the activists shown in the exhibition, he cofounded the gay organizations Cara-Friend and Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) which are still in operation today. Cara-Friend, founded in 1974, provided information for gay, questioning, or closeted people throughout Northern Ireland. LGBTQ+ volunteers answered letters and telephone calls and also befriended clients to help them accept their sexual orientation and integrate into the gay social scene.²⁹ NIGRA, founded in 1975, campaigned for the decriminalization of homosexuality in the province. The photographs in the exhibition portrayed the early activities of these organizations and the lives of many of the members.

Creating the Exhibition

The seeds of the exhibition project began in a small room in Queen’s University Belfast, with the exhibition team holding 35mm photographic slides up to the light while listening to Doug Sobey contextualize the photographs and identify the friends and acquaintances pictured within the celluloid slides. On meeting Doug for an oral history interview about gay life during the Troubles on March 4, 2016, he mentioned a small collection of personal photographs that he had taken in the 1970s. Later he brought along four small boxes of 35mm celluloid slides depicting photographs of the everyday life of his gay social circle in the 1970s. Concurrently, the Ulster Museum began a Heritage Lottery Funded-project entitled “Collecting the Troubles and Beyond” which aimed to enhance the museum’s contemporary collections with particular focus on gathering more material relating to underrepresented minorities such as LGBTQ+ experiences.³⁰ In an effort to diversify its collections around the Troubles, the museum placed notices in the local newspapers requesting archival donations. The museum stressed that “The Troubles did not take place in a vacuum—major changes were taking place in society and the economy at the same time. The reality of life is reflected in our personal memories

26 Homosexual Law Correspondence, Northern Ireland Office (NIO), NIO/9/2/2/6, Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI).

27 Richard Kennedy, interview by author, December 20, 2016, Belfast.

28 Doug Sobey, interview by author, March 4, 2016, Belfast.

29 Cara Friend Annual Report 1974–1975, Cara-Friend Papers, D4437/4/8, PRONI.

30 See for example, “Share your Experiences of the Troubles,” *Banbridge Leader*, November 22, 2016.

and the photographs and mementoes that underpin our family history.”³¹ As a response to this appeal encouraging individuals to share their diverse experiences during the Troubles, Doug and I decided to organize a photographic exhibition based on his personal snapshots of gay life in Belfast in the 1970s. These photographs were combined with excerpts from oral history interviews with gay men and lesbians that I had conducted during my Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded PhD project undertaken at Queen’s University Belfast over the previous two years. A subsequent partnership with exhibitions curator Karen Logan at the Ulster Museum facilitated the addition of other personal photographs and provided institutional support to create the exhibition. After meeting with Karen Logan in late November 2016, we were informed that the Ulster Museum only had one opening available for a temporary exhibition in March and April, and therefore the curators had four months to select the photographs, design the labels, contact subjects for permissions, and organize a launch party. When the exhibition ended, Doug Sobey and other gay activists bestowed their personal photographs to the Ulster Museum for posterity. Therefore, the development of this temporary exhibition afforded the museum a permanent addition to their archival collections.

The exhibition had two main objectives. Firstly, the exhibition enhanced and extended the histories of the Troubles, challenging traditional assumptions and perceptions of the conflict. Secondly, by displaying private photographs and personal histories, it revealed the hidden history of the LGBTQ+ community to the general museum-going public. In order to most effectively do so, the curators advertised the exhibition as part of the “Collecting the Troubles and Beyond” project in the Ulster Museum. Housed in the Belfast Room, the temporary exhibition on gay life in 1970s Belfast was physically separated from the main gallery, but nevertheless the violence of the Troubles and the impact of sectarianism were clearly acknowledged within the exhibition labels and oral history excerpts.

The aims underpinning the exhibition were based on a fundamental belief in LGBTQ+ equality. Ongoing discussions around continuing legal and social discrimination peppered conversations as photographs were chosen and labels designed. Together Karen Logan, Doug Sobey, and I selected the images that we felt represented queer activism and community connections during the Troubles. The photographs depicted informal get-togethers, beach trips, and dinner parties alongside images of protests and political organizing, particularly in the Cara-Friend offices. Public exposure of personalized histories aimed to emphasize the existence, value, trials, and tribulations of gay life, past and present, to uninterested, uninformed, or intolerant visitors. Speaking at the American Historical Association in 2012, Don Romesburg highlighted the value of actively presenting LGBTQ+ history to multiple publics. He stated, “Simply bearing witness to the struggles for

³¹ “Ulster Museum to Collect Personal Stories From the Troubles,” *The Irish News*, November 11, 2016.

access to civil rights, markets, subcultures, relationships, and our bodies and psyches can, in itself, richly affirm queer lives. For many non-LGBT museum visitors, just the demonstration of LGBT belonging can be revelatory.”³² Likewise, in Northern Ireland, the experiences of the past play a crucial role in the construction of identity and belonging for all communities.³³ The exhibition aimed to position the LGBTQ+ history of Belfast as a subject worthy of documenting, highlighting the value of gay pasts to both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ visitors. The exhibition emphasized that gay histories “merit the cultural respect that comes with a history honored in the traditional venue of a museum.”³⁴ Several scholars have stressed the revolutionary potential of queer museums and LGBTQ+ exhibitions, as “queer public history initiatives suggest that the social, economic, political and sexual regimes that structure LGBT life are historically contingent—and may therefore be susceptible to change, even to transformation directly through our own actions.”³⁵ In a country where resistance to marriage equality remains, despite increasing societal approval, an exhibition showing the successes of dissent and the possibility of social change was timely.³⁶

Exhibiting Oral Histories

The political and legal repercussions of collecting reminiscences of the Troubles haunts all oral historians working on the conflict, as “documenting the past appears decidedly hazardous for all concerned.”³⁷ Contemporary oral history research about life during the Troubles exists under the shadow of the controversy surrounding Boston College’s “Belfast Project.” Having recorded interviews with former paramilitary members, the Belfast Project promised participants that the content of the interviews would only be released posthumously. However, the Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) petitioned the British government to subpoena the archive to release the interviews, claiming they were related to a 1972 murder.³⁸ In response to the Belfast Project controversy, the Oral History Society (OHS) issued a statement reiterating that if a narrator divulged criminal activity, this

32 Don Romesburg, “Going Viral with Brick-and-Mortar Queer History: Opening the GLBT History Museum,” American Historical Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois, 2012. See also “About QTM,” <https://queeringthemuseum.org/about/>; “The Un-Straight Museum,” <https://unstraight.squarespace.com/>; and “History is Resistance Campaign,” GLBT History Museum, <http://www.glbthistory.org/historyisresistance/>.

33 Croke, “The Uses of the Past in Northern Ireland,” 103.

34 Gerard Koskovich, “Displaying the Queer Past: Purposes, Publics and Possibilities at the GLBT History Museum,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 71.

35 Ibid.

36 Jon Tonge, “Survey: Voters Polarised on Same-Sex Marriage, Brexit, an Irish Language Act in Northern Ireland,” *Belfast Telegraph*, July 28, 2017.

37 Ruan O’Donnell, “Oral History and the Politics of the Troubles: The Boston College Tapes,” *History Ireland* 20, no. 2 (March/April 2012): 13.

38 Henry McDonald, “Boston College Ordered by US Court to Hand over IRA Tapes,” *The Guardian*, April 25, 2016.

would void assurances of confidentiality.³⁹ The OHS did not discuss potential issues or consequences for narrators admitting to behavior that had been illegal in the past, but was legal in the present. Introductory panels for the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition acknowledged the criminal aspects of gay life in 1970s Belfast; as Jeff Dudgeon declared, “We were actually conspiring to not just change the law but *break the law* while we were doing it.”⁴⁰

Unfortunately, audio excerpts from the oral history interviews could not be logistically incorporated into the temporary exhibition as the museum did not have the audiovisual equipment necessary for playing the oral histories. Nevertheless, the curators insisted that the exhibit would include personal stories from men and women who faced discrimination, police harassment, and familial rejection as a direct result of their sexual orientation. Each photograph was accompanied by a label providing contextual information and a short excerpt from an oral history interview. The excerpts from personal interviews complemented the pictorial images but also communicated the fear, cooperation, and triumph not captured in the photographs. Although visitors could not hear the voices of the narrators, reading the direct speech of the activists offered a vicarious view of this turbulent time in Belfast’s history. The excerpts supplemented the images and brought the “emotional reality of personal experience” to the visitor.⁴¹ As homosexuality remained illegal in Northern Ireland throughout the 1970s, many gay men and women lived and loved in secret. As a result, very few archival papers or objects exist to display the gay history of Belfast to the public. The risk of arrest or exposure if personal papers were discovered resulted in many gay men and women destroying, hiding, or encoding any references to homosexuality. Without these voices presented in the excerpts, the exhibit and the history of gay life in Belfast would be incomplete.

The oral history excerpts offered collective experiences of sectarian violence or state control but also presented uniquely gay views of 1970s Belfast. Curators hoped that the excerpts would speak to both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual visitors through the references to general concerns of the Troubles as well as specific issues relating to gay life. Several narrators presented the gay community as a safe space, largely free from sectarian prejudices. Numerous photographs displayed the activities of the Gay Christian Fellowship group, founded in 1976 as an inclusive nondenominational Christian support and lobbying group. This group rejected the religious divisions segregating the city and sought to work together to change the churches’ view on homosexuality. The shared experience of living with secrecy, fear, and discrimination due to their sexual orientation drew many people together despite

39 “Oral History Society Statement on the Boston College Belfast Project, May 2014,” *Oral History* 42, no. 2 (Autumn 2014): 27.

40 Jeff Dudgeon, interview by author, February 17, 2016, Belfast.

41 Selma Thomas, “Private Memory in a Public Space: Oral History and Museums,” in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008): 91.



Doug Sobey (left) and Jeff Dudgeon, 1977. (Doug Sobey Collection, Ulster Museum, BELUM. W2017.11.3 [18a]).

political or religious differences. One excerpt featured on an exhibition label explained, “I never felt that the sectarianism that was rife in the rest of Northern Ireland was evident on the gay scene. LGBT people didn’t seem to worry too much about what community you came from. It was a very integrated scene . . . because they were sort of like outcasts almost—or felt outcast—or felt rejected—by their own communities in a way. They had more in common with each other than they had differences with each other.”⁴² These oral history excerpts offered an alternative version of history to that of traditional sectarian hatred and community division, as many gay men and women socialized together regardless of religious or political difference.

Conducted for an alternative purpose, the oral history excerpts, although relevant, did not explicitly address the events displayed in the exhibition. The interviews, conducted for a PhD project on gay life during the Troubles, focused on personal experiences in the city during the conflict, as well as connections and divergences within gay identity and community. Narratives of LGBTQ+ subjects are often framed by a coming-out story, whether it is narrators coming out to themselves or others.⁴³ The coming-out narrative places sexual orientation as a central aspect of personal identity and often positions the narrator within an imagined gay

⁴² Steven Birkett, interview by author, May 20, 2015, Belfast.

⁴³ Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Queer Theory meets Oral History,” *Journal of History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (2008): 187–9.



Jeff Dudgeon (left) and Richard Kennedy, Enniskillen, 1977. (Doug Sobey Collection, Ulster Museum, BELUM. W2017.12.5)

community.⁴⁴ Similarly, when exhibiting LGBTQ+ histories, it is difficult to resist a focus on coming-out narratives.⁴⁵ As the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition focused on relationships and activities of gay activists, the oral history excerpts avoided coming out stories. However, displays depicted the beginnings of an open gay liberation movement in Belfast, with tongue-in-cheek, campy photographs presenting the activists as “out” despite legal repression.

Although interview transcripts included the broad concerns of the gay liberation movement, an opportunity to ask specific questions about the activities captured in the photographs could have provided even deeper insight into gay life in 1970s Belfast for the museum-going public. As the oral history interviews often depended on snowball sampling, Sobey encouraged many of his friends to contribute to the project, and therefore, several interviews featured the activists in the photographs. The exhibition did not include interview excerpts from any unseen narrators which created an obvious limitation; visitors encountered a narrower range of perspectives than if excerpts had featured a broader array of personal

44 Jen Bacon, “Getting the Story Straight: Coming Out Narratives and the Possibility of a Cultural Rhetoric,” *World Englishes* 17, no. 2 (1998): 250.

45 Robert Mills, “Queer is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture,” *History Workshop Journal* 62, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 255.

histories.⁴⁶ However, the curators wanted to focus on the individuals pictured in the photographs. All narrators and photographic subjects received an invitation to the launch of the exhibition where they could share more of their stories with other attendees. On the opening night of the exhibition, Doug Sobey brought the camera that he had used to take the photographs in the 1970s and he gave a short lecture sharing his experiences. This enabled a select audience to not only read the words of gay activists on the accompanying labels, but also to hear personal stories, too long overlooked. The overwhelmingly positive response to Sobey's talk emphasized the value of audible recollections, which provided "an intimate and moving human presence," but this experience unfortunately was not available to other subsequent visitors.⁴⁷

Exhibiting Private Photographs

Images captured by amateur photography have been used by many art and history museums to create exhibitions.⁴⁸ Whether the exhibitions chose to display anonymous snapshots, found photographs, or private collections, museums have increasingly acknowledged the important role of amateur photography in national visual culture. However, once separated from the photographer or the familial photo album, these personal photographs can be "rendered mute and meaningless, an arcane document of an unknown life."⁴⁹ Several museums have avoided this problem by presenting amateur photographs as artistic rather than historic exhibits, allowing the images to be appreciated for their creative value.⁵⁰ However, within the "Gay Life and Liberation" exhibition the accompanying oral history excerpts and contextual labels provide subjective meaning to what might otherwise be perceived as random photographs of telephone boxes and dinner parties.

Personal photographs have also been used by community-based exhibitions in Belfast to highlight experiences of individuals and specific neighborhoods during the Troubles. For example, Falls Community Council, housed in a predominantly nationalist area, proposed a West Belfast Living History Museum that would incorporate personal photographs and oral histories to display everyday life before and during the Troubles.⁵¹ Catherine Zuromskis suggests that photography of the

⁴⁶ One notable absence was the lack of women in the photographs or excerpts, as Sobey's social circle mostly consisted of gay men.

⁴⁷ Selma Thomas, "Private Memories," 93.

⁴⁸ See for example, "Snapshot: The Photography of Everyday Life," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 22–September 8, 1998, <https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/snapshots/>; "The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888–1978: From the Collection of Robert E. Jackson," National Gallery of Art, October 7–31, 2007, <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2007/snapshot.html> and "Fan the Flames: Queer Positions in Photography," Art Gallery of Ontario, June 18–September 7, 2014, <https://ago.ca/exhibitions/fan-flames-queer-positions-photography>.

⁴⁹ Catherine Zuromskis, "Outside Art: Exhibiting Snapshot Photography," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (June 2006): 426.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁵¹ Crooke, "The Uses of the Past in Northern Ireland," 95.

recent past can unnerve visitors as the comfort of an abstract history is removed and they are confronted with “something unsettlingly familiar, private, and too close for comfort.”⁵² Many local visitors remembered Belfast in the 1970s, and therefore, the photographs presented views of this turbulent time through a different lens. By using photographs, the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition at the Ulster Museum used a familiar methodology to reveal the potentially unfamiliar and unexpected histories of gay men and women during the conflict. In addition, the images evoked shared remembrances of passé fashion and hairstyles, and landmarks such as Balloo House and Mount Stewart, well-known historic buildings in Northern Ireland. Displaying personal photographs invited visitors into a subjective experience of the Troubles that blended the well-known experiences of the city and sectarianism with new insights into the histories of gay life. Previously unseen by the public, these images presented an “improvised” or “surrogate” gay family and immersed the viewer in a world of “family” dinners, house parties, political protests, day trips, and gay organizations. The colorful, vibrant photographs contrasted sharply with the black and white images of death, division, and destruction featured in the permanent Troubles exhibition in the nearby gallery. Although the photographs portray experiences beyond the conventional, the exhibition reminds local viewers and informs an international audience that everyday life continued for gay people in Belfast in the shadow of the violence.

The photographs illuminated an alternative gay history of Belfast, challenging the contemporaneous stereotypes of a hidden gay life existing in the shadows. In the 1970s few gay social spaces existed and cruising public parks or visiting bars could incur the risk of exposure, violence, or imprisonment. Sobey emphasized the impossibility of photographing gay people socializing in bars, as the patrons operated under a strict code of secrecy. Although gay men and women certainly did frequent these spaces, other venues dominated in these pictures. The photographic exhibition therefore revealed the importance of organizational offices and private house parties within the gay social scene. Domestic spaces provided safe spaces for gay men and women to form social or sexual relationships away from the prying eyes of the public.⁵³ Hence these personal photographs uncovered the previously undisclosed, private soirees that fostered friendships, romantic relationships, and political activism.

Moving Beyond a Dichotomous History

As previously mentioned, the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition challenged the collective memory of the Troubles by moving beyond a unionist or nationalist narrative. It undermined a dichotomous past that ignored anything that did not fit neatly into the “divided communities” historical framework. Although the activists

⁵² Zuromskis, “Outside Art,” 438.

⁵³ Stephen Vider, “Oh Hell, May, Why Don’t You People Have a Cookbook?: Camp Humor and Gay Domesticity,” *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (December 2013): 879.

negotiated the ethnosectarian conflict and held their own political opinions like everyone else in the city, homosexuality did not sit comfortably within either viewpoint. Similarly, the exhibition avoided presenting LGBTQ+ history as a simplistic linear narrative. Robert Mills warns against “presenting LGBT history as a diachronic tale of homophobia, outing and community formation.”⁵⁴ LGBTQ+ history is never a simplistic story of collective acceptance and growth; race, gender, religion, class, and other factors have inevitably had a fundamental impact on experiences and histories. Through the presentation of a single photographic collection from the 1970s, visitors were offered one view of early gay organizing in Belfast, one that foregrounded the history of white queer men in Belfast in the 1970s. Scholars have discussed the problems surrounding intersectionality in queer exhibitions, highlighting the problems with histories that present white cis gay men as the benchmark for what counts as queer.⁵⁵ In the case of this exhibition, this was partially a result of the general lack of racial diversity in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, as there were only small communities of Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese immigrants. Racial diversity was considered irrelevant in Northern Ireland as reflected in the 1971 census which did not include any questions about race or ethnic identity.⁵⁶ Within the Belfast gay community, racial identity was only mentioned by visitors or correspondents outside of Northern Ireland. For example, a New Orleanian correspondent to Cara-Friend in 1980 emphasized that he only wanted to meet men who were “white in race.”⁵⁷ Nonetheless, the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition could have highlighted the lack of racial diversity within the gay community in Belfast in the 1970s. It would have been beneficial to explicitly challenge the presumption that everyone in Northern Ireland during the Troubles was white, and that only white people were queer. As a result of the temporary exhibition, a number of female narrators came forward to share their experiences which will to some degree counterbalance the subjectivity of the white queer male history displayed in the images and excerpts.

The photographs and oral histories also chronicled the arduousness of the journey, as throughout the campaign for legal change, LGBTQ+ people faced religious condemnation, police harassment, and societal disapproval. The exhibition acknowledged the trials of homophobic repression and the importance of “being out” to identity formation as gay men and women attempted to form a community in opposition to (but also alongside) tightly delineated Catholic/Protestant or nationalist/unionist communities. For example, Doug Sobey emphasized that when interacting with anyone who contacted Cara-Friend, “the main

54 Robert Mills, “Queer is Here?”

55 Jennifer Tyburczy, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 236.

56 Northern Ireland General Register Office, *Census of Population 1971* (Belfast: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1975), <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/1971-census-summary-tables.pdf>.

57 Unknown to Cara-Friend, August 11, 1980, C-F Papers, D4437/2/8, PRONI.

thing that you were sharing with the person was that you were gay yourself.”⁵⁸ Volunteers openly shared their sexual orientation and created a sense of connection and community to frightened callers and correspondents who contacted the organization. Often sexual orientation replaced religion or politics as the foremost identity signifier, and gay men and women avoided references to religion when seeking contact with the gay community.

Although the exhibition displayed only a snapshot of Belfast’s LGBTQ+ history, it created a space for the acknowledgement of other minorities, such as immigrants and religious or racial minorities and their experience of the Troubles. The photographs and oral history excerpts in the exhibition not only depicted the experiences of gay men and women, but also the experiences of white LGBTQ+ immigrants. Some labels briefly noted that several activists, mostly men from England or Scotland but also one man from Canada, had immigrated to Northern Ireland in the 1970s. However, the exhibition failed to draw attention to the numerous gay men and women who felt unable to remain in Northern Ireland due to sectarian violence and homophobic oppression or those who moved to the city, only to face unexpected repression. Jeffrey Dudgeon claimed that the difficulties in Belfast during the Troubles led many gay people to leave. As he said, “obviously, Dublin and London existed and most people emigrated eventually.”⁵⁹ Likewise, Kevin Merrett, born in England, commented on the different values and viewpoints he experienced when he moved to Northern Ireland, remarking, “I was quite amused with some of the social attitudes which I considered rather backward. I was shocked by the power of religion throughout society.”⁶⁰ The photographs and oral history excerpts focused on the gay liberation movement in Belfast; therefore, the exhibition did not address specific challenges facing gay migrants in the 1970s. Although not included in the exhibit, an acknowledgement of queer exile and migration would have publicized the widespread rejection and isolation missing from the private photographs.⁶¹ In future exhibitions, I would ensure that absences are highlighted to visitors and are clearly addressed. A wider discussion of the intricacies of gay identity and experience within the exhibition could have offered a more complex narrative regarding the gay communities in Belfast in the 1970s.

Responses to the Exhibition

Many individuals, families, and various LGBTQ+ organizations visited the exhibition and some visitors provided feedback. As the Ulster Museum does not charge

⁵⁸ Sobey interview.

⁵⁹ Dudgeon interview.

⁶⁰ Kevin Merrett, interview by author, February 14, 2017, Belfast.

⁶¹ Eithne Luibhéid, “Irish Migration and Irish Sexuality Scholarship: Queering the Connections,” in *Theory on the Edge: Breaking Feminist Waves*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 61–72.

an entrance fee, the display was available to all interested visitors. This enabled the museum to promote the unfamiliar history of LGBTQ+ Belfast to a wider public. Due to its placement in the Belfast Room, however, which is a room available for hire for private functions, the exhibition was inaccessible on a few days. Although the museum's requirement to generate additional revenue is understandable, this use of the room could have affected visitors who had traveled to Belfast specifically to see the exhibition. To avoid visitors' frustration and disappointment, it would have been useful to publish a brief listing of the dates and times when the room was closed to the public. After the exhibition, a small section of the photographs was redisplayed at the launch of LGBTQ+ Awareness Week. This allowed parts of the exhibition to reach an even broader audience.

Visitors reacted to the exhibition on social media and via email correspondence, expressing interest in specific photographs and commenting on insights gleaned from the oral history excerpts. Most feedback was anecdotal as friends and colleagues shared their opinions and most people responded positively to the "Gay Life and Liberation" exhibition. The introductory panels included email addresses and encouraged feedback, but a visitor logbook or short feedback form at the exhibition may have encouraged a wider response. A few online news articles also commented on the exhibition and encouraged readers to visit the temporary display. One arts, heritage, and culture website publicized the exhibition as one of the "5 must see Belfast Museum exhibitions in 2017."⁶² *The Belfast Telegraph* also referenced the exhibition receptively, its reviewer commenting "what struck me most about this exhibition was not the misery of the time, however, but the sense of mutual support, hope and resilience."⁶³ This suggests that the exhibition succeeded in challenging preconceived ideas of gay life during the Troubles by displaying both the positive and negative aspects. In addition, LGBTQ+ visitors thanked the museum for featuring the history of gay liberation in 1970s Belfast. One visitor praised the curators for exhibiting "a brilliant and important part of the history of Northern Ireland" that he found "beautiful, poignant and emotional."⁶⁴ Elizabeth Crooke suggests that many visitors consider the act of historic display as a "form of acceptance, tolerance, or legitimization."⁶⁵ Thus, for LGBTQ+ people in Belfast, the recognition of past struggles potentially offered hope for a more inclusive future.

The exhibition only received one formal complaint. The complaint epitomized a conservative religious response, reminiscent of the opposition to homosexual law reform in the 1970s, which framed homosexuality as a threat to children. The

62 Niamh McGovern, "5 Must-See Belfast Museum Exhibitions in 2017," *Culture Trip*, March 1, 2017, <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/northern-ireland/articles/5-must-see-belfast-museum-exhibitions-in-2017/>.

63 Fionola Meredith, "Window Tribute to LGBT People Has an Obvious Subject, and is Staring Council Right in the Face," *Belfast Telegraph*, April 7, 2017.

64 "Gay Life and Liberation," e-mail message to author, April 4, 2017.

65 Crooke, "The Uses of the Past in Northern Ireland," 95.

complaint stated, “We were very disappointed that you had a display about gay rights. We do not wish our children to be confronted with such pro LGBT propaganda.”⁶⁶ The Ulster Museum responded to the objection by reiterating its commitment to diversity and inclusion. The reply emphasized, “‘The Gay Life and Liberation’ exhibition reflects an important aspect of our social and political history . . . we remain committed to exploring our history and identity across a broad spectrum of diversity.”⁶⁷ The exhibition contained no graphic images and was separate from the main galleries; therefore, all visitors specifically had to choose to enter the photographic display. Numerous scholars have suggested that an anxiety or unwillingness to include sexually explicit, or even sexually suggestive, objects or images in queer exhibitions is often unconsciously embedded in museum practice as curators, workers, and directors fear backlash from visitors, funders, or the wider public.⁶⁸ However, this was not a purposeful decision by the curators of the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition as none of the photographs included sexually explicit imagery; instead the photographs and oral histories on display emphasized friendships and romantic relationships.

Conclusion

Exhibiting histories of everyday life during the Troubles in post-conflict Northern Ireland has proven to be a challenge for public historians. Attempts to gratify both unionist and nationalist communities have contributed to a dichotomous history that ignored the multifaceted experiences of the sectarian conflict. The “Gay Life and Liberation: A Photographic Record of 1970s Belfast” exhibition acknowledged that the Troubles fundamentally impacted the lives of everyone in the city. At the same time, it shifted the focus from the sectarian division towards a glimpse of gay life in 1970s Belfast. It presented this unknown and unfamiliar history to the public, emphasizing the struggles faced by the gay community and the gay liberation movement amid the conflict. The exhibition highlighted how activists navigated the sectarian tensions alongside anti-homosexuality legislation, discrimination, and societal disapproval.

Using private photographs and oral history excerpts, the display privileged a personal view of gay life, focusing on a small group of friends and activists who were largely white queer men. Showing both political activities and leisure time highlighted the joy, friendship, and community alongside the struggles. One oral history excerpt declared, “I was extremely happy with it all because I had found myself

66 Anonymous, “Complaint-LGBT exhibition,” email to National Museums Northern Ireland (NMNI), April 19, 2017.

67 “Re: Complaint- LGBT exhibition,” email to anonymous, April 20, 2017.

68 John Fraser and Joe Heimlich, “Where Are We?” *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (2008): 9. See also Jill Austin, Jennifer Brier, Jessica Herozeg-Konecny, and Anne Parsons, “When the Erotic Becomes Illicit: Struggles over Displaying Queer History at a Mainstream Museum,” *Radical History Review* 133 (Spring 2012): 187–96, and Robert Mills, “Theorizing the Queer Museum,” *Museums & Social Issues* 3, no. 1 (2008): 41–52.

a community that was really supportive and really positive.”⁶⁹ Despite violence and sectarian division, finding acceptance and belonging through gay organizations provided many gay men and women with fond memories of Belfast in the 1970s. Curators hoped that the exhibition would further promote tolerance and acceptance within Northern Irish society by emphasizing the longstanding diversity of Belfast. Yet due to limited time restraints in the planning of the exhibition, and in our enthusiasm to feature the first queer history exhibition at the Ulster Museum, the exhibit failed to fully represent the LGBTQ+ community of Belfast, as the photographs and oral histories only briefly reflected on the experiences of queer women and trans people. Similarly, the exhibition did not challenge the presumption that the queer community in Belfast was exclusively white. Although there were no photographs or oral histories that highlighted racial diversity, the exhibition could have acknowledged, or even emphasized, the absences and silences. The Ulster Museum’s requests for LGBTQ+ artifacts will hopefully result in the future in an exhibition that fully represents the diversity and complexity of the LGBTQ+ community in Belfast. The overwhelmingly positive response and further exhibitions of the “Gay Life and Liberation” exhibition emphasize the value of using personal stories and minority community histories to enhance, complement and complicate the existing representations of the Troubles.

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69 Richard Kennedy, interview by author, December 20, 2016, Belfast.