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The Red Hand/s of Ulster (Lámh Dhearg Uladh) and other bloody Irish flags...

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This author has written elsewhere of the political context, value, power and significance of blood and bloody markings on textile artefacts – cloth, clothing, flags, banners, menstrual pads, birth-stained sheets, blood-marked bandages, death-stained prison blankets. These have become either revered and roseate relics, as key to the Irish nation's history as those of sanctified saints, or reddish symbols redolent of national abjection, revulsion and shame (see also Volume 8, *Politics and Power*).

Bloody Irish flags…

Those roseate relics and reddish symbols include priest Father Edward Daly's blood-stained, now blood-faded, handkerchief. This simple cloth was elevated by him to a 'cease firing' flag, enabling removal of Jackie Duddy's 17-years-old body during continued threat to life on Bloody Sunday, 30 January 1972. Jackie was one of thirteen unarmed civil rights marchers shot dead by British Paratroopers in Derry (officially, Londonderry, situated in Ireland's northern province of Ulster). While there are some colored and some hand-colored photographs of Father Daly's action, Fulvio Grimaldi's monochrome image – graphic enough – is displayed along with the actual handkerchief in the Free Derry Museum, Derry (Figure 1). As with many blood-marked textiles, domestic laundering failed to remove entirely the now almost watermark-brown residue of horror on the cloth. While the life-blood that pulsed through a bullet-hole and onto a Derry street was hot and vital, it chilled, darkened, stained, faded, and became a materialised memory.

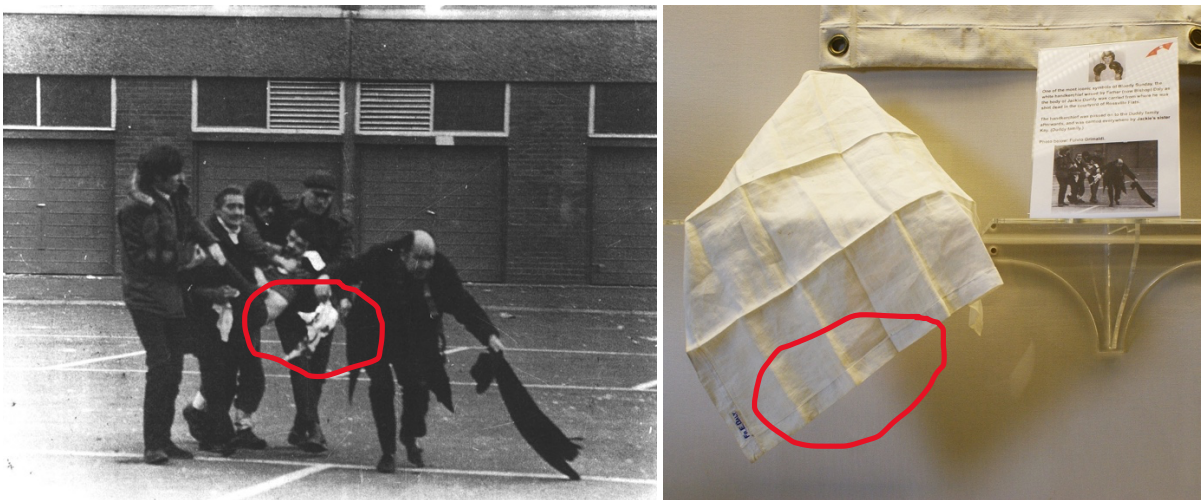

Figure 1: Father Edward Daly with the body of Jackie Duddy, Bloody Sunday 1972 (image copyright Fulvio Grimaldi, courtesy Museum of Free Derry) and Father Daly's laundered handkerchief from Bloody Sunday, Free Derry Museum, Derry.

Barnett describes the intimacy of cloth, its 'implication of the absent body', the place where 'body meets world', and this seems apt here (Barnett: 2014, 213). She cites the vital and mobile liquidity of fresh blood saturating the porosity of cloth, and then becoming the 'memory trace of the abjects … essential to … material existence, to life itself' (Barnett: 2014, 213). Barnett's contention that 'the stain is a reminder of the fragile liminality of that boundary' echoes blood's process of solidification – then enshrinement, memorialisation and reification – and is mirrored by colour changes from the

pulsating crimson of freshly spilled and oxygenated arterial blood to the darker rusty brown of desiccated blood and its trace (Barnett: 2014, 203). That desiccation informed the palette for the author's series of textile, hand-made paper and natural fibre material artworks made in the early 1990s in response to the disappearance, mythification and exhumation of victims' bodies from the bog landscape that so conjured the Troubles (Figure 2). Colors near to, but not quite, blood red were reflective of both the chroma of dried blood and of peat bogs – reds that were more cordovan, rose taupe and madder than alizarin, cherry or scarlet, as befitted the subject-matter.

Figure 2: Catherine Harper, *Head Down*, 1990, 180 x 230 cms.

The idea of temporality is important, as red is not just red, but rather a myriad of shades and hues, each with its own emotional temperature, symbolic meaning and cultural echo. The lyricism of naming emphasises this: the practicality of barn, brick or rusty red; the mysticism of amaranth, cinnabar or Persian red; the innocence of candy apple, tomato red or poppy; the authority of cardinal and imperial reds; and the coquetry of reds that are cerise, carmine or rose.

In forensic practice, age estimation of bloodstains by variation of color over time is carried out using data related to short and longer-term blood oxidation, and the impacts of temperature, humidity/hydration and presence of sunlight. Determination of time lapse since deposition of blood on textiles at crime scenes can be decisive. Variations of cloth texture, structure, wicking and base color, as well as the blood's surface tension and viscosity, impact velocity and physical interaction with the cloth surface of the spreading blood drop, spatter or flow all contribute to changes in color intensity, purity and/or hue (Marrone et al: 2021; Michielsen et al: 2015).

The blood-stained linen shirt of Irish republican and socialist martyr James Connolly, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising (1916) in opposition to British rule in Ireland, and executed by firing squad for his part in it, is showcased as a treasured and iconic cloth object in the National Museum of Ireland (Figure 3). As a bloody Irish banner of both triumph and defeat, its once blood red, now

faded-to-pink-tinted-grey stain represents the tropes of sacrifice and martyrdom that militant Irish republicanism celebrated (Pearse: 1922).

Connolly's shirt is housed in the same gallery as the bloodied and brain-marked cap and greatcoat of Michael Collins, Irish revolutionary, soldier, politician, key leader in the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and Chairman of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State. Collins was ambushed and murdered during the Irish Civil War (1922-23). This artefact – another bloody Irish flag – is a contentious embodiment of the literal mind, the bloody brain-matter, the intellect and intelligence of the nascent Irish Free State. The blood-stain and brain-stain are now black and dead.

Figure 3: James Connolly's shirt, 1916. Collection of the National Museum of Ireland.

While the Daly, Connolly and Collins textiles were once marked with fresh, warm bloody red, they have faded as cultural flags through time and via shades of decay from maroon to rust to the dowdy brown-grey of old blood. Yet their original and poetic vividness continues to prick the Irish imagination. Red resurfaces again on Irish cloth as shame, the post-partum lochia rubra of 'illegitimate' Irish babies, secreted, smothered, stabbed, or 'given up' to Church and State authorities' incarceration, servitude or anonymised export (Grierson: 2017; McCafferty: 1987; Ryan: 2021). Red mobilises again on Irish cloth as anger in the stinking clotted menstrual blood of Republican women's 'dirty protests' on prison clothes and blankets in Ulster's Armagh jail in the early 1980s (Wahidin: 2017). Red drips slowly onto Irish cloth as sorrow from the sanguinary bodies of Irish women onto whom untold crimes denying bodily and reproductive autonomy had been perpetrated in the name of ruthless righteousness, patriarchal piety and medical misogyny (Dunphy: 2021; Holland and Cullen: 2012). And red emboldens Irish cloth as violence rendered symbolic on flags and banners, in the severed red hand emblem of the ancient province of Ulster, *Ulaidh* in Irish, inaccurately synonymous with modern Northern Ireland, and its thirty plus years of contestation, aggression and cruelty (Lundy, 2007).

The Red Hand, literally women's red paint hand-prints, has become a symbol of courage and protest. Used to deface the outside wall of the headquarters of dissident republican group *Saoradh* (Salvation) in Derry, public and community outrage followed the fatal shooting of 29-year-old Northern Irish journalist Lyra McKee while reporting on violence in the Creggan area of Derry on 18 April 2019. Protester Sinead Quinn's words, '…they have blood on their hands for what has

happened' are salutary (McCurry and Rutherford: 2019). Ireland – in the Republic, and, much more slowly, in the North – is changing. The valorised Red Hand of conflict and blood sacrifice has given way to the Red Hand of Irish women's protests – for peace, rights and autonomy. Blood is – literally and metaphorically – on the hands of the paramilitaries, the priests, the politicians, the patriarchy, and the protectors of a conservative Ireland that has no place in the 21st century.

The Red Hand of Ulster…

The language of color is powerful in Northern Ireland – the nationalistic colors of British and Irish flags (red, white and blue on one side; green, white and orange on the other), and with orange linked to unionism (from orange lilies to Orange Order sashes) and green to nationalism (from shamrocks to the 'wearing of the green' adopted by Irish patriots in the early-eighteenth century, and since). The historic Flag of Ulster, with its red cross originally stitched onto a gold background, and its Red Hand sewn onto a central white shield, served as the basis for the design of the Ulster Banner. That banner, often referred to as the Flag of Northern Ireland, and more often now a synthetic printed rather than sewn linen textile, consists of a red cross on a white field, upon which is a crowned six-pointed star with the Red Hand symbol in its centre (Figure 4).

Figure 4: contemporary image of the Ulster Banner (Flag of Northern Ireland), Belfast (undated) Getty reference number 42-19608880

Like much in Ireland, North and South, the provenance of the Red Hand of Ulster (*Lámh Dhearg Uladh* in Irish) is complex. Its popular origin is the mythical tale of two Scottish chieftains racing their boats across the water towards the province of Ulster, with the first to lay a hand upon the land to have claim over it. One of the men cut off his own hand, threw the mutilated part from his boat onto the shore, and thus won the land of Ulster. Imprinting the blood-stained red hand on a woollen banner sealed the deal, and provided a vivid and appropriate textile artefact that has played a key part in Ulster's "long and complicated history of conquest, rebellion, endemic violence, and political tumult" (Lundy, 2007).

The Red Hand on textiles is used historically to denote, for example, loyalty to the British Crown and the Union of Great Britain and Ireland, as in the ribbon for the *Union is Strength* badge of the Ulster Unionist Convention, 1892. The ribbon shows an embroidered shield with a Union flag, Irish harp and the Red Hand, and nine shamrocks underneath (Figure 5). It was similarly adopted as insignia for the British military during both World Wars, for example, by the 36th Ulster Division, famous for their efforts at the battle of the Somme and by the 3rd (Ulster) Searchlight Regiment, formed in 1939 and renamed the 4th Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment in 1942 (Figure 5). Relatively few textile artefacts of this kind are, however, still in existence. The three imaged here incidentally show both left hand

(sinister) and right hand (dexter) symbols: the right hand appears on both the Ulster Banner, the commonly used flag of Northern Ireland, and the provincial flag of Ulster (the yellow flag with a red cross and red hand in a white shield).

Figure 5: Badge and ribbon from the Ulster Unionist Convention, 1892 (courtesy of Ballymoney Museum, Northern Ireland; Shoulder flash of the 36th Ulster Division (permission of The Royal Ulster Museum Collection); Formation sign of the 3rd (Ulster) Searchlight Regiment (permission of Minden Militaria https://mindenmilitaria.com).

The Red Hand of Ulster flag was the central loyalist power icon in Northern Ireland's so-called Troubles (1968-1998). As the most identifiable symbol of Loyalist identity, pugnacity, tradition and alliances, the Red Hand is a symbol of violence, oppression, defiance and/or victory grasped. It continues to be used by staunchly Loyalist Northern Irish individuals and organisations today as a badge of particular ethnic identity, embroidered and printed on banners, flags, flute band uniforms and other ceremonial regalia (Figure 6). Unlike the muted shades of blood rendered old and impoverished in visual and symbolic terms, the Red Hand of Ulster sits in the proud, dominant and overt chromatic range of crimson, cardinal, imperial, vermillion and scarlet.

Figure 6: Commercially-available embroidered cotton Ulster and Northern Ireland sew/iron-on patches, each with the Red Hand symbol (dexter), 70 x 64 mms; printed Northern Ireland flag T-shirt and Red Hand Ulster Loyalist 'Never Surrender' T-shirt.

Fade to…

Where textiles have been used to examine memory, melancholia and mourning associated with Northern Ireland's violent recent past, there has been a preoccupation with active re-imagining, re-examining and re-visualising and re-imaging. Nickell's review of Northern Irish cross-community projects, like the collective quilt-making endeavours used to support bereaved or traumatised

individuals from the conflict, notes that their focus tends to be on inclusivity, balance rather than blame. She asserts that reconciliation results in use of symbolically neutral imagery and motifs; yet, erasure of symbolic charge is not complete where color – 'the whiteness of pristine linen' or 'red, ripped cloth' – is dominant, and reconciliation is not this easy (Nickell: 2015, 250).

Irene MacWilliam's *Peace Quilt 1: Common Loss* (1994) is one such 'red ripped cloth' artwork, comprising of three thousand, one hundred and sixty-one fragments of red fabric, one for each person killed in the Troubles between 1969 and 1994 (Figure 7). The 'red handedness' of its making is clear, and it is a fine contribution to the Conflict Textiles collection and digital archive (https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/about-2/). Yet the brightness of the multiple reds suggests fresh blood, and we need to see the bloodiness of Northern Ireland's recent past recede and fade before reconciliation, or even just a reckoning with the past, is even possible. This will take time, like blood on cloth takes time to move from body-heat redness through shades of decay into the neutral grey of memory. Northern Ireland's conflict is still too present in hearts and minds, and bright red seems too vital, too near the source of blood spilled over the three decades of the Northern Irish Troubles, the conflict that ran in Northern Ireland from 1969 to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

More than 3,500 people were killed in the conflict, 52% of whom were civilians. Many, many more were maimed, physically and emotionally, and bear lasting wounds and scars. The peace is tenuous, and there has been sporadic violence since 1998. We might keep our heads down, and wait patiently for the generation of Troubles torn, traumatized and tainted individuals to fade away to grey….

Figure 7: Irene MacWilliam, Peace Quilt - Common Loss, 1996, Northern Ireland quilt, 230 x 150 cm. Ulster Museum History collection. Photo Martin Melaugh, © Conflict Textiles https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/conflicttextiles/

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