

No Country for Young Men? **Fearghus Roulston, University of Brighton**

The outward looks of yearbook photos – the faces which are by turn composed, inscrutable, amused, wry, fed-up, jovial, on the brink of laughter – are invitations to augury, albeit a strange kind of augury where we look for futures that have in fact already past. They compel us towards temporal calculations: 1965, 1968, 1998, 2020. They also compel us towards context, towards history and geography: Northern Ireland, Belfast, the Troubles.

Here is one route into that context. The first child killed in the Troubles was Patrick Rooney, a nine-year old living with his family in Divis Tower, the tallest building in West Belfast's sprawling Divis Flats complex, now demolished apart from the tower itself. He was shot with a bullet from a Browning machine gun, fired at the flats from one of the armoured cars used by the Royal Ulster Constabulary or RUC, during the riots of August 1969. An RUC officer was interviewed about this murder by the Police Ombudsman in 2018 as part of the ongoing legacy enquiries, but not charged.

Between Patrick Rooney's death in 1969 and March 1998, after the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday peace agreement, 1,108 young people between the ages of 12 and 23 were killed in Northern Ireland because of the conflict, accounting for almost 30 per cent of the total number of deaths. Shooting was the most common cause of death, followed by bombs and explosions. Young men were more at risk of being killed than young women; the majority of these deaths took place in urban areas, with 58 per cent of all deaths for those under the age of 18 occurring across five Belfast postcodes. Ten of the 14 people who were murdered on Bloody Sunday in 1972 were under 22.

Particularly for young Catholics in working-class areas, harassment from the police and the army became part of the fabric of everyday life. Streets were securitised, and the sectarian geography of the province became a mechanism for governance and policing, by state and non-state actors; something as simple as which side of the road you were walking on could be read as a signifier of belonging to one side or another. Young Catholics and young Protestants joined paramilitary organisations as well as taking part in more informal acts of

territorial marking, like parading, and in acts of political protest – the Civil Rights movement, while emerging from the experiences of Catholic communities across the province, was given organisational impetus by student activists like Michael Farrell and Bernadette Devlin.

Harassment from the police and later from the British Army was often felt particularly strongly by teenagers, who were more likely to occupy or cross public space in ways that jarred with the state's desire to map and control the landscape. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, in 1992, stated baldly that, "harassment of children under 18 is endemic, is directed against children of both traditions – nationalist and unionist – and is in violation of international agreements and standards". The liminality and transgressions of adolescence could also make teenagers targets for harassment and violence from paramilitary groups within their own areas, through what is euphemistically-termed 'community policing' – punishment beatings, kneecappings and other forms of violence were (and are) used to maintain control over young people in urban Northern Ireland.

With this context looming over and around the images then, it is difficult not to see them as redolent with foreclosed possibilities, dissolving like steam above the heads of young people who could not have known what the next 30 years was going to bring.

But the context and history we are compelled towards by the outward look of the photograph obscure as much as they reveal. They over-determine the images and they skew our capacity to examine what else they might contain. The danger is that archetypal images overwhelm the images in front of us and render them invisible – so, as Kate Newby argues in her work on imaginaries of childhood in the conflict, all we can see is the child-as-innocent-victim, or the child-as-threat, or the child-as-possibility. The desire to glean trauma, or violence, or deprivation from photographs of young people in Northern Ireland is on one hand a necessary intervention into a silencing whereby, especially in Britain, these experiences have left little mark on public memory; but on the other hand it is to replace one silence with another, by rendering other elements of the lived experience of young people in conflict more difficult to listen to.

The trouble with contexts is that they give us too much and too little. It is tempting to collapse these photographs into their context and to respond to that invitation to augury with a strange kind of retrospective, compulsive, anonymised prediction – here is what probably happened, or here is what might have happened, or here is what was happening at the time. This is an understandable urge and, ultimately, not a wholly inaccurate one. Northern Ireland is a small country and the Troubles had a wide reach. But partially resisting the urge to conjure up past futures opens up another disquieting space from which to view the photographs, in which they oscillate between visibility and invisibility, silence and noise; what's sad is that we don't know.