

# Walls of fire

**DRAWING SUPPORT:  
Murals in the North of  
Ireland**

**BILL ROLSTON**

£9.99. BEYOND THE PALE PUBLICATIONS

**I**N Belfast and Derry, brightly painted murals adorn selected gable ends in working-class areas. They often form backdrops to press or television coverage of the conflict in Northern Ireland. They are often dismissed as "sectarian vandalism", and Bill Rolston has done us a great service by looking behind the routine portrayals to consider murals as important elements of cultural identity. The most valuable part of this book is the wealth of magnificent colour photographs (112 in all) of murals, stretching back to the late 1970s.

Loyalist murals date from before the First World War. Many are regularly repainted to coincide with the annual 12th of July commemoration. The most common Loyalist mural depicts King Billy crossing the Boyne in victory over the Catholic King James. As well as the Red Hand of Ulster and the Union flag, many contemporary murals feature armed and masked men, representatives of the UDA or UVF.

On the other hand, there are some impressively detailed memorials to the slaughter of the Ulster Division on the Somme and the occasional humorous reference such as the mural of the Pope, hands held aloft, waving a red, white and blue football scarf.

Loyalist murals tend to hark back to a mythical historical



**Life and death in Belfast: a 1981 mural in Rockmount Street showing a dying Republican hunger striker and the Virgin Mary in the H-Blocks**

golden age. By contrast, Republican murals are a relatively recent phenomenon, arising out of the H-Block protests of the early Eighties. They too make use of flags and emblems and the ubiquitous representations of armed IRA members. There are

also many references to the Republican version of Irish history, featuring the 1916 Easter Rising and Edinburgh's own James Connolly, as well as many current images of the British presence in Ireland.

Feminism makes brief appear-

ances and there are attempts to internationalise the republican struggle with references to Cuba, Nicaragua, Palestine and Southern Africa.

*Drawing Support* is a valuable documentary record with the added benefit of an intelligent

and authoritative guiding commentary of a phenomenon which is often a fleeting one — some of the murals included here lasting as little as a matter of hours before being defaced.

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