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## Getting Massey: The Limavady Statue Stoush and the Politics of Public Space in Northern Ireland

Ewan Morris

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On the morning of 25 January 2008, New Zealanders awoke to news of renewed conflict in Northern Ireland. What made this story somewhat different from other tales from the troubled province, however, was that the conflict in question was over a statue of a New Zealand Prime Minister: William Massey. According to the news stories, the nationalist-dominated council in Massey's birthplace of Limavady, County Derry, was proposing to remove the statue of Massey from its position outside the council building. The reason for the proposal to remove the statue, along with other items with royal or military connections, was that Massey had been a member of the Orange Order. His statue could, therefore, be seen as sectarian.<sup>1</sup>

The prevailing tone of the coverage in New Zealand was one of amusement, mixed with condescension. On Radio New Zealand's 'Morning Report', presenter Sean Plunkett suggested to a Limavady Sinn Féin councillor that the dispute would do nothing to change New Zealanders' perceptions of the Irish as people who love a good fight.<sup>2</sup> Political historian Michael Bassett declared that 'You'd have thought a little town in [Northern] Ireland would be rather proud that one of their people went off to New Zealand and became Prime Minister ... [I]f multicultural politics involves destroying the history of a place, well then it has no future'.<sup>3</sup> The *New Zealand Herald* editorialised under the heading 'Healing rifts won't start with removing statues': 'Massey's career provides a valuable lesson for those trying to heal the wounds of decades of sectarian strife ... When accused of being a sectarian, he once famously replied: "I am Prime Minister, and my duties as Prime Minister come first." That's not a bad lesson for the councillors of Limavady to learn and a good reason for

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Houlahan, 'Irish target NZ PM's statue', *New Zealand Herald*, 25 January 2008, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/northern-ireland/news/article.cfm?l\\_id=76&objectid=10488735&pnum=1](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/northern-ireland/news/article.cfm?l_id=76&objectid=10488735&pnum=1), accessed 28 January 2010; 'Stoush over Irish Massey statue', *Dominion Post* (Wellington, New Zealand), 25 January 2008, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/233985>, accessed 28 January 2010. 'Stoush' is New Zealand and Australian slang for a physical or verbal fight.

<sup>2</sup> Radio New Zealand National 'Morning Report' programme, 25 January 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Houlahan, 'Irish target NZ PM's statue'.





them to keep the Massey statue as a reminder.<sup>4</sup> National Party Member of Parliament Paul Hutchison, whose Hunua electorate covers Massey's former electorate of Franklin, wrote to the Limavady council offering (probably tongue in cheek) to take the statue off their hands: 'I'm sure the offer will weigh heavily on their minds', he remarked.<sup>5</sup> When news of the story's coverage in New Zealand made its way back to Northern Ireland, Limavady mayor Edwin Stevenson declared himself saddened and embarrassed by coverage of the dispute halfway around the world. '[T]he people of New Zealand are amused that trivial things such as mugs and statues are making serious news coverage over here', he said. 'I personally find it sad that Limavady Borough Council is dragging itself through the mud'.<sup>6</sup>

This article sets out the background to the conflict over the Massey statue in Limavady itself, and situates the dispute in the wider context of debates about symbols and public space in Northern Ireland. It argues that it is not helpful to simply dismiss such debates as trivial. Symbols are important in Northern Ireland, and can be extremely divisive, as the controversy in which the Massey statue featured shows. It is precisely for this reason that communities in Northern Ireland are recognising the need to search for new strategies for dealing with symbols in public spaces.

## Commemorating Massey's Ulster origins

William Ferguson Massey was born in Limavady in 1856.<sup>7</sup> He arrived in New Zealand in 1870, following his family who had left Ireland in the previous year. He farmed in the Auckland region before entering Parliament in 1894,

<sup>4</sup> 'Healing rifts won't start with removing statues', *New Zealand Herald*, 26 January 2008, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/northern-ireland/news/article.cfm?l\\_id=76&objectid=10488888&pnum=1](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/northern-ireland/news/article.cfm?l_id=76&objectid=10488888&pnum=1), accessed 28 January 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Hutchison to the Councillors, Limavady Council, 12 February 2008; 'MP offers to solve an Irish problem', 26 February 2008 (New Zealand Press Association story). Copies of the letter and news story were kindly provided by Dr Hutchison's office.

<sup>6</sup> 'Mayor "sad" as statue row reaches NZ', *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 January 2008, <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/Mayor-39sad39--as-statue.3716583.jp>, accessed 28 January 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Some news reports of the Limavady dispute gave Massey's name as 'William Massey Ferguson', leading one wit to ask the inevitable question, 'Any relation to the tractor ...?': EWI, comment on the Slugger O'Toole website, 18 January 2008, <http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/limavady-councillors-and-audit>, accessed 30 January 2010.





and was Prime Minister of New Zealand from 1912 until his death in 1925.<sup>8</sup> Massey returned twice to Limavady during his term as Prime Minister, while on official tours of Ulster in 1916 and 1923.<sup>9</sup> His connection with Northern Ireland was officially commemorated before he died when, in 1925, the avenue leading to the Northern Ireland Parliament at Stormont was named Massey Avenue in his honour. During a tour of New Zealand in 1929–30, Northern Ireland Prime Minister Lord Craigavon said that the road had been named after Massey because he was ‘the greatest living Ulsterman of his day’.<sup>10</sup> When Massey died, Craigavon made a statement in the Northern Ireland Parliament in which he referred to Massey as ‘one of our most distinguished sons in any part of the globe’. He continued: ‘Our Province may be proud of those it has sent forth to all corners to uphold British traditions, and in that long roll of names none stands more honoured in our hearts than that of the late Prime Minister of New Zealand’.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this recognition of Massey during his life and immediately after his death, there seems to have been little attempt to commemorate him in Northern Ireland until relatively recent times. In Limavady itself there is a Massey Avenue (which, perhaps significantly, intersects with Protestant Street); one of the first post-war housing estates was named after him; and a plaque was put up at the location of his family home. It was not until 1995, however, that a statue of Massey was erected in the town. The statue, which stands outside the offices of the Limavady Borough Council, was the work of Belfast-born sculptor Philip Flanagan, and was funded by the Limavady Borough Council and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The project to

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of Massey’s life see Barry Gustafson, ‘Massey, William Ferguson, 1856–1925’, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 22 June 2007, [www.dnzb.govt.nz](http://www.dnzb.govt.nz), accessed 4 January 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Massey’s 1923 visit to Northern Ireland is discussed in Keith Jeffery, ‘Distance and Proximity in Service to the Empire: Ulster and New Zealand between the Wars’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 36 (2008), 460–2; his visit to Limavady is specifically discussed at 461.

<sup>10</sup> *Wellington Evening Post*, 4 January 1930, clipping in diary of Lady Craigavon, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, D.1415/C/4, quoted in Jeffery, ‘Distance and Proximity’, 457. For further discussion of Massey’s ‘Irishness’ or ‘Ulsteriness’, see James Watson, ‘Links to Limavady: Ulster in William Ferguson Massey’s Character and Career’, in Brad Patterson (ed.), *From Ulster to New Ulster: The 2003 Ulster-New Zealand Lectures* (Coleraine and Wellington, 2004), 75–89; Geoffrey W. Rice, ‘How Irish was New Zealand’s Ulster-Born Prime Minister Bill Massey?’, and James Watson, ‘“I am Irish Myself”: W.F. Massey and Ireland, 1912–1925’, in Brad Patterson (ed.), *Ulster-New Zealand Migration and Cultural Transfers* (Dublin, 2006), 241–54, 255–62.

<sup>11</sup> *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons*, vol 6, 12 May 1925, 544.



erect the statue had been initiated by the former mayor, Ian Grant of the Ulster Unionist Party, but by the time the statue was unveiled Barry Doherty of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) was mayor. Speaking at the unveiling, which was performed by the New Zealand High Commissioner, Mayor Doherty 'said that it was fitting that they should erect a statue in memory of one of their most illustrious sons'.<sup>12</sup> It seems, then, that there was at least a degree of cross-party and cross-community support for the erection of the statue.

In the first decade of this century, Massey's memory in Northern Ireland appears to have been claimed more assertively by the Orange Order. The extent to which Massey engaged in sectarian politics in New Zealand has been the subject of some debate,<sup>13</sup> but there is little dispute about the fact that he was a member of the Orange Order in New Zealand.<sup>14</sup> Between 2003 and 2006, a Massey Festival was organised in Limavady by the Limavady District Orange Lodge. In 2003 the festival lasted for two weeks and included a display on Massey's life, the dedication of a plaque honouring Massey at the entrance to the lodge, and the placing of an orange sash on the Massey statue during the Orange Order's 12th of July parade.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, the festival received funding from the Limavady Borough Council and in 2004, despite one SDLP councillor's concerns about the festival committee being

<sup>12</sup> 'Statue of former Limavady man unveiled', *Northern Constitution*, 16 September 1995, on file in 'William Massey' clipping file, Limavady Public Library. See also Arts Council of Northern Ireland, "'William Massey'" by Philip Flanagan', <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/publicart/tour/tour24.htm>, accessed 6 January 2010. For the political affiliations of Ian Grant and Barry Doherty, see 'Limavady Borough Council Elections 1993–2005', <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections/lglimavady.htm>, accessed 6 January 2010.

<sup>13</sup> For two differing views, see W.J. Gardner, 'The Rise of W.F. Massey, 1891–1912', *Political Science*, 13(1) (1961), 6, and Gardner's 'W.F. Massey in Power, 1912–1925', *Political Science*, 13(2) (1961), 25–6; Rory Sweetman, *Bishop in the Dock: The Sedition Trial of James Liston* (Auckland, 1997), ch. 9.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Farland, *Farmer Bill: William Ferguson Massey and the Reform Party* (Lower Hutt, 2008), 16, 18–19; Patrick Coleman, 'Who Wants to be a Grand Master? Grand Masters of the Orange Lodge of the Middle Island of New Zealand' in Brad Patterson and Kathryn Patterson (eds), *Ireland and the Irish Antipodes: One World or Worlds Apart?* (Spit Junction, 2010), 96. Farland notes that Massey's descendants do not believe that he was an Orangeman, but Coleman, who has researched the history of Orangism in New Zealand, writes that 'Massey was definitely a Grand Master' of the Loyal Orange Institution.

<sup>15</sup> 'Successful Massey Festival at Limavady', *Orange Standard*, September 2003, <http://www.grandorangelodge.co.uk/press/Orange-Standard/2003-Standard/0309-September2003/article6.html>, accessed 7 January 2010.



controlled by the Orange Order, funding was approved with the support of a Sinn Féin councillor.<sup>16</sup> In 2006, the 150th anniversary of Massey's birth, the Massey Festival Committee planned to commemorate Massey throughout the year.<sup>17</sup> Following the Limavady statue controversy, and perhaps as a result of it, Massey was included as one of the 'Heroes from History' in the Orange Order's 2009 calendar (based on an exhibition that ran at the Order's Belfast headquarters). The Orange Order's director of services, David Hume, said of Massey and the other 'heroes': 'we believe that the Orange Order was at the heart of what motivated them'.<sup>18</sup>

### **The development of Limavady's 'neutral public space' policy**

The origins of the controversy over the Massey statue do not, however, lie with the statue itself. Instead, it was part of a wider dispute about emblems and commemorative items on Limavady Borough Council property.

Limavady town, where the statue is located, is predominantly Protestant and unionist, but the Limavady Borough Council area has a Catholic and nationalist majority.<sup>19</sup> The town has acquired a reputation as a centre of conservative Protestantism and Orangeism, and in the early 1980s it gained some notoriety when a Presbyterian minister in the town was forced out of his church for being too friendly with the priest of the Catholic church across the

<sup>16</sup> Minutes of the Leisure Services Committee, Limavady Borough Council, 12 May 2004. Three nationalist councillors voted against funding the festival, while two abstained. All minutes and other Council documents cited in this article are available on the website [www.limavady.gov.uk](http://www.limavady.gov.uk).

<sup>17</sup> 'Massey Ferguson "a Limavady legend"', *Northern Constitution*, 24 March 2006, on file in 'William Massey' clipping file, Limavady Public Library.

<sup>18</sup> 'Heroes of Orange Order to feature on new calendar', *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 October 2008, <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/Heroes-of-Orange-Order-to-4591338.jpg>, accessed 7 January 2010. Massey has also been claimed as a 'Great Ulster-Scot' in a pamphlet produced by the Ulster-Scots Agency: *Great Ulster-Scots: People and Events in History: William Ferguson Massey—Prime Minister of New Zealand 1912–1925* (Belfast, undated). While not so obviously sectarian as the attempt to claim Massey for Orangeism, this also has the effect of claiming Massey for the Protestant tradition, since the Ulster-Scots language and culture movement is associated with that tradition.

<sup>19</sup> In the 2001 census, 56 per cent of the population of Limavady Borough Council area said they were Catholic by background, and in the 2005 local government elections, 54.5 per cent of the vote went to nationalist parties: Limavady Borough Council, *Equality Impact Assessment: Policy on Neutral Public Space* (2007), 11 (hereafter *EIA: Neutral Public Space*).





road.<sup>20</sup> However, the demographics of the wider Council district have changed in recent decades, with the proportion of Catholics in the district's population increasing. Although Limavady Borough Council was formerly unionist-controlled, nationalists have had a majority on the Council since 1993.<sup>21</sup> The Council is made up of fifteen councillors. Since the 2005 local government elections, nine of the councillors have been nationalist and six unionist. Of the nationalist councillors, six are from the republican party Sinn Féin.

In 2003–4, Sinn Féin councillors successfully campaigned to change the Council's policy with regard to the flying of flags from Council buildings, from a policy of flying the Union Jack on certain specified days to one of flying no flags at any time.<sup>22</sup> It appears that, in bringing up the issue of emblems and memorabilia on Council property, Sinn Féin councillors saw themselves as continuing their campaign to create a neutral environment.<sup>23</sup> At a Council meeting in August 2005, Sinn Féin councillor Paddy Butcher proposed a motion calling for the Council to remove all British military memorabilia from the Council offices, in keeping with the Council's 'policy of [having] a neutral building and not fostering division'. Unionists on the Council strongly opposed the motion, calling it sectarian, divisive, and another attack on unionists' British identity. In reply, a Sinn Féin councillor said that there was very little in the Council that reflected his culture or identity and that ideally the council would accept symbols of everyone's culture, but since this was not going to happen a policy of neutrality was the best solution. In the end, an amended motion was passed affirming the Council's commitment to equality, and agreeing to the establishment of an all-party Working Group to consider whether the Council's policy in relation to symbols should be one of neutrality or of parity between the symbols of the different communities. Unionist councillors voted against the motion.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Steve Bruce, *God Save Ulster! The Religion and Politics of Paisleyism* (Oxford, 1986), 192–4.

<sup>21</sup> Horseman, 'Limavady Borough Council', 26 November 2008, <http://ulstersdoomed.blogspot.com/2008/11/limavady-borough-council.html>, accessed 24 January 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Limavady Borough Council, *Equality Impact Assessment for Consultation of Limavady Borough Council's Flag Flying Policy* (2004).

<sup>23</sup> See the comments of Sinn Féin councillor Marion Donaghy: 'The emblems project was really the second half of the game ... The final score is two-nil for equality and mutual respect for each other's culture'. 'Limavady Council adopts neutral public space policy', *Northern Constitution*, 6 July 2007, 4, on file in 'Buildings–Limavady' clippings file, Limavady Public Library.

<sup>24</sup> Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, Limavady Borough Council, 17 August 2005. The minutes record only a 9–6 vote, but that split makes it clear that voting went along nationalist-unionist lines.







The Working Group was duly established, and proposed what became known as the 'neutral public space' policy: 'That the public areas within the Council Offices building and grounds be maintained as a neutral environment with regard to how they reflect religious or political opinion'. The Council accepted this as a policy in principle in 2006, and also accepted a recommendation that the draft policy be screened for consistency with the Council's obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.<sup>25</sup> This section requires public authorities (including local councils) to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between various specified groups, and the desirability of promoting good relations 'between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group'.<sup>26</sup> Like other bodies in Northern Ireland, councils also have obligations as employers to promote equality of opportunity. According to the Fair Employment Code of Practice, this obligation includes promoting a harmonious working environment by, for example, prohibiting 'the display of flags, emblems, posters, [or] graffiti ... which are likely to give offence or cause apprehension among particular groups of employees'.<sup>27</sup>

An Equality Impact Assessment of the proposed neutral public space policy was undertaken. It considered the possible differential effects on the Protestant/unionist and Catholic/nationalist communities of the Council's policy on the display of emblems, and whether the policy could create a 'chill factor' that could inhibit some people in their dealings with the Council.<sup>28</sup> As part of the assessment, a concerted attempt was made to consult with the community and with Council employees, but the response was very poor. Only a few written submissions were received, and no members of the public turned up to meetings organised to discuss the issue.<sup>29</sup> It is hard to know what to make of the lack of response to the consultation. Given that the proposed policy had originated with concerns about items associated with the unionist tradition, it may be that most nationalists were happy enough with the policy but did not feel strongly about it, while unionists were unhappy but felt they

<sup>25</sup> *EIA: Neutral Public Space*, 8–9.

<sup>26</sup> See Good Relations Associates, *Embedding Good Relations in Local Government: Challenges and Opportunities* (Belfast, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Equality Commission of Northern Ireland, *Fair Employment in Northern Ireland: Code of Practice* (Belfast, 1989), 16. See also Equality Commission of Northern Ireland, *Promoting a Good & Harmonious Working Environment: A Guide for Employers and Employees* (Belfast, 2009), 6–9.

<sup>28</sup> *EIA: Neutral Public Space*, 10, 18–19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–7.







could have no influence on the nationalist-dominated Council.

After considering various alternative policies the Council could adopt, the Steering Group for the Equality Impact Assessment concluded that the proposed neutral public space policy would help to produce a more harmonious working environment by reducing the potential for conflict over symbols, but that it would probably have an adverse impact on the Protestant/unionist community, as most of the contentious items on display in the Council offices would be from that tradition. The Steering Group recommended an extended neutral public space policy which would apply to *all* Council-owned and -managed buildings and facilities. It was felt that this approach would help to minimise the impression that the policy was directed against the Protestant/unionist symbols located in the Council offices and grounds. In June 2007 the Council approved the extended neutral public space policy, and agreed to set up a cross-party forum to consider implementation of the policy. Implementation issues would include questions of definition: what constitutes a 'neutral space', and how were objects to be judged as to whether they were contentious or not?<sup>30</sup>

The Neutral Public Space Forum was to consist of three nationalist and two unionist councillors, reflecting the composition of the Council, with an independent chair. However, unionist councillors refused to take their allocated places, arguing that the Forum should have equal representation of nationalists and unionists. Nonetheless, the Forum went on to draw up a list of items that were inconsistent with the neutral public space policy, and it is at this point that the Massey statue enters the picture. The list included the Massey statue, a Union Jack flag in the Mayor's Parlour, a Charles and Diana mug presented by the Royal Irish Rangers, and various other commemorative items associated with the British Army. The only item on the list that was associated with the Catholic/nationalist tradition was a memorial to a republican hunger striker; all of the other items could be seen as being more associated with the Protestant/unionist tradition. The Forum recommended that items on the list could be offered to a 'like-minded organisation' or a museum, returned to the donor, put into storage or relocated to an appropriate site.<sup>31</sup>

The Forum's report to the Council meeting in January 2008 led to a heated debate. Unionist councillors complained that the Forum had been made up entirely of nationalists; noted that some items on the list were historically significant, and that Catholics had also served in the British Army so some

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 19–22, 28–32.

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of Limavady Borough Council meeting, 22 January 2008.





items were cross-community; and observed that there had been no complaints about the items on the list from either the public or Council staff. Nationalist councillors stated that unionist members had been invited several times to join the Forum; that there was no desire to take away anyone's culture or history, but rather to ensure that all those working in or visiting Council buildings felt comfortable; that items on the list would be viewed in a better light in a museum, together with other artefacts; and that the ideal situation would be one of inclusion rather than exclusion, with both traditions being fairly represented. The meeting eventually voted to put adoption of the Forum report on hold in an attempt to find common ground. At the time of writing, some two years later, it appears that no further progress has been made.

When the list of items for possible removal was reported in the media, unionists reacted with anger to what they saw as an attack on their tradition.<sup>32</sup> A loyalist crowd gathered outside the Council meeting at which the neutral public space policy was being discussed, and nationalist councillors were abused as they left the building.<sup>33</sup> Subsequently, a petition opposing the removal of the contentious items was signed by more than 1000 people.<sup>34</sup>

Mayor Edwin Stevenson said that a number of items on the list for possible removal were 'quite historical and it would be a shame to see them go'. Referring specifically to the Massey statue, the unionist Member of Parliament for the area said 'We should be celebrating history and not trying to re-write it'.<sup>35</sup> The question of what to do about items that were of historical interest,

<sup>32</sup> Clare Weir, "'Contentious' symbols row', *Belfast Telegraph*, 18 January 2008, <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/contentious-symbols-row-13376808.html>, accessed 23 January 2010; Stephen Dempster, 'Plan to purge town of Protestant symbolism', *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 January 2008, <http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/Plan-to-purge-town-of-3687058.jp>, accessed 23 January 2010. For a variety of views, both nationalist and unionist, on the controversy, see the following posts and associated comments from the Slugger O'Toole blog site: 'Limavady councillors and "audit"', 18 January 2008, <http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/limavady-councillors-and-audit>; 'The lessons of Limavady', 23 January 2008, <http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/the-lessons-of-limavady>; 'Alternative lessons of Limavady', 29 January 2008, <http://sluggerotoole.com/index.php/weblog/comments/alternative-lessons-of-limavady>, accessed 30 January 2010.

<sup>33</sup> 'Police intervene in council row', 23 January 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/7203882.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/7203882.stm), accessed 23 January 2010.

<sup>34</sup> '1,000 sign petition in emblems row', *Derry Journal*, 15 February 2008, <http://www.derryjournal.com/county/1000-sign-petition-in-emblems.3783213.jp>, accessed 23 January 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Weir, "'Contentious' symbols row'; Dempster, 'Plan to purge town of Protestant symbolism'.





but were associated with a particular religious or political tradition, was one that the Steering Group for the Council's Equality Impact Assessment had recognised as raising particular difficulties. They were aware that in Northern Ireland historical items could 'be symbolic or iconic for only one section of the community and could be considered to provide a "chill factor" for the other'.<sup>36</sup>

The Massey statue was mentioned frequently in coverage of the dispute, and its inclusion on the list was a particular focus for unionist outrage. Among other things, unionists were concerned about how talk of removing the statue would look to tourists from New Zealand.<sup>37</sup> The Massey statue is listed among sites for New Zealanders to visit in Ireland, and Massey features in the Limavady *Visitor Guide*, albeit in the section on 'Folklore, Myth and Legend'.<sup>38</sup> Unionist councillor George Robinson claimed that the statue was a big tourist attraction: 'I have met relatives of Mr Massey who have visited Limavady just to see the statue'.<sup>39</sup>

There was some disagreement about how well-known Massey is in Limavady itself. It was claimed that the councillors who drew up the list of contentious items had to do an internet search to decide whether Massey was contentious or not, and Mayor Stevenson said 'the question I am most often asked about [the statue] is "who's he"? He can't be that contentious'. On the other hand, Councillor Robinson claimed that Massey was 'a man held in very high esteem'. The statue, according to Robinson, was 'a tribute to one of the town's most famous and successful sons'.<sup>40</sup> Certainly Robinson himself was aware of Massey and of his identity as an Orangeman, as he had opened the Massey Festival in 2003 at the Limavady Orange Hall, where the District Lodge had prepared 'a display on the life and times of Bro. William Ferguson Massey'.<sup>41</sup> It was during this same Massey Festival that an Orange sash was placed on the Massey statue on 12 July, a point specifically mentioned by nationalist councillors during the Council debate on the Neutral Public Space Forum report.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> *ELA: Neutral Public Space*, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of Limavady Borough Council meeting, 22 January 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Chris Kinder, 'Places of interest to Kiwi visitors', 1 October 2007, [http://www.newzealand.ie/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=75&Itemid=37&limit=1&limitstart=3](http://www.newzealand.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=75&Itemid=37&limit=1&limitstart=3), accessed 31 January 2010; Limavady Borough Council, *Visitors Guide 2009: Limavady & the Roe Valley* (Limavady, 2009), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Greg McKeivitt, 'Limavady row causes Kiwi storm', 25 January 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/7209254.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/7209254.stm), accessed 28 January 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Weir, "'Contentious" symbols row'; McKeivitt, 'Limavady row causes Kiwi storm'; Dempster, 'Plan to purge town of Protestant symbolism'.

<sup>41</sup> 'Successful Massey Festival at Limavady'.

<sup>42</sup> Minutes of Limavady Borough Council meeting, 22 January 2008: points raised by





## Symbols and public space in Northern Ireland

The Limavady dispute is part of a wider pattern of controversy over symbols in public places in Northern Ireland. There is a long history in Ireland, and particularly in Northern Ireland, of using flags, banners, memorials, parades, and other commemorative and symbolic practices to claim territory, intimidate or antagonise.<sup>43</sup> More recently, however, the Northern Ireland 'peace process' has led to recognition of the need to find new ways of dealing with conflict over symbolic questions. The Good Friday Agreement, endorsed by voters in both parts of Ireland in 1998 as a framework for resolution of the Northern Ireland conflict, explicitly recognises the sensitivity of the public use of symbols. It talks of the need, in creating new institutions, 'to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division'.<sup>44</sup> The people of Northern Ireland are still working through what this means in practice, and much of this work is happening at the local level.

In a society like Northern Ireland, where territory is contested and communities are still segregated to a remarkable degree, the creation of truly public space is one of the major challenges for the future. Without spaces in which people from different communities (including new migrant communities as well as the more established Catholic and Protestant communities) can meet and mix without feeling alienated or intimidated, it is hard to see how a more harmonious and integrated society can develop. In 2005 the Northern Ireland Government released its framework for good relations in Northern Ireland, entitled *A Shared Future*. This document

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nationalist members included 'Massey statue had been misused when the Sash or other garments were draped over it'.

<sup>43</sup> The literature on these topics is extensive, but see in particular Belinda Loftus, *Mirrors: William III & Mother Ireland* (Dundrum, 1990) and *Mirrors: Orange & Green* (Dundrum, 1994); Lucy Bryson and Clem McCartney, *Clashing Symbols: A Report on the Use of Flags, Anthems and other National Symbols in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1994); Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford, 1997); Anthony D. Buckley (ed.), *Symbols in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1998); Dominic Bryan and Gordon Gillespie, *Transforming Conflict: Flags and Emblems* (Belfast, 2005); Ewan Morris, *Our Own Devices: National Symbols and Political Conflict in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005); Dominic Bryan and Clifford Stevenson, 'Flagging Peace: Struggles Over Symbolic Landscape in the New Northern Ireland', in Marc Howard Ross (ed.), *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes* (Philadelphia, 2009), 68–84.

<sup>44</sup> 'Agreement Reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations', 10 April 1998 (see 'Economic, Social and Cultural Issues', para 5).





recognises the importance of 'reclaiming shared space' by ensuring that city and town centres are 'safe and welcoming places for all'. As part of this aim, the Government proposes action to remove or control unofficial flags and emblems that are used to mark territories, exclude and intimidate.<sup>45</sup> There will be significant challenges for the Government, councils and communities in implementing this strategy, but it is undoubtedly an important part of creating public spaces that are open to all.

This still leaves the question of what to do about civic spaces like council buildings, and the use of symbols in and around them. Civic spaces are part of the wider public space, but they also occupy a special position. They are supposed to represent the community as a whole, and there is a particular obligation to ensure that they are inclusive and accessible so that everyone feels able to participate in decision-making and to access public services. Is it necessary, then, for such spaces to be 'neutral', in the words of the Limavady Council policy, and for all emblems that might be associated with a particular political or religious tradition to be removed? Or is it better to think in terms of 'shared' spaces? In theory at least, a shared space in which everyone can feel included and represented sounds more inviting than a neutral space from which all potentially contentious emblems have been banished. When Belfast City Council considered its approach to memorabilia in the City Hall it recognised that it would not be helpful to simply remove some or all of the items on display on the grounds that they were predominantly associated with the Protestant/unionist tradition. Instead, it asked an advisory panel of experts to report on how to achieve a more balanced and inclusive display, and the panel's recommendations were approved by the Council.<sup>46</sup> In its 2007 *Good Relations Plan*, the Belfast City Council talks of opening up the City Hall for use by all communities, and seeking to transform cultural symbols 'from seeming apparently "threatening" to "interesting" examples of a city with diverse cultures'.<sup>47</sup>

Of course, such aspirations are easily stated, less easily achieved. The past decade has seen remarkable changes in Northern Ireland, and the challenge

<sup>45</sup> Northern Ireland Government, *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2005), 19–22.

<sup>46</sup> Belfast City Council, *Good Relations Strategy* (Belfast, 2003), 40–1; minutes of the Policy and Resources Committee, Belfast City Council, 21 February 2003. For more recent decisions on the implementation of the policy, see minutes of the Memorabilia Working Group, Belfast City Council, 15 September 2009; minutes of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, Belfast City Council, 18 September 2009; minutes of the Belfast City Council, 1 December 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Belfast City Council, *Good Relations Plan* (Belfast, 2007), 12.





now is to build on the historic political settlement by moving towards a society that is inclusive, tolerant and pluralistic, one in which people can express their differences without promoting division and discord. This means there must be dialogue about questions of symbolism and use of public space. There is no doubt that such issues will remain divisive for some time to come, and will be used by political parties to gain political capital, but they cannot be ignored or treated as a diversion from 'real' politics. Symbolism is inseparable from politics, and particularly from the politics of nation and community: it is through symbols that we imagine ethnic and national communities. Through dialogue about symbols, then, it may be possible to build more inclusive communities, though the difficulty of doing so should not be underestimated.

The decision of the Northern Ireland Executive to amalgamate councils as part of a reorganisation of local government means that questions of symbolism and public space may be revisited by new councils.<sup>48</sup> The local government reorganisation could be an opportunity for a new start in thinking about how to create shared public space in Northern Ireland. It is also possible, however, as a committee that was part of the local government reform process noted, that discussion of symbolic issues 'could result in meltdown' of the new councils.<sup>49</sup>

At the time of writing the local government reform programme is in limbo, and will not proceed in 2011 as originally planned, but some kind of local government reform still seems likely.<sup>50</sup> It was proposed that Limavady would form part of the new Causeway Coast and Glens District Council. This district would be likely to have a unionist majority,<sup>51</sup> so if amalgamation goes ahead the new council may overturn Limavady's neutral public space policy. At the same time, the main offices of the new council might well be located somewhere other than Limavady, leaving the Massey statue standing outside what might be only a satellite office.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Department of the Environment of Northern Ireland, 'Local Government Reform Programme', [http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local\\_government/local\\_government-3.htm](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local_government/local_government-3.htm), accessed 25 January 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Report back from Governance Sub-Group, recorded in minutes of Local Government Taskforce Working Group, 4 July 2006, 4.

<sup>50</sup> Department of the Environment of Northern Ireland, 'The Future of Local Government in NI', [http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local\\_government/future\\_lg.htm](http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/local_government/future_lg.htm), accessed 12 August 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Horseman, 'Supercouncils plan on the rocks', 13 November 2009, <http://ulstersdoomed.blogspot.com/2009/11/supercouncils-plan-on-rocks.html>, accessed 25 January 2010.

<sup>52</sup> 'A bigger voice for Limavady unionists', *Derry Journal*, 14 March 2008, <http://www.>





The building of a new civic centre in Limavady, which will include the tourist information bureau currently housed in the Council offices, is also likely to diminish the importance of the building outside which the Massey statue stands. The William Massey Centre was not among the names shortlisted for the new centre, which will instead be called the Roe Valley Arts and Cultural Centre.<sup>53</sup> While Massey was suggested as a name for one of the rooms or spaces within the centre, this name was not one of those finally chosen by the Council.<sup>54</sup> Despite all the controversy in 2008, however, the Massey statue still stands in Limavady, and there seems to be no suggestion now that it will be removed.

It remains to be seen whether communities in Northern Ireland can find ways of working together to create a 'more inclusive symbolic landscape',<sup>55</sup> a landscape in which different identities are recognised by allowing space for a multiplicity of symbols and narratives. William Massey's statue should be able to find a place in such a landscape, but this may require seeing him as more than simply an Orangeman or even an 'illustrious son' of Limavady. Recognising that Massey was a contradictory figure, one who was shaped by the prejudices of his background but was also pragmatic enough to look beyond them when necessary, may be more valuable for Limavady and Northern Ireland generally than celebrating, denigrating or ignoring his memory.

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[derryjournal.com/county/39A-bigger-voice-for-Limavady.3878139.jp](http://derryjournal.com/county/39A-bigger-voice-for-Limavady.3878139.jp), accessed 30 January 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Minutes of Limavady Borough Council meetings, 14 January 2010 and 2 February 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Minutes of Development Services Committee, Limavady Borough Council, 13 April 2010 and 29 June 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Marc Howard Ross, *Cultural Contestation in Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge, 2007), 324–5; see also Marc Howard Ross (ed.), *Culture and Belonging in Divided Societies: Contestation and Symbolic Landscapes* (Philadelphia, 2009).

