

# **Cultural Identity and Representation: A Case Study from Northern Ireland**

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## **Abstract**

Cultural identity is a well examined concept and has been critiqued within a multitude of disciplines. Multiple interpretations may be offered from a variety of perspectives, ranging from the individual to the collective, the national to the global. One important element of cultural identity concerns its [re]presentation in the public realm. Museums and heritage centres are concerned with presenting elements of national cultures to their audiences and, therefore, make value judgements concerning the selection, interpretation and representation of the past (Ashworth and Larkham, 1994). This in itself is a complex process, which becomes even more difficult in spaces of contested heritage and multiple possible representations. This research addresses the above issues and utilises a unique case study within Northern Ireland to examine issues of cultural identity and representation.

## **Research Objectives:**

- To elicit debate and discussion on how multiple Irish histories might best be represented in public heritage spaces
- To offer a critical appraisal of the representation of migration at the Ulster American Folk Park, Omagh, Northern Ireland
- To bring together two audience groups, one from each side of the Irish border to discuss issues of cultural identity, representation and authenticity
- To comment on the relationships between the visitor, the 'producers of culture' and cultural policy-makers

A critical analysis of the Ulster American Folk Park (UAFP) was undertaken using both secondary and primary research sources. Initially, general and specific literature relating to Irish cultural identities was reviewed. Primary research involved participant observation and content analysis of the exhibitions and narrative typology at the UAFP. Furthermore, two audience groups were brought to the site where focus groups and interviews were conducted. This paper outlines the ways in which this mixed visitor groups reacted to the UAFP's representation of migration histories and the ways in which they dealt with the issues of nationality, cultural identity, and authenticity that were raised.

Bringing together a heterogeneous group of visitors (in this instance final year students from a University north and south of the border) aimed to engage an open discourse on often difficult, politically and geographically sensitive issues.

The approach was both useful and innovative. Using a public heritage centre to stimulate discussion of real issues of representation and 'authentic histories' by northern and southern Irish consumers groups led to valuable insights and increased understandings that were of benefit to the visitors and the curators at the site itself. Specific visitor evaluation was made concerning exhibition layout and content as well as possible future adaptations. Ideas relating to views on cultural identities and the relationships between positionality and situated knowledge also emerged. Full details of these outcomes will be discussed in the full version paper. The implications of this type of research for better informing cultural policy might be further explored. Linking theoretical, complex themes concerning cultural identities with pedagogic good practice, informed curatorship and applied policy formulation would be enormously beneficial to cultural sector research

### **Keywords**

Cultural identity, heritage representation, authenticity, understanding.

## **Introduction**

The ways in which objects are selected, put together, and written or spoken about have political effects. These effects are not those of the objects *per se*; it is the use made of these objects and interpretive frameworks that can open up or close down historical, social and cultural possibilities, by legitimating difference, museum pedagogy can become a critical pedagogy. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). The importance of insightful and inclusive cultural policy that acknowledges such legitimisation of difference is crucial in spaces of contested identity and multiple heritage(s). Northern Ireland is only one such space in an increasing number of global zones of conflict where concepts of 'national cultural identity' have become fragmented, blurred and often violently challenged.

This paper will address issues relating to the representation of emigration history and heritage using a specific museum case study site situated within Northern Ireland. Heritage is a much debated concept with definitions ranging from 'anything simply inherited from the past, ... an incorporation of the natural and the built environment' (Duffy, 1994, pp.77) to 'a commodified product using a selection of resources from the past for the products of modern demands ... a specific use of history, not a synonym for it' (Ashworth and Larkham, 1994, pp 47) These authors also argue that the heritage commodity is a product which can be used by consumers/visitors and therefore contains particular messages. "These messages stem from the conscious choices of resources, products and packaging, which are performed on the basis of sets of subjective values, consciously or not, of those exercising these choices (Ashworth and Larkham, 1994 pp.20) In recent decades many writers have discussed 'dominant ideology hypotheses' in relation to culture and other issues, whereby governments and/or ruling elites project legitimising messages to compound their positions. Bourdieu's concepts of 'cultural capital' can be extended to include heritage, and as such, forms part of a process of national politico-cultural power relations.

On the island of Ireland, where concepts of 'national', 'heritage' and cultural identity are contested and problematic, the role of cultural organisations, policy formulators and museum sites takes on added significance. "In Northern Ireland, culture is one of many terrains on which political struggles are waged. Culture is seen as one battlefield on which the broader political struggle can be fought, the interests of one's own national community advanced, and those of the other retarded." (Thompson, 2003, pp1) It should not however, be assumed that dominant state organisations and others do not

*acknowledge* the difficulty of variable definitions, uses and interpretations of both 'culture' and 'heritage'. A multiplicity of quite different ideologies can (and do) exist, and can be conveyed through the same heritage, rather than any specific coherent political programme intended to support any distinctive prevailing view of society. Whether national conflicts are reconcilable through proactive, inclusive cultural heritage policy is arguable and remains to be seen in many places, but questions of identity and difference appear to be ubiquitous in the landscape of contemporary political theory. (O'Neill, 2003)

Moving from the conceptual to the applied, the politics of representation become crucial at the practical level of museum and exhibition design and layout. What is said and what is not, becomes loaded, and more importantly, *how* messages are portrayed takes on added significance. The task for museum curators, educators and exhibition developers – is to provide experiences that invite visitors to make meaning through deploying and extending their existing interpretive strategies and repertoires, using their prior knowledge and their preferred learning styles, and testing their hypotheses against those of others, including experts. (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995)

## **Cultural Policy Context**

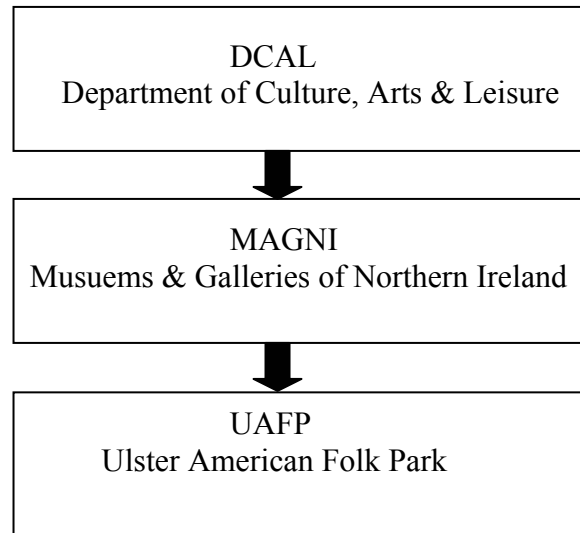
O'Neill (2003) further argues that conflicts of national identity typically call into question the legitimacy of the state, the justice of its key institutions and the inclusiveness of the ethos in which those institutions are embedded. The state must, comments Thompson (2003) be seen as complicit in the shaping of cultural forms, and not simply taking ready-formed cultural identities and making them manifest in the public realm. Bearing this in mind, we must assess the importance of museums and heritage spaces in roles of the *creation* and authentic reflection of cultural identities.

Chappell (1989) suggests that museum visitors are ready to be challenged about major issues from the past and present and that good museums must not be passive or regressive but rather, should have things to say that ultimately advance the discussion about social relations and economic structures. Furthermore, Ellis (1995) comments that museums have been urged to adopt a political stance in their exhibitions that explore social problems and (Karp, 1992) concurs that they cannot be impartial observers in clashes over contested identities. If the understanding of culture suggests a critical role for museums in picturing and presenting inclusive, equitable societies (Sandell, 2002), then the structures and organisations related to cultural conveyance must be closely examined.

It is beyond the remit of this paper to attempt an in-depth review and critical assessment of the history of cultural structures in Northern Ireland, but a contemporary overview is needed as cultural context for the case study review that follows. The government department in charge of cultural matters is the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL). DCAL was formed as a result of devolution as a new department which, for the first time in Government in Northern Ireland, has created a focus for culture, arts and leisure. Of relevance to this research, is the administration of 'museums and heritage' by DCAL (including the built heritage, landscape and archaeology, local history and heritage based attractions). DCAL (2001) acknowledges the value of culture in its own right but also comments that it can help promote social inclusion and improve community relations by bringing people together, and helping communities to learn about and understand themselves and one another. Amongst other functions, DCAL's strategy includes working with local District Councils to develop integrated local plans for culture, arts and leisure. A range of other governmental and non-governmental organisations are partnering DCAL in these development plans.

Pertinent to this work is the MAGNI organisation, Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, which is within the Culture & Creative Industries division of DCAL. Established in 1998, MAGNI consists of the main museums, galleries and heritage sites in the province (including the Ulster American Folk Park case study site). MAGNI's main functions are 'through its collections, to promote the awareness, appreciation and understanding by the public of: art, history and science, the culture and way of life of people; and the migration and settlement of people.' (DCAL website, 2004. [www.dcalni.gov.uk](http://www.dcalni.gov.uk))

**Figure 1. Cultural Organisational Structures, Northern Ireland.**



Key operational programmes and documents for DCAL include the aforementioned Local Cultural Strategies, as well as the recent 'Local Museum and Heritage Review' (2002). The latter was an attempt to stock-take and devise strategies for future museum and heritage development within the new cultural department in NI. Amongst its key findings was the proposal to set up a new 'Heritage Sub Group' within a wider Cultural Forum. Again, definitional and conceptual challenges surrounding the meaning of 'heritage' will have great significance as this proposal is developed in real terms. Even the initial departmental response to the proposal (DCAL/DoE, 2002) acknowledges that 'overlapping responsibilities for heritage mean that the involvement of others will be necessary to ensure that the definition reflects the needs of the museum, heritage, tourism and cultural sectors.' Furthermore, as museum and heritage sites take on added roles of cultural education in society, the politics of inclusion and representation must be addressed and somehow expressed. Recent education consultancy documents – such as – "A Culture of Tolerance: Integrating Education" (1998) and "Towards a Culture of Tolerance: Education for Diversity" (1999) have proposed ways in which to appreciate cultural diversity and to promote 'cultures of tolerance'. DCAL's own document 'What Culture Can Do For You' (2002) states clearly that museums achieve educational benefits by 'educating people about their history, which helps inform them about their personal identities.' Working together with other governmental departments will, it seems, be a necessary focus for a successful integrative cultural-heritage-museums sector.

As a newly formed department with a cultural remit for the first time in NI (and in a government stimulated by devolution but struggling with political wranglings and stoppages) DCAL has an immense task on its hands.

## **Assessing Multiple Heritage(s): The Ulster American Folk Park, a Case Study.**

### **Background**

The Ulster-American Folk Park, located in Omagh, Co. Tyrone, was used in a recent cross-border field study to elicit debate and discussion on how multiple Irish histories and identities might best be represented in public heritage spaces.

The Ulster-American Folk Park (UAFP) was established in 1976 as Northern Ireland's contribution to the American bicentenary. It was themed around the portrayal of the emigrant trail to America, and in particular, on the story of the Mellon family – a Presbyterian success story of accomplishment in the New World. Large scale emigration from Ireland to North America began in the 1720s and throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century, involved many settlers who sought land and a new way of life. Many of the early (Ulster) pioneers were Presbyterian and became known in their adopted country as Scotch-Irish. Interrupted only by the American War of Independence (1775-83) and the Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815), the great tide of emigration continued in to the nineteenth century as America began to attract immigrants from all parts of Ireland.

The Great Famine in Ireland (also known as 'the potato famine' or simply, 'the famine') lasted from 1845-49 and brought lasting demographic change to the island of Ireland. Pre-Famine emigration to the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is thought to have been in the region of 1.5 million people. The five year period of the famine itself is thought to have contributed at least another 1.5 million to the American population, not including those who died in transit (UAFP, Museums and Galleries Northern Ireland website). The UAFP, claims, according to the informational literature, to 'tell the story of these emigrants and their everyday lives through the reconstruction of original and replica buildings' (UAFP website, accessed April 2004). The juxtaposition of historical data on 'pre'/'during-famine' emigration figures followed by the above statement suggests a museum concerned with the telling of a comprehensive range of migration histories; however, this is questionable at the UAFP. If a museum or a site is to have an educational value... they must also honestly represent the more shameful events of our past... if interpretation is to be a social good, then it must alert us to the future through the past (Uzzell, 1989, quoted in Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996)

The UAFP centres its story of emigration largely around the enterprise success of Judge Thomas Mellon, who was originally from Co. Tyrone, and who went on to found a vast industrial empire in Pennsylvania. 'His experiences *are typical of many emigrants*' the UAFP explanatory literature tells us, 'and it is fitting that his boyhood home should provide the centrepiece of the Ulster-American Folk Park'. Over the past twenty five years the park has grown and now claims to be 'the largest museum of emigration in Europe and stands as a permanent symbol of the many links which have been forged down the centuries between Ireland and America' (UAFP website). Along with the outdoor-indoor folk park, the site also contains a complementary indoor museum exhibition entitled 'Emigrants' and houses the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) which serves as a research resource for migration records and archives. In 1998, the UAFP

joined with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Armagh Museum, and the Ulster Museum to form the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI).

### **Research Case Study**

As an academic working within the emerging field of heritage studies in the Republic of Ireland, the author felt the need for constant negotiation, assessment and justification of the term ‘national heritage’ which is not as problematic, perhaps, in other countries. The UAFP was chosen as a case study site for a practical research exercise which brought together two visitor groups – one from the Republic or ‘south’ of Ireland and one from the North, to discuss and critique differential heritage representations and issues of cultural identity. The visitor groups in this instance were final year geography and heritage studies students from southern and northern Irish universities. The role of universities in cross-border co-operation and education is an important one and here, ‘visitor-studies’ take on a more loaded meaning in the context of the peace-process and creating new or emerging cultural representations.

Specifically, the aims of the field-study were to (a) facilitate communication and interaction between students from both sides of the border on how multiple Irish heritages might best be represented in public heritage spaces, (b) to engage an open, honest discourse on often difficult, politically sensitive issues in a safe environment, (c) to increase understanding and awareness of multiple perspectives from within a heterogeneous group and, (d) to evaluate the potential value of such exchanges for both museum – visitor relations and for better informed cultural policy formulation.

The challenges of the exercise included the mixed nature of the group in terms of origin, gender, religion and to a lesser extent, age. The case study involved pre-visit instruction and discussion of relevant heritage and cultural policy literature, followed by a long-weekend residential programme designed to meet the research aims listed above. Practically, this included a series of lectures, workshops, guided and self-directed tours of the folk-park itself, the emigration galleries and the Centre for Migration Studies. The two groups were given the opportunity to observe and assess heritage representation at the site and were later allocated mixed workshop groups to discuss a variety of issues centred around identity, cultural representation and interpretation.

Some references to the UAFP can be found in Irish heritage literature (e.g. Brett, 1996), and this research allowed a group of mixed visitors to assess for themselves some of the ideas put forward by other writers. Brett (1996) comments that ‘the mythical structure’ of the UAFP as presented is a system of binary opposites that are visualised and simulated as:

**Table 1. Ulster-American Differentiation (after Brett, 1996)**

ULSTER	AMERICA
Stone	Wood
Thatch	Shingle
Shaggy	Smooth
Grazed	Planted
Dense	Cleared
Natural	Rational
Picturesque	Modern



The park, Brett suggests, presents an unproblematic migration process which deals with issues of class and religion in an implicit and taken-for-granted manner. The narrative typology of the space suggests a simple presentation of the backward versus the modern. Brett's concerns centre around the apparently neutral representation of the UAFP and the representativeness of the broader Ulster (and for some, the broader *Irish*) migratory community. The park, he comments, is not neutrally Ulster-American in a geographic sense, but Ulster-Presbyterian-American in a confessional sense (Brett, 1996). Further issues for consideration include conflicts between authenticity and myth in a public heritage space that serves both cultural-educational and entertainment (tourism) functions.

Cultural representations of heritage, identity and place are produced and consumed by a multiplicity of groups, even within the same bounded space (Graham et al, 2000)

The student-visitor groups' activities worked at many different levels. Knowledge gain and attitude change are desirable cultural performance indicators according to much research on heritage-visitor interrelationships (e.g. Uzzell and Ballantyne, 1998) In this instance, not only were the general research aims adequately met, added learning outcomes were part of the interactive experience. These included the recognition of:

- Student knowledge as legitimate
- De-centring authority
- Deep learning (for those open to it)

There was an important pedagogic premise to the UAFP research as students were encouraged to take ownership of their own learning, deep understanding of the material content of the site, and also of their co-visitors in terms of understanding multiple perspectives. Issues of situated knowledges and positionality were important underlying principles which were raised *in situ* to help further understanding of difference and the Other. The politics of difference is an implicit issue faced daily by at least one half of the research group; the ability to assess these concerns within a safe, cultural space was a key element to the exercise.

Workshop exercises (written and verbal) and pre/post visit questionnaires on the student visitor group (60 people) gave some interesting results on key themes of heritage representation and individual/group expectations, knowledge gain and understanding. The following provides a selection of quotations and feedback on the exercise –

### ***Group Expectations***

The group was asked what they thought they might get from such an exercise, and what their expectations were before coming to the heritage park. Responses were positive but varied.

*"To listen to other people's views on migration and get a real sense of what it is all about"*

*" A comprehensive tour of the park ... workshops and to deepen my knowledge, just for myself – and exams as well I suppose!"*

## **Heritage Representation and Authenticity**

Individual responses on questions about views on the content, layout and interpretation of history at the UAHP include:

*“some representations were valid but a lot was missing, such as the true squalor and hardship from the period”*

*“the park described real life stories”*

*“Presbyterianism might be relevant to Presbyterians but not to me. The predominance of this faith in this area necessitates that portrayal but to some it detracts from the museum’s appeal”*

*“I think the representation is valid and authentic, it’s been researched thoroughly. It can’t portray every situation, so within these limits it’s very accurate...”*

Overall, the responses were diverse. As expected, many of the southern visitor group were surprised at the lack of reference to the famine, which formed a large element of their migration-education and heritage, whilst the northern group did not reference this issue as much. In certain answers, there appeared to be an element of ‘wanting to say the right thing’ and be politically correct, but in general, honesty and directness came through in the visitor critique of the site. The park’s claim to tell the story of Irish emigrants and the choice of the Mellor family as a ‘typical emigrant experience’ was challenged by many members of both groups.

*“in terms of a Presbyterian focus, the presentation seems valid, but not in terms of general emigration”*

Suggestions for improvements among the group included a variety of measures such as:

*“the park should decide on a clear focus and stick to it, at the moment it appears to be trying to switch horses crossing the stream. It claims to represent emigration in general but should stick to a Presbyterian focus and openly admit to this and promote the park as such.”*

*“the park could be more inclusive and up-to-date if it provided information on emigration to other lands, and also maybe focus on return migration and modern day migration. It needs a more universal approach, encompassing all...”*

*“the park should do more live events and cross-border things, like we just got involved in; it opened my eyes a lot to how I think about things”*

## **Outcomes**

The visit outcomes can be categorised somewhat into ‘general’ knowledge gain, negotiation skills, crossing borders and building bridges.



**Table 2. Visitor Experiences at the UAFP**

Knowledge Gain	<p>“ it was useful to interact with the students from the south and see their perspective”</p> <p>“ the main learning outcome for me was that I learned about emigration from a different perspective – an Ulster-Presbyterian one”</p> <p>“ I learned about what life was like in Ireland back then and why people wanted to leave...”</p> <p>“ I saw the overall image and story of the folk park and got many views on Irish migration and Irish society as a whole”</p>
Negotiation Skills	<p>“ how important it is to be open”</p> <p>“how to communicate with the Northern students in a sensitive manner on issues raised during our stay”</p> <p>“ both groups worked together and brought their own skills and resources to the questions and exercises and we worked through them together”</p>
Crossing Borders	<p>“ I suppose we were suspicious of each other, at least to begin with”</p> <p>“ didn’t think the southern students would be as friendly as they were”</p> <p>“I didn’t think the two groups would get to know each other as well as they did”</p>
Building Bridges	<p>“ I think it might be about making connections, in the first place”</p> <p>“ not to be afraid, but still sensitive... fear was there with most of us, but we all wanted to learn from each other and the work that was being carried out”</p>

Taking the concept of ‘bridge-building’ a little further, the group was asked also to comment on the role heritage sites such as the UAFP played in cross-border cultural education. The responses were overwhelmingly positive and most felt the exercise they had participated in was hugely beneficial.

*“the park helps to educate all about the perceptions people have about emigration and other issues which may not normally be addressed with regard to the North”*

*“this place has a huge role to play and could really improve relations...”*

*“ the site is an excellent provision so long as it doesn’t seek to establish a superiority of North over South”*

*“heritage sites can bring communities together, create public awareness and help create peace in Ireland. They can educate all Irish people no matter what their religion is, but also make a statement to the world as to how the folk park is, in my opinion, making a big difference”*

*“Sites like the UAFP can have a key role in education from primary school upwards because there is possibility for an educational setting for institutions from both sides of the border. They can really contribute to cross-cultural understanding.”*

The findings of this research generally indicate that both groups had varying degrees of criticism of the UAFP, based largely around issues of representation, selectivity and diversity (or lack thereof) of historical information on Irish migration.

Plans are afoot at the UAFP to develop the park further to include a new ‘National Museum of Emigration’. Despite the title ‘national’, correspondence on the development refers still to ‘a museum [which] interprets *Ulster* emigration worldwide’ and the building of ‘Ulster to the world’ emigrant-associated collections. This development is still in its planning stages and is heavily dependent on resources. Interestingly, one of the research workshop exercises with the cross-border groups was to discuss the possibility of developing a National Museum of Migration at the UAFP. The groups found it an exceedingly difficult exercise to assess and questioned the legitimacy of adopting the term ‘national’ and the contentious issue of locating such a museum in the north as opposed to the south. One innovative participant suggested building an interactive museum of migration on a boat (to symbolise movement) and floating it up and down the river Shannon back and forth across the border in a politically correct effort at inclusivity and parity of location!

## **Conclusion**

The research case study employed was simple but effective. It illustrated very clearly that different user groups can engage with heritage space on different levels yet see the perspectives of other possible interpretations. It challenged some of the pre-existing claims of the heritage park itself on issues of representation and allowed for a frank but secure exchange of views on cultural diversity and interpretation.

Research of this nature, although one-off, contained, and practical in nature, should be of great value to a variety of possible audiences; (1) museum curators; who should welcome honest feedback of a more conceptual nature than is often the case in the typical, quantitative ‘enjoyment rating’ tick-box approach to feedback, (2) academics who research and teach issues of contested space, place, culture and heritage, - by bringing groups of students (who may well become professionals in the cultural industries later in their careers) to sites of heritage-difference, greater understanding of sometimes complex, academic theoretical issues can be simplified and approached with practical sensitivity and pragmatism; (3) cultural policy makers; as new, inclusive concepts of culture emerge in Northern Ireland, cultural departments and organisations, museums and heritage professionals will need to pay greater attention to how politically-sensitive constructs of the past might best be represented.

Using a heritage site to stimulate discussion of real issues of representation and ‘authentic histories’ by northern and southern Irish consumer groups led to valuable insights and understandings. Linking theoretical, complex issues concerning cultural identities and representation with pedagogic good practice, informed curatorship and

inclusive cultural policy formulation should be enormously beneficial to cultural sector research.

If heritage sites are to be used as contemporary spaces of cultural participation and identity formation, boundaries must shift, perhaps uncomfortably sometimes, to incorporate new ways forward. Sandell (2002) suggests however, that despite a growing recognition that museums have often reproduced and reinforced social inequalities through their collecting and exhibitionary practices, many museum staff are uncomfortable with the notion of relinquishing their pursuit of perceived objectivity and neutrality in favour of adopting an active, political stance on equality issues. In the case of Northern Ireland, we must ask 'what obligations might be placed on museums to do so, and indeed, what impacts might result from such actions'? As issues of culture, identity and heritage are challenged and played out within an emerging politico-cultural policy arena in the province, should the deconstruction of culture, as Fraser (1995) proffers, aim to destabilise all fixed identities and thus create fields of multiple, debinarized, fluid, ever-shifting differences?

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