



‘... a social precipice...’

URSULA BURKE & DANIEL JEWESBURY

From at least the mid-17th century until the mid-19th, the western side of the Malone Road, between modern-day Methodist College and Balmoral Avenue, was occupied by a succession of narrow strip farms. Let from the estate of the Marquises of Donegall, these farms rolled down from the well-drained Malone ridge, a mile or so westwards to the floodlands of the Bog Meadows, which still today border the Blackstaff River. As Trevor Carleton points out, this distribution was

based on the egalitarian principle that each had a fair share of the sandy soils on top of the ridge, boulder clay on the middle slopes and damp water meadows at the bottom.¹

Along the road, the first houses would have been rough: ‘one-storey,

¹ Trevor Carleton, ‘Aspects of Local History in Malone, Belfast’ in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 39 (1976), p. 65.

mudwalled and thatched². Occasionally, grander buildings intervened; the ruins of one of these, Cranmore, now hidden amongst the playing fields of the Belfast Academical Institution, represent the oldest house still standing in Belfast. Until the early 19th century, however, short leases discouraged new building on any great scale. The introduction of 61-year leases in 1799, and of leases in perpetuity in 1823, and finally the sale of lands from the estate after 1846 were crucial factors in triggering the suburbanisation of the Malone Road and its surrounding districts.³ Prior to this, there had been little development, either of land or buildings, and the farms themselves had generally been sublet. As titles changed hands in the 19th century, so the pattern of the old farms gave rise to the modern street plan: the first to be laid out, lined with detached and semi-detached villas, were Windsor Avenue, Wellington Park and Derryvolgie Avenue; the rest of the

² Trevor Carleton, 'Malone, Belfast: The Early History of a Suburb' in *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 41 (1978), p. 94.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-97.

streets we now recognise were added gradually throughout the second half of the 19th century.

Simultaneous to these changes in the Donegall Estate, the landscape further west was being significantly realigned. The Lisburn Road was laid out between 1817 and 1819, taking a straighter course than the 'Old Dublin Coach Road' (the Malone Road). It was the first road to cut across the Malone farmlands. Soon after, in 1839, the Ulster Railway was driven through, close by the western side of the Lisburn Road, and the farms were divided once again. The burgeoning suburb had been given its most important hard boundaries, boundaries reiterated today by the M1 and the Boucher Road industrial estate, and which constitute a broad barrier between affluent South Belfast, on the hill, and West Belfast, beyond the Blackstaff.

The development of the Lisburn Road beyond the municipal boundary (which until 1896 ran along Cadogan Park, between today's police and fire stations) was very slow to take shape:

In 1856 there were only fifty houses on the Lisburn Road, twenty-two were situated on the ‘Dummies Hill’ opposite the Work House (now the City Hospital) and the Institute of the Deaf and Dumb and Blind (demolished). The remaining twenty-eight included six cottages at Scotchmount (now Tate’s Avenue) and another group of cottages was situated on the City Boundary...

Beyond that boundary were

Two farms, called Myrtlefield and Maryville... the only other houses in the area were Hampton House (Stockman’s Lane), Malone Presbyterian Manse and Willowbank.⁴

In other words, nearly all the streets that now run from both sides of the Lisburn Road south of Cadogan Park were laid out in the last forty years of the 19th century. Certainly, by the time of the Ordnance Survey of 1902, almost the entirety of today’s street plan was complete.



The Lisburn Road,
between Cadogan Park
and Balmoral Avenue

⁴ *St. Nicholas’ Parish Church 75th Anniversary* (1976). No author, no page numbers.

Soft boundaries

Writing in 1960, Emrys Jones makes some fundamental observations about the development of the Lisburn Road:

Notwithstanding the generalisation that the better villas are built on the sands and the poorer terraces on the clay, it is the road which forms the boundary between two sets of values associated with the two areas.⁵

On the western side of the road were built the Workhouse, the Deaf and Dumb Institute, the Fever Hospital and the Lunatic Asylum; on the ridge, the Botanic Gardens, Methodist College, Assembly's College and Queen's University. As one travels down the Lisburn Road out of Belfast, one can see the divide clearly still, even though many of the more grotesque Victorian landmarks have long since disappeared. On one's right, the streets fall away

⁵ Emrys Jones, *A Social Geography of Belfast* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960) p. 240.

steeply to the outskirts of the Village, with few large villas (the area around Ulsterville Avenue is a notable exception) and a majority of artisan's and worker's cottages, the spartan two-up-two-down redbrick that cover so much of Belfast. To the left, the avenues are lined by trees, and they climb gently, serenely, towards Malone and Stranmillis. As Jones affirms, 'all the maps of social data confirm that the Lisburn Road is a social precipice.'⁶

Jones also comments on the way in which the Lisburn Road acts as Malone's shopfront:

the purely upper-class residential nature of Malone has precluded shops. It is worth noting that even on the Lisburn Road, there are many fewer shops on the east side of the road than the west.⁷

A picture begins to emerge of a very clearly delineated neighbourhood, one as enclosed by hard boundaries as the other parts of this infinitely

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

fragmented city. A road which runs from north to south but which looks east, up the hill, almost in deference, its back to the sloblands, the car showrooms, the labyrinthine terraced streets. Yet within the precincts of these hard boundaries are other boundaries still, multiple internal borders. These leafy frontiers protect the private space of the homeowner; they are the vestigial hedgerows left after the farms were cleared. Behind each, the tiny family plot is still cultivated, only now it is filled with roses, clematis, rhododendrons, rather than grazing cattle, sheep, or crops.

Walking or driving along the Lisburn Road on a Saturday afternoon, one will see many others doing the same. The road is a promenade, with specially cultivated zones of visuality, consumption and spectacle, and with its designated private-public social spaces, its wine bars and pavement cafés and boutiques. The street itself seems to be subject to invisibly-written gradations of social status: around the junction with Tate's Avenue, the Lisburn Road is also a junction between the loyalist Village and the bedsitland of the University; further south, just beyond the police station,

the petrol station and the Co-op, the concentration of shops suddenly changes. The last take-away, the last discount supermarket, the last flags, and then the bars and cafés and lingerie and shoe and clothes and interior décor and furniture shops proliferate. At this end, too, even the provision shops become luxury outlets: a baker's, a delicatessen and a specialist butcher's nestle next to one another in some sort of faux-village. Jones, in 1960, was able to remark that in Belfast one is never far from a hardware shop; since the advent of the out-of-town superstores, even hardware shops have become prestige outlets.

Archive: Lisburn Road

The photographic project *Archive: Lisburn Road* is an attempt to document a previously unrepresented segment of Belfast. Throughout the years of the Troubles, Belfast became a cipher for intractable conflict, for grimy industrial poverty, for gaudily-expressed hatreds. In the ideologically-

encrusted images on TV and in movies, in art and photojournalism, dirty-faced children crowded noisily around glowering peacelines, while bloodied rioters threw petrol bombs at armoured cars and marchers swaggered triumphantly past. This accretion of representational tics focused exclusively on one class of people, even while it insistently sorted them into sub-genres. Absent from any such images were the sizeable middle class of Belfast. One of the effects of such habits of representation was that large numbers of people in Belfast were able to watch the Troubles on TV and imagine that they were happening elsewhere, in some other city; the Troubles were the business of the people in the pictures – the people taking part. Over thirty years it became increasingly easy for the middle class to hold the belief that they were not in any way implicated in the failure of politics in Northern Ireland. They, after all, had voted steadfastly for the parties that condemned the violence, the Alliance, the SDLP. The idea that the divisions acted out through the sectarian violence might just be a *symptom* of a problem located more generally in the fabric and structure of

the society was not widely accepted.

Through a repetitive repertoire of visual clichés, the Belfast of popular representation became a parallel city, a kind of mythic supplement to the organic, divided-and-yet-somehow-coherent city that existed in actuality. The mythic city has by now, to some extent, supplanted the ‘real’ or ‘whole’ Belfast. For some, this has been very convenient: it has allowed the gaze to be diverted from those places, both real and figurative, in which power was concentrated, whilst the segregation and sub-segregation of the city continued, seemingly inevitable and inexplicable.

For this project, we have photographed a half-mile stretch of the Lisburn Road, and the streets that run into it, over the course of several months. The area that we have recorded is confined by Drumglass Park to the north (known to many as Marlborough Park) and Malone Park to the south. We believe that this neighbourhood is unique in the inner Belfast area. There are other suburbs in the city which boast tree-lined streets, large houses and spacious, tidy gardens, but the distinctive and

spectacularised *material culture* of this area, which flows out from the many shops, cafés, bars and restaurants on this small stretch of the Lisburn Road, is not seen in such a concentration in any other area.

Our primary concern in photographing this small neighbourhood in such detail is to render visible a community that would rather be invisible. Indeed, we contend that it would rather not see itself as a community at all, since that word today carries connotations of less well-presented and well-to-do districts, and people. The strategic invisibility of this area is ‘complicit’ with the overrepresentation of the ‘divided Belfast’: by these two phenomena this area of very considerable affluence is able to extract itself from the ‘political problem’, and to absolve itself of any responsibility in its solution.

The form of the ‘archive’ is increasingly being used by artists and curators, as a container for a range of critical devices. Often it is employed at an ironic distance, a means by which to ‘critique’ the practices of anthropology, or ethnography, or colonialism, or museology. Alternatively,

conceptualists, who get excited about the *form* of pure information, value the structural qualities of archives (archive as database). Interest in the form takes precedence over the specific nature of any content.

Archive: Lisburn Road is not an attempt at ironic critique. We do not view, or present, our subjects as ‘strange’ or ‘other’, or as objects of ridicule. Nor have we superimposed some pre-ordained, unvariable formal style upon an arbitrarily selected content. We have chosen to describe our work in this way, firstly, because we hope that it has something of the breadth of a genuine archive: a range of views, a sequence of images whose meaning is generated collectively rather than individually. We also believe that it contributes to a larger, ongoing archive, the archive that is the sum of all the representations of this city, which we all produce and consume on a daily basis. We have attempted to place in that larger archive an image of Belfast that has not generally been available.

Inasmuch as we have tried to redress a perceived imbalance in terms of *what* is shown, we have also considered *how* it is shown. We have

photographed in daylight, in artificial light and in a combination of the two, in the day, at dusk and at night. We have not tried to achieve a slavish naturalism: these are not self-consciously boring photographs (even if it is decided that they have turned out that way). But we have not used 'effects' for their own sake. We have tried to produce a set of images that is as revealing as possible about the particular 'unity of atmosphere' of our area of study, even as we acknowledge that there is no such thing as an unmediated, uninflected or un-'affected' representational strategy.

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