November 1997

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Recommended Citation

Chepesiuk, Ron (1997) "Times of Troubles: An Interview with Wes McCann about Northern Ireland Libraries," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 9: Iss. 5, Article 31.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2933>

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Times of Troubles: An Interview with Wes McCann about Northern Ireland Libraries

by Ron Chepesiuk <104551.2330@compuserve.com>

Belfast, Northern Ireland—The great divide separating Northern Ireland Protestants and Catholics is distinctively etched in the graffiti one sees on the building walls in the two communities. In the Protestant Shankill areas is the blunt slogan, "Not an Inch," a reference to the Protestant majority's belief that even a small compromise will lead to what they adamantly don't want — unification with the overwhelmingly Catholic Irish Republic to the South. The Catholics of the Anderson and Fall Roads communities counter with the clever slogan, "not an ounce," a reference to large caches of plastic explosives kept by the Irish Republican Army. For nearly thirty years, the Irish have been trying to terrorize Northern Ireland's people into accepting its twins goals of British out and an Unified Ireland. This is the harsh political reality in which libraries in Northern Ireland must function. It's an environment charged with distrust, hate, and violence in which 3,200 people have been killed since 1969. Contributing Editor Ron Chepesiuk recently visited Northern Ireland to learn more about its library system. He was one of fourteen library leaders who participated in a ten-day study tour this past January 26-February 4, which was sponsored by the British Council, the cultural arm of the British Government. Over coffee one morning, Chepesiuk interviewed Wes McCann, study tour coordinator and Director of the Belfast-based Stranmillis College Library, to learn how our colleagues are doing under the circumstances.

ATG: What are your job responsibilities at Stranmillis?

WM: I am a librarian at a teacher's college, and my job is to provide library service to staff and students and support learning and teaching. I have six full-time staff under me.

ATG: How do you become a librarian in Northern Ireland? What's the route to being a professional?

WM: In most cases, it's an university degree followed by one or two years of post graduate work in librarianship, either in England or here. The library training course in Northern Ireland has changed in recent years, and my feeling is that the route to becoming a professional librarian is less rigid here. We have people in Northern Ireland who got to the top of the library profession without the formal accreditation, but they got the right kind of

breaks and have the right kind of subject expertise.

ATG: But is that a good or bad thing for the profession in Northern Ireland?

WM: I think it's good thing because a number of outstanding individuals have made it to the top of the profession.

ATG: Many American librarians might say that is contrary to professional standards and it hurts librarians who play by the rules, so to speak.

WM: Well, it's less common than it used to be. The exception today might be a few jobs where subject expertise is essential.

ATG: What opportunities are there for local librarians to move within the profession in Northern Ireland?

WM: It is a small place and in recent years it's been very difficult to move within higher education. There has been little growth; in fact, it's a fairly static scene. So it's easier to move from one university to another than it is to move up. At this stage of my career, it would be impossible to move from the academic to public library sphere. It doesn't happen too often at my level — the senior (management) level.

ATG: What impression do Northern Ireland librarians have of the American library profession?

WM: Obviously, we have learned a lot from our American colleagues. Indeed, at one time there was an awful lot to learn. We have reached our own level now, and we have done things that our American colleagues can look at now and say that we do better.

ATG: Could you give us an example?

WM: The way we approach local history. In talking to some of the other Americans on the study tour, I've learned that local history is not given a high priority in the U.S. Libraries here, though, place a high value on local history and have given much effort to making it a part of the services we provide. That goes for all kinds of libraries.

ATG: Is that because of the so called Troubles you have here?

WM: Yes, I think this interest began at least twenty years ago when the Troubles

started flaring up. People became interested in their identity — that is, who they were — and began to look at local history and started asking who they were and where did they come from. They began looking for what is distinctive about themselves. There is a strong tradition here of librarians collecting and preserving local history, so they concluded that there was more than they should be doing. Every public library authority in Northern Ireland has a highly developed local history collection. We also have this tradition in Northern Ireland where both academic and public libraries work very closely with museums and the Public Records Office. We share expertise, working together and not competing.

ATG: How is the library profession viewed here in Northern Ireland?

WM: We are still the butt of jokes. There is still the perception of the librarian as a mousy person — the lady with the bun and the man with the glasses. I think it will always be like that.

ATG: I can't see you wearing a bun.

WM: But I wear glasses (laughs). The profession here used to spend an awful lot of time examining itself. Why aren't we more accepted? Why does the public ste-

"Obviously, we have learned a lot from our American colleagues."

reotype us? ... that sort of thing. I hope we've given up on that and just keep on doing the job the best we can and hope that those we serve are appreciative of what we do for them.

ATG: How about the information revolution? What's the feeling about the Internet, the Web, etc. Is there any feeling that all of that is a threat to the library as we know it?

WM: I think only for those librarians who are stuck in the past. I think librarians here feel they have nothing to fear, so long as we keep up with developments, and I think we are. I'm sure you've seen the high level of involvement with technology on the part of some of the libraries you visited. I know there has been talk about the "death of the book" and "every

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man being his own librarian", what with increasingly easier access to computer terminals. But the evidence shows that the public still needs help. There is still a role for the intermediary in information exchange and I don't see that changing radically in the near future

ATG: *So are you optimistic about the future of libraries in Northern Ireland?*

WM: Oh yes. Take a look within the field of higher education, the field I know best and one I work in. There has been a recognition that considerable investment has to be made in the libraries of higher education. The authorities recognize that libraries are still in the forefront of the information revolution.

ATG: *It seems, though, to be crunch time for libraries in Northern Ireland. One public librarian told us her public library is losing fifty percent of her book budget. What are your thoughts about that?*

WM: There has been a problem. Because of the unexpected additional spending on security and because of the recent civil unrest, the government has hit education here very hard. The Secretary of State made it perfectly clear that the British Government felt the security problem was wasting its money. So they told the people of Northern Ireland: "if you waste our money, you are going to pay for it." We thought a ceasefire would bring a peace dividend and that the money saved would be diverted to things like libraries, schools and hospitals and improving the infrastructure. But suddenly everything went into reverse because the ceasefire ended and civil unrest followed. The book funds in libraries were among the first things marked as having to take a cut. I believe libraries can live with that for one year, but it will be a very serious situation if the cuts extend beyond that.

ATG: *So what impact are the Troubles having on libraries here? For example, have there been physical attacks on libraries?*

WM: In a very few isolated incidents. A few years ago, the Linen Hall Library was firebombed. It was made clear, though, by those who plan those things that the people who did it didn't do what they were told to do.

ATG: *What about censorship? Is there any attempt from the Protestant and Catholic communities to exclude books from the collection?*

WM: I don't think that's a problem. The libraries are collecting the literature

of the Troubles and making it available. Libraries here have always tried to be even-handed in their collecting of materials. Of course, if you have a library in the Protestant or Catholic areas, it is going to be careful about displaying items that might attract attention. It would be stupid to do otherwise. Of course, libraries will not display items on the open shelf that could be subject to theft or mutilation.

ATG: *What role do you see libraries playing in diffusing the Troubles?*

WM: I don't know how much of a role libraries can play, although it's true that in certain communities, libraries are one of the services that create a sense of community. If minds are closed, there is little libraries can do to change perceptions. I think that is true for churches and schools as well.

ATG: *Do you think Northern Ireland libraries are treated equally within the United Kingdom?*

WM: There are actually some ways libraries are better off than our counterparts in other parts of the UK. For example, libraries here are clearly linked to the educational system, which is mandated to provide strong library service, including the appointment of a fully qualified chief librarian. That doesn't always happen in other parts of the U.K.

ATG: *How do you feel about the future?*

WC: The people here felt a tremendous sense of relief when the ceasefire came along. Everyone had high hopes for '96. We realized how much we had been missing. People publicly said we can't allow ourselves to go back in time. A lot of tourists came to see us. There were Italians, Germans, French The place was booming; you couldn't get a hotel room in Belfast. Then the ceasefire ended in February (1996) and things started to go in reverse. It's going to take the courage of one side (Protestant or Catholic) to say, "My culture and identity is not defined by forcing it on you." I strongly believe that it is a sign of strength to say: "If that offends you, I won't do it, even though I have the right to do it." But that's the crux. Someone has got to take the first step.

Ron Chepesiuk, journalist, historian and Professor and Head of Special Collections, Dacus Library, Winthrop University in Rock Hill, is the author of eight books and 1,400 plus articles. He spent 1981 and 1982 living in Ireland and has written extensively about Northern Ireland politics and libraries. Among his many interviews are Sinn Finn leaders **Gerry Adams** and **Danny Morrison**.

Northern Ireland's CAIN Project – A Global Cyber Resource for Conflict Studies
by **Ron Chepesiuk**

Belfast Northern Ireland— Any librarian doubting the tremendous impact the Internet is having on library development worldwide should visit Northern Ireland. There, among other cyber projects, the Queen's University of Belfast, the University of Ulster, and the Linen Hall Library are working together to develop **CAIN (Conflict Archives on the Internet)**, a project that aims to develop a multimedia database of resources that can be used for teaching and research into conflict studies. That such a project is based in Northern Ireland is appropriate, given that the small region of the United Kingdom (pop. 1.5 million) has been rocked with civil unrest and political violence for nearly thirty years.

Officially launched in January 1996, CAIN will use the Worldwide Web as a platform for locally generated resources and as a gateway to other similar network resources worldwide. The library materials to be used include bibliographic records, still and moving resources from collections all over Northern Ireland, and full text documents, particularly those from the Linen Hall Library's noted Northern Ireland Political Collection. The Linen Hall Library houses the premier collection on the Northern Ireland Troubles and is one of the few local libraries that has built bridges across the great cultural divide that separates the province's Protestants and Catholics. "I think the fact the collection started in 1968 when no other institution would collect this type of material, or didn't think of it, says something about our institution," explained **John Gray**, the Linen Hall Library's director.

"Working with the Linen Hall Library and the University of Ulster has made CAIN an exciting collaborative project," said **Nigel Butterwick** of the Service Development Department at Queen's University at Belfast Library. "We see it benefiting a wide variety of researchers, from scholars to all type of students. It will provide access and show how libraries can use network information to enhance service."

The project is expected to provide a number of other specific benefits. For example, CAIN will assist in the preparation of library materials, reduce pressure on library resources, encourage active learning and promote the awareness and usefulness of networked information within the academic community.

The project has a definite two-year plan. During the first year, the project hopes to provide two or three periods and issues, which will be illustrated by multimedia sources, and a directory of researchers worldwide who are working on the Northern Ireland conflict. The second year, the project expects to extend the periods and issues covered in the year one and will identify and incorporate other information providers.

According to CAIN's program statement, the project's partner institutions hope to use the World Wide Web as the principal delivery mechanism for its services so that "the service itself would act both as a gateway to other networked resources and as a platform for locally generated resources."

Dr. Martin Melaugh, CAIN's project emphasized, "We do provide links to other sites that contain information about Northern Ireland's Troubles and other sites are welcome to link to our site."

For further information, see the Web site, located at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk>.