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*Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland*. James Bluemel, Series Director; Sian McIlwaine, Producer-Director; Will Anderson and Andrew Palmer, Executive Producers; Rachel Hooper and Vicky Mitchell, Series Producers; Stewart Armstrong and Louise Duffy, Producers. KEO Films and Walk On Air Films, 2023. [318 minutes].

Featuring the personal testimonies of twenty-five activists, survivors, perpetrators, and victims, James Bluemel's five-part docuseries *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland* is a powerful retrospective of the conflict which raged between 1969 and 1998. Series director Bluemel and his colleagues invite viewers to empathize with interviewees across the political spectrum, and to form their own judgements. The result is a remarkable series which communicates how deeply contested the memory of this internecine conflict remains. *Once Upon a Time* continues the longstanding partnership between the BBC and the Open University, where senior lecturer Philip O'Sullivan was the lead academic researcher on this series. In its attentiveness to difficult pasts and partisan perspectives, the documentary develops O'Sullivan's previous work with the Open University in Ireland: for a decade, he co-led its oral history project *Time To Think*, which recorded interviews with politically motivated prisoners who took undertook Open University degrees between 1972 and 2000.

Proceeding chronologically through five one-hour episodes, Bluemel replicates techniques celebrated in his acclaimed series *Once Upon a Time in Iraq* (BBC, 2020), which won the BAFTA for Best Factual Series. Bluemel's new series similarly engages partisan personal testimonies from a host of witnesses, including many beyond the usual public gaze. In this case, contributors include veteran republicans who took up arms against British rule; loyalists who vowed to maintain the union with Britain and targeted the Catholic population to undermine support for the IRA; and members of the security forces who defended the union against the republican insurrection. Bluemel's interviewees also include the bereaved who lost loved ones in a conflict that cost more than 3,500 lives. Many of the twenty-five interviewees reappear in multiple episodes. Unlike Bluemel's Iraq series, *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland* eschews a "voice of God" narrator, instead allowing interviewees to speak entirely for themselves.

To many British viewers, who are the primary target audience for this series, the conflict in Northern Ireland was dangerously close to home, yet strangely unfathomable. To explain the causes of the conflict, the series, as the opening caption puts it, centers "ordinary people from all sides" sharing "personal stories." Producer-director Sian McIlwaine has contended that

amplifying “emotional” narratives enables wider audiences to “[learn] most from history.”<sup>1</sup>

Committed to exhibiting conflicting narratives, *Once Upon a Time* contrasts significantly from one of the more recent landmark series on the conflict: BBC Northern Ireland’s *Spotlight on the Troubles: A Secret History* (2019). *Spotlight* overtly belonged to the genre of historical investigative journalism, yielding some notable exposés for a Northern Ireland audience acutely acquainted with individual events and controversies during the Troubles. By contrast, *Once Upon a Time* assumes less subject-specific knowledge. Here, interviewees are afforded greater space to delineate their partisan perspectives on the conflict and its aftermath. Where *Spotlight* strove to recover objective truth, Bluemel’s series prefers to present contested subjective memories of the Troubles, both to explain the conflict’s origins and to signal its entangled legacies.

*Once Upon a Time* continues the agonistic mode of remembering advocated in relation to Northern Ireland by scholars such as Chris Reynolds, Graham Black, and Connal Parr, and deployed by public history practitioners at Belfast’s Ulster Museum and London’s Imperial War Museum.<sup>2</sup> In this agonistic framework, opposing narratives of the conflict are presented in parallel not to be resolved, nor melded into artificial consensus. Rather, wider publics are invited to reach their own conclusions—upholding the premise that agreeing to disagree is a fundamental prerequisite for building a new society in Northern Ireland.

Uncrowded by fast cutting or overbearing narration, the series allows dissonance between interviewees to emerge organically. In the first episode, for example, Derry republican Billy McVeigh offers an orthodox nationalist explanation of the conflict’s outbreak in the late 1960s. The Troubles did not begin with rioting, McVeigh insists, but rather with the unionist regime repressing “peaceful” civil rights demonstrators. Moments later, Jeanette Warke, a working-class Protestant, dismisses the idea that Catholics suffered unique discrimination. “We had nothing,” Warke says of her own community. By juxtaposing these contested memories, the director and production team pithily convey to the viewer the memory wars intensifying Northern Ireland’s ethnonational divide.

*Once Upon a Time* intersperses the immediacy of talking heads with more descriptive archival reportage. Including clips of, for example, a BBC journalist talking to camera amid the Battle of the Bogside in 1969, Bluemel deftly interweaves temporal markers that, in the absence of an omniscient narrator, double as

1 “The making of *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland*,” The Open University video, 6:30, [connect.open.ac.uk/history-and-the-arts/once-upon-a-time-in-northern-ireland](http://connect.open.ac.uk/history-and-the-arts/once-upon-a-time-in-northern-ireland).

2 Graham Black and Chris Reynolds, “Engaging Audiences with Difficult Pasts: *The Voices of ’68* Project at the Ulster Museum, Belfast,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 1 (January 2020): 21–38; Chris Reynolds and Connal Parr, “Northern Ireland’s 1968 at 50: Agonism and Protestant Perspectives on Civil Rights,” *Contemporary British History* 35, no. 1 (March 2021): 1–25; See Ulster Museum’s permanent gallery “The Troubles and Beyond” and the Imperial War Museum’s first exhibition dedicated to the Northern Ireland conflict, “Living with the Troubles” (until January 7, 2024).

explanatory scene settings. But archival film also functions as an elicitation device. In several instances, Bluemel's interviewees feature in decades-old historical footage. For instance, we see British Army veteran Tom Wharton watching himself being interviewed in the early 1970s. As he sees his younger self candidly admit to being "biased" against Northern Ireland's Catholic minority, the present-day Wharton acknowledges the fact with a resigned nod and a thin half-smile to camera. Playing with time in this form helps Bluemel transcend rigid moralistic binaries, instead inviting the viewer to empathize with interviewees' essential humanity amid invidious circumstances.

Bluemel's interviews are sensitively attuned to how ex-combatants and their relatives grapple with their pasts. Throughout the series, former loyalist prisoner James Greer remembers with bitter candor his mobilization some five decades earlier: "Sectarianism ultimately destroyed my life." Fusing the personal and the political, *Once Upon a Time* eloquently illustrates the gendered dimensions of sacrifice and loss. The third episode, for example, features Bernie O'Rawe—who supported her husband Ricky through the "horrific" blanket protest—and Bernadette McDonnell, whose father, Joe, died on the republican hunger strike in 1981. O'Rawe's powerful testimony upends prevailing republican narratives of heroic communal togetherness: "I hated every minute of being a prisoner's wife."

Although it is aimed primarily at an interested viewing public in Britain, this series deserves attention from a wide, even international general audience. By affording space and prominence to twenty-five interviewees across the political spectrum, Bluemel's work explicates the social and political forces which propelled the conflict and why its legacies remain so divisive. Sensitive to the complexity of individual trajectories and contested memory, *Once Upon a Time in Northern Ireland* stands apart as agonistic public history par excellence.

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