



BRIDGE OVER TROUBLES' SLAUGHTERS

BY BRITTNEY SALINE

Artist Karl Porter talks about how graffiti and CrossFit are healing wounds in the flashpoint city of Derry in Northern Ireland.



In Derry, one of Porter's murals sits beneath Irish Republican Army (IRA) and Bogside Republican Youth (BRY) graffiti on the shingles above.

It was well past 1 a.m., and darkness blanketed the city of Derry, Northern Ireland. The streets were barren save for two teenage boys and their paint.

Silence hung heavy in the back alleys of the bad side of town, interrupted only by a sound like static slicing the air.

Cloaked in a thick, black hoodie, Karl Porter held a small, pressurized can in his left hand. He gave it three sharp shakes and aimed for a wall, deftly directing the soft aerosol spray into the graceful shape of an E.

Neither boy noticed the car's approach until four masked men erupted from within. The vehicle was unmarked.

"That's when we realized we couldn't really run," Porter recalled.

The men were members of one of Northern Ireland's paramilitary organizations, vigilante enforcers of order on the hunt for two gunmen in dark-colored sweatshirts. Presumably nationalist, they would settle for catching unionists defiling their territory with political graffiti.

Thankfully, Porter was just tagging the wall with his graffiti name, Easi, the I a modification for the harder-to-draw Y. He had earned the nickname for his casual approach to his job as a gas-station attendant.

"I was quite lazy," Porter, now 28, described his heavys

16-year-old self. "When I was at work, one of the girls said, 'You're too easy. I'll call you Easy from now on.' The name stuck."

Because Porter's art neither defaced any political murals nor posed political threat, the men left the "graffers" to their painting unscathed. It wasn't the pair's first encounter with masked men in the night, but it was "the scariest one we've had," Porter said.

More than a decade after the end of The Troubles, the 30-year period of Irish civil unrest responsible for the deaths of more than 3,600 people and thousands more injuries, wounds still run deep in Northern Ireland, a part of the Province of Ulster. Bomb scares, shootings and threats of paramilitary violence are

still commonplace between the western Cityside and eastern Waterside communities of Derry (officially Londonderry), a city divided by the River Foyle and social malaise.

"There's a lot of fear," said Porter, who attended Catholic school in his youth but describes himself today as an apolitical and non-religious free thinker. "People live in fear and they don't realize it."



Porter grew up in Shantallow, a Cityside public-housing estate only miles from the mainly Protestant area of Waterside.



In Bogside, colors overhead clearly indicate who is welcome and who is not.

History of Hostility

The Troubles are said to have officially begun Oct. 5, 1968, with a civil-rights march supported by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. But the root of unrest reaches back to the 1300s, when English barons had seized nearly all Irish land.

King Henry VIII of England declared himself King of Ireland in 1541. His attempts to establish Protestantism in Ireland were ultimately realized in 1690, when the Protestant William of Orange defeated the Catholic James II to claim the throne in the Battle of the Boyne. The event is still commemorated in modern Northern Ireland with marches and fanfare every July 12, Orangemen’s Day.

For more than two centuries, Irish Protestants and Catholics disagreed over how Ireland should be governed. Protestant unionists favored British rule while Catholic nationalists fought for an independent Ireland.

Though the 1920 Government of Ireland Act granted each side its wish, giving the southern Republic of Ireland its sovereignty and keeping six predominantly unionist counties in the north as part of the United Kingdom, it was far from a fairy-tale ending. Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland lived segregated lives, and unionist gerrymandering, discriminatory hiring practices and laws governing voting rights prompted Catholics to campaign for equal civil rights in the 1960s.

Despite a 1968 ban against marches issued by William Craig, Northern Ireland’s minister for home affairs, protesters marched in Derry anyway on the night that started The Troubles. The police force of Northern Ireland, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), was deployed to disband the march, and the use of what has been described as excessive force—including batons and water cannons—was broadcast around the world.

Catholics answered violence with violence, rioting against the RUC and the British soldiers deployed to Northern Ireland to reinforce the police. In 1969, after what many Catholics deemed an insubstantial response by the Irish Republic Army (IRA), the IRA was split into two factions: the Official IRA, who believed in an Ireland united by peaceful measures, and the Provisional IRA, who would not hesitate to use violence to achieve their ends.

For the next three decades, blood was spilled on both sides.

For the next three decades, blood was spilled on both sides. After the Provisional IRA launched an attack against British troops in 1970, British soldiers retaliated in a gun battle against both IRA factions. On Jan. 30, 1972, known thereafter as Bloody

Sunday, 13 civilians were killed when the British Army opened fire on a Catholic civil-rights rally in Derry. Six months later, the Provisional IRA (known by this time simply as the IRA) detonated more than 20 car bombs in Belfast, killing nine people and injuring 130 more on July 21, Bloody Friday.

Meanwhile, paramilitary forces dealt vigilante justice with kneecappings, beatings and bombings, and civilians—many living in neighborhoods bordered by barbed-wire fences and guarded by masked guerilla fighters—were caught in the crossfire.

The IRA and the British Army (and paramilitary groups on each side) exchanged blows for the next two decades. Hope for a peaceful resolution dawned with the signing of the 1998 Belfast (or Good Friday) Agreement, which outlined plans for nationalist and unionist power-sharing in the Northern Ireland Assembly, as well as proposals for paramilitary decommissioning and the release of paramilitary prisoners.

Still, it would not be until 2005 that violence subsided with the end of the IRA’s armed campaign, as the IRA pledged to pursue its aim of a united Ireland through peaceful measures. However, tension remains to this day, with towering “peace walls” dividing the Catholic and Protestant populaces of Derry.

Such was the world Porter was born into.

City of Flags

Porter grew up on the edge of Shantallow, a Cityside public-housing estate dubbed “Shanty” by locals. Rows of condensed, terraced houses sat circled by two roads that merged to greet a Catholic chapel.

Though the modest home he shared with his single mother and elder brother was just a few miles from the mainly Protestant Waterside, Porter rarely ventured across the river.

“I couldn’t really go across,” he said. “I was always at risk.”

Paramilitary groups, still active even after the IRA laid down its weapons in 2005, unofficially policed neighborhoods in both communities. They would give young vandals three warnings before contacting their parents. The message would contain a time and place for the parents to bring their children to be shot in the knees.

“Which means they’ll survive,” Porter said. “They might have to walk with a limp ... but the parents were actually taking their kids there because they knew that if they didn’t take the punishment, they’d maybe get killed in the future.”

Color showed Porter where he was welcome and not.

Curbstones painted orange, white and green—to match the flag of the Republic of Ireland—were Catholic ground. Corners doused in red, white and blue and streetlights festooned with Union Jack flags marked territory claimed by Protestants.

“It’s like a dog peeing on lampposts,” Porter said. “It’s all about identity. You stay where you know you’ll be safe.”

Graffiti along the city streets was limited to political murals and slogans or the initials of paramilitary groups. But on a summer bus trip to Belgium with an educational program, teenage Porter witnessed something he had never seen before: art on the walls lining the motorways. It was bright, brazen and full of life.

“My eyes would get sore trying to focus on something because it was going so fast,” he said. “Purples, yellows, blues and pinks ... they were all mixed together. It was cool to see that there’s not just five colors in the spectrum.”

“Why the fuck should I not be allowed
to walk in my own city?”
—Karl Porter

It’s not as though people in Derry lacked passion. But to tag walls and warehouses in a still-hot post-Troubles zone meant taking a risk, according to Kenneth Bush, Ph.D., former professor at the University of Ulster.

“Indeed, there is a very different, and more dangerous, set of rules for the graffiti game in Northern Ireland,” he wrote in his study, “The Politics of Post-Conflict Space: The Mysterious Case of Missing Graffiti in ‘Post-Troubles’ Northern Ireland.” “Within the narrow space that graffers see themselves working, there is a two-fold risk: of being mistaken for an armed dissident by police, and injured; or of being identified as a graffer by the armed dissidents and disciplined for anti-social behavior.”

But seeing something other than political propaganda emblazoned on the walls in Belgium made Porter question the limitations he felt in his hometown.

As his gaze lingered over the familiar flags and murals that divided his home, he puzzled over a single question:

“Why the fuck should I not be allowed to walk in my own city?”



In Protestant neighborhoods, the colors of the Union Jack are prominent, declaring allegiance to the loyalist cause.

Courtesy of Karl Porter



Graham McFadden stands in front of a Porter mural inside CrossFit Derry. The mural is decidedly apolitical to help McFadden welcome all athletes to his facility.

The Writing on the Walls

Despite the risk, Porter decided to become a graffiti writer.

While his friends partied and drank late into the night, Porter drew. He doodled in diaries, tracing bowls of fruit and filling the pages with rows of his least-favorite letters: A, R, P, T and Y.

“You work on weaknesses, just like in CrossFit,” he said.

The local supply store wouldn’t sell spray paint to a 16-year-old, so he stole a small stash to get himself started. He practiced beneath bridges and scrawled over abandoned warehouses on the 5-mile trek home from work each night.

At first, Porter painted only his name. As he improved, he mimicked popular cartoon figures such as Marvin the Martian and “Simpsons” characters, recruiting a friend from school to paint by his side.

“It was good to have a lookout, someone who could check behind you,” he said. “It was almost like a stealth mission.”

Spending his wages on gas, Porter often drove four hours to Dublin to tag more territory. The goal was to get his name on as many surfaces as possible; to tag a train would be the most-esteemed feat. He was caught several times but never charged.

Graffiti was his passion, a release from the tension of living in a sociopolitical minefield, but it remained only a hobby until 2010. While Porter was at university in Scotland, a friend offered his name to a Derry arts organization looking for a muralist to lead a workshop with area youth. Though Porter’s modus operandi had always been to paint anonymously, he took a break from obscurity and his studies to offer his expertise.

“If I have the ability to help change things for the better through arts, then it’s my responsibility as a human being to see that through,” he said.



Porter first tried CrossFit in 2013 at CrossFit Tampere in Finland, where he traded painting for training.

The relationship flourished, and Porter was soon booked with commissions ranging from garden walls to storefront murals.

In March of 2012, he received a commission that would change his life: painting a CrossFit affiliate.

Painting to Pull-Ups

CrossFit Derry, owned by Graham McFadden, affiliated in January 2012. With his space located on the eastern edge of Cityside, McFadden wanted CrossFit Derry to feel like home to athletes on either side of the river.

“With so many political murals in our country, I wanted something that both sides of the community could identify with,” he said.

The project was the first in a series of affiliate commissions that would eventually lead Porter to wield barbells himself. But he

was taken aback when he first visited the gym and saw its virgin pull-up rigs still polished and clean.

“It was weird because there were no machines,” Porter recalled.

The first step was to present preliminary sketches to McFadden.

“You want to design something that makes them feel different and unique,” Porter explained. “It’s almost like an identity, not for the CrossFit (affiliate) itself but for the CrossFitters.”

McFadden’s only directive was to write the affiliate’s name and to use purple and yellow, hues chosen for what he described as their positive vibe.

“I wanted the box to feel welcoming,” McFadden said. “Karl understood my vision of acceptance, and I gave him free reign of the murals.”

Donning his earphones to blast Sigur Rós or laboring in silence,



Before CrossFit, Porter was about 60 lb. heavier than he is today.

Porter lost himself in his art, dressing the white cinder-block walls in rich purples, yellows, greens and blues. Abstract shapes reached out from a vast blue-and-white target to form the word “Cross,” with the word “Fit” in fiery orange beneath.

“It’s a kind of meditative state,” he said. “You can draw through your problems. ... If you make a mistake, you can just spray over it. It’s forgiven.”

He worked between four and 12 hours per day for nearly a week, sometimes in the small hours of the night to avoid the distraction of curious onlookers.

As he painted, his thoughts drifted to his own physique.

Though his father had been a champion bodybuilder, Porter never learned much about fitness from him. Divorced from Porter’s mother when Karl was a young child, his father rarely took time from his schedule of training and partying to be with his son.

“I always asked him to show me things (about bodybuilding) ...

but he always did his own thing,” Porter said.

Though Porter had played rugby in college, the post-match beers added a few layers to his 5-foot-8 frame. By the time he stepped foot in CrossFit Derry, he weighed an uncomfortable 252 lb.

“I had heard about (CrossFit) before but never had the chance to try it,” he said. “I was in need to lose weight and get active.”

It would be a year before schedule and circumstance permitted him to try CrossFit. After completing murals at CrossFit Derry and subsequently at CrossFit Aberdeen in Scotland, he joined CrossFit Tampere while studying abroad in Finland in March 2013, trading painting for training.

His first workout was 50 reps each of wall-ball shots, box jumps, sit-ups, push-ups and air squats. As he struggled to advance through the box jumps, a crowd gathered around him, shouting in Finnish and pumping their arms.

Porter was sold.



Now an experienced CrossFit athlete, Porter sees a link between his art and the art of lifting.

“It was the only time I ever felt like I’ve done some work,” he said. “And I got this kind of underdog vibe from CrossFit. I wouldn’t be keen on anything mainstream.”

He was drawn to the technical aspects of CrossFit, likening training the Olympic lifts to mastering straight lines and smooth curves on the wall.

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“It’s just like spray painting,” Porter said. “You practice and practice, doing lines and lines, like a clean. You go from the ground to the knees, the knees to the hips, and get your elbows under.”

For the next year, Porter’s studies and commissions took him across Northern Ireland and Scotland. Training out of both CrossFit Aberdeen and CrossFit Derry, he lost more than 60 lb. in less than a year.

His newfound fitness, he said, was good for more than just a better Fran time. He also credits CrossFit with making him a more agile artist.

“One of the main reasons I wanted to get fit was to be a more active graffiti writer, meaning more legal and illegal work,” he said. “I could not climb a wall at 250 lb.”

Community on the Walls

Beneath the mural Porter had painted more than a year prior at CrossFit Derry, rows of athletes worked the floor last September, chalk dust and sweat settling in their wake.

Across the room, the shouts of Cityside and Waterside dwellers rivaled the screech of the speakers. Far from the partisan



At CrossFit Derry, political lines are blurred by the simple title “athlete.”



Perhaps one day “peace walls” will be a thing of the past, and unionists and nationalists will repair relationships damaged by hundreds of years of discord.

shouting of The Troubles, these calls were only recognizable as the screams of CrossFit athletes, some of whom had come from as far away as Belfast to throw down.

“Over here, it’s like a political minefield,” Porter said. “People almost look for a political agenda in what you say so they can pick holes. But with CrossFit it’s, ‘Get it done, have fun, and go home.’ There’s not even any questions asked.”

McFadden had reservations when opening CrossFit Derry. Nearly three years later, none remain.

“Making the decision to affiliate in one of the most controversial-named towns in Northern Ireland was difficult,” he said. “But putting CrossFit at the forefront, I believe, has certainly changed things. We have people from both sides of the community training together.”

For some Derry athletes, joining the affiliate marked the first time they had truly integrated with people from outside their comfortable bubble of the politically homogenous. According to Porter, CrossFit provides the ideal environment for neutralizing tension.

“People who do CrossFit can’t be too sensitive. ... You’re gonna rip your hands open, and there’s gonna be piss and blood everywhere,” he said.

“CrossFit has created a family without religion and without prejudice.”
—Graham McFadden

Porter doesn’t even always know to which party or religion many of his fellow athletes belong. He’s too busy cheering them on to worry about what which flag flies on their corners.

“When someone else hits a personal best, you’re more chuffed that they beat themselves,” Porter said. “Especially in Northern Ireland, you’re psychologically breaking down these characteristics and traits you find in certain communities. It’s not about your race or your background or religion.”

McFadden agreed, citing Porter’s mural as a symbol of his affiliate’s integration.

“CrossFit has created a family without religion and without prejudice,” he said. “They don’t see religion in the box. They see CrossFit and their community on the walls.”

Color of the Future

As the next generation steps forward in Northern Ireland with horizons broadened by education and distance from the turmoil of the past, the sociopolitical climate in Derry is becoming more temperate. In 2011, the pedestrian Peace Bridge was built over the River Foyle to link the Cityside and Waterside communities, a symbol of reconciliation and celebration.

Today, Porter uses graffiti to counteract the cycle of discrimination and violence.

Through his company, Urban Vizualz, he works with people with physical and mental disabilities, troubled teens, and prison inmates, teaching the history of graffiti writing and the basic techniques of muralism.

When the inmates are released, Porter provides them with free space on Urban Vizualz’s property walls for sanctioned mural practice. The goal, he said, is not to promote vandalism but to teach them social skills and give them an outlet for expression.

“The youth offenders have no guidance and no leadership qualities, and I can see a direct correlation with the inmates we’re working with,” Porter said. “I can see that link, and that’s what I’m trying to stop.”

CrossFit, he said, has served as a model for the kind of inclusive environment he hopes to build for his students.

“I want to cross all boundaries and barriers through my art ... and create bonds between people from different cultural backgrounds through graffiti or muralism,” Porter said. “I feel that CrossFit also does this in some kind of metaphorical sense. I think the likes of CrossFit just kind of builds that confidence and openness to work with others ... it’s something I’ve tried to instill in my workshops.”

Meanwhile, he continues to paint, designing murals for CrossFit affiliates across the U.K. that embody the physical, mental and emotional character of CrossFit.

“I am a firm believer in the underdog, and the whole culture and ethos of CrossFit fits that mentality perfectly,” Porter said. “It’s different and very exciting, just like graffiti and a little like me.” ■

About the Author

Brittney Saline contributes to the CrossFit Journal and CrossFit Games website. She trains at [CrossFit St. Paul](#).