

Institution: Queen's University, Belfast		
Unit of Assessment: 28		
Title of case study: Alternative Belfast: shared histories of an industrial city		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Olwen Purdue	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer, Irish Social History	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2007- present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: August 2013 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>The history of Belfast is often seen, over-simplistically, as one of sectarian conflict and deep division. Olwen Purdue's work has challenged this perception and changed the way people think about Belfast and its past, engaging local and international audiences in an alternative, more nuanced, social history of a remarkable city at the height of its industrial might, and of the shared experience of those who lived and worked in it. Her work has informed the interpretation of Belfast's history by major cultural and heritage institutions. It has also reached millions of people in Northern Ireland, Great Britain and globally through television, museum exhibitions, internationally-acclaimed visitor experiences and a community engagement project.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>In a body of work spanning thirteen years, Olwen Purdue has shed an important new light on the social history of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Belfast and its rural hinterland, providing the first detailed examination of issues such as poverty, welfare, power and agency generally overlooked in historical accounts of the region.</p> <p>From 2007, Purdue was employed on the ESRC-funded project, 'Welfare Regimes under the Irish Poor Law 1850-1921' in which she developed new research into poverty and welfare in the north of Ireland. Her work provided the first scholarly exploration of the ways in which the poor and working classes of nineteenth-century Ulster experienced and engaged with welfare provision in the form of the workhouse. (1)</p> <p>Her growing body of work and expertise in the social history of Belfast and its hinterland led to a research commission from two companies (CHL Consulting and Event Communications) which were contracted by Titanic Foundation and Belfast City Council to develop the content of the highly-acclaimed visitor experience, 'Titanic Belfast', which opened in 2012. Purdue was commissioned as academic adviser for this venture, her research and expertise shaping the content of the attraction's opening gallery which highlights working conditions in Edwardian Belfast and outlines the social and economic context within which the <i>Titanic</i> was built. While working on this commission, Purdue drew on themes she was identifying to edit a collection of essays on the social history of the industrial city, <i>Belfast: the emerging city 1850-1914</i>. (2)</p>		

This work also led to a major AHRC-funded project (with Prof. Peter Gray), 'Welfare and Public Health in Belfast and its Hinterland 1800-1972'. Purdue's work focused on the period 1850-1939 and provided the first in-depth exploration of the challenges of poverty and engagement with welfare systems experienced by many of Belfast's labouring classes, particularly women and children. Sole-authored outputs from this project included an article in *Urban History* and an invited chapter in a volume on welfare regimes in Europe (3 & 4). Her work on this led to a further commission in 2013 to provide expert historical research and advice for the Ulster Museum, part of National Museums NI. Purdue advised on the content of a new permanent gallery on the history of nineteenth-century Belfast, 'An industrial giant and the shadow of poverty', and wrote and presented a talking-head audio-visual installation which explained this aspect of Belfast's history. In 2017, she also produced an online documentary on poverty and welfare in the city from both historic and contemporary perspectives – 'Belfast, a tale of two cities'. (5)

These themes were further developed and explored within a wider geographical context and theoretical framework in Purdue's 2018 edited collection, *Urban spaces in nineteenth-century Ireland*, in which her own chapter investigated the ways in which Belfast's poor navigated and challenged the constraints of welfare provision in their use of the city's workhouse.(6)

Purdue's work has shed new light on how the poor of nineteenth and twentieth century Belfast, particularly women and their families, experienced working life in the city and faced the challenges of poverty and ill-health, how they engaged with and experienced welfare provision, and how they exercised agency in using the limited welfare options open to them. Thus it offers alternative - and shared - historical narratives to the more familiar ones of sectarian division and difference, and has foregrounded for the first time the histories of groups too often overlooked in the overwhelmingly masculine historical narratives of this divided city.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Olwen Purdue, 'Poverty and power: the workhouse in a north Antrim town 1861-1921', *Irish Historical Studies* (November, 2011)
2. Olwen Purdue (ed.), *Belfast the emerging city* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012)
3. Olwen Purdue, 'Surviving the industrial city: the female poor and the workhouse in late nineteenth-century Belfast', *Urban History*, Volume 44, Issue 1 (2017)
4. Olwen Purdue, "'A gigantic system of casual pauperism': the contested role of the workhouse in late nineteenth-century Belfast" in Beate Althammer, Andreas Gestrich and Jens Gründler (eds.), *The welfare state and the 'deviant poor' in Europe, 1870-1933* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)
5. Olwen Purdue, 'A tale of two cities: poverty and welfare in Belfast past and present', (2017), <https://vimeo.com/202078870>
6. Olwen Purdue, Georgina Laragy and Jonathan Jeffery Wright (eds) *Urban Spaces in nineteenth-century Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018). Purdue's own chapter was "'High walls and locked doors": contested spaces in Belfast workhouse 1880 – 1905'. The volume was described in the leading Irish history journal, *Irish Historical Studies*, as 'innovative, varied and intriguing volume which inspires the reader to engage with new ways of exploring our urban past' (Vol 43, issue 164, Nov 2019, p. 344)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Purdue has worked with a range of partners to develop new, high-impact ways of disseminating her research on the social history of industrial Belfast, challenging the predominant narratives of sectarian conflict and encouraging a deeper understanding of Belfast's rich, and shared, social history. The main impact of her work is outlined below.

1. Impact on public awareness and understanding

Through her work with Titanic Belfast, the Ulster Museum, and television, Purdue's research has reached millions of people locally and globally.

As the leading expert on the social history of nineteenth and twentieth century Belfast, Purdue was commissioned in 2011 as historical advisor for **Titanic Belfast** on the recommendation of Belfast City Council. She worked with the designers on all aspects of the attraction and was responsible for developing and signing off on all historical content. However, her distinct knowledge and expertise were particularly employed in shaping the content of Gallery One - Boomtown Belfast - which introduces the visitor to life in Edwardian Belfast, and outlines the social and economic context in which *RMS Titanic* was built (A).

The visitor attraction opened in March 2012, and has had a significant impact since then. By August 2019 more than **5.7 million** people had visited Titanic Belfast (**4.9 million in the period 2013-2020**); the majority (80%) from overseas (B). As each visitor follows a pre-set route, commencing with Purdue's 'Boomtown Belfast' gallery, every visitor experiences this gallery.

Survey evidence indicates that visitors learn a great deal from the content of Boomtown Belfast. A visitor survey carried out by Queen's University researchers in 2019 ($n=419$), found that nearly all (99%) respondents reported having gained new knowledge from Boomtown Belfast. Two-thirds (66%) said they had discovered more about the linen industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while 62% said they had learned more about the ship-building industry. Most respondents (95%) were tourists; among their comments were the following: "Very informative. [I] learned a lot about Belfast. I never would have guessed Belfast had this industry." and "It made me aware of the rich history of Belfast and the importance of the shipping industry." (C).

Purdue's expertise in Belfast's social history led to her being invited in October 2013 to become an academic advisor to the **Ulster Museum**, working with the museum in the development of an entirely new permanent gallery on the social and economic history of Belfast – 'Industrial Giant and the Shadow of Poverty'. This used the museum's collections to explain the industrial growth of Belfast and to engage audiences in exploring the social conditions of the time.

The Ulster Museum has attracted **hundreds of thousands of visitors annually** (623,272 in 2018-19) with 30% of visitors coming from outside Northern Ireland, of which half have been from overseas.(D) A 2015 review article concludes that the new galleries, of which Purdue's was one, provided 'a more nuanced approach to the interpretation of history – one forged from an interest in bringing new layers of understanding. This encourages us to think about the lives of children, women and disabled people, and creates a link between the stories of Northern Ireland and the international experience'. (E)

A visitor survey carried out by Queen's University researchers in 2019 ($n=115$) focused on responses to the 'Industrial Giant and Shadow of Poverty' gallery. 83% of respondents said the gallery 'improved my knowledge and understanding of nineteenth-century Belfast', while 52% said they now understood more about poverty in Belfast. Comments included: "The depth of information provided allowed me to make connections through history I otherwise would not have known." (tourist). "I didn't know of the strong presence of the linen industry in Belfast" (tourist) (C)

It is, however, through the expert advice based on her original research that Purdue has provided for **TV documentaries** that her work has reached its widest audiences. As a result of her expertise Purdue was commissioned as historical advisor and expert interviewee for a number of different programmes with a combined audience of several million. These included: *Britain's Hidden Heritage* (BBC1, 2015) (approx. 4.25 million viewers); *Britain's*

Most Historic Towns (Channel 4, 2018) and BBC NI's 3-part series *Family Footsteps* (2018). (F).

In 2018, Purdue's work reached millions of viewers through her commission as credited historic expert and interviewee for the Channel 4 documentary, *Belfast, Britain's most Victorian City* (2018). (G) Each episode reached an average of **1.5 million** viewers on its first airing, placing the series at Channel 4's third highest-viewed in that prime-time slot over the past three years. The series has since been repeated in the UK and distributed worldwide. (H)

The beneficial learning impact of Purdue's TV work is illustrated by the result of an online viewer survey conducted by Queen's University researchers shortly after the two relevant episodes of *Family Footsteps* aired ($n=65$). More than half (55%) of respondents said they had gained a greater insight into life in nineteenth-century Ulster as a result of the programme. Nearly half (49%) said they had a better understanding of the region's social history, while 42% said they would like to find out more about that social history. (C)

2. Making a major contribution to Belfast's visitor offering and the work of cultural institutions

Purdue's research has made a vital contribution to the work of major cultural institutions and visitor experiences, enhancing their content and shaping how they engage public audiences. This has enriched the experience of those who visit them and has helped to enhance Belfast's reputation as a tourist destination.

Titanic Belfast was declared the World's Leading Visitor Attraction in the 2016 World Travel Awards, organised by the World Travel and Tourism Council (I). Purdue's work has been considered pivotal to that success. Belfast City Council's Heritage Officer stated that Purdue made 'a particularly valuable contribution' to the work of Titanic Belfast 'both in terms of process and by bringing high level, specific knowledge of the social context of the period in question'. 'A large part of the reason why the project exceeded expectations so comprehensively', he added, 'is the quality and authenticity of the content, firmly based on a foundation of research, to which Dr Purdue was a key and vital contributor (I)

Her research has also enhanced the Ulster Museum's offering by contributing new social and economic historical content which provides a more nuanced, complex and diverse narrative of Ireland's past than was previously available and has helped contextualise subsequent galleries dealing with the recent conflict in Northern Ireland. NMNI's Head of Collections has observed that its collaboration with Dr Purdue was 'highly productive and impactful' and 'enabled us to locate contested history within a broad social, human centred context'. (J)

Finally, her work as historical adviser for the Channel 4 series *Britain's Most Historic Towns* was described by the series' production company, IWC Media, as 'crucial ... highlight[ing] the most relevant areas of Victorian influence over the city, whilst ensuring that the script for the episode is historically and factually accurate'. (K)

3. Engaging hard-to-reach local audiences in exploring a shared history

Purdue also sought to engage local hard-to-reach audiences, mainly young people, in the history of their city through the project '**Our Stories, 1932**'. Purdue drew on her research into the city's social history to work with Greenshoot Productions in developing a series of research workshops and activities for young people from north and east Belfast in which they researched work, life and poverty in their area during the 1930s. These groups presented their findings to an audience which included two playwrights – Martin Lynch and Gary Mitchell - who incorporated this material into a stage play, *1932: The People of*

Gallagher Street. The play ran in The MAC Theatre, to full audiences (2-13 November 2017, total audience: **2,253**), helping to raise public awareness of social conditions in Belfast

A follow-up audience survey, carried out by Greenshoot Productions, ($n=111$) found that almost all respondents (96%) left the play wanting to know more about this period in Belfast's history. 77% of respondents learned something as a result of watching the play, and just under two-thirds (58%) stated that the play changed the way they thought about social conditions or community relations in the 1930s. (L)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Testimonial from Head of Content, Event Communications, one of two companies contracted to provide the content for Titanic Belfast which commissioned Purdue as an expert advisor.
- B. Statistics emailed 22 August 2019 from Chief Executive Officer, Titanic Foundation.
- C. Combined visitor/audience survey reports for (a) Titanic Belfast (b) Ulster Museum (c) Family Footsteps TV show.
- D. Emails dated 12 June and 27 July 2019 from Head of Strategic Research & Planning, National Museums Northern Ireland.
- E. Elizabeth Crooke, Review of the Ulster Museum's Modern History Gallery, *Museums Journal* (Feb 2015)
https://www.academia.edu/11203563/Review_History_Galleries_Ulster_Museum_February_2015
- F. The estimated viewing figure of x for *Britain's Hidden Heritage* comes from this average viewing figures list for the top 100 UK TV programmes in 2012
<https://www.documentarytelevision.com/ratings/what-do-uk-viewers-watch-top-100-factual-programs-broadcast-2h-2012/>
- G. Email dated 14 November from Senior Production Manager, IWC Media
- H. Testimonial letter, Heritage Officer for Belfast City Council, which part-funded the development of Titanic Belfast. For details of the World Travel Awards see:
<https://www.worldtravelawards.com/award-worlds-leading-tourist-attraction-2016>
- I. Testimonial letter, Head of Collections, National Museums Northern Ireland
- J. Testimonial, IWC Media, Production Company for the 'Britain's Most Historic Towns' series
- K. *1932: The People of Gallagher Street*. Letter of appointment for Olwen Purdue; and audience survey results carried out by Greenshoot Productions. For details of the play see: https://www.whatsonstage.com/shows/belfast-theatre/1932-the-people-of-gallagher-street_109156