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## The Easter Lily and Remembering those who Sacrificed

With delicate white, trumpet shaped petals and yellow stamens the Easter lily is revered for its wonderful fragrance and magnificent bloom during the springtime. The Easter lily can be seen every year leading up to the Easter season pinned on the shirts of Catholics and Irish Republicans around Northern Ireland. The Easter lily is also seen incorporated in murals around Republican neighborhoods.

In 1925, nine years after the Easter Uprising took place, members of the Cumann na mBan also known as the "League of Women" created the Easter lily as an Irish Republican Symbol. The Cumann na mBan which translates to the Irish women's council, was originally formed as a paramilitary organization but in 1916 became an auxiliary of Irish volunteers.

During the Easter Uprising the women became a part of the "Army of the Irish Republic" and held jobs that included gathering intelligence, working in the ambulances, as couriers, scouts, carrying arms to insurgent strongholds and were present in almost all outposts. The women were instrumental in organizing the evacuation of buildings and the destruction of incriminating papers in preparation for the surrender by the Irish Republican Army. After the defeat of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the execution of sixteen of its leaders, the Cumann na mBan began to popularize the memory of the men who died and were jailed for fighting for the "Irishman's dream". (Cumann Na MBan - League of Women)

Easter lilies are traditionally recognized in Christianity as symbols associated with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, chastity and purity. Because of its prevalence in churches, and its bloom corresponding with the anniversary of the Easter Uprising, the women of the Cumann na mBan, began to sell paper badges of the Easter lily to raise money for the families of the men and women who lost their lives fighting for Ireland's freedom. Citizens who bought the lilies would then wear them to honour the sacrifices made by the men and women who fought in the 1916 Easter Uprising.

The Easter lilies were widely received across nationalist political parties during the early years of its conception. The split of the Irish Republican Army in 1970 also resulted in a split of the Easter Lily. The Official IRA and the Sinn Fein garnered the nickname 'the Stickies' because they adapted the Easter Lily with a self-adhesive backing. The Provisional IRA secured their Easter lily with a pin, alternatively getting the nickname 'the Pinheads' (Easter Lily - Irish Symbol of Peace).

Today in Northern Ireland the Easter lily continues to be sold during the Easter season as a representation of the 1916 Easter Uprising and is also now associated with those lives lost during the Troubles. A strong nationalist symbol, it was illegal to wear the Easter lily during the times of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Proceeds from the sale of the Easter lily goes to the upkeep of republican graves and memorials. Murals of the Easter Lily commemorating the fallen soldiers and the struggle can be found on buildings in Catholic neighborhoods.

By those of the Republican community the Easter lily is categorized as a National emblem that represents the unification of the North and South expressing appreciation to the men who lost

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their lives during the 1916 Easter Uprising. The Easter lily also represents what the men and women were fighting for during the uprising, “the realisation of every Irishman’s dream, ‘Ireland free from the centre of the Sea’ ” (Wear an Easter Lily).

The Easter lily is a reminder of the lives lost fighting for Ireland’s freedom, for Catholics and Republicans in Northern Ireland wearing the Easter lily is another connection to the Republic of Ireland and a reminder of the struggle for the dream of a united Ireland and for equality. For Protestant and Unionist the events of the 1916 Uprising was a conflict with the aim of forcing them to an independent Ireland against their wishes. The symbol of the Easter lily in turn represents the trauma they experienced during that time.

The Easter Lily is considered a symbol of division in Northern Ireland. In 1954, the Parliament of Northern Ireland passed the Flags and Emblems Act. Under this act the Easter lily was categorized as a divisive symbol, which prohibited it from being worn by government employees. Although the act was repealed in 1987, the Easter lily is still a divisive symbol. Because of the prevalence of symbols in Northern Ireland, the Equality Commission advises employers on creating a harmonious and neutral work environment.

The Commission has classified the Easter lily as an 'emblem with the potential to cause disharmony' (Morris) and is not recommended in the work space. Because of the classification, government officials are not allowed to wear the badge to work. In 2017, the Sinn Fein called for the Belfast City Council to recognize the Easter lily as equal to the poppy. Both symbols have similar significance of honouring those who have died fighting. The poppy is allowed to be worn by government officials and is even sold at the City Hall, while the Easter lily remains a contentious symbol in the public space. Some unionist see the recognition of the Easter lily as an endorsement and glorification of the Provisional IRA.

Some strides towards the allowance of the Easter lily to be freely worn have been made. Council members in Londonderry/Derry and the Strabane District voted to allow council workers to wear the Easter lily for one week leading up to Easter Sunday, the same length of time the poppy is allowed to be worn leading up to Remembrance Sunday. While the council has ratified the policy, a consultation process with the workers still needs to take place. Supporters of the new policy says the allowance of the Easter lily will contribute towards creating a shared place rather than a neutral one. A shared space of equality and recognition where things can be seen.

The idea of a shared space for equality and recognition can possibly be an avenue of reconciliation between the Protestants and Catholics. Having equal recognition of symbols, especially symbols with similar meanings can begin to address inequalities of cultural expression. Addressing such inequalities, while difficult to do and allowing the other the space for culture can reduce tensions that are solely based on inequality that has separated the two communities. Accepting that symbols change and can mean many different things is another way to address tensions.

The meaning of the Easter lily has evolved and also represents hope and peace for the future. The colors of the Easter lily mimic the tricolor of the flag of the Republic of Ireland. The green stem of the lily represents the native celtic settlers and the Roman Catholics, the orange stamens represent Protestestans settlers and the white petals between them represents hope and lasting peace for a union between Protestants and Catholics.

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While the majority of those who wear the Easter Lily do so in remembrance of the Republican men who died fighting, the meaning of the lily has evolved and have come to represent the “Possibility of unity, equality and prosperity for all the peoples of the island” (‘Wear an Easter Lily’ call). A combination of both the Easter Lily and the poppy is another way to build bridges. The shamrock poppy or something like it has the ability to become a universal symbol that both communities can identify with and use in remembrance of those they wish to honor.

The Easter Lily formed by a group of women in 1925, to honour the men who died fighting in the Easter Uprising, is a prominent symbol to Catholics, Republicans and Nationalists in Northern Ireland today. Every year they decorate their churches and wear the paper badge on their clothing to remember those who fought for their freedom and equality. While today it still remains a contentious symbol there is hope that the Easter Lily will be accepted in the shared space of Northern Ireland.

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