Walls of fire

DRAWING SUPPORT: Murals in the North of Ireland
BILL ROLSTON
£9.99. BEYOND THE PALE PUBLICATIONS

In Belfast and Derry, brightly painted murals adorn selected gable ends in working-class areas. They often form backdrops to press or television coverage of the conflict in Northern Ireland. They are often dismissed as "sectarian vandalism", and Bill Rolston has done us a great service by looking behind the routine portrayals to consider murals as important elements of cultural identity. The most valuable part of this book is the wealth of magnificent colour photographs (112 in all) of murals, stretching back to the late 1970s.

Loyalist murals date from before the First World War. Many are regularly repainted to coincide with the annual 12th of July commemoration. The most common Loyalist mural depicts King Billy crossing the Boyne in victory over the Catholic King James. As well as the Red Hand of Ulster and the Union flag, many contemporary murals feature armed and masked men, representatives of the UDA or UVF.

On the other hand, there are some impressively detailed memorials to the slaughter of the Ulster Division on the Somme and the occasional humorous reference such as the mural of the Pope, hands held aloft, waving a red, white and blue football scarf.

Loyalist murals tend to hark back to a mythical historical golden age. By contrast, Republican murals are a relatively recent phenomenon, arising out of the H-Block protests of the early Eighties. They too make use of flags and emblems and the ubiquitous representations of armed IRA members. There are also many references to the Republican version of Irish history, featuring the 1916 Easter Rising and Edinburgh's own James Connolly, as well as many current images of the British presence in Ireland.

Feminism makes brief appearances and there are attempts to internationalise the republican struggle with references to Cuba, Nicaragua, Palestine and Southern Africa.

Drawing Support is a valuable documentary record with the added benefit of an intelligent and authoritative guiding commentary of a phenomenon which is often a fleeting one — some of the murals included here lasting as little as a matter of hours before being defaced.

— D M