



## Along the watchtowers

### Castles of Ulster

By Jonathan Olley  
Factotum Books, £20  
Reviewed by David Brittain



*Castles of Ulster* by Jonathan Olley. Spread: Forkhill Army Base, 1998; cover: Golf Five Zero watchtower, 1999. Both images are from South Armagh, Northern Ireland.

The book has long been the favoured platform for photographic projects that demonstrate an unconventional approach to political matters. *Castles of Ulster* features 24 black-and-white photographs of army barracks and watchtowers that were erected in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. In the late 1990s, before the army dismantled these structures, Olley managed to get access. They occupy remote hilltops, absurd corners of the main streets of small towns and police compounds, and most seem temporary and improvised. Because each uncaptioned image occupies its own spread, you have the luxury of examining it, without distraction, and moving between images without encountering text (this is kept at the back).

In a 'bureaucratic' style that eschews the visual rhetoric of the press picture, Olley's images are highly detailed and the series comprises a sort of typology of architectural forms that expresses the functions of policing. To dominate the land around requires towers; strong fortification expresses the anticipation of attack, antennae are a sign that the occupiers are in communication, and so on.

David Brett's keynote essay describes these British-built high-tech edifices as symbolic counterparts of ancient castles. Fittingly, the other texts that frame Olley's photographs are interviews with people whose lives were affected in some way by proximity to outposts. A British soldier (John A) tells Richard West about life inside these buildings, while Sinn Féin MP Davy Hyland recalls the tensions that existed between army personnel and the people of south Armagh. Hyland has been lobbying for the preservation of at least one of the 'castles' as a monument to occupation. *Castles of Ulster* is both attractive and politically sophisticated.

## Recollections mixed

### Feast: Christy Johnson and 33 Confessors

By Christy Johnson  
University College for the Creative Arts, £30  
Reviewed by David Brittain

This interesting book makes fiction out of combining two types of factual testimony – found photographs and witness interviews. Christy Johnson salvaged more than 300 black-and-white first Communion pictures as various bins (like wedding photography, Communion photography has its own conventions), and copied them. She then interviewed 33 women 'confessors' about the memories they associate with their own Communion photographs. Finally, extracts from these interviews were carefully matched with the salvaged images.

The titles of its seven sections allude to the other-worldliness of this most mystical religious rite of passage (described by one essayist as consisting of 'the consumption of a son whose father had ritually sacrificed him'). For instance, 'Wash me clean from every stain' dwells on the symbolism of whiteness.

The deliberate mismatch of text and image is not apparent, and at times it seems as if the narrator must be the subject in the picture. This appears to be the case when a delightful photograph of twins is paired with a text that records the memories of a twin. Other pairings are more complex, and calculated to make the reader question the way they have been conditioned to acquire knowledge. For instance, a text by a 'confessor' recalling the shame of spilling blood on her Communion dress is illustrated by a picture of an unknown child in a white veil that has been marked as if by a shower of dark spatters.

This book is a gallery of touching vernacular portraits, yet much more. One intention seems to have been to highlight the universal nature of the experience of Communion as part of puberty. Despite changes in fashion, these Communion portraits seem to possess a timeless quality. Another intention would seem to be to question the authority of 'documentation', and the book itself as its enshrinement.



Spread and cover from Christy Johnson's *Feast*: salvaged, black-and-white first Communion pictures.