

The background is a vibrant, abstract composition of swirling colors. On the left, there are warm tones of red, orange, and yellow. On the right, there are cooler tones of blue, green, and cyan. The overall effect is reminiscent of water or a sunset. A dark silhouette of a woman stands in the center, facing right. The text is overlaid on this image.

Trasna na dTonnta Across the Waves

WOMEN'S REFLECTIONS ON
THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

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Introduction

There has always been a strong relationship between Ireland and America. This joint project between Relatives for Justice and the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians was undertaken to bring the voices of the women to the forefront. We honor those who worked for peace and are thankful to provide their perspectives to the discussion. This project is dedicated to all who worked towards peace in the north of Ireland during the darkest days and to those that continue to work to heal the wounds of the past.

Every one of the women who contributed to this publication has our lasting gratitude. To share personal reflections is to allow our view of events to expand, enrich and become contributions to the future. Collectively we learn and when we share that learning the potential and possibilities of our future are brighter. Go raibh mile maith agaibh uilig. Thank you all of you.

For those who lead the peace initiatives in their communities, we are forever indebted. May their legacy inspire others striving to bring peace to their communities.

Dolores Desch
National Freedom for All Ireland Chair,
Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians

Foreword

Obstreperous women. The women who do not take the things as they are. The women who will fight tooth and nail for what is right and the people and community they love. That is who we celebrate in this contribution to the narratives about the Good Friday Agreement. Women on both sides of the Atlantic fought for our peace. While war was raging, while peace was hoped for and while peace was being built.

Women did not reside in the places of privilege. They did not walk the corridors of power. Women were found burying the dead, but keeping the family going. Women were found amongst the barriers to development and equality, breaking them down. Women were found writing the statements of the violated, recording them for when remedy might be possible. Women were found in prisons and visiting prisons. Women were there all the time, arguing for their families and their communities - but rarely for themselves.

Somehow the history of women during the conflict and in the peace process is neglected and goes inadequately recognised. This is largely because of the roles and places we privilege. The most stark example of this was when the Long Kesh site was being preserved. The first places to be destroyed were the Quakers' Hut where thousands upon thousands of women were supported and guided in the darkest of days. And the "visits", again where women's history and participation in that site was located. Other experiences and histories were privileged. We can acknowledge and remember all without deleting some.

We have only twelve voices there. There are tens of thousands that should and must be recorded.

In *Relatives for Justice* our work is built on the foundations laid by women. Emma Groves, the mother blinded by a rubber bullet who travelled from the White House to the Kremlin seeking to have the weapons of mass destruction in our community - plastic and rubber bullets - banned.

Clara Reilly the sister of Jim and Harry Burns and the community's most formidable human rights activist. From London to Dublin to Washington to Brussels to Ardoyne to Dungannon to Turf Lodge, Clara Reilly advocated, documented, cared and established professional human rights framed support for victims of the conflict. In any other arena she would be awarded peace prizes.

Eilish McAnespie McCabe, the sister of Aidan McAnespie, who met Prime Ministers, Taoisigh and US Presidents to promote the truth that lasting peace must be built on justice. She built relationships with women from all backgrounds, harmed by all actors to the conflict. She framed the development of Relatives for Justice in the fundamental value that there can be no hierarchy of victims and all victims deserve equality of treatment and law.

They are the foundations upon which RFJ is built. Noticing women's experience of conflict as different. Noticing women's needs as different. Noticing the policy gaps that create inequality. Law and policy currently fail women affected by conflict. The so-called injured pension denies payments to those who suffered psychological injury as a result of bereavement who were not present at the scene of the killings. With 91% of the dead being male, of course women and girls were not in the places where men were killed. However, women and girls are therefore more likely to be bereaved and more likely to live with psychological injury.

The legacy legislation which has been condemned from Dublin to Belfast to the United Nations to the Washington Capitol Building, denies surviving relatives the right to an effective investigation into the deaths of their loved ones. Again look at the statistics. 91% were men. Women are disproportionately affected by this heinous legislation.

Three out of every four people who are full time carers of persons injured during the conflict are women. Yet none of our policy is applied with a gender lens.

Women experience trauma differently, as their body processes trauma and memory in a different way to men. None of the guidelines on supporting persons with counseling or psychology apply a gendered lens.

As we mark the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement the outstanding matters of the rights of victims and survivors remains the place where the peace process has not reached and society fails. This should create an imperative on all of the actors in the current body politic. Victims and survivors must see their rights realised in their lifetimes. However late, a meaningful human rights compliant process to deal with our past, is also an opportunity to acknowledge women and their contributions, apply a legislative gender lens, see mothers as primary victims and create the conditions for true participation.

Andrée Murphy
Deputy Director Relatives for Justice

Foreword

Since the beginning of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians (LAOH), women have taken an active role in Irish and Irish American history. Irish women were the first to leave their family and their beloved Ireland for the shores of America. They made an impact on their new communities but never forgot the land of their birth. Our early years were a very troubling time for the world. The Easter Rising, World War I and the movement to obtain the votes for women. Our Order was blessed with wonderful leadership during this period. All of these women were very proud of their Irish and Irish American History. In 1918, Past President Ellen Ryan Jolly along with the current President Mary McWhorter and future President Adelia Christy, addressed the Hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs on the Irish Question. Many Irish Representatives spoke before the Congressional Committee to encourage the passing of a Resolution 357 to present the Right of Ireland to freedom, independence and self-determination at the International Peace Conference. Only five women were invited to address the Congressional Committee, three were leaders in the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians. Women did not even have the right to vote yet but members of our Order were addressing a Congressional Committee. Today's members are the legacy of our early leaders. For the past 129 years, our members have been taken on the role to speak up and take action to help with issues to assist both in Ireland and in America.

The LAOH Freedom for All Ireland Committee has provided financial aid to charities and agencies that encourage cross-community cooperation, economic development, social change, cross-border collaborations, Irish history and language education, nationalist infrastructure maintenance and construction efforts, and Irish unification initiatives based on peace and justice for all throughout Ireland. In addition to financial support, members of this Committee are advocates sharing information to support the full implementation of all parameters of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians Inc (LAOH). is honored to collaborate with Relatives for Justice in this important project to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. Women need to be

remembered in their role in history. Recently, Women involved with the Good Friday Agreement were featured at a Conference at Georgetown University Women at the Helm. We all owe these women our appreciation in bringing and sustaining peace in the land we all love. As an American woman, I am very appreciative of Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, Hiliary Clinton, and Martha Pope. These American Women were very important with the United States Government's role with the Good Friday Agreement. The LAOH and Relatives for Justice with the publication of *Trasna na dTonnta-Across the Waves* Women's reflection on the Good Friday Agreement featuring both sides of the Atlantic that were advocates for peace and social justice issues in the North of Ireland will be a publication that historians will value in their research on this period of Irish History.

Marilyn Madigan

National President, Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians



GERALDINE BYRNE NASON

Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason assumed her role as Ireland's 19th Ambassador to the United States in August 2022. Geraldine was Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Ireland to the United Nations in New York (2017- 22).

In 2022, Ireland marks two important anniversaries: 100 years since the establishment of the Irish State and 50 years of EU membership. Such anniversaries prompt us to take stock as a nation, and reflect on the extraordinary change that we have undergone since our turbulent beginnings. In my view, it is a story of remarkable progress, though there is plenty of work still to be done. Today we are a more prosperous, diverse, and tolerant island than ever before. I am proud to represent that 21st century Global Ireland.

One of the most significant markers of this progress is the role of women in Irish society, and how women have helped to transform and shape our society in that time. Today, women and girls rightfully enjoy a far greater participation in all spheres of modern Ireland, and while a considerable gap remains, we are occupying a greater number of leadership positions in Irish political, economic and social life. One noteworthy example from my own field is that in 2023, over half of Ireland's diplomatic missions will be headed by women; a long overdue improvement from when I first joined the diplomatic service.

Though the improved visibility of women in public life is hugely positive, it is essential that we bring to light the vital role women have played throughout our history, often in less conspicuous but no less decisive ways. The upcoming 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement is an opportune moment to do so.

The Good Friday Agreement was unquestionably a remarkable political achievement that required courage and leadership from all sides, including the United States. However, I have learned throughout my career that lasting peace can only be built from the ground up. The peace we have enjoyed for nearly 25 years would not have been possible without ordinary women and men taking

extraordinary actions to break down the barriers between their communities and to reconcile their differences.

Often the peacemakers in everyday life, women the world over are well positioned to lead this difficult task. In Ireland this was certainly the case. Having seen and suffered the consequences of violence, courageous women stepped up and used their voices to advocate for a different path. Women showed leadership at community and significantly, a political level, as epitomized by the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

They recognized that any successful peace agreement would require input from all sides. By advocating and negotiating hard, women ensured that the principles of equality, inclusion, and human rights found their place at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement.

I am convinced that the efforts of these women to involve themselves at all levels of the peace process, often in the face of prejudice and harassment, was critical to the success of the enduring peace that followed. I recognise that a stable foundation for cooperation at a national level as something that is sadly too often lacking in peace processes. As a result, the Good Friday Agreement stands out among peace agreements for its durability.

The Good Friday Agreement was not the end of the peace process; rather it was a 'truly historic opportunity for a new beginning', as promised in its first line. It gave us the framework to meet both the challenges and opportunities that have arisen in the years since it was agreed. The disruption caused by the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union is, of course, one such challenge. Crucially, the Protocol was agreed by the UK and EU to minimize this disruption and protect the Good Friday Agreement, as well as to protect the EU's Single Market. We want to see the current differences resolved and a full return to the collective endeavor of ensuring the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement deliver for all. The Irish government, working with our partners in the EU, continues to work hard to find a sustainable solution, but leadership from all sides will be needed once again to protect the hard-won peace we enjoy.

In spite of these challenges, the Good Friday Agreement changed the course

of history for our island. A generation of young people has grown up in peace, communities flourish, and the hurt caused by decades of violence is slowly dissipating. We owe this to the collective efforts of ordinary people; including many hard-working women across Northern Ireland, who continue to work hard every day to nurture this exceptional Agreement.





SARAH MCAULIFFE-BELLIN

Sarah McAuliffe-Bellin is currently a member of LAOH Division 32 Allegheny County, President of the LAUC Pittsburgh Chapter and Secretary of Onora. She's 2016 Grand Marshal of the Pittsburgh St. Patrick's Day Parade and has been a long-time activist promoting the unification of Ireland in a peaceful manner.

In reflecting on these past 50 odd years since the beginning of internment in the six counties, it was self-evident that the role of women in the struggle for equality, civil rights and the goal of unification in Ireland was paramount to the change wrought on the island of Ireland. This time-period is an arbitrary starting point but in my mind the struggle in the north at that time was the beginning of the end for armed struggle and the start of a political struggle that brought the Good Friday Agreement into being. Women kept the home intact to the extent they could, bearing great hardship and pain, gave aid and assistance to those in their community in need of support and safety and most importantly, stepped up and included their voices and bodies during civil rights marches, in running for and holding office and at times ending up in prison or dying as a consequence of their role in the struggle.

There are many women that come to mind that inspired my small participation here in America and I fear that I have left out many names who have influenced me in some way. Those who come immediately to mind however, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, a former MP for Mid-Ulster who barely escaped with her life after being attacked at her home, Maire Drumm, a vice president of Sinn Fein, murdered in her hospital bed while recovering from eye surgery, Rita O'Hare, who served time in prison but also became Sinn Fein Representative in the US and who nudged me continually to stay involved and speak here in the USA. Mary Nelis, who had two sons in the H-Blocks and who protested in front of the British Embassy along with other women wearing just a blanket to raise awareness at the treatment of their sons and husbands and other loved ones in one of the worst prisons in Ireland. How strong and bold and defiant they were. The women I have named, and their comrades risked so much, lost so much, but continued to speak out, regardless of threats and intimidation. Would I

have the strength to take such risks if my family never left Ireland? I would like to think so, but my path has taken me on a different journey. What I do know, and what I feel is my duty, is that I must lend my voice now and continue in whatever way that I can to further the cause in finding a resolution that allows this small island to be unified. A peaceful unification, a just unification that illustrates respect and inclusivity for all.

Approaching the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in 2023, some of the signatories to the GFA have changed or gone away entirely. The Women's Coalition, co-founded Monica McWilliams, was a signatory to the GFA but no longer hold seats in the assembly. The SDLP has women in leadership but in my opinion, it is Sinn Fein that truly led the way in opening avenues for women in the politics of Ireland; for ensuring that the voices of women are heard and respected. This recognition of the role of women, the importance of their voices and participation stands in stark contrast to those political parties who seem to prefer a passive woman, a woman who stays at home and out of politics.

For me, I am entirely confident in the women at the helm of party leadership today in Sinn Fein. These women are strong, smart, and not beholden to anything but progress and equality for the people of Ireland. I am always impressed by their attitude and actions and for their commitment in what at times must seem like such tiresome theatrics by those who feel threatened by change. I am grateful for those women that I have learned from, who have been models of strength and resilience and know that I for one will hold their names and memories close.



KATHLEEN WHITFORD

Kathleen is a Nurse Practitioner at the Cleveland Clinic. She served as the Midwest Chair of Irish Northern Aid, Delegate to the United Irish Societies of Cleveland, Ohio and a member of the Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians

First of all, I would like to thank the LAOH and the Relatives for Justice for chronicling the experiences of women in commemoration of the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. At a time when The Good Friday Agreement and many democratic compromises are threatened - it is especially meaningful and important.

I was in eighth grade at the time of Bloody Sunday, in high school when the Kent State shootings occurred. Then I was in college/first job during the hunger strike. So I grew up during the back drop of the civil rights movement here in the US as well as the North of Ireland.

My grandparents emigrated from Roscommon/Leitrim but my parents first visited Ireland in the early 1980s. They went to the north of Ireland and visited a friend in Antrimtown. While there they met and became close to Oliver and Bridgid Kearney. The next year I visited Ireland for several weeks. When we headed north, we were pulled to the side at the border. Our suitcases were opened, clothes thrown all over the grass and we were questioned at length. Afterward we drove up to visit our friends and the Kearney family in Antrimtown. We witnessed the Orange Marches and the bonfires. We also experienced UDR soldiers aiming guns at us as we jogged on the trail and walked in the city.

While I was there, we spent a lot of time with the Kearney family - Oliver, Bridgid, and their now adult children. Oliver asked me what I knew about the MacBride Principles for the North of Ireland and Irish Northern Aid. I did not know much and learned a lot on that initial trip. When I returned to

the US, we started a coalition to work for The MacBride Principles for Fair Employment in the north of Ireland. This meant lobbying for US companies to follow these principles in their offices in the north of Ireland, lobbying for assurance that investments by US cities, states and companies follow these fair employment policies in the north of Ireland. Initially I as the only woman involved in the NE Ohio coalition. However, as we wrote letters, brought in speakers, lobbied and attended city and state hearings the number increased. The Ohio women working for the MacBride Principles were selfless political activists- writing letters, traveling to marches and demonstrations, attending meetings, and organizing fundraisers.

In later visits to Ireland, I learned more about the full situation in the north of Ireland. I was able meet and spent time with Fr. Des Wilson, Mary Nellis, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey and other civil rights activists. I became involved in Irish Northern Aid both in Cleveland and nationally. Initially I was the only woman in Cleveland INA - but the female activists who were involved in the MacBride campaign also became active in Irish Northern Aid. Over the years we brought in many speakers from Ireland for political education for our region and nationally. There was so much publicity about the paramilitary groups but so little press about the ongoing discrimination, intimidation and unexamined violence supported by the security forces. We are lucky enough to have multiple Irish organizations in NE Ohio. But for me the litmus test was always - what is the group and its members doing to work for the equality and justice in the North of Ireland.

We watched the Good Friday Agreement negotiations, and like the other Irish American organizations we cheered its legislative passage. While there was a lot of work remaining, it seemed this was a wonderful first step in moving forward. As we move toward the anniversary, I hope all of us in US continue to lobby for supporting the agreement and all it stands for. I am grateful to a part of the ongoing political action of the LAOH, the AOH and the American Brexit Committee.



STELLA O'LEARY

Stella O'Leary, the long-time Irish American political activist and Democratic Party fundraiser, has been appointed by President Biden to be the observer to the International Fund for Ireland (IFI)

Left: Stella O'Leary with Secretary Hillary Clinton

Summer 1996 was a tense time for Irish Americans involved in the Northern Ireland peace process. President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton had invested a lot of effort and talent to achieve a peace settlement in Ireland and to bring about the end of the violence that had taken more than 3,600 lives. We were convinced that if President Clinton failed to win re-election the peace process would be abandoned by the incoming President.

Inspired by Rosemary O'Neill, a State Department foreign service officer, and daughter of House Speaker, Tip O'Neill, a group of us, mainly women, met to chart a course of election activity, using the Irish peace process as our issue, to ensure the re-election of Present Clinton. Although I had no previous experience working in American politics, the group chose me to lead the re-election effort. Next day I went to the Federal Election Commission and registered a Political Action Committee named Irish American Democrats. We worked hard, producing signs, bumper stickers, and a magazine and hired buses to campaign for President Clinton in New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and other States that had large Irish American populations. We also advertised in Irish American newspapers across the country, attended Irish summer fairs in several states, and got very complimentary press coverage for our efforts.

President Clinton and the White House were appreciative of our election efforts. In the first four years of his presidency President Clinton invited a number of us, activist women, to join the White House National Security Council meetings on matters relating to Northern Ireland. Included were Martha Pope, who left her role in the Senate as a foreign affairs advisor

to assist George Mitchell, and Nancy Soderberg, Staff Director at the National Security Council from 1993 to 1997 when she engaged the IRA and helped negotiate a ceasefire in 1994.

During these years I had the honor of accompanying President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton on their many trips to Ireland and Northern Ireland. They were joyous occasions that laid the groundwork, and provided the welcoming atmosphere, that led to the success of the peace negotiations. My favorite occasion was an evening in Dundalk, when Van Morrison led those of us who had worked together on the peace negotiations in a joyous "Days Like This" sing-a-long.

Meanwhile Hillary was vigorously encouraging the newly formed Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. The NIWC was led by Monica McWilliams (Catholic) and Pearl Sagar (Protestant) and they formed a political party to participate the 1996 Forum elections. The Women's Coalition placed emphasis on neglected conflict issues that affected women, inter-community dialogue, domestic violence, integrated education, poverty, and health. They were joined by other outstanding women leaders, including trade union officials, Avila Kilmurray, Inez McCormack and May Blood to name just a few. They successfully introduced amendments to the Good Friday Agreement on housing, the inclusion of women in political life and initiatives for young people affected by the conflict.

With the re-election of President Clinton in 1996, he immediately resumed his work on a peace agreement sending George Mitchell to Northern Ireland to broker the Good Friday Agreement. To protect the Good Friday Agreement and to continue their mission to promote peace, justice and prosperity in Ireland, Irish American Democrats continued as a Political Action Committee. Twenty-six years since our inauguration we have raised millions of dollars for candidates for State and Federal office who support Ireland. Proudly, we can say that today, Joseph Biden, President, Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, Richard Neal, Chair of the Ways and Means Committee and numerous other elected Members of the Congressional Friends of Ireland are vigorously defending the Good Friday Agreement.



REBECCA TURKINGTON

Rebecca Turkington is a PhD candidate in history at the University of Cambridge. She previously worked on gender and security at the Council on Foreign Relations and Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security.

In 2000, the United Nations acknowledged the importance of women's participation in peace processes with Security Council Resolution 1325. Though progress is slow - in the last five years women have constituted just 14% of peace negotiators - the Resolution provides a framework that women can call on to demand inclusion. During the Good Friday Agreement Negotiations, there was no such global recognition. The cross-community Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) had to fight to convince voters and party leaders that women's voices mattered in the peace talks. But even prior to UNSCR 1325, the NIWC benefited from international networks of women - and continues to pay it forward by sharing their experience with women peacebuilders around the globe. Acknowledging the global context in which the NIWC operated helps illuminate the importance of such networks then and now.

Created just six weeks before the election determining which parties would have a seat in the Good Friday talks, the NIWC scrambled to quickly develop a party platform. They drew on links to the international women's movement. A delegation of Northern Irish women had recently attended the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing and drafted a set of policy papers around the conference topics. These papers, and the far-reaching goals for global women's and human rights that came out of the Beijing Platform of Action, became the bedrock of the NIWC's aims.

The NIWC also benefited from other women who'd been in their position before. South Africa had undergone a series of multi-party talks in 1990-94, which women influenced through the Women's National Coalition, created in response to their under-representation in the talks. Guatemala, likewise, had seen women contribute to its 1994 Framework Agreement through a civil society assembly created for the purpose, and Palestinian women had built

strong civil society organizations to push for peace in the early 90s. The NIWC adopted its internal negotiation practices from South Africa and were able to meet with women from the process during a formal trip to Johannesburg in 1997, one of a series of conferences that brought together South African and Northern Ireland negotiators.

American women provided a range of support too, from early meetings at the Dublin home of US Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, to small-dollar donations from Seven Sisters colleges, to training in negotiation techniques. In Washington, the NIWC gained a prominent endorsement from First Lady Hillary Clinton. After the NIWC was left off the list of Northern Irish party representatives meeting with the President, the White House scrambled to get them a meeting with the First Lady, and they spoke for more than an hour. When Clinton gave remarks later, she made specific mention of the role of women in the peace process, showing other parties that the Administration saw the NIWC as key players.

Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the women of the NIWC have maintained strong international links by passing on guidance to other women working for peace. In the decades since 1998, they've traveled to Myanmar, Colombia, and Israel/Palestine to share their strategies with grassroots women's groups, advised Syrian women participating in UN-led talks, offered friendship and tactical advice to negotiators in the Philippines and Eastern Turkey, and spoken on stages ranging from college campuses to the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Northern Ireland's example has bolstered claims for why the inclusion of women from civil society in formal peace talks is essential - the NIWC served as important mediators between parties, offered detailed policy proposals, and brought their own agenda to the table, introducing issues to the final Agreement text that would otherwise have gone unacknowledged. As research on women and peace processes becomes increasingly robust the NIWC remain a favorite case study, and rightly so. It took creativity and hard work to first access and then influence the multi-party talks, and the NIWC's success has inspired other civil society women to take up the baton in their own contexts. As importantly, their experience has also pushed government

leaders and multilateral organizations to understand why women's voices matter. Through its example and the international work its members continue to do, the NIWC's influence extends far beyond Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement.



KATHLEEN SAVAGE

Although she lives in Massachusetts, the name Kathleen Savage is well known in Belfast and Derry. As a member of Noraid, she was often in the north of Ireland during the conflict. Her support for political prisoners and their families during the troubles brought hope those in the community. In 2020 Kathleen was presented with the David Burke Award from the Golden Bridges initiative which connects Boston, Massachusetts, and Northwest Ireland.

In August 1985 I boarded a bus at Sinn Fein Headquarters in Dublin with two other busloads traveling to the North of Ireland for a fact-finding tour organized by Sinn Fein and the *Irish People* newspaper whose editor was Martin Galvin. I had been to the South of Ireland for two scenic tours and vowed when I returned that I would not go again until I traveled to the North and saw how the Catholic population there were coping during the Troubles. We were billeted with local families during our ten days there and saw first-hand what life was like for them. It was named the “Belfast March Tour” as it culminated with the Anti-Internment Rally in Belfast always the Sunday closest to the 9th of August. Internment was introduced in the North on August 9, 1971 and ended December 1975. During that time almost 2,000 people were interned with only 100 Loyalists. Annual commemorations included the tradition of bonfires. I can remember going to the bonfires in Belfast & Derry on the actual date of August 9th. Richie Lawlor an attorney from Hartford CT, was President of Irish Northern Aid (Noraid) at the time and was the US Representative and Fra McCann Belfast was the Sinn Fein Representative leading the group.

From the time we arrived in Belfast the atmosphere was very tense with the sight of British Soldiers on almost every street, stones being thrown at them by youngsters and telling them to go home. The first home I was put up in was with Gerard McGuigan who was a Sinn Fein Councilor at the time. We were friends until he passed on in 2021. R.I.P. I subsequently went on four of the fact-finding tours and stayed throughout the Six counties. The atmosphere in those days were very tense and the concern was always if we were going to get stopped by the British Army, UDR, or even the UVF.

On my first tour a woman on my bus had gone to visit a prisoner in Long Kesh and asked if anyone would like to write to an Irish political prisoner and asked for people to give her their address. She then looked at me and asked if she could take my name and address which I gave her. The next month I received a letter from a Peter McVeigh who was from Lurgan, Co. Armagh. He had been sentenced to life. In that first letter he told me his mother died the month before and he was unable to attend either the wake or funeral. Naturally he was very distraught. He asked if I would visit him in prison which I arranged the following year. He also asked if I would travel to Lurgan and meet his brother and family which I did and also met his sister Alice that live close by with her family. I made many trips to Lurgan, staying with Alice who graciously put me up, and met most of Peter's large family. He was eventually released after serving 18 years and after some difficulty adjusting to life on the outside, he moved to Dundalk, met a lovely woman, and is happily married and has a daughter who is now a nurse. We are still friends today.

At a local Irish Festival, on one of the tables was a list of all the Irish Republican Prisoners in the prisons in England, also Long Kesh, Maghaberry, Crumlin Road, Portlaoise and Magilligan Prisons. This list was made up and changed periodically by Mike Duffy from Philadelphia I.N.A. That was how I began writing to the prisoners sending them birthday cards, Christmas cards, etc. I have three shoe boxes filled with letters, thank you cards, etc. that I received over the years from the men and women in those prisons. They told me how grateful they were that there were people from the U.S.A. that cared about them.

Through this correspondence I was asked to visit many prisoners, so I subsequently went to Crumlin Road Gaol, Long Kesh, Magheberry & Portlaoise Prisons. It was very difficult for me to visit and then to leave the prisoner as I knew they were subjected to so much suffering there. I would always either have a headache or just a feeling of malaise.

Another prisoner that I became friends with was Seamus Dillon. I had sent him a card and he received it, although it was addressed to Gerard Dillon. He somehow received it and wrote me a thank you and asked if I would write to him. His mother requested me to visit her & her husband in Coalisland,

Co Armagh which I did. They accompanied me on the visit to see their son. I visited and stayed with them for a few years when I went over on my yearly visit in August. They became like family to me. I saw the day when Seamus was released from prison in 1994 and by 1997, he was living a good life, happily re-married until tragedy struck on December 27, 1997. He was working doorman at the Glengannon Hotel in Dungannon, Co Tyrone when he went out to see what was transpiring with the roar of cars coming into the carpark. He was shot with a hail of bullets and another man with him is paralyzed and in a wheelchair today. The LVF claimed responsibility for the murder. This was in retaliation for the murder of Billy Wright who was killed earlier in the day in Long Kesh by the I.N.L.A. At his funeral Fr. Rice said, "he had a very tough and a very unusual life" and that he was "a victim of the times" in which he lived.

There were so many tragedies that happened during the Troubles that it's impossible to speak about all of them, although I did get to meet Rosemary Nelson, Sheena Campbell and Dwayne O'Donnell. Rosemary was a solicitor who I met on a few occasions and had tea with her in her office in Lurgan. She was killed when a bomb planted under her car exploded near her home on March 15, 1999. It was carried out by an Ulster Loyalist Paramilitary group. Sheena Campbell was a 29-year law student at Queens University wantonly murdered by a masked gunman as she sat with her back to the door at the bar in the York Hotel. I had many conversations with her at the Sinn Fein office in Lurgan while visiting friend there. The last time I saw Sheena was at the Anti-Internment Rally in August that year and congratulated her on studying law. It was a great loss of humanity. On one of my fact-finding trips I was put up with the O'Donnell family from Cappagh. Dwayne their oldest son was 17 years of age when UVF gunmen opened fire and killed Dwayne and three others outside of Boyle's Bar in Cappagh. The gunmen then attempted to enter the pub but civilians inside realized what was happening and barricaded the door. These are people I will never forget and will stay with me in my heart and mind.

After all the violence and hatred brought about during this war (I call it a war) it was hard to imagine that there would ever be a semblance to Peace in this part of the world. On August 31, 1994, the Provisional IRA stunned

the world by announcing a conditional ceasefire. The ceasefire was broken in 1996 by bombings in London and Manchester. After a 25-year campaign the Provisional IRA leaders set down their arms and would seek peace through political negotiation. There were a lot of talks and negotiating that took place behind the scenes with a few players such as John Hume, Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Fr. Alec Reid. President Bill Clinton would grant Gerry Adams a 48-hour visa to the States in January 1994, in spite of sustained pressure from British officials to prevent it happening.

In May 1995 Gerry Adams was granted a visa to again travel to the United States, evidence that he was now taken seriously as a politician.

I was in the South of Ireland with my sister Virginia on May 22, 1998 when the first all-island vote in Ireland since partition took place and the people overwhelmingly supported the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement's framework for peace, equality, tolerance and mutual respect. It was so wonderful for me to think that a Peace could come to Ireland! I saw on television the people in Belfast in motorcades waving the Irish Flag and honking their horns in jubilation! It truly was an exciting time.

Now almost 25 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland must address its past before the passage of time ruins any effort to do so. That's why the Legacy Bill cannot be passed if there is to be a lasting Peace with Justice. The Good Friday Agreement has to be fully implemented to be successful! I pray that I will live to see the day that Ireland Is United and Free!!

Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith's Pivotal Role in the Northern Ireland Peace Process

TRINA Y VARGO



Jean Kennedy Smith (centre) with former Irish Minister Liz O'Donnell (right) and the late John Hume MP



Trina Vargo is the founder of the US-Ireland Alliance. She created the George J. Mitchell Scholarship program and the Oscar Wilde Awards

In this 25th anniversary year of the Good Friday Agreement, there is, finally, some overdue recognition of the many women who were involved in the peace process. Having been involved myself, I have noticed someone who has not received sufficient attention, President Clinton's Ambassador to Ireland, Jean Kennedy Smith.

Before there could be a Good Friday Agreement, before Senator George Mitchell could be appointed to chair peace talks, before paramilitaries on both sides called ceasefires in 1994, there was the matter of the visa for Sinn Fein Leader Gerry Adams to visit the United States. If that visit hadn't occurred in early 1994, it's unlikely that any of the rest would have followed.

In 1992, Bill Clinton was elected President. One of his early acts, in 1993, was to appoint Jean Kennedy Smith as his Ambassador to Ireland. This uniquely American habit, of having ambassadors who are politically appointed, can cut both ways. Sometimes they can make a total mess of things. But on occasion, ambassadors who are not beholden to a system in which they hope to rise, are often freer to take chances, to think outside the box. Jean Kennedy Smith was an example of that. The other advantage she had was in having the ear of President Clinton and of her brother, Senator Ted Kennedy.

I was Senator Kennedy's foreign policy adviser at the time and I spent most of 1993 working on his behalf to determine if the IRA sincerely wanted to end the violence, as had been put to us. At the end of 1993, Irish Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and UK Prime Minister John Major were seen to advance things with their Downing Street Agreement.

In late December, Senator Kennedy decided to go to Dublin for the holidays to visit his sister, who was ensconced in the Phoenix Park, the home of the American Ambassador to Ireland. Jean had been talking with a range of people on the island and had concluded, before any other US government official, that a visa for Adams to visit the US was needed.

I distinctly recall being in my mother's home in Pennsylvania over Christmas 1993 when Jean rang to tell me that "Teddy should make a statement, before he leaves the US" in support of a visa for Adams. Adams had never been granted a visa to visit the US and if this was to occur, it was something that President Clinton would have to grant. I told Jean that I thought making an announcement before he'd even met with her and others about this would be premature but that she would be seeing him soon enough and she and others could put this to him.

Even though the Senator was on a private trip, and even though it was the holidays, for Jean, this was work. She pulled out the stops in arranging for numerous people, including Prime Minister Albert Reynolds, to join her in making the case to her brother. (As Senator Kennedy was not a supporter of the IRA, and as President Clinton would not be naturally inclined to grant a visa - he'd already denied Adams once - it was accepted that Ted Kennedy's

support was necessary if Clinton was to be convinced.)

If you didn't live through those days, it's hard to understand how "out there" the idea of a visa was at the time. While the current generation may view Sinn Fein as just another political party and Gerry Adams as just another politician, in 1992, Adams was barred from the United States due to Sinn Fein's connection to the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Until 1994, the British Government forbade Adams' voice from even being heard on television. Taoiseach Reynolds, who was already viewed as a bit of a cowboy by Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), was prepared to take the chance and he found in Jean the support and backbone that was lacking in most officials (there were a handful of diplomats who thought this was a good idea, but they had to be careful as their bosses were more cautious.)

Ted Kennedy returned to the US leaning toward arguing for a visa and his decision was made after he met with SDLP leader John Hume in Boston in early January 1993 - they were both there to attend the funeral of the former Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill.

We spent the month of January working to convince President Clinton to grant a visa to Adams. In doing this, we too were up against officialdom - the State Department, the Justice Department, the counterterrorism office in the White House - all opposed a visa. And the British Government was apoplectic, which was bizarre as they had just admitted in November that they'd been speaking with the IRA themselves.

To say many in the State Department were livid with our Ambassador in Ireland would be an understatement. Ray Seitz, our Ambassador to the UK, was especially dismissive of Jean. Jean wasn't a diplomat, and she was a woman, therefore, what did she know? This level of sexism, by the way, was felt by most if not every woman who was involved in this process. We were regularly told that we didn't know what we were doing. And we're regularly called "difficult".

Before every other US government official, even before President Clinton, Jean was out in front, and she was right. Women played a much larger role in

the process than is often written. It was often behind the scenes. For Jean, it was public, and her head was on the chopping block. I remember her joking with her brother that she hoped it wouldn't all go pear-shaped as she rather liked living in the Phoenix Park. She remained there until after the Good Friday Agreement was achieved in 1998.

Here's to difficult women.

Creating the conditions for peace



EILEEN HOWELL

This piece remembers one of the most important women of the peace process - the much missed Eileen Howell. This West Belfast woman worked day and night for the conditions which are necessary for a lasting peace. In her memory Falls Community Council produced a pamphlet - *The Life of Eileen Howell*.

With permission we reproduce just one of the important contributions Eileen made, which reflects the significant challenges, the role of courageous women, and the role of the United States.

Mary Robinson's visit to West Belfast

In 1990 when Senator Mary Robinson was elected President of the Irish Republic the demonisation of Sinn Fein and the campaign to isolate it was at its height. Places like Crossmaglen and West Belfast were painted in totally negative ways, their people disgracefully depicted by British Secretary of State Peter Brooke as the 'terrorist community.' Despite Sinn Fein's significant electoral mandate it was banned from being heard on radio and television under broadcasting restrictions in Britain and Ireland.

In 1993 when it was revealed that John Hume and Gerry Adams were engaged in a series of talks the main political parties both North and South, and figures in the Dublin and London governments, criticised Hume for breaching the establishment consensus on the isolation of the party. Efforts to get politicians or high ranking civil servants from the South to visit the North were generally being met by consistent refusal, and British government vetting of funding

for projects like the regeneration of Conway Mill were part of a campaign to blackmail the community into moving away from supporting Sinn Féin.

Inez McCormack had known Mary Robinson through working on the abortion campaigns, though they had entirely different views about the North. Inez had been invited to the inauguration of the new president and suggested to Mary Robinson that if she was using the term “extending the hand of friendship” in her speech then this had to include places like West Belfast. “I approached Eileen,” said Inez, “following some discussions with Gerry Adams to ask her would it be possible for community organisations in West Belfast to invite Mary Robinson to the area on an official visit. I remember Eileen’s initial response: ‘Do you think they should?’ And she continued. ‘I wouldn’t want to be part of that, of asking her, if she were to say, “No”, and snub our community.’ “Her passion was that her people were human and that humanity was being denied. The core of the visit to me was that Mary Robinson would be able to exercise her oath of office by coming into this community asserting their humanity.

The eventual visit in June 1993 was long in the planning. A year beforehand Mary Robinson invited a delegation of women from West Belfast to Aras an Uachtaran at which point an invitation was extended to the President to visit the area. A huge amount of homework then had to take place beforehand. “We worked together intensely under huge pressures from the British and the Irish governments that this visit should not take place. Eileen just took the simple mandate that she was going to construct a visit that showcased the talents of the people of West Belfast, their abilities, courtesy, warmth, talent and diversity. Mary Robinson would be meeting people representing the community from all walks of life. Adopting this approach meant that the British stereotyping of this community could be challenged head on.”

Eileen and Inez spent day and night together during the negotiations for the visit. Each time they took a step forward someone intervened to ‘rock the boat’. They worked hard on pulling together an invitation list and were constantly in contact with Aras an Uachtaran. One the eve of the Falls Community Council’s AGM Eileen was on her way home from the supermarket when she was involved in a car accident which left her with a fractured sternum.

She insisted on going to the meeting and afterwards went back to the hospital where she was kept in for a few days and was then off work for several weeks and on pain killers. "The British government was against Mary Robinson coming and wanted to know if she would be meeting Gerry Adams and if there was going to be a handshake. The bottom line was that she couldn't come into this community and not meet the MP for the area, just as out of courtesy she would meet an elected representative in any other constituency."

Eileen, Inez and Geraldine McAteer, another of the key organizers, were up all night two days before the visit because the British government demanded that it be cancelled. "After her accident," recalls Geraldine McAteer, "Eileen was in a great deal of pain and was supposed to be confined to bed. However, she wanted to be sure that all the right arrangements were being made for this historic event and insisted on the team coming up to her home for meetings. I always felt guilty about this later as we would literally arrive, take over the house, report in on what had been organised and discuss all the variety of actions that needed to be handled. I can still see her lying up on the sofa in pain, but despite the pain, I think she enjoyed every minute of it."

Foreign Minister Dick Spring, the leader of the Labour Party which was in coalition government with Fianna Fáil, had gone to an Taoiseach Albert Reynolds and said that the visit must be cancelled. Reynolds, who was later to play a crucial part in the early days of the peace process, took the position that no Fianna Fáil Taoiseach could do that. Mary Robinson was under huge pressure to back out.

What made the situation worse was that someone had given her the first draft of the invitation list rather than the final draft which had been painstakingly agreed. Eileen was extremely angry at the humiliation that was being heaped on her and her community in terms of the way these hurdles were being presented. But she was patient and steadfast because she understood the bigger prize. "She showed so much leadership," said Inez, "and I could see that the respect with which she was held in local communities was enormous. We had to chop and change the running of the visit on a daily basis so we were backward and forward with local groups constantly, everyday the rules changed."

An Irish government representative was sent to Belfast and met with Eileen and Inez in Eileen's house for several hours until four or five in the morning. He then had to fly to Dublin to go through the itinerary with the President just hours before her departure. When Mary Robinson came to the city in February 1992 the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Nigel Dodds of the DUP, had refused to meet her. Now, the British government was saying that she could not come because she had not gone through the proper channels. They then refused to provide her with diplomatic security protection but she came anyway.

She was greeted at the Belfast Institute of Further Education College in Ballymurphy by cheering pupils from the local Irish language schools. The legendary McPeake family played traditional Irish music as did Sean Maguire on fiddle. St Agnes's Choir rounded off the entertainment with some pieces from popular operas. One local way is reported to have shouted "Up the IRA." As far as Eileen was concerned there could be no censorship. Among the groups participating in the visit was Féile an Phobail, one of whose founders was Gerry Adams. It was the prospect of the President shaking his hand, which might not seem to be such a big deal nowadays, which was the focus for those who were out to prevent the visit. "We stood firm on Robinson and Adams meeting, on not censoring those in attendance and on things like ex-prisoners being able to attend, but it was agreed that the any handshake between Adams and Robinson would not be done publicly. This was what the Irish government pressed for during the final 48 hours.

"The thing was the visit showcased the humanity, the normalness of West Belfast. It included photograph exhibitions and singing from local choirs. This is what the world's press saw. Eileen was insistent that the press captured things like St Agnes Choral Society. They were very obviously interested in snapping an Adams/Robinson handshake and what they got was something entirely different. For Eileen the visit achieved her purpose of showing people as human, it went beyond the political for her."

Although the 'Sunday Independent' subsequently called upon Mary Robinson to resign, a series of other articles elsewhere presented West Belfast as a warm place. The 'Irish Times' carried eight critical articles on the Robinson/Adams'

handshake, which took place in private, but more importantly an opinion poll revealed that 77% of people in the South backed President Robinson. The visit was a huge success, said Liz Groves. It created a new 'buzz' in the area and helped re-energise and re-motivate the local community. "The event was one of Eileen's fondest and proudest memories," said Geraldine McAteer. The Northern Ireland Office described the visit as "not conducive to the maintenance of good community relations." Later, Mary Robinson speaking about the handshake said: "Gerry Adams was a very important leader, both a community and political leader in that environment. It was worth taking the risk because I was promoting reconciliation."

To exemplify how tactically important this visit was, sometime later representatives of the north's Industrial Development Board said they couldn't possibly come into West Belfast and meet with Eileen. She very promptly reminded them that if the President of Ireland could then so could they!

This ice-breaking exercise contributed in its own way to an evolving peace process which included secret British Government/Sinn Féin contacts and the Adams/Hume/Reynolds dialogue. In that context, as a result of her persistence and the precedents she set, later there were other prestigious visits to West Belfast by Albert Reynolds, Bertie Ahern and Ron Browne, President Bill Clinton's Commerce Secretary.

"Jean Kennedy-Smith was one of the American representatives we got to know and work with," recalls Geraldine McAteer. "She invited us from the Foundry Trust - Eileen was chair of the Trust - to talk about West Belfast to a range of delegates from the US and we used the opportunity to highlight the lack of investment and promotion of the area from agencies like the IDB."

On his first day in Ireland, initially as President Clinton's Economic Advisor, Eileen hosted Senator George Mitchell in West Belfast, bringing him to meet community and residents associations; local business people and many who had suffered from the conflict, including Emma Groves.

"Eileen was very well respected by representatives from the South, the EU and the US, people like Chuck Meissner, Jean Kennedy-Smith and Mary Bannon,

she became a touch stone for opinion at that time. She gained the respect, often grudging, of government departments and she was instrumental at key times in changing government policy and practice with regard to community-based economic regeneration. She showed immense intellectual strength, personal courage and leadership during very difficult times, particularly prior to the IRA ceasefire of 1994, when she worked hard to ensure that issues regarding unemployment, poverty and discrimination had to be fairly addressed as part of any long term settlement.”

Padraic White, former Managing Director of IDA-Ireland, recalls being contacted by Dr Martin Mansergh, then advisor to the Taoiseach Albert Reynolds TD, to join a meeting Mansergh had arranged in Leinster House with community leaders from West Belfast, including Eileen. “It was my first encounter with Eileen Howell and other community leaders from West Belfast such as Geraldine McAteer. We had a very productive and engaging exchange and I offered to follow up by visiting West Belfast and seeing for myself the range of industries already there and the facilities for new inward investment. I was profoundly impressed by the innate ability of Eileen and her colleagues and their passionate commitment to the development of West Belfast. Eileen subsequently participated in the Washington Investment Conference organised by President Bill Clinton in May 1995 and a senior Irish official told me of the most valuable contribution Eileen and her colleague, Geraldine McAteer made there.”

Reflections on the Peace Process



RUTH TAILLON

Ruth Taillon was Director of the West Belfast Economic Forum from 1993 to 1998. She subsequently worked mainly on peacebuilding in the Border Counties and cross-border cooperation until she retired in 2019.

The decade or so prior to the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement had its horrors, but was also a time of hope for transformative change in the lives of the ordinary people in communities such as West Belfast.

In March 1988, British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brook, designated West Belfast as a “terrorist community”. This was amplified across the media and officially implemented through public policy. In fact the policy of political vetting had started back in 1985; the first project to have funding withdrawn was the crèche in Conway Mill. As Gerry Doherty wrote in 1995,

“the strategy for economic development pursued by successive Northern Ireland Office ministers since 1985 has been to channel resources and investment through projects and schemes which have been regarded as safe, usually controlled by successful middle class professional and business people, who are often associated with the Catholic church.”¹

Many of the community projects in West Belfast were in response to the absence of public services in a community that ranked among the most deprived in this part of Ireland. They were addressing unmet social needs such as youth work, education or counselling for a population that was excluded

1 Gerry Doherty. The Minority Experiences of Nationalist West Belfast, The Shankill and the Falls: the Minority Experiences of Two Communities in West Belfast, Central Library, June 1, 1995. <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/segregat/temple/discus5.htm>

from - and distrustful of - engagement with services offered by the state. *Feile an Phobail* and *Meanscoil Féirste* were at the cutting edge of what we thought of as “the culture of resistance”. But there was a plethora of community-based projects; some of which - such as Conway Mill, the Falls Women’s Centre and the Falls Community Council - are still with us and thriving today.

The 1988 *Obair Report* into unemployment in West Belfast led to the “Is West Belfast Working?” conference in 1990 and the formation of the West Belfast Economic Forum (WBEF). The mid-1990s was a period of intense activity on many fronts as we struggled to shape the agenda of what was a rapidly evolving “peace process” and a promised “peace dividend”. The *Clár na mBan* (Women’s Agenda for Peace) conference in 1994 brought together republican feminists to enable them to contribute to the debate around a lasting settlement and end to war. Following the first IRA ceasefire in 1994, a wide coalition of community representatives came together and after an extensive consultation process agreed the *Clár Nua* policy framework for the reconstruction of West Belfast. A fundamental principle was that a framework for reconstruction must address the legacy of inequality, power relationships, political discrimination and cultural marginalisation. We had challenging conversations about “good relations” *vs* a rights-based approach. I remember causing something of a stir with an article entitled “No reconciliation without redress”.

Eventually, as peace was processed in other domains, there were some moves to bring community development work in from the cold; although divide and rule tactics continued. (I’m thinking, for example, of certain individuals in Making Belfast Work.) On the other hand, there were other individuals who valued what we were trying to do and treated us with respect. Chuck Meissner, US Assistant Secretary of Commerce for International Economic Policy, who died in a plane crash over Croatia in April 1996, was a champion for West Belfast community development. His death was a real tragedy for us and for people in the Balkans. The former head of the Irish Development Agency (IDA), Pdraig White, offered invaluable advice and continued to mentor community initiatives in North and West Belfast for many years. It would also be remiss not to acknowledge the significance of the EU Peace Programmes; that despite deserved criticism, delivered much needed resources and the

“partnership principle” requiring public bodies to include civic society in programme delivery and governance.

The political landscape has changed utterly since the Agreement. The concept of “culture of resistance” is not sustainable when many of the resisters are in government (or would be if we had one). We were very proud of the resilience of our community in the face of repression and oppression; it is only in hindsight that we are able to recognise the enormity of the damage done, individually and collectively and how many social and economic issues are unresolved. It's time for a new generation to organize and secure delivery of the promised peace dividend.



Living through the early years of the Troubles were bittersweet



MARGARET MCGUNINNESS

I was born in October 1967, my childhood had warmth and comfort in it, not really understanding what it was and how it would affect me. All of that changed on 9th August 1981. My dad was murdered by a plastic bullet. I was 13 years old and the eldest of five. My mum had to work so I looked after my siblings.

It was tough but as we lived in Bawnmore, we had mums' family and friends to help us. In my mind it was the norm as other families had lost loved ones too. In Bawnmore we had 25 deaths caused by the Troubles. This was in a parish of less than 200 families. This is a ratio of one troubles related death for every 8 families.

Dad's death was a huge blow for mum. Peter was the love of her life. I keep thinking that he has missed out on so much, particularly his 11 grandchildren and 2 great grandchildren that he never met.

It was tough living without him. Even still he is my first thought in the morning. The only thing that eases that pain is my mum is with him now. I think to myself, "as long as he has Bell by his side". I miss them both so much.

Mum joined the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets in 1984 following the death of John Downes. She went to meetings, protests and just about anything that she could do to help get these weapons banned. She was with other families and some of the injured protesting, remembering dad and most of all seeking a ban on these weapons that had killed civilian men women and children. We were all a part of a campaign.

A standout memory of the campaigning is the morning of September 1985. Mum got home from a protest at the factory in Scotland which manufactured these lethal weapons. They didn't get home until 5am. I got my sister and brothers out to school for her and then I went into labour with my first child.

The Good Friday Agreement was signed on the 10th April 1998, it was my mum's 54th birthday. She thought it was a good thing. I was a single mum of three. I was 29 years old and had spent more of my life without my dad in it. It was very emotional for us. I personally think the GFA was a good thing and I hope and pray we never go back to the old days. "They were not good days".

In 1989 mum worked with other grannies, mummies and women in the Bawnmore area to set up a women's group. They worked together to help tackle the problems in our area the lack of jobs, housing, deprivation that we were experiencing.

Greencastle Woman's Group was also formed with the help of Barnardos and Making Belfast Work and that didn't go down too well with the men and the youth of the community. We were lobbying, training, meeting with other groups. We had a voice and we weren't afraid to use it. We worked with Rathcoole women's group and a group from Dundalk. We worked cross community/border. We just wanted a better life for our children. We were prepared to work with anyone but as things go funding fell through and the group had to wind up.

After mum died, we missed a couple of the annual white line pickets which are held to remember the dead and injured of plastic and rubber bullets and calls for the banning of plastic bullets.

In recent years, after the publishing of Relatives for Justice new book *Plastic Justice*, we met up again with the members of other family members. We decided to re-group and work again on banning plastic bullets, so we re-energised the United Campaign Against Plastic Bullets that our parents had campaigned so hard on. Working with Relatives for Justice we share a strong desire to have plastic bullets banned. I have made friends for life.

As a member I can honestly say that during these past couple of years, I have felt happier with what's happening in my life. Working with other families and with RFJ has meant that I have felt happier than I felt for a long time.

Margaret Bateson



I left Northern Ireland at the age of 20, like many young people seeking an alternative to the violence, conflict, sectarianism and hatred. Ironically this was just a few short months after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. After a stint in France, I headed to Dublin, not an obvious choice for an east Belfast protestant. But like all families, we were a mixed bag with a proud Dublin born grandmother and potential prize winners for the only house to have an RTE aerial in the 1980s in Sydenham.

I spent a few more years overseas, this time working in international development in the remote archipelago of Vanuatu in the South Pacific, literally the furthest away possible. Little did I know that not only would I return to Belfast but in the privileged position of the Chief Executive of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) from 2014 to 2022 and a witness to the hidden and long term impact of the 'Troubles' on victims and survivors, families, communities and wider society.

Dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland has long been a contested and divisive debate which many would like to forget and pack away in a box labelled 'too difficult'. Policy development since 1998 has painfully emerged from a series of failed negotiations including Eames Bradley (2009), the Stormont House Agreement (2014) and the current Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation Bill) to name just a few in a long and no doubt unfinished list. Different events. Same outcomes. The voices, needs and rights of victims and survivors rarely heard much less responsibility and accountability taken for any action.

The 10 year government Strategy for Victims and Survivors in 2009 was welcomed. It initially promoted a benevolent and top-down approach focusing on centralised government structures (including VSS) and struggled

to engage with the complexities of the needs and rights of victims and survivors and community NGOs with diverse values, narratives and lived experiences.

Despite this, much has been able to be achieved, mostly testament to the passion, commitment and strength of victims and survivors, communities and those working with and within them.

The establishment of the VSS in 2012 was difficult but an independent review in 2013 provided space and an opportunity to do things differently - to move beyond a centralised medicalised approach and to co-design and deliver with victims and communities.

Community-led networks of health and wellbeing caseworkers and advocacy workers from 2017 paved the way to providing access to a wide range of trauma-informed, long term and wrap-around services promoting creativity, safety, trust and choice.

In 2021, the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme (TPDPS), commonly known as the 'pension' was established to acknowledge those seriously physically and psychologically injured. This quickly followed in 2022 with the establishment of the Regional Trauma Network, a new and innovative partnership approach linking the VSS community partners with health trusts promoting protected and prioritised pathways for victims and survivors.

It's comforting to see this as a tidy timeline of positive events. In reality, there remain gaps in services. It has also been and continues to be an ongoing, messy and contradictory process, but one that has shown that progress is possible when we do things differently... when we take risks, when we adopt a humanitarian approach, when we seek to understand the pain of others even when we do not share their views, when we adopt an attitude of curiosity and generosity, when we involve victims and survivors in the design and implementation of policies and when we stop asking victims and survivors to 'move on'

Most victims and survivors would love nothing more than to 'move on' and what they ask is small - that we as society show empathy and compassion and protect the right to support, services, truth and justice to show that the life of their loved one mattered.

We can do this by addressing the far-reaching consequences of the transgenerational and intergenerational impact and stopping the transmission of trauma in mental health, education, employability and relationships to our future generations.

We can do this by acknowledging the different experiences of men and women by systemically applying a gender lens to policy development. The continued focus on the forensic analysis of incidents, dates, and actors misses the ripple effect of trauma. 91% of those who lost their lives were men and 4 out of 5 of the carers of those who were seriously injured are women. Beyond the statistics are many women who adjusted their own life plans and aspirations, did not prioritise their own health and wellbeing and continue to carry the burden of pursuing truth and justice into old age often passing it on to the next generation.

We can do this by holding those who inflicted the most harm to account and ensuring that international obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the needs and rights of victims and survivors post-conflict are met.

We can do this so that in another 25 years time we reflect on a stable, progressive and outward looking society where there is mutual respect and recognition and an inspiration to other nations experiencing conflict... as I write these reflections working in a divided Cyprus ...

A Lot Done, More to Do



MARTINA DEVLIN

Omagh-born Martina Devlin is an author and journalist. She has written eight novels, a collection of short stories, two non-fiction books and two plays. Her latest book is Edith: A Novel about the Irish R.M. co-author Edith Somerville. Prizes include the Royal Society of Literature's V.S. Pritchett Prize and a Hennessy Literary Award, and she was shortlisted three times for the Irish Book Awards.

She writes a weekly current affairs column for the Irish Independent and was named National Newspapers of Ireland commentator of the year. The first holder of a PhD in literary practice from Trinity College Dublin, she teaches Irish literature for Boston University.

Would I vote for the Good Friday Agreement again? In a heartbeat. Yes, I know there's disillusionment because the sense of hope has evaporated - it's fallen short on expectations. But people are alive today because of that peace deal.

Alive and disappointed beats dead.

Alive and disappointed beats injured.

Alive and disappointed beats explosions and shootings.

Alive and disappointed beats watch towers, checkpoints and control zones.

Alive and disappointed beats feelings of utter hopelessness.

It's understandable why people are disenchanted. Possibilities shimmered, that Eastertime twenty-five years ago, when Van Morrison's *Days Like This* was our national soundtrack. Presidents, prime minister and Taoisigh were beating a path to our door. This battered wee nook of the world felt it counted.

Anyone who grew up during the Troubles was shaped by them - impossible

to be unaffected. But we have been moulded, too, by the peace process, and perhaps we tend to overlook that. I try to remember how something exceptional happened in my lifetime: our leaders reached a settlement and their communities backed them.

It's the closest I've come to witnessing a miracle. Gamers play war games and not peace games because, in the words of American cartoonist Bill Watterson (the Calvin and Hobbes strip), there are "too few peace models" for the latter. It matters to remind ourselves about the wonder that is this agreement because life has a knack of bringing us down to earth with a bump. No sooner are we sitting on a cloud than a change in the political weather bumps us off it.

Many people have grown dissatisfied, and rightly so, by how that sense of purpose woven through the treaty has been squandered. By the way victims and survivors are meant to muzzle their hurt, betrayal and pain, stay mute about gaps in their family circle, offer it up for the greater good.

But forgetting pain is extremely difficult. There are a great many victims and their experience needs to be recognised. Expecting them to keep quiet and stop asking for answers is not respect. Letting them be marginalised by and from the justice system is not respect.

Northern Ireland is more or less a peaceful society today, but it's not a reconciled one. That's hindered by the lack of restorative justice, including the absence of a forum where questions about killings might be answered. Some people just want facts - to know what happened. Others want accountability. Meanwhile, finger-waggers like to deliver tone-deaf lectures about the need for everyone to just get along together (like normal people, is the subtext). Easier said than done in the face of unfinished business.

The Good Friday Agreement is a towering achievement, but it's not perfect. There are gaps in its implementation and unintended consequences from some of its provisions - the ease with which Stormont can be collapsed, for example. And while questions of life and death have been transformed, society itself hasn't undergone radical change. Sectarianism remains in place, communities are divided, too many schools and neighbourhoods are segregated.

With hindsight, I'm often struck by how little attention has been paid to the way women and children suffered during the Troubles. Mothers were trying to keep it normal, despite the abnormality of armed conflict on the streets: make lunch boxes, press school uniforms, raise children.

Let's take a look at that extraordinary speech by Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?' Shakespeare is reminding his audience how cultural or religious differences are irrelevant in the face of common humanity.

Now change that Jew to woman. 'Hath not a woman eyes? Hath not a woman hands?' Or switch it to children. 'Hath not a child eyes? Hath not a child hands?' How to make your voice count was a problem during the Troubles, and it remains a problem today.

A lot done, more to do. It's essential to pay close attention if you want to do something properly - attention has slipped. But it can be refocused. Shoulders to the wheel.



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