

FOREWORD

Henry Patterson

Ken Funston's elder brother, Ronnie, was on his tractor feeding silage to his cattle when he was ambushed by two Provisional IRA gunmen. His mother heard the shots and ran to find her son dead on the tractor while his two murderers walked across the fields towards the border with the Republic of Ireland waving their rifles and cheering. The murder provoked the premature deaths of Ronnie's parents and the family had to sell the farm and move to a more secure area in Fermanagh. When he was murdered in March 1984 Ronnie had left the Ulster Defence Regiment eight years previously and was one of a number of former members of the security forces and Protestant civilians who were murdered by the Provisionals in Fermanagh.

In part this book is a challenge to the public invisibility that many victims of paramilitary violence feel they suffer from. This was described by Ronnie and Ken's sister, Olive Moffitt: 'It's good that you're not listening to news every morning and hearing that somebody's been murdered. People can live in peace and go to their work ... They don't think of the people who have had a loss – there's no talk about them now at all, they are forgotten. You are just expected to get on with your life.'¹

The importance of the book consists to a significant degree in its empirical and theoretical challenge to what has become the most influential intellectual framework for dealing with Northern Ireland's past. For although there is no societal consensus around the issues of victims and the agencies responsible for deaths, that has not prevented the dominance in the media and academia of a paradigm whose origins are within the socio-legal theories of transitional justice.

Although developed to deal with the violent legacy of dictatorial right-wing regimes in Latin America and apartheid South Africa, where state actors were responsible for the bulk of deaths and human rights abuses, it has been applied to Northern Ireland, a devolved regime within a liberal-democratic state and where the vast bulk of deaths were the responsibility of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups.

As the introductory chapters of the book demonstrate, this inversion of reality has its roots in a successful process of what it refers to as the ‘colonisation’ of nationalist memories of discrimination and undoubted injustice by a republican project that elides the fact that injustices were well on the way to being addressed in 1970 when their armed struggle began. It also points to the role of the Blair administrations and their overwhelming focus on giving republicans a soft landing, which involved acquiescing in the use of notions of ‘parity of esteem’ and the need to avoid a ‘hierarchy of victims’ to blur the essential moral distinction between victims and perpetrators.

As someone who has taken a particular interest in the IRA’s use of the border as a strategic resource during its thirty year campaign and written about the experience of border Protestants, I was particularly impressed with the fusion of oral history – by far the most extensive in terms of the victims of the IRA in Fermanagh – with a broader narrative of the ebbs and flows of the Provisional campaign in all its dimensions, including the devastating and repeated attacks on the infrastructure of Protestant-owned businesses in Fermanagh.

I had doubted the applicability of the term ‘ethnic cleansing’ to the IRA campaign, although recognising its emotional truth for the victims. It is a neuralgic term in Irish academia, as the heated debate over Peter Hart’s use of it in his book on the IRA’s campaign in West Cork has demonstrated. Its use for the Provisional IRA campaign has recently been disputed by Brendan O’Leary in his *Treatise on Northern Ireland*. After reading this manuscript with its rich but harrowing testimonies I am now ready to accept its appropriateness, at least for the west and south Fermanagh areas where the Provisional IRA’s campaign was particularly intense.

Cillian McGrattan’s existing work on nationalist memory and political violence, drawing on a grasp of the important theoretical interventions on history and memory and other examples of historical amnesia and repression, is the basis for demonstrating how the dominant discourse on the Troubles has virtually eliminated representation of a three-decade assault on the Protestant community’s physical, economic and cultural presence on the border.

In his *Hope and Memory* Tzvetan Todorov writes:

The only chance we might have of climbing a moral rung would be to recognize the evil in ourselves and struggle against it. You gain no direct benefit from discussing the evil that our ‘own side’ might have done ... Revisiting historical episodes in which one’s own group was neither 100 percent heroic nor the complete victim would be an act of higher moral value for the writers of historical narratives. No moral benefit can accrue from always identifying with the ‘right side’ of history; it can only arise when writing history makes

the writer more aware of the weaknesses and wrong turns of his or her own community.²

Unfortunately, as of now, neither nationalism nor unionism appears to be capable of climbing Todorov's moral rung. Michelle O'Neill, Sinn Féin's first minister of Northern Ireland, has claimed that there was no alternative to the IRA's campaign of violence:

I don't think that any Irish person ever woke up one morning and thought that conflict was a good idea, but the war came to Ireland. I think at the time there was no alternative.³

A subsequent *Belfast Telegraph* poll found that 69 per cent of nationalists and republicans agreed that 'violent resistance to British rule during the Troubles' was the only option.⁴

Cillian McGrattan, whose parents were stalwarts of the SDLP, points out that during the Troubles the majority of nationalists supported the non-violent, democratic nationalist alternative to republicanism's armed struggle. Fermanagh's experience of the Troubles remains a powerful challenge to O'Neill's narrative: of the 116 deaths from violence during the Troubles the Provisional IRA was responsible for 90 per cent: 99. Loyalist paramilitaries murdered five people in the county.

Even Gerry Adams appeared to recognise the deeply destructive nature of the IRA's campaign against men like Ronnie Funston when in a statement in 1988 he proclaimed his desire to 'de-sectarianise' the IRA campaign by concentrating on British Army targets in Northern Ireland, Britain and Europe. Such a campaign would be 'vastly preferable' to killing Protestants in the uniform of the RUC and the UDR: 'both communities have suffered enough', he declared.⁵ Despite Adams's declaration, as some of the testimonies in the book show, the campaign would continue for another six years and dissident republican activity would find support in former Provisional areas of support in Fermanagh into the new century.

The legacy of the Provisional IRA's campaign needs to be seriously addressed by all those involved in the current campaign for a unity referendum. Professor O'Leary is the most substantial intellectual supporter of Ireland's Future, the civil society grouping that is making most noise on this front. The nearest he comes to a registering of the sort of devastation described in this book is the following:

Almost all other parties to the conflict believe that republican violence was disproportionate to the grievances of Northern Catholics or perverse because it increased hostility to a reunited Ireland. They are less likely to say such violence was futile: it made a difference in blocking off certain options.⁶

If this is the best the champions of a new Ireland can do, it is little wonder that they reject the idea of reconciliation within Northern Ireland as a prerequisite for constitutional change on the island.

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Notes

1. Quoted in South East Fermanagh Foundation, *For God and Ulster: The Vow of Those Who Reject Violence* (Lisnaskea, 2015), v.
2. Tzvetan Todorov, *Reflections on the Twentieth Century* (London: Atlantic, 2014), 144–45.
3. Rory Carroll, ‘Backlash after O’Neill Says There Was No Alternative to Conflict’, *Guardian*, 4 August 2022.
4. Suzanne Breen, ‘Seven in 10 Nationalists Agree with Michelle O’Neill’, *Belfast Telegraph*, 19 August 2022.
5. Quoted in Henry Patterson, *Ireland’s Violent Frontier: The Border and Anglo-Irish Relations during the Troubles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 195.
6. Brendan O’Leary, *A Treatise on Northern Ireland, Volume III, Consociation and Confederation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 288.

