

Northern Irish still at work creating a space for peace

Arthur Jones | Nov. 28, 2011



The "Beacon of Hope" sculpture in Belfast, Northern Ireland (Newscom/Design Pics)

BELFAST, NORTHERN IRELAND -- The "Troubles" in Northern Ireland may be over. The memories live on.

The British and Irish flags on Shankill Road and Falls Road are division markers like the painted curbstones that proclaimed the different territories. The flags, increasingly tattered and bedraggled, still flutter from some windows and back fences in proud, if lame, protest.

The still riot-prone July 12 Orange Day Protestant marches close to "Catholic" areas rekindle memories. The times live on in the probes that have seen the British government reopen in 2011 an investigation into the British military's role in 1972's "Bloody Sunday," when 14 unarmed Catholics died. ([See accompanying story](#) [1].)

The memories surfaced again this year as former Irish Republican Army deputy commander Martin McGuinness threw his hat in the ring in a bid to become the Irish Republic's president. McGuinness has not denied being an IRA deputy commander in Derry, Northern Ireland, but during the campaign he strenuously denied he was a senior IRA figure after 1974, when he was arrested and convicted in the Republic. The charges hurt. He came in third in the October electoral field of seven candidates.

Despite it all, Redemptorist Fr. Gerry Reynolds said, the 1998 "Good Friday" peace settlement is well-established. His colleague, the Rev. John Dunlop, cautioned, "I have never said this was reconciliation. This is political accommodation, an extremely complicated political accommodation."

Dunlop -- a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Northern Ireland -- and Reynolds were long prominent among those Catholic and Protestant church people working over the decades across religious boundaries to provide "a climate for discussion." But they noted the 1998 agreement could not claim a true peace until the warring IRA and the Protestant paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force and Ulster Defence Association actually surrendered ("decommissioned") their weapons. Decommissioning began in 2001 with the IRA, and took the rest of the decade to achieve.

Finally, Dunlop said, "after 30 years of unnecessary and unjustifiable violence we came to where we could have

been in 1971.?

At this distance it becomes easy to underestimate how formidable the obstacles to peace were. The killings were gruesome and constant. The Troubles permeated everything. Fodor travel guides to Ireland in the 1980s warned Belfast visitors, "Stay away from Falls and Shankill Roads after dark. Don't go near West Belfast during any military or ceremonial parade. Don't take photographs of soldiers, police or military installations," and do make sure to take a Protestant black cab ("red poppies" or "Shankill" sign) to the Protestant side. Catholic cabs for the Catholic side had Irish-language signs or "Falls Road" in their windows.

In the 1980s, the bombings and killings were a constant. IRA explosions killed innocent people in London and in Brighton, England, at the Conservative Party Conference, and in the British colony of Gibraltar. Even so, glimmerings of a peace process would surface. In the mid-1980s Social Democratic and Labour Party leader John Hume and Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams were meeting.

Dunlop told *NCR*, "What enabled the breakthrough were a couple of different things. The Provisional IRA was concerned that their campaign was consistently resisted by the security forces -- they had to reach the stage where they were persuaded they couldn't win. Second, various channels were opened between Sinn Féin [the IRA's political wing] and the British government. Back-passage, secret, quiet. That began to generate some element of understanding. Then you got Douglas Hurd [Britain's secretary of state for Northern Ireland] telling Ulster that Britain had no economic, strategic or military interest in remaining here. For me, as a Northern Presbyterian and Unionist official, it was a bit like a husband saying to his wife, "Well you can continue to live here as long as you like, but I've no interest in staying. But if you want to move in with the man next door that's OK with me and I'll facilitate your departure." That was kind of disconcerting."

The two communities, Catholic and Protestant, operated in different ways, Dunlop said.

"There is in a Catholic community a degree of cohesiveness which does not exist in the Protestant community. The Unionist community is influenced by a kind of Presbyterianism that is inclined to split." The difficulty on the Unionist side, he said, was trying to keep the constituency together. For the other side, "In Ed Moloney's book [*A Secret History of the IRA*], the way they had to manage their internal problems was quite difficult, also ruthless, quite risky. Clearly not everybody was happy so you get a dissident crowd, but who were not powerful enough to stop it."

The Americans came in for praise. "We were very fortunate [Bill] Clinton was president, good State Department advisers were evenhanded, Clinton's speeches here were absolutely perfect, he got the nuances right, which meant he'd taken the trouble to understand it. [U.S. Special Envoy] George Mitchell had the patience of Job. I don't know how he stood it year after year."

Finally, Dunlop said, British Prime Minister Tony Blair told Northern Ireland, "The train is leaving, and either you're on board or you're not on board. But you have to understand, it's going." The booming voice of Northern Ireland's most easily recognized and consistently anti-settlement political figure, cofounder of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Rev. Ian Paisley, finally stepped in to assist the peace. Paisley (ennobled by Queen Elizabeth II as Baron Bannside) supported decommissioning. "Nobody quite knew why," Dunlop said. "Someone said to me, 'You know, John, he became a Christian.' He said, 'Seriously, it was a kind of spiritual insight he got.'"

Dunlop added, "Give this to Paisley, when he said he'd do something, he did it with some style." The Ulster paramilitaries surrendered their arms.

Reynolds, a monk at Belfast's Clonard Monastery for the past 28 years, said the settlement will continue to work because "it is based on the three essential political relationships: Britain-Ireland, Northern Ireland-

Republican Ireland, and the internal politics in the north.?

The monk became involved in 1983 in an unexpected way. Irish sisters of the Family of Adoration established a convent in Belfast in 1980. The Family of Adoration, founded by a group of women in Paris in 1848 after the city's archbishop was killed, came together in the conviction, Reynolds said, "that it is really on our knees before God we receive the gift of peace." His involvement with the Family of Adoration led Reynolds into the broader work of the churches: creating a space for peace.

Reynolds continued, "They used to say, 'There'll always be fighting here.' I used to say, 'But God doesn't want us to be fighting. If we work at what God wants, we'll achieve it. And we've done it. We have it for export.'"

And the flags that still fly? Will they inevitably rot?

Reynolds said, "More than likely. Or be taken down and folded away. But I think we first have to bring people into an awareness of what we are creating, and what we can yet create."

Meanwhile, the tourists happily flock to bustling, peaceful Belfast. Most are blissfully unaware of the significance of the elegant, towering lady, the "Beacon of Hope," at Lanyon Place, in Belfast's "Thanksgiving Square."

Yet there she is as she stretches her arms up and out toward the future Reynolds and others foresee.

[Arthur Jones is *NCR* book review editor. His e-mail address is ajones@ncronline.org.]

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