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After 37 years, Martin McGuinness at last reaches point of no return

By Ed Curran
Monday, 16 March 2009

The first time I laid eyes on James Martin Pacelli McGuinness was in a back street of the Bogside in 1972.

I had gone there to gauge the mood and report on what was then Northern Ireland's most infamous trouble spot.

There were no soldiers or police on patrol. Young men manned barricades and drove around the rock-strewn streets in hijacked cars. Up on the ancient walls of the city, over-shadowing the Bogside, troops peered down through their binoculars.

Martin McGuinness, I had been told, was the man to meet because he was in control of these dangerous streets. As I walked towards the Brandywell Inn, notebook in hand, an old battered Ford Cortina drew alongside me. A group of youths jumped out and ordered me into the vehicle.

The muzzle of an American carbine protruded from under the driver's seat. I sat in the front and behind me the youths examined the contents of my wallet.

I said I was going to see a Mr McGuinness but mention of his name seemed to make no difference to their threatening mood as we drove around and around the dilapidated neighbourhood.

Half an hour elapsed and then the car swung into a street of old terraced houses. Ahead, through the windscreen, I could see a young, curly-haired man, dressed in a soiled Aran sweater.

He was loling up against the wall but sprung to attention as my captives drove up and spoke to him.

"This is Martin McGuinness," said the driver, beckoning in the direction of the young man who was already disappearing through a doorway. "You can get out and go in. Martin will talk to you now."

I remember not being able to take in how youthful Martin McGuinness was. At only 22 years, he was clearly in charge.

That day, in 1972, I listened to his trenchant denunciation of the RUC and British Army and his vow that they would never walk the streets of the Bogside again.

There was no doubting his republican credentials and revolutionary zeal. He had piercing eyes and a chilling determination in his voice.

His message was dour and uncompromising, so much so that I remember feeling distinctly uncomfortable in his presence.

Fast forward 37 years to the steps of Stormont last week as 58-year-old Martin McGuinness denounced dissident republicans to the media with these words: "These people, they are traitors to the island of Ireland. They have betrayed the political desires, hopes and aspirations of all of the people who live on this island and they don't deserve to be supported by anyone."

The message from his lips was very different from that which I had heard all those years ago on a May afternoon in the Bogside but the determination in his voice was still the same.

Standing there alongside the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, it was a defining moment for this community, and surely most of all, for him.

How far, I thought, had he and every one of us travelled in the 37 years since our paths had

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first crossed? The young man of violence in 1972 has become a defender of peace in March 2009. In saying that, I am mindful of the dreadful deeds with which he and his cohorts were associated for so long.

The terrible tragedy for all of us is that he directed his undoubted leadership qualities for so much of his own life, and ours, in such a negative, destructive manner just as Ian Paisley too did for so long with his language of intransigence.

The past week's events have galvanised people across Northern Ireland as never before. The deaths of two soldiers and of a police officer have focussed our minds on the importance of preserving and nurturing political agreement.

These murders were meant to drive a wedge between us but instead they have pulled us closer together. They have given a new meaning to the old slogan: 'United we stand, divided we fall.'

The side by side appearance of Peter Robinson, Martin McGuinness and the Chief Constable on Stormont's steps may well turn out to be the point of no return on the long road to a lasting settlement.

First there was Paisley and now there is McGuinness. From 1972 to 2009, what road to Damascus they have trodden.

How relieved and thankful every one of us should be that human nature can change and that politics can be made to work.

There is surely no better proof of that amongst us at this moment than James Martin Pacelli McGuinness, the Deputy First Minister of a new Northern Ireland — one that is desperate to go forward in peace and not back to its terrifying past.

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He is actually from Northern Ireland Ray, not the north part of The Republic of Ireland.

Posted by rob | 18.03.09, 13:08 GMT

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great article he has come a long way from a wee boggie to joint leader of the north part of ireland good luck martin and your family and friends happy st patricks day to all people on the island of ireland and around the world

Posted by ray ... usa | 17.03.09, 15:37 GMT

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No point scoring,no hints sinn fein know who is behind the attacks,just a well written article,maybe Ed could give Gail Walker a few pointers!

Posted by *stephenm* | 17.03.09, 09:03 GMT

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Great article.

Posted by *McRee* | 17.03.09, 08:18 GMT

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Your mouth needs to be potty trained, Mickey.

Posted by *Mr. P* | 16.03.09, 19:12 GMT

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The reference is to 'The Sword of Damocles', a story from Greek mythology

Posted by *pdwhistle* | 16.03.09, 14:46 GMT

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Martin had taken his jumper to Damoclean and they had failed to get rid of the stain . Is that not obvious

Posted by *Woolly* | 16.03.09, 13:58 GMT

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I think Damascene is the word you're looking for. Damoclean – if it means anything – suggests a sword above our heads ... either that or an Irish Mr Clean.

Posted by *Walter Ellis* | 16.03.09, 13:31 GMT

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"dressed in a soiled Aran sweater"

How did that happen, was he not potty trained?

Posted by *mickey* | 16.03.09, 12:07 GMT

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I wonder what the writer means by ...'what Damoclean roads they have trodden'?

Perhaps Mr Curran needs the Sword of 'Damascus' (sic) to fall on his head and knock his metaphors together.

Posted by *GerryMac* | 16.03.09, 11:26 GMT

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