

FOREWORD

SINCERE and altruistic people suffer many disabilities, suspicion of their motives, disbelief in their probity, criticism and vilification. Their final penalty, and the most difficult to bear, is to be misunderstood, even by friends and associates. Thus it was with the progenitors of civil rights in Northern Ireland.

There is a modicum of injustice in all societies. Sometimes it is unintentional, even inevitable; then again it may be inbuilt, planned and consistently applied. The Northern Ireland of the sixties had all these shades of injustice in fair measure, yet it ambled along as it had done for more than three decades, and nobody took much notice. Most intelligent people realised that many things were wrong but what was there to do? That was just the way it was and what cannot be cured must be endured or, as the Tyrone woman put it, 'What bees, biz.' Those who suffered the injustices smouldered on, their resentment unchannelled and made even keener by their very impotence. (The knowledge that a considerable body of opinion held that they had contributed to their own plight did little to help.)

If there was an occasional howl of protest at the hustings or a stuttering speech in Stormont, sure wasn't that only to be expected? Didn't politicians have to say something to justify their existence and their big pay? The pundits knew it would never change—no, nay, never.

Then, to the confusion of punditry, something began to change, a new approach emerged. Quietly, almost surreptitiously at first, the hard, grinding, unspectacular work of gathering *facts* had begun. Where there had formerly been only vague generalisations, now there was *evidence*, uncontestable,

incontrovertible, painstakingly laid out for all to see. This development, the foundation of the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland, was the single most important one in the genesis of the civil rights movement.

Those who formed the Campaign were an unlikely lot. What was in it for them? Not money, because most of them had that in fair abundance. Certainly, compared with those they sought to help, they were affluent. Not fame, because they must have known that they would be scorned and jeered at as a collection of middle-class busybodies. Could it possibly be, then, that it was actual dedication to some abstruse, un-native ideal—fair play, equity, or even justice?

The twitching, nose-tapping, winking pundits had it all taped as usual, however: *she* was *after the seat*. That was the glittering prize, a position in the gilded halls of Stormont or Westminster! Some prize indeed, but it was the goal of many who looked on *the seat* as the ultimate attainment, the apex of human endeavour.

Who was *she* or, more properly in the then almost entirely male-dominated society of Northern Ireland, why was it *she*? To find out we must go back to the middle of that decade called The Hungry Thirties, in Scotland.

It was in the rumbustious No Mean City, Glasgow, that the young, newly qualified Patricia McShane first came up against the appalling effects of man's inhumanity to man. In the Gorbals and in other less salubrious districts, where Razor Kings terrorised every 'close' in the narrow streets, she carried out her social work, storing up the experiences which would later benefit more rural but similarly deprived people.

After marriage to a general practitioner, she settled down to a period of mainly genial domesticity in Dungannon. With three daughters reared, and in those more mature years when the creature comforts would normally beckon, she began to feel unease at the plight of many young married mothers. Her husband, Dr Conn McCluskey, had told her about these women, with their stories of the impossibility of getting housing accommodation, who crowded his surgery every day. He had begun to despair of treating these harassed young women medically while their elementary social needs went unsatisfied. This despair was communicated to his wife, who decided that something must be done about it.

It is told later in this book how Mrs Patricia McCluskey then started the group with the inspired title of The Homeless Citizens' League. When, in her wide-brimmed hat and striking costume, she headed a parade of homeless young mothers, their babies and prams, through Dungannon, she strode right into the conscience of a people and into the history of our times. There, indeed, all unknowing, walked the Juno, the veritable Mother of Civil Rights in Northern Ireland.

Beside this Juno, in the stirring years that followed, the dashing figure of her husband always appeared. It would be straining the O'Casey analogy too far to describe him as the Paycock (though some might claim that his sartorial rectitude and general elegance would qualify him for just such a title!). Here was no dithering, foostering, ineffective character like the Paycock in the play. Instead, there was a sometimes sardonic, sometimes outrageous, frequently stimulating and entertaining, always *concerned*, family doctor.

It is surely no discourtesy to the other dedicated members of the Campaign to mention that the McCluskeys worked ceaselessly—annotating, checking, querying, often encouraging, cajoling and bullying others to greater efforts. During all those years of intense community activity Conn McCluskey carried on a busy medical practice, frequently going far beyond the call of duty in the interests of his patients. And when the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association commenced, he continued urging his new associates ever onward and upward. Excelsior!

Who, then, better to write a history of civil rights in Northern Ireland than one who had been so deeply involved in the game before the others had even heard the starting whistle?—*a* history, not *the* history, because this is not the definitive story of the civil rights movement and its genesis—nor does it pretend to be. It is a highly individual account of a period, written by an artist, for artists can usually see right to the centre of things.

An artist as well? Yes, under the name of Constantin Cluskey he has sculpted many widely acclaimed pieces which were, and are, exhibited in various parts of the world. It is most appropriate that some of his larger works have been put on display in the wide open spaces of parkland, exhibition

centre and airport where the public can enjoy them. Such figures as Lugh Lamh Fhada, Excelsior, Coquette, Laocoon and the smaller pieces: Icarus, The Underdog, The Prisoner, Derry, and others, illustrate the depth of his sympathy and understanding which probe close to the heart of the human condition.

Life in Northern Ireland would have been different if tolerance and understanding had prevailed—or had even been given a fair trial. The members of the Campaign for Social Justice and of the original N.I. Civil Rights Association (all decent, reasonable, ordinary people) asked—pleaded for—tolerance and understanding. It was not to be, however, though some more liberal representatives of the Unionist establishment tried hard, even if for merely selfish reasons, to inaugurate a more equitable system. They were pursued and dragged down to ruin by the baying hounds of intolerance and bigotry which have bedevilled Irish society for centuries.

Up off their Knees is an insight into a traumatic period when many people were tested in the crucible of peace and justice. It will cause hair to stand on end. Some will chuckle, others rage and curse. Others still will threaten, but that will not be a new experience for the author. His book will, of course, be misunderstood, for it seems there can never be an end to misunderstanding in our Northern Irish society.

Two things will be established by this book—*she* was not *after the seat*, and (to expand Robert Burns) ‘a chiel has been amang ye takin’ notes an’, feth, he has *printed* them’.

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